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## Articles by Joel Kramer & Diana Alstad

*Transforming Sexuality*

*Changing the Context of Conquest*

*Diana Alstad and Joel Kramer*

**Diana:** These times feel very unique for men and women. On the one hand, there is a chance for intimacy and understanding that can transform old modes into a new way of approaching life. Awareness of sex role conditioning, more space for women to define and support themselves, and men's increasing need and willingness to share some of their burdens and responsibilities, may offer us an opportunity to move out of the proverbial battle of the sexes. On the other hand, as you look around, there seems to be crisis everywhere, in couples and families, and tension, broken relationships, pain, and conflict.

**Joel:** The very crisis is a sign that old structures are breaking down, making a new way possible and indeed necessary. How can a species survive if its two parts are locked in conflict? If we are to survive, a new balance between men and women will have to be created. Right now the amount of energy locked in male-female problems is enormous, preventing us from facing other vital challenges freshly.

**Diana:** There is such pain and confusion because the problems we're facing are unprecedented and can only be solved through a transformation in the way we approach relationships. If men and women could learn how to be open and supportive with each other, we could meet this challenge and bring about a needed harmony. Our present problems are linked not only to obvious areas of tension, such as unequal power, but also to the very ways in which we attract each other. Love and sexuality are out of kilter. People who are "good for you" or "friends" are often not the ones who turn you on sexually; in fact, it seems hard to find a lover and a friend in the same person.

**Joel:** One of the main problems is that we don't seem willing to let go of the pleasures and seeming advantages of traditional ways of relating. If we look more closely at what attracts men and women, we can see that much of it is not related to love at all - nor to respect, care, and understanding.

**Diana:** Let's go into what sexual attraction is all about, where it comes from, and what keeps it going. Why does the great passion of a new romance later get lost in conflict, hurt, boredom, or merely comfort? The very nature of sexual desire and what we think of as "romance" often sets people up for failure before they have had a chance to create their own unique relationship.

**Joel:** Understanding how and why this occurs can change the way you approach relationship, and transform its internal dynamic. As we talk about this, it's important to keep in mind we're discussing a model or cultural prototype whose elements can be found in most relationships at some level, at some point. Part of what ignites sexual desire are conditionings which have both mechanical and self-centered aspects. Far from reducing sex to this, our interest is in freeing sexuality as much as possible from these deep programmings. The only way to free yourself is first to realize that you are operating "on automatic." Making unconscious programming conscious removes some of its power to move and determine you.

**Diana:** We're talking about patterns and tendencies, realizing that a model cannot exhaust the variety

and complexity of encounters. People do break out of patterns and go beyond them, and it's easier to do so if each person can learn to recognize these tendencies in him or herself - to see them, not to judge or try to get rid of them.

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**Joel:** Throughout history different groups - from Freud to feminism - have tried to analyze and understand sexuality and its conflicts. But by and large, men and women have not joined hands, without blame or self-justification, to look at how the "male-female dance" works and what each sex brings to it. Usually when they discuss the subject, each side tries to show how their own sex has it "worse" and the other is to blame. This attitude, due to anger and resentment between the sexes, is understandable, but it is important to recognize that it's not conducive to objectivity.

**Diana:** A big problem with romance and sexual desire is they are usually based on images that prevent you from seeing the other person as he or she is. It is the image that attracts you. Since the images are fairly one-dimensional, they don't hold up well over time or when the real "nitty-gritty" of living together starts. The less you face everyday issues, the longer romance lasts - hence the popularity of affairs, flings, et cetera. It's a shock when the pressures of reality start breaking down the images. If not much else was there, there's no support to hold the relationship together while it shifts to a new foundation. When images crack, a stronger glue is needed, such as care, openness, and common interests. Another element that makes communication difficult is that old saying, "Opposites attract." Each sex is attracted to what it lacks. A different age or lifestyle, a foreigner or different class or background can accentuate the difference by its seeming mystery.

**Joel:** Traditionally, beauty and power fed these images. Over the centuries, women's physical attributes are what have attracted men sexually. Women, on the other hand, have tended to respond more to men's power than to their looks. This power expresses itself in many ways: physical strength; dominance over other males; wealth; ability to mold the external environment through politics, art, and science; and even sometimes power in the relationship. (Though this is often a source of great conflict). Each sex subtly, or not so subtly, rewards the other for developing those qualities which attract it, and in so doing helps determine the ideals of masculinity and femininity.

