

Sexuality, Spirituality and the Body

An Interview with Joan Borysenko, PhD

By Nancy Eichhorn, PhD



To Begin: A Personal Story on Spontaneous Remission

"When I was 10 years old, I experienced spontaneous remission from a psychotic episode and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) through a spiritual experience," Joan said as she revealed both an intimate snapshot of a vulnerable time in her life and insight into her scientific and clinical fascination with and exploration of spirituality, sexuality, psychology, nutrition, and more the past 40 years.

"I had seen this frightening movie with my mom. There were jungle scenes, head hunters with poison darts, scorpions, things that would scare a young child. I dreamt scary images; the movie traumatized me. One week later I started to hallucinate. I saw head hunters, feared they were going to break into the house. I developed OCD to manage, control, and make sense of the hallucinations. I believed that if I did the right rituals I would keep the head hunters from manifesting and killing my family."

"I started with handwashing then developed other rituals. Before I spoke, I had to organize all my words into a mental list, which slowed my speech. When I read a book, I had to read it upside down, which meant I read upside down and backwards. And, I had to read everything three times. If I was disturbed while reading I would be in terror—absolutely, unbelievably, I can't tell you how terrified I was. I couldn't sleep or I would dream."

"One day, several months later, I thought, maybe if I prayed (now prayer was not in my family background). It was an inexplicable experience. The fear dissipated, and I felt a sense of peace. Fear and peace are different body experiences. You can taste terror, smell it, feel its waves of energy, its panic flushing, tensing. And when it suddenly stops and is replaced with a deep sense of peace and safety, a sense of something larger than yourself, it's an opening of the mind/body state of being. I felt inspiration beyond anything my mind could dream up."

"I knew I could heal from this mental illness. I knew how to do it. During this state of peace, this poem came to me about divine light and being watched over in the universe. I realized that if I thought of the poem I could bring the peaceful state back. When I was scared by images of the head hunters, I said the poem and went back to the peaceful state. I knew I could call back that deep sense of peace. If I did the rituals, I would stay stuck there. The prayer state needed to come to the ritual and I needed to say the poem. In three to four days the nightmares disappeared. The head hunters went away."

"As a scientist and a psychologist, I believe in spontaneous remission."

Spontaneous remission is not as rare as people may think (Jessy, 2011). It has been associated with the placebo effect—if you believe it will work, it will. According to Christina Sarich (2014) the Institute of Noetic Sciences has documented over 3,500 verifiable cases of diseases, often life threatening, that went away on their own accord. Joan explained that research has defined three commonalities that exist in cases of spontaneous remission regardless of the precipitating event, be it a psychological or physical illness (cancer, heart disease, diabetes), three things were in place:

The person believed spontaneous remission/regression was possible

The person believed it was possible for him/her to personally experience spontaneous remission

The spontaneous remission was grounded in some sort of spiritual experience

"Somehow, they entered an ultimate reality," Joan said. "Maybe it's like a physicist who studies string theory, who believes in parallel universes—there's a shift in parallel realities where the illness never existed. Whatever the explanation, the person went into a somatic state. They had a felt sense of peace, and were able to reproduce it, like the place of peace I experienced when I was 10 years old. This personal experience guided me as a scientist, as someone interested in the spirituality of healing."

As a spiritual mentor, Joan works with students to impart the wisdom of feeling states: they are "all sensations in the body and if you stay with the sensation you will discover it is impermanent—underneath the experience of fear, you go through a doorway that leads to wisdom, insight, healing," she said.

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Life Force Energy: One Pathway In

While Western medicine has yet to embrace concepts such as life force energy, other cultures have for centuries, including Chi energy or Ki (as in Reiki) (Chinese/Japanese healing), and Shakti, which means life force energy in the Eastern Hindu tradition. The only way people in the Western states think about life force energy deals with whether sexual energy is growing. Yet, life force energy is related to all intelligent energies. Joan said that our understanding of this magnificent energy unfolded via the study of epigenetics. As well, her fascination with trauma and trauma treatment lead her to explore how the mind was involved and what allowed resiliency. She asked, "How can we, as therapists, support our clients so their traumatic images are integrated into the body so they no longer bring forth negative emotional effects?"

