

He Was My First, Too

I breathed a sigh of relief as I pulled into the only available spot behind the nondescript building where a therapist I'll call Michael has his office. DC's terrible traffic, along with the frustrating search for a parking spot, had frayed my already keyed up nervous system. A quick look in the rearview mirror told me nothing I didn't already know. My short hair, dark on top, silver on the sides, was as neatly styled as ever. The sagging under my eyes, unfortunate evidence of my age, was almost concealed in the lift of my bright and hopeful smile. I was feeling the invisibility of age, aware that my previously reliable sexual currency had begun to lose its value.

Back home, my new boyfriend had reassured me that I was ready for this and that he would support me however I needed. He'd reminded me to give my full loving attention to this client, to hold nothing back. He'd assured me it would only ripen our own connection. Our unconventional open relationship relied on this sort of positive and non-possessive communication.

Opening the car door, I recalled my mentor Vena's generous advice, whispered in a dark moment of self-doubt during my training: "Age doesn't matter. Just be your brilliant and beautiful self. Maturity is a gift in this work, as much as your willingness to be vulnerable and authentic. Remember, your clients will always be more anxious than you."

I stopped in the fifth-floor restroom to wash my face and give myself a once-over. My pits were dripping, but thankfully not showing through. I whispered a quick pep talk to the stressed-out man in the mirror: "You can do this. Your whole life has been a perfect preparation." Opening the door, I almost ran into a gaunt man with caved-in posture. His eyes darted up to meet mine, then scurried back to the floor in front of him.

"OK," I said to myself as the door swung shut behind him, "maybe I don't look as young and sexy as I used to, but at least I'm not dealing with socially constricting paranoia like he is."

Five minutes later, Michael formally introduced me to the gaunt man. I'll call him Ted. My job would be to guide and partner with him in his first successful sexual experience.

Surrogate partner therapy (SPT) grew out of Masters and Johnson's research into sexual dysfunction. Their work, although controversial both in the 1960s and now, proposed that problems of sexual functioning can be resolved in the context of sensual retraining within the couple. The impressive results reported in their groundbreaking book *Human Sexual Inadequacy* supported this theory, which still underpins contemporary sex therapy. Masters and Johnson further reported that clients who did not have partners could learn the skills of intimacy, relaxation, communication, and sexual functioning by going through the same structured couples exercises with a surrogate partner. Since then, trained surrogates have worked with therapists to help thousands of clients, both men and women, resolve sexual issues.

Without even knowing this work existed, I'd been preparing for it my whole life. I'd been through plenty of loves and losses, and a fair bit of personal therapy, all of which are way more important prerequisites for entering the training than physical beauty or sexual attractiveness. And after a first career as a modern dancer, a full-time private practice in bodywork and movement therapy had taught me to work sensitively with all sorts of clients.

Then in 2002, following a breakup with a long-term partner, I'd thrown myself into questioning everything in my life. Not a midlife crisis, I'd told myself, but rather a midlife growth spurt. I was especially determined to challenge the unconscious patterns and assumptions of my sexual expression.

An intense series of experiential trainings with the Body Electric School shook up my perspectives in all the ways I needed. In listening to other gay men's stories, I realized how privileged I'd been, living lightly in a healthy, well-balanced body, with a family who accepted and loved me, a career that rewarded me for being my wildly expressive self, and a life mostly free of sex-shame and internalized homophobia. I had struggled with coming out decades before, but sex had always worked for me. Throughout the '80s and '90s in New York City, I'd somehow, miraculously, sidestepped HIV and found degrees of happiness in a couple of deeply satisfying relationships.

I wanted to give back, to offer my well-trained body and hard-won emotional maturity to the service of other men's healing. Surrogacy seemed like the perfect way to apply many of the skills I'd developed as a movement therapist—meeting clients where they are, taking them into pleasurable experiences in their bodies, guiding them in how to live and move with more ease and freedom—toward even more personal, intimate work.

I had to wait four years before another gay man was accepted into the IPSA program and I had a training partner. Under the guidance of our trainer, Dr. Vena Blanchard, he and I danced through the intense two-week training, centered around sensate focus exercises that moved from hands to whole body caresses and eventually to non-demand genital touch. The star pupils in a small class of straight trainees with their assigned partners, we met each new assignment with playfulness and sincerity, and quickly found ourselves addicted to each other's touch. The biggest struggle we had was how to keep from rushing ahead into intercourse.

This whole process seemed so natural to me, as if this were exactly how sexual relationships were meant to develop. Some years later, explaining this to a group of sex therapists, I noted that the graduated sensate focus work reconstructs pathways in the brain, imprinting an organic process of sensual exploration that overrides dysfunctional mental patterns with new images of satisfying body-based intimacy.