**Diana:** At the same time men and women put each other down for those very differences: women for being "vain, overly emotional, weak and dependent" and men for being "competitive, domineering, aggressive, closed." This is just one of the many binds each sex puts the other in, one of the many ways each manages to feel superior to the other. The women's movement has been very critical of traditional sexuality based on beauty and power. Suspicious of romance, many feminists turned instead to friendship as a basis for love and became interested in how to infuse it with passion or sexuality. Friendship seemed closer to the new ideals, which involved getting rid of power plays and sex roles, so that there could be more equality and sharing. But the conditionings linked to sexual desire run very deep and don't change overnight merely because you don't like what's happening and postulate new values. In fact, these new values often make it even harder for you to look at how you function, because you will be judging, censoring, or disliking yourself according to the new ideals. You don't really give yourself a chance to understand, to see more clearly how and why you are that way and what you are getting out of it.

**Joel:** No action is feedback-free: Everything we do fuels something - some pleasure, fear, security, or habit. Often our newly acquired values are reactions against aspects in ourselves which we don't like. But reactions don't free us, since we act out our conditioning in a new disguise. A real change of values comes from a deep place that is not reactive.

**Diana:** In spite of heightened awareness in the last ten years, I think men are still sexually turned on to beauty and women to power in very deep ways. What's new is that people are no longer satisfied with this way of relating and, out of their dissatisfaction, are experimenting more with their lives.

**Joel:** Another aspect of romance that people don't usually want to look at, even though it brings great conflict, is what role "conquest" plays in this. You know, it's what those "love" stories are about in

novels and movies - the thing that comes before "The End," where they tack on "And they lived happily ever after." The "ever after" is, of course, real life. The stories stop just when their life together begins, because people are more interested in the romantic element that contains conquest and images. This is how I see it working: The lust or desire a man feels for a woman is not unlike the excitement of "the hunt." He sees something and he wants it, wants to possess it, take it, win it. And then, after getting it, he's no longer turned on in the same way, so he moves on to something else - another woman, business, or golf.

**Diana:** At first when the woman feels the power of his desire, this male energy being totally focused into her can turn her on tremendously, if the man interests her. It's hard not to feel flattered and special as the cause of this surge in him. This is a traditional source of female power. She might play hard to get if she has learned how to make the hunt more interesting. Yet, the game is itself often a source of great ambivalence, as power comes from withholding and passion from surrender. Playing hard to get often does in fact attract the man more.

**Joel:** Yes, it's more exciting to hunt tigers than rabbits. The woman, being the focal point of his desire, naturally assumes that she is the cause as well as the object of it; but the energy of that desire stems more from the play of it than from her as a person. He may not realize this either, and so he is not really lying to her, for these mechanisms often operate at unconscious levels. When involved in conquest, he is in one psychological space; afterwards he is in another. In fact, many men feel bad when they see this trend in themselves and understand how self-centered it is.

**Diana:** Both sexes are taught to play "conquest and surrender" from an early age. Girls learn very young, often from the way their fathers treat them, that men respond more to cutesy coyness than to directness. So they are rewarded for being manipulative and later criticized for it. This puts the woman in the double bind: She's forced to be gamy to keep the man's attention, but he puts her down severely for being a "tease" when she "leads him on without coming through." (This can be used to justify rape, because a tease deserves it, the logic goes.)

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**Joel:** Men learn young that what counts in the world is what other men think of them, and that women can be useful insofar as they bolster adequacy or impress other men. It's important to see how much the need for adequacy affects men's relationships and sexuality. In romantic literature conquest referred mainly to sexual conquest, because it was assumed that when a woman gave herself sexually, she gave herself totally. The so-called sexual revolution, however, has shaken this up, now that playing hard to get is in many circles considered old-fashioned. Since sexuality is no longer symbolic of total commitment, much of the hunt has shifted its focus from the sexual act to winning the total being, the heart and mind, of the other person. There is still much play in the sexual field, but the serious hunt is at a deeper level and plays itself out in many ways, with sexuality as just one aspect of it. Conquest can even be played out in the confines of marriage or a couple relationship, until one person wins the other totally.

**Diana:** Conquest can string itself out for years now, because people are more reluctant to get involved. They may not be as hard to get sexually, but fear of being trapped and missing out makes the field of emotional conquest more challenging.

**Joel:** One way conquest works is that there's more power in denial than in giving in to the other - this holds true for both the man and the woman. So much of the power in relationship is linked to who wants whom more, which can shift back and forth. This leaves little room for love. When you open up to loving someone, you become vulnerable, which gives the other person a certain amount of control over you. But since men are conditioned to want to be in control, and women are attracted to men's strength, which they also associate with control, there's a tendency for both men and women to mistake love and vulnerability for weakness. In conquest the one who opens to love is often punished, for that very opening may cause the other to withdraw. If a woman wins a man's heart, he can seem less strong and interest her less, too. Now women are more into hunting, while some men are trying

to open emotionally, so the dynamics are shifting.