"The body is the way in," she said, sharing the answer she discovered after years of research. "Life force energy shows up as a spectrum of emotions. To work with life force energy you have to be in the moment. This seems to be the way to work with trauma and resilience. It's less top down intellect, and more bottom up body-to-mind, how changes in the body show up in the mind, in our thought processes."

"Working with clients for years, I frequently see people who are traumatized have a moment of transcendence—they leave their body in trauma and enter a different reality, akin to a mystical experience."

"The spiritual realm is beyond religion," she said. "No matter what door you go through, if you talk to a mystic from any religion—Jew, Christian,

Muslim—something larger than the individual mind occurs. They are all talking about the same thing: this immediate sense of recognition."

Interspirituality

"It is important to distinguish religion from spirituality," Joan wrote in her keynote address overview. "While they may overlap, it's entirely possible to be spiritual without being religious and vice versa."

"Spirituality," she wrote, "is a commitment to a life of depth and compassion that connects each of us to a larger whole. It is predicated on the development of a contemplative life in the classic sense of contemplation: an open and curious examination of experience as it unfolds, moment-by-moment. This is also called Presence, and it is the basis of an awakened life based on guidance from the Source, in service to the highest good."



“Our personal spiritual development must ultimately serve others for it to be an authentic unfolding of the heart of spirit in action.”

“While different faiths developed through specific prisms of culture and contexts in space and time, there are universal spiritual principles which are foundational to all of them. Interspirituality is the common ground, where all of the wisdom traditions meet. Interspirituality is committed to finding the spirituality both within and beyond religion. What ties us together is a shared desire to connect with the Ground of Being in a way that fully respects our differences. The challenge is to embody what is most true and real for us without seeking to convince or convert others.”

“Our intention is to delve deeply into the perennial interspiritual philosophy of guidance and discernment so that we may become more fully present and capable of clear, compassionate action in the world.”

“Interspirituality,” she explained during our interview, “is beyond dogma, beyond individual belief. It comes together in a place more grounded in us, in sensation and direct experience.”

“Awe,” she added, “is an intensely spiritual state.” She mentioned George Vaillant (2008), a psychoanalyst and research psychiatrist at Harvard University, who wrote an article on spirituality in which he discusses spirituality not as doctrine nor as dogma but as a constellation of positive emotions: awe, compassion, love (attachment), hope, trust (faith), forgiveness, joy, gratitude (all of which are hard wired in human beings as well as all mammals).

According to Vaillant, positive emotions evoke our thought-action tendencies, the patterns that lead to behavior. Vaillant argued that spirituality is not about ideas, sayings, sacred texts or theology; rather, spirituality is all about emotion and social

connection.

“In psychiatry and psychology, positive emotions are thrown out,” Vaillant shared during an interview with Jim Fleming (Wisconsin Public Radio, retrieved from <http://www.ttbook.org/book/transcript/transcript-george-vaillant-spiritual-evolution>). “Take a look at a 21st century classic textbook of psychiatry. There are hundreds of lines on negative emotions such as hate, terrorism, sin, and guilt, and thousands on depression and fear. Yet there are only five lines on hope, one on joy and none on compassion and forgiveness.”

“Our whole concept of psychotherapy might change if clinicians set about enhancing positive emotions rather than focusing only on negative emotions,” Vaillant said.



Joan agreed saying, “Our psychotherapy would absolutely revolutionize if we focused more guidance to help people experience positive emotions rather than stay stuck in negative.” Then she added with a heartfelt laugh, “It beats the pants off feeling anxious, depressed and furious.”