SPT was commonly referred to as "sex surrogacy" until the '90s, when initial research showed that surrogates spend only about 10 percent of their time in specifically sexual activities with their clients; today, the men and women who do this work mostly refer to themselves as "surrogate partners." Training days wove in lectures about sex therapy principles, protocols for practice, sexual health, sexual dysfunctions, intimate communication, and working in triad with therapist and client for maximum therapeutic impact. The work seemed a perfect fit for me. I took copious notes on which I still rely when planning the work I'll do with a client.

Michael's call asking me to work with Ted—my first opportunity to work on a real case—came shortly after I completed my first training with IPSA. With Vena's approval, I said yes without hesitation. I've since learned it is wise to ask more questions about the client's motivation and readiness to face the challenges of an intimate relationship before agreeing, but thankfully, this case would be relatively smooth sailing, and I still look back on this experience with gratitude for Michael's sure hand on the tiller.

Michael told me Ted had a steady job, his own home, and a small group of supportive friends, but, at the age of forty-seven, no sex life. His parents and his Catholic school upbringing had drummed into him unrelenting guilt and shame around all things sexual, and he'd completely missed the early sexual explorations of adolescence. He'd been too afraid to venture into any erotic exploration. No petting, no playing around, no dating, no getting to first base.

In his late 20s, he'd admitted to himself that he was attracted to men, but by then, his patterns of anxiety had become so ingrained that at the first tremor of attraction, fear blocked out all attempts to make contact.

In the decades that followed, his feeble attempts at dating had inevitably fulfilled his worst fears. If he managed to tolerate an initial contact and accept a date, he'd freeze up at the first sensual overture. Once, at the end of a lovely dinner, when his date had leaned over to kiss him, he'd thrown up on the table.

Michael told me Ted had had years of useful psychotherapy, but sex still terrified him. That's where I came in.

I would join Ted in a carefully constructed practice relationship, to build his skill and confidence. If all went well, we'd get to know and trust each other emotionally and physically, and step by step—through lots of touching, breathing, and communication exercises—work our way toward pleasurable sexuality.

Within a few minutes of our first meeting, Ted told me he was ready to “invest in his future happiness.” What a wonderful phrase, I thought, and a harbinger of success for our work together. And this work is indeed a big investment, not unlike investing in a course of psychotherapy. There is no health insurance company in the United States that covers it, so it was going to be all out-of-pocket for Ted, a big expense he'd already prepared for.

I immediately loved Ted's courage and his willingness to wade into waters that were terrifying to him. I was moved by the power of his inner spirit, a spirit that had survived half a lifetime without the love it wanted and deserved, a spirit that would not accept a future life without the hope of an intimate relationship.

Sitting across from him in Michael's office, I realized I was looking forward to our time together. I gave him an open and welcoming smile, but the smile he returned didn't quite make it to his eyes. So I dove into a little pep talk I had prepared for this moment.

“Ted, I'm also a little nervous right now. That's natural at the beginning of any relationship. But I want you to know I've got experience that will help us get comfortable quickly, and with Michael's support, I'll listen for the right timing for each new step toward intimacy. You won't need to worry about my panicking, or getting angry, or running away when you are struggling. I'll stick with you as long as you need me.”

When Ted nodded hesitantly, I went on. “You say you are ready for a sexual and intimate relationship, and I believe you. This one—” I gestured between us, “—will be real, or as real as we can make it. But it will also come with ‘training wheels.’ During the course of our work together, you'll check in with Michael regularly.” We both looked to Michael, who nodded reassuringly. “He can help you process any rocky, emotional stuff that may emerge. I will also consult with Michael after each of our sessions so he and I stay united in our support for your process. How does that sound?”

Ted said he understood, even though his foot didn't stop its agitated shaking. With another nod from Michael, I laid out the structure I'd planned for our working time.

Because of distance, I suggested we meet for six two-hour sessions over a long weekend, and then repeat that a couple of weeks later. This split schedule would give Ted time for emotional processing while minimizing the number of vacation days he'd need to use. This pattern of working in short, intensive visits has continued to work best for most of my clients.

To make up for what he'd missed growing up, the first weekend would be a crash course in sensual experimenting, the kind most of us go through as teenagers. This would help his sexual self catch up to his mental and physical maturity.

The second weekend, we'd move into intimacy training of a more adult nature—getting naked together, sexual touching, maybe even kissing. If and when he was ready, perhaps on a third weekend, we'd head into the open sea of sexual play. Without a particular destination, but with Michael's piloting toward experiences most likely to boost Ted's self-confidence in future intimate encounters, we'd set our course by the stars—healthy and safe sex practices, clear communication of wants and needs, discovery of mutual interest.