**Diana:** Traditionally a woman's choice of man largely determined the life she would lead. Perhaps one reason women have been attracted to power is that they have not shared equally in institutional power; therefore they looked to men for survival and the quality of their lives. Self-interest can unconsciously condition one to act in ways that bring security and protection. Material dependency necessarily creates psychic dependency. If women were sharing material power, then they wouldn't need to hook onto men to survive. Naturally, all of this influences sexuality.

**Joel:** What is needed, of course, is a sharing of institutional power. What is also needed is for both men and women to develop an inner strength based on feelings of real adequacy, rather than relying on external sources of power to bolster themselves. Anything that comes to you externally can be taken away. Institutional power does not satisfy internal adequacy, and consequently you can never really get enough of it to feel secure. Real strength, which comes from one's capacity to meet challenges freshly, cannot be taken away.

**Diana:** It's easy to mistake external power for inner strength. Another problem is that in centering around a man, women tend to set their own development aside. Current reactions against this and against traditional sex roles have contributed their share to the confusion. As a result, each sex is putting the other one into new binds. Women's new message to men is "Be more open and emotional; give up some power and share it with me so we can have an equal relationship." Sometimes when the man lets go of traditional male ego supports and opens up more, paradoxically, the woman may lose sexual interest in him. I have often heard women say, "I have a problem. My husband has opened up to me in new ways; he is sharing his fears and weaknesses, and he has become a real friend now. I love him, but I'm not turned on to him sexually anymore, and I don't know what to do about it. We're both very upset."

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**Joel:** Images of male power are associated with being invulnerable - being "cocksure." When a man gets in touch with emotions and fears and lets go of old self-images, at first he doesn't have anything to replace them with.

**Diana:** In this transition he does seem floundering and lost. It's hard to be turned on by someone who isn't feeling good about himself. The man needs time to develop an identity based on inner sources of strength and adequacy.

**Joel:** The man's new message to the woman is "Be more independent - I don't want to support you or have you be so clinging and emotionally dependent." Yet a large part of him is still into having her center her life around him, for that feeds his adequacy, his desire for control, and gives him power and security. There is a freedom in having the women stronger and more independent, but he's used to the old pleasures of having her dependent on him. So men's double message to women is: "Be strong and independent, but still center around me."

The major problem is that both sexes are asking the other to change without being fully cognizant that they, too, must change. This means women getting stronger and more independent. A further necessity is for each sex to find this integration in the other attractive, which involves changing the way desire has been conditioned in us. Since the roots of attraction are so deeply conditioned, acknowledging this problem is not sufficient to change things unless the understanding is total - not merely intellectual, but also emotional. Real understanding, real "seeing" comes from the mind and the heart; only this kind of understanding can bring transformation.

**Diana:** In conquest, the two people are fundamentally not turning on to each other as much as to their own sense of power. Power is the ability to command attention and get what you want. So much of this is self-centered, on both sides. It's as if two egos or images were posturing in front of each other, using the energy they generate for their own adequacy needs. The pleasure and gratification involved are enormous. Momentarily, when you're feeling your power to attract, it does make you feel

good. Using each other this way, however, doesn't give any sense of support and actually continues to promote inadequacy, which generates the need to conquer or withhold again in order to feel adequate.

**Joel:** It works like a feedback loop. The more you get, the more you need, because all that is being fed is image; neither one's real sense of adequacy is being satisfied.

**Diana:** There's a seesaw quality to it. Have you ever noticed how often when one is feeling good, the other is feeling bad or one-down, and then it can switch? It's not a coincidence that when one is up, the other is down. It's difficult for both parties to feel adequate at the same time, because in conquest adequacy is linked to power, and when one has it, the other doesn't.

**Joel:** There's tremendous energy and excitement when two people first connect. The particular quality of that initial sexual flash has an in-built decline, since part of the hit is based on newness. Someone once remarked to me that the second night resembles the hundredth more than than the first night. The first time two people really connect (which may not literally be the first night), there is the quintessence of this extreme sexual energy, which is so powerful that one may remember it for a lifetime.

**Diana:** This intensity can actually create problems, because there is so much pleasure in it that people link it with the very essence of what sexuality is about and easily mistake its power for love. If you build an image of love with that at the core, naturally when that falls through, you become disillusioned about love. The passion of romance becomes a model to measure relationships with. It lingers in memory, making people feel something is wrong or missing when this particular kind of intensity is not there.