She noted that we live in a reality of duality: there’s light and dark, good and bad, right and wrong, laughter and tears. “If we can develop enough spaciousness to host all these dualities, all these feelings that

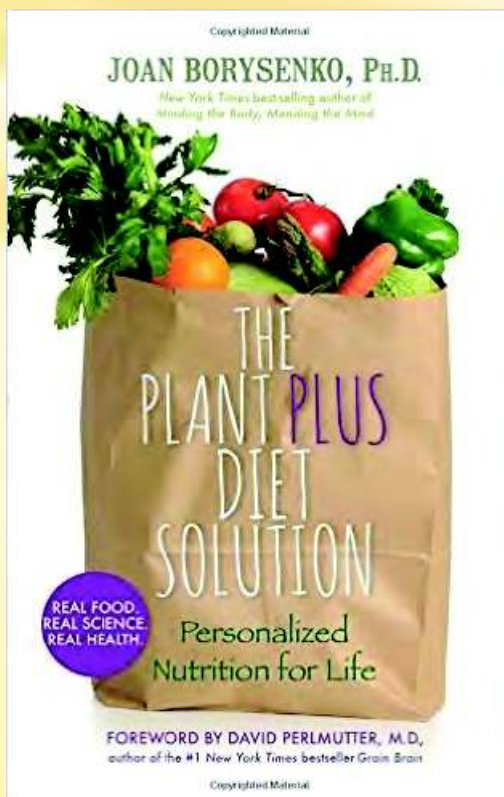
to the field as well as to individual emotions, then we can switch our attention from thoughts floating down the river of consciousness to the river itself (citing Father Thomas Keating's metaphor and his work with Centering Prayer.

"When I speak (or other speakers) to groups there is always a felt sense that comes over the room. You can feel the shift in the room, when we have all stepped into the river. Ideas are not important. There is some opening, some feeling transmitted that brings people beyond the mind into the great heart that we are all a part of. It's not an intellectual sense and once it is felt and pointed out, you know that place as home. It is the greatest gift."

To sense this "shift in the room" yourself, be sure to attend Joan's keynote address on Friday, July 22, 2016 at 8:30 am.

Joan Borysenko, a distinguished pioneer in integrative medicine, is a world-renowned expert in the mind/body connection. Her work has been foundational in an international health-care revolution that recognizes the role of meaning, and the spiritual dimensions of life, as an integral part of health and healing. After graduating magna cum laude from Bryn Mawr College in 1967, Dr.

Borysenko earned her doctorate in Medical Sciences from the Harvard Medical School, where she completed post-doctoral training in cancer cell biology. Her first faculty position was at the Tufts University College of Medicine in Boston. But after the death of her father from cancer, she became more interested in the person with the illness than in the disease itself, and returned to Harvard Medical School to complete a second postdoctoral fellowship, this time in the new field of behavioral medicine. Under the tutelage of Herbert Benson, M.D., who first identified the relaxation response and brought meditation into medicine, she was awarded a Medical Foundation Fellowship and completed her third post-doctoral fellowship in psychoneuroimmunology. In the early 1980's Dr. Borysenko co-founded a Mind/Body clinic with Dr. Benson and Dr. Ilan Kutz, became licensed as a psychologist, and was appointed instructor in medicine at the Harvard Medical School. Her years of clinical experience and research culminated in the 1987 publication of the New York Times best seller, *Minding the Body, Mending the Mind*, which sold over 400,000 copies. The 20th anniversary edition, newly revised, was published in 2007. Author or co-author of 13 other books and numerous audio and video programs, including the Public Television special *Inner Peace for Busy People*, she is the Founding Partner of Mind/Body Health Sciences, LLC located in Santa Fe, NM. Dr. Borysenko's warmth and credibility—plus her lively sense of humor—create a compelling presence. One of the most popular and sought after speakers in the field of health, healing, and spirituality, her engaging and well researched presentations are perfect both for professionals and for the general public.



Joan "cuts through the thicket of confusing—and often downright wrong—advice on nutrition and gives you easy-to-digest, bite-sized servings of real scientific information so you can discover which foods your body needs to heal and thrive."

As a psychologist and cell biologist, she offers trustworthy advice "to psych out your inner saboteur, enabling you to make the changes you've been dreaming of. And as a busy woman who loves good food, she'll teach you how to make simple, scrumptious, satisfying meals that you and your family will love whether you are omnivores, vegans, or vegetarians" (review retrieved from: <http://www.amazon.com/The-PlantPlus-Diet-Solution-Personalized/dp/1401941486>)

You can read a book excerpt [here](#)