The intention, I reminded Ted, was for him to meet his stated therapeutic goal—to feel ready to begin dating in the real world.

Both Michael and Ted agreed to my plan, and Ted signed the necessary releases so Michael and I could legally and ethically consult.

A couple of weeks later, Ted drove down to Charlottesville and settled into a hotel for the weekend.

To prepare, I had spent way too much time vacuuming, dusting, and scrubbing my loft, then lit a stick of sandalwood incense—for me, a meditative and masculine scent. I wanted Ted to feel special, anticipated.

I rolled out the king-size mat I'd purchased specially for this work—a single play-space ready for movement and breathing games, deep intimacy work, and rewarding relaxation.

I worried I wasn't prepared enough to meet the dual challenge of feeling my way into a relationship with Ted emotionally and physically while maintaining the necessary clinical awareness. I pored over my notes again, detailing the process that would plant new seeds for Ted's long-term psycho-social-sexual growth. A decade later, I fret less about my workspace, but this review of my training notes is still an important ritual of preparation for each new client. And finding the right balance of personal involvement and professional perspective is still the central challenge of this work.

When Ted arrived for our first session Friday evening, his spine stiffened when he saw the mat, so I sat him facing away from it. A cup of tea and some casual conversation did wonders to help him settle.

It was a relief for both of us when he took easily to the first exercises in relaxing into his breathing and scanning his body for sensations. So we proceeded into hand caresses, the first in a series of graduated sensation-based experiences in which each person takes a turn at "caressing" their partner. The tight structure of each exercise—first only the hand for five minutes, then the feet for ten minutes, then the face and hair for fifteen minutes, and so on—provides safety to explore both the active and the passive roles. The structure is intended to give clients freedom to map the pleasures to be found in touch, without asking for or expecting any particular response. Inevitably, there are also moments of clumsiness, anxiety, irritation, and even boredom, so it is crucial to discuss the feelings that come up at every role switch.

After a trembling and clammy beginning, Ted's touch became soft, warm, and dry, indicating a reduction in his anxiety. He also began to slow down and calm his breathing. A soft smile replaced the furrowed brow.

As we neared the end of our first two-hour session, I asked him to stand up for some simple movement games. Marimba music set a lighthearted mood as I had him shake and drop the

weight of each arm in turn. Many men resist trying anything new that might reveal their stiff and awkward movement patterns, but Ted went with it and discovered on his own how much this simple play relaxed his shoulders. I had him sway his weight back and forth in time with a slow soul tune—“Almost Like Being in Love” by Natalie Cole—then gambled that we could hold hands for a little slow dance. When he smiled and twirled me under his arm, I knew we had navigated past at least some of his discomfort.

Saturday morning, after more preliminary relaxation and breathing exercises, I took another risk and asked him to explore draping his body over mine as I lay belly down on the play mat. Even fully clothed, he was tentative at first, his breath fast and hot on my neck, but with reminders to tune into his breathing, he slowed down and let his body’s warmth melt into me. I’ve always loved the feeling of a man’s solid weight spreading my tensions away and told him so with an appreciative groan. When we changed roles, honeyed warmth swam between us as I felt his wiry body soften under my weight. I whispered into his ear, “Ohhhh. I love how you are letting me in.”

A few deep breaths later, when I rolled off, there were tears in his eyes. “I never allowed myself to do this before.”

“I’m so glad you are letting yourself now with me.” When I hooked his little finger with mine and looked in his eyes, I got teary, too. Letting him see my emotional response was important for him to trust me as his real partner, and I was glad I was comfortable with this show of vulnerability. We ended the session with him curled up next to me under a cushy, fleece blanket, my arm cradling his head. The sweetness lingered as I wrote my report to Michael.

But in the next couple of sessions, the forward movement in our relationship ran aground. Clients’ emotional struggles are expected and were discussed in our training, but the reality was unsettling for me, especially early on in my career. It was hard for Ted to keep his attention on what my skin felt like when he touched me or how he experienced my touch when I caressed him. Anxious self-criticism and echoes of church admonitions about the wickedness of the flesh drowned out the pleasure sensations. But I held steady, and we addressed these distractions head on. After caressing and being caressed in each new area of the body, we took time to identify where or when he lost his focus on the sensation and, more importantly, where or when he was able to bring himself back.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s normal to have trouble maintaining sensory attention without mental chatter. What’s important is to bring yourself back, again and again, to what you are feeling.” In the fourth session, I introduced the “May I/Will You” game—an opportunity to practice articulating desires to do something to the other or to receive something from the other. Each request is followed by actively consenting (or not) and following up with only those actions that have received an affirmative response. Then we change roles.