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**Joel:** Sex is good when it's "that," but it is "that" only within the whole context of conquest. Sexuality, like everything else, always occurs within a context. If you are attached to this particular expression of sexuality, it is necessary to keep the context of the relationship the same. This, of course, is not possible, for every relationship changes, either by growing or by becoming more rigid and habitbound. Trying to keep the context the same does not in fact result in keeping it the same, but actually insures that the relationship will move toward greater rigidity. This attempt to hold passion ends by destroying it.

**Diana:** Conquest sexuality, by its very nature, creates hurt and ambivalence. People want to eliminate the pain and keep the pleasure, not seeing that in order for this to occur, the whole package must change, including the source and nature of the pleasure. The problems are not merely incidental - they are the other side of the coin. Sexual conquest and the quality of energy it generates come together in a total package. Change the context in which it occurs, and the sex also changes in its nature.

**Joel:** If the source of the relationship is coming from a different place, then the sexuality and what attracts are entirely different, too. The problem is that we, from early ages, are taught to approach sexuality out of storybook and Hollywood romanticism, which offers merely glossy versions of conquest. We hunger for this excitement, and if we find it, the intensity further conditions the way we think about sexuality. Memories create the desire to recapture the same highs.

**Diana:** How you look at things influences everything you do. Sexuality is not only in the body, but in the mind. So much of being turned on or turned off has to do with the way the mind is looking at the relationship, the partner, the world. The conquest syndrome determines the way men and women think about and act toward each other - their ideals and expectations. Conquest is a headset that reduces what could be a rich and varied fabric of relating - a source of learning for both sexes - to a narrow range of possibilities, with the main focus on sex. Its particular approach to sex further limits the capacity of creative expression and traps men and women in a mold. It also creates a lot of antagonisms, with each sex feeling used, suspicious, and resentful, which makes communication

difficult. No wonder it's hard for men and women to open up with each other and break out of patterns.

**Joel:** Conquest usually involves an initiating male and a receptive female. Even when it's the woman who starts the dance by playing seductive, she usually waits for the man to take the sexual initiative. If she always leaves this first step to him, he can begin to feel it as a pressure. This can lock the man in a performance role in which he is so concerned with his images of adequacy that he can't be spontaneous and let go. Performance, comparison, and adequacy fears keep him from getting involved at deep, emotional levels, and the sexuality gets locked in fixed patterns which eventually dull it.

**Diana:** For the woman to take the initiative means facing the fear of rejection. Even within a relationship, when you make sexual overtures, you take the risk the other person will not be open to you at that moment. Constantly living with the possibility of rejection as part of the initiator's role is one reason men armor themselves and are less open emotionally.

**Joel:** It's important for a man to learn to allow a woman to turn him on. A man may think he would love women to come on to him, but when they do, this strikes against the chords of male conditioning. The normal male headset is that the man is in control and he does "it" when he wants. His own need, his internal push, is his driver. He's not ordinarily open to the woman turning him on out of her need. A woman who directly initiates is felt as a challenge to his adequacy - implying she's not satisfied or that she wants control. This way of reacting to her, much of it unconscious, reinforces the women's fear of rejection. The man is ambivalent, caught between wanting to stay in control and a desire for more spontaneity without having to "perform."

**Diana:** It seems that much of the male sex drive has more to do with the man's physiological rhythm or superficial attraction to a woman than with emotions or being sensitive to where the woman is at. The woman initially feels flattered at being the chosen one, but in time she feels taken for granted, and the mechanical aspects of his desire become evident to her.

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**Joel:** You could talk about people getting addicted to conquest like being addicted to drugs or a hit of any sort of intense stimulation. Your nervous system, your sexuality gets hooked into needing a certain level of intensity. An easy way to get intensity is through one-night stands. Conquest can also be played over and over within a relationship, in more subtle ways - through withholding affection, arguing, flirtations, or external dalliances which add the stimulation of jealousy. Quarreling can jack up the emotions and interest, and then surrendering to sex afterwards revives the conquest drama. When either isn't getting enough attention, he or she can begin to withhold, making the other win them again. But since the quality of passion in repeated conquest of the same person is dimmer than it was initially, going to others can seem more appealing. A new person turning on to you touches back into that initial raw desire. A woman might find, for example, that if another man wants her, her husband's interest rekindles. Being afraid to lose her, he feeds more energy into her, trying to capture her again. There is no way for her not to like this. This works the same for men, too.

**Diana:** If a relationship is based on romance, there is bound to be great fear involved at its core - fear that another person will generate the now lost extremes that you can't seem to recapture together. This fear can become part of the excitement in the relationship, since jealousy revives old feelings associated with the suspense of conquest: Who will be chosen?

**Joel:** Over a lifetime, conquest sexuality may develop in different directions. You can lose interest in conquest after you have run the number so many times that the very repetitiveness of its patterns gets dull. Even repeated newness gets old. Fast openings usually lead to fast closings, and this reinforces mistrust. Sexuality can open you too soon, before the relationship has built the supports to handle intimacy. Trust only grows in time - trust that the other cares about you and will take you into account.

**Diana:** Using the other for your own adequacy feels empty over the years, bringing cynicism and closing you to love. The conflicts that conquest sex generates over a lifetime can cause interest in sexuality to wane or even disappear. The fear of losing one's sexuality, stemming from disinterest, can drive men and women to further conquests, in a desperate attempt to prove they are as sexual as they used to be. Sexual problems such as difficulty with orgasm, impotence, and frigidity could well be linked with these conflicts.

**Joel:** One way people regenerate interest in sex is by making the stimulus hit stronger. This is why a lot of sexuality eventually hooks into taboo - things that at certain levels are frowned on or forbidden. Social taboo, or anything generally considered "kinky" - or perverse, can be used to rekindle sexual interest after one has become jaded with self-centered sex.

**Diana:** Generally, when people are looking for a relationship, what they're interested in is who is turning them on the most at any given moment. The spectacular pleasures of sexuality are ephemeral, however, and in and of themselves are not a good foundation for the kinds of merging that intimacy over time can bring. At first the quality of sexuality influences the rest of the relationship to a very great degree, but this soon reverses and then it's the other aspects that influence the sexuality. You can bury bad feelings initially through sex, but eventually this doesn't work. The intensities that come in a mature relationship are of a different order and have another flavor. Here the energy is coming from a place of true intertwining.

**Joel:** What you are talking about is really a movement from youth to adulthood. There is great reluctance to move into this new space, just as there is reluctance to grow up. The beginning of a relationship is a period of grace, where through the highs of openings and discoveries, a special energy permeates everything. Youth is also like a period of grace, offering tremendous energy that seems boundless. You can mistreat your body without paying many dues, so you can be more careless and carefree. Growing up means you have to be more careful, since health isn't just a given. But if you hone yourself as you age, you can actually gain energy and have more focus than in youth.

**Diana:** The same is true with relationships. The beginning is a time of innocence, but as a relationship matures, habits replace the sense of discovery; ways of relating become old, confined, and highly patterned. To keep a relationship new and alive, you have to put energy into it, for without attention, awareness, and care, habits will end by stultifying it.

Newness is the key to passion - for each person to be new in themselves and in the relationship. In the first blush of a young relationship, the two people are totally involved, immersed, in each other. Gradually, as they reenter the stream of life, other things - careers, children, friends - take over and the relationship becomes a context for living. Each person following his or her path out in the world can bring to the relationship rich sources of newness - people, ideas, and interests.

**Joel:** "Newness" doesn't necessarily dissipate over time; on the contrary, it may reemerge as two people get to know each other in depth. There can be great excitement and learning in that process. In fact, continuity allows certain depths of passion that only come from getting to know a person, for it takes time to develop intimacy and trust.

**Diana:** Newness also comes from working through problems: instead of trying to ignore or get rid of them, you can use them as an occasion to learn about yourself and the other person. Communication is the doorway for newness to enter. Communication is a dance that involves listening to the other person and trying to understand their needs and where they're coming from - which does not necessarily imply doing what they want. It does involve being more interested in understanding than in either blaming or convincing the other that it's their fault and that if only they would change, everything would be all right.

**Joel:** Approaching sexuality out of a willingness to explore, rather than expectations of how it should be, allows passion to live. Instead of diminishing, this kind of relationship builds in time.

**Diana:** As a relationship matures and communication gets deeper and more refined, merging can occur. Magic returns in this new space of discovery and adventure. The sexual energy generated by

this intertwining is more subtle, but no less powerful or sensual than conquest sexuality. When a man and woman merge instead of being locked in power plays, they get to a point of integration in which they transform each other; the differences between them become a source of expansion rather than antagonism.

**Joel:** What we are talking about is another way of looking at and approaching relationships and sexuality, in which the major interest is in exploring and growing together. We all hunger for solutions, but rather than defining or laying out a new way to be, we must all be pioneers if we're going to create a new way to live together. No real solution can come until both men and women truly see the nature of the problem, which lives in each of us and which also only lives in relationship. "Seeing" the problem brings forth change; seeing the patterns changes you. As long as men and women are hooked into romance, they can never meet each other totally. If we are to open opportunities to meet as human beings, we must leave the whole context of conquest. It takes equals to create the possibility of mature love.

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