We started off slow, with easy to imagine and non-threatening requests: Will you caress my arm? May I hug you from the back? As Ted grew bolder, the game heated up. He requested we strip to our underwear, and I asked him if I could squeeze him all over. To my surprise, he said yes, but as I tightened my arms around his chest, he began to cry. He confirmed my suspicion that the tears were from inner conflict—getting touched in a way he longed for while being distracted by the critical voices telling him he didn’t deserve it.

I asked, “Does it help you stay present if I squeeze harder and move faster?” When I did, his crying flip-flopped with laughter.

“More?”

Ted said, “Yes.”

“Does it help if there is so much activity that your mind won’t have time to think?”

“Yes.”

After only a minute of vigorous wrestling, he caught my eye, and we both erupted in surprised laughter.

I got on top of Ted for more of the puppy dog tussling, even play-humped him. “How does that feel?”

He opened his eyes, cocked his head, and announced to the ceiling fan swirling lazily above us, “I like this, and it’s OK.”

I upped the ante. “It’s not just OK; it’s great! This pleasure in our play is a gift. Our being gay is a gift. What is happening here, now, is a gift for both of us and for the world.”
And he agreed!

I had him climb on top of me again, to fit himself to the contours of my body. We laughed as he tried it this way and that. Where do the knees go? Is that too much weight? Is this too high up? We explored how it felt if each of us moved our pelvises—rocking, thrusting. Thankfully, no disapproving voices appeared, and he only laughed when I crowed, “Ah, the pleasure of play sex!”

On Monday morning, in our last session of the first weekend, as we cuddled and talked, we played with each other’s hands for a long time—beginning a delicate and wistful leave-taking.

“Sweet,” he said as he gazed down at my fingernails grazing his wrist.

“Delicious,” I moaned into his ear, breathing in a distinctly masculine scent.

Then shifting energy abruptly, I growled and squeezed all the muscles up and down his sides. He laughed, grabbed my hips, and rolled me half off the couch, shooting me a goofy smile. When I pinched his nipples, his eyes shot wide.

“Yes?” I twisted them. “You like?”

He nodded and bit his lip.

“I assure you, you’re not alone.” And gave him a sly smile.

Our ending time came too soon. Pulling away was like pulling taffy. The flood of sensual pleasures had begun to work their magic on both our bodies.

That evening, I had to think carefully about how to handle professional boundaries when my boyfriend asked me how it had gone. In our agreement to share openly with each other, I still needed to choose my words carefully. I told him of my tenderness and my pride, how well I thought my client had done, how well I had handled the challenging moments. Later, in bed together, we relished long, luxurious skin-time, blissfully free of the need to keep watch for demons, Ted’s of course, but also my own. I became aware just how wonderful it could be to surrender to the simple pleasures of each moment. My work with my client was indeed adding richness to my boyfriend-time.

Two weeks later, Michael called to say Ted felt confident enough to sail on into more specifically sexual currents. He wanted to head right into kissing, as much as part of him still dreaded it. When Ted arrived to begin our second weekend of sessions, I insisted on chatting and relaxing on the couch together first. When he was able to slow his breathing and let himself be cradled in

my arms, I had him lie back and close his eyes. “Don’t do anything. Just sense what my lips on your neck and face feel like.” His labored breathing soon shifted into barely audible moans of pleasure, and for five dreamy minutes, I lost myself in the subtle hint of Old Spice tang on warm, salty skin.

When he tried kissing me the same way, he stopped within seconds, saying he felt too clumsy. So I suggested kissing requests in alternation. With not much time for each kiss, and one simple request to fulfill (mine or his), he finally got into it. When he surprised me by initiating our first mouth-to-mouth kiss, I pulled back, locked eyes with him, schooled my face into the sternest expression I could muster, and asked, “Please sir, may I have a full minute of that?”

“Uh-huh.” He grinned and leaned in as if to prove to himself he could last that long!

When he finally pulled away, it was my turn to grin. “That—” I paused for dramatic effect, “—was heavenly.”

He looked into my eyes, listening from deep in his own sensation as I continued. “I love sensually focused foreplay like this. Many men do. And I want you to love it, too. I know you missed it growing up and are still afraid of it. You know, Michael and I are both convinced that lots of experience in this sort of timeless pleasure will build your confidence as a lover.”

He nodded. “I know. That’s why I’m here.”

Many long moments later, I watched him pull on his clothes in a sensory stupor then stagger off toward his hotel. I got on the phone to Michael immediately to rave about our success.

On Sunday morning, however, his old demons stormed in with a vengeance, this time catching me off guard. The warm stream of body pleasures had begun to fog my clinical navigation. Years later, although more alert to this danger, I am still more likely to throw caution to the wind and let the therapist hold the steering wheel while I ride the client’s emotional waves by his side.

“What’s going on in your head, Ted?”

“All I can hear is how bad I am for wanting this.”

“You don’t believe those voices anymore, do you?”

“Not really.” He didn’t sound convinced.

Although both of us were discouraged, I suggested a sensual shower, an activity he had really gotten into before. He relaxed a little in the warm water, but nagging anxiety would not let him go. His body would not soften to enjoy my touch, and he showed no urge to wash or caress me. He just sobbed in my arms—exhausted and frustrated by the internal struggle.

And, I have to admit, my self-doubt was back, too. Was he having trouble because I wasn’t young or sexy enough to keep him interested?

After Ted left, I told Michael in a panicked phone call that I feared Ted might bail out of the process because of the intensity of his inner struggle. But with Michael’s urging, Ted did return for our next session, and I guided him back into what had seemed most helpful: playful tussling, rolling on top of each other, soft caressing. I really wanted us to find our way back to those earlier glimpses of hopefulness.

My steady stream of instructions and lots of rolling around, skin-on-skin, finally produced arousal in both of us. I sat us facing the mirror, his back leaning into me, and dribbled oil down his belly so he could show me how he liked to masturbate. It was a pretty sexy sight. Although not all the way hard, he surprised us both by spewing come up his belly!

“Oh, no. I wanted to hold out longer.” Discouragement was in his voice, but I started whooping and hollering in celebration.

Then he got it. “I guess this was a big deal, huh?”

“Yup. Absolutely! This was your first sexual experience all the way to ejaculation in front of another man.” We stayed there admiring the results for a while, a smell like new shoots in springtime filling our noses. We discussed how important this step was—how important each step had been.

Session twelve was scheduled to be the last one for a while, so there was pressure to perform—not usually a good thing for men of a certain age—but we wasted no time getting naked. I had him lie back, sat between his legs, and talked him into deep breathing while softly cupping his genitals. He initiated pelvic rocking with his breathing, and I praised him for remembering it. Then I began to apply oil and massaged from his inner thighs to his diaphragm, flooding the whole region with teasing stimulation. I paused a couple times to let his body enjoy the cresting sensations, a partial erection, shivering skin.

“How about participating with the shivering? Try out some shaking, and undulating, and rocking motions.”

I don’t know who started it, but soon we were growling, barking, and whining. Animal noises drowned out any residual negative self-talk. Our flushed faces and erect penises upped the charge even more. I coached him to picture images that turned him on, and he went back and forth between looking at me and looking inward at his erotic imagery. His loud and splashy orgasm was followed by a self-satisfied grin. Then with playful banter, he began to egg me on.

“Why not help me out instead of just gabbing and gawking?” I asked. “Stroke my inner thighs or something.”

When I came at his first touch, he crowed, “Couldn’t do it without me, huh?”

“Nope.” And I gloated inwardly at our successes, his and mine.

We took a short shower together, chuckling like teammates after a good game, got dressed, then lingered over tender goodbye kisses. I sent him off with congratulations for the good work he had done.

By accident, a month later, I saw Ted at a networking cocktail hour for gay professionals in DC. I made brief eye contact to acknowledge discreetly that I was aware of him, and he came right up to me. Through the noisy chaos of men and women chatting each other up, he leaned in and whispered, “I’m practicing my pelvic pump right now.” Then he stood back, gave me a wicked grin, and swaggered over to talk with someone else.

The anxiety-paralyzed man I had met in Michael’s office a couple of months earlier was nowhere to be seen. Ted was a lean, sexy, self-assured man looking to connect—ready for business or pleasure, whichever came first.

In the years since, I’ve worked successfully with a variety of clients, many who were able to meet their goals by making good use of this practice relationship. Some needed my experience and maturity to guide them; some, my body’s playfulness and sensuality to break through their mental chatter; some, my firm determination to stick to the boundaries that gave us safety while keeping us focused on their long-term goals. Others were less successful in staying the course all the way

into a harbor of authentic connection and pleasurable sexuality, clinging as they did, to their heavy emotional rigging. Some had trouble at first getting past my not looking like a porn star. But most, like Ted, have been so wrapped up in their stories about themselves that my concern about being too old hasn't even come up. And in this vessel of limited time and structured intimate space, I've learned to jettison my own baggage to fly with the wind on the sea of love.

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