

## On Kissing

See! the mountains kiss high heaven,  
And the waves clasp one another;  
No sister flower would be forgiven  
If it disdained its brother;  
And the sunlight clasps the earth,  
And the moonbeams kiss the sea --  
What are all these kissings worth,  
If thou kiss me not me?

From *Love's Philosophy* by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I'll admit it: I was on the rebound. I had just had my heart broken a few weeks before, and I was on my first official date with a guy I had recently met; his name is Ed. We were sitting on my couch after a wonderfully and creatively planned evening: we walked around a lake, we ate dinner, we made cookies, we watched a movie, and, most importantly, we had spent the evening asking each other questions from lists we had both prepared prior to the date. The questions ranged from "What day in your life would relive if you could?" to "What's your all time favorite TV show?" He was attractive, he was smart, he had what my parents' call "earning potential," he was funny, he was musical, and most importantly, he shared my passion for and devotion to my Christian faith. What could go wrong? Well, I'll tell you.

After we watched the movie, Ed said, "You should know that I have made a commitment not to kiss anyone until my wedding day." I *said*, "Oh really? That's great." I *thought*, "O sweet Jesus why have you burdened this boy with such a conscience? What a waste on such an attractive guy!" I had my first kiss when I was twelve, and to be quite frank, I just really like kissing. Don't get me wrong – I do not go around indiscriminately kissing random people; but when the

opportunity presents itself, I really like kissing. And here was this guy whom I really liked and really liked me back, and we weren't going to kiss?



Out of a world of laughter  
Suddenly I am sad. . .  
Day and night it haunts me,  
The kiss I never had.

From *Midsummer* by Sydney King Russell

There are many different kinds of kissing: parent to child, sister to brother, friend to friend, lover to lover, even pet to owner, I suppose. The Romans, in fact had names for different kinds of kissing: *osculum* means friendship kiss, *basium* means passionate kiss, and *saviium* means deep kiss, a.k.a. the French kiss. What I have been thinking about is passionate kissing, lover to lover -- *basium* if you will. Passionate kissing is so common in our culture: it's on TV, it's in the movies, it's in the lyrics of popular songs, it's in the halls of schools--it seems it is everywhere. (I have noticed that it seems to go on around me quite a bit more at times in my life when I am not doing it.) Kissing is an integral part of our Western culture, and I think it's about time we figured out what all the fuss is about.



Well, Ed and I ended up becoming involved in dating relationship, and things were going great. We spent time together watching movies, eating out, eating in, spending time with friends . . . it was pretty much a typical dating relationship--except that we didn't kiss. We held hands and did all the cuddling stuff – but no kissing. My friends and family found the entire thing to be totally weird, but everyone couldn't help but respect it some way. Ed's reasons

for not wanting to kiss were that he wanted to respect and honor me, and he wanted to be sure that he was not only interested in me for his own physical gratification: that's pretty hard to argue with. I have been in relationships in which the intention of both parties was to go no further than kissing in the physical aspect of the relationship, but things somehow went way beyond that anyway. Ed had a valid point, and I understood it intellectually -- but how I dealt with it emotionally was a whole different story.



Alas, how easily things go wrong!  
A sigh too much, or a kiss too long,  
And there follows a mist and a weeping rain,  
And life is never the same again.

From *Sweet Peril* by George MacDonald

Hollywood has certainly profited from the romantic kiss. Though it's hard to believe in this day of "anything goes" cinema when bare breasted women are as common in a movie theatre as popcorn, kissing was once considered erotic and not entirely suitable for public viewing. Still, kissing has been on the big screen since the big screen became -- well, big. The first couple to ever be recorded on film kissing was John C. Rice and May Irwin. This famous kiss was featured in the 1896 film appropriately entitled *The Kiss*. The longest kiss in cinema history was featured in the film *You're In the Army Now*; this kiss between Regis Toomey and Jane Wyman (a.k.a. Mrs. Ronald Reagan) and lasted three minutes and five seconds. Kissing in the movies has only picked up from there; even action or adventure movies seem to include a sub-plot that involves kissing along the way.



Kissing is a deeply personal act that can help provide a bond between two people, and it is an act that separates their relationship from the others in their lives. Ironically, I realized this most intently when Ed and I weren't kissing. Our relationship was wonderful, but I felt like something was missing. Avoiding kissing each other was becoming such an issue that *not* kissing made kissing unbelievably prominent in our relationship. I suppose it was much like telling someone not to think about a huge red and purple striped elephant; the first that comes to mind is a big old striped pachyderm. During this time, I began to realize how important physical affection is to me. And this only makes sense: our bodies are wired to connect physically, not only for purposes of procreation, but also for emotional and relational stability, as well. I entered my relationship with Ed telling him that I had decided to embrace his decision not to kiss. (How evolved and unselfish of me.) That lasted about three weeks. By about a month into our relationship, I was frustrated -- and I made sure that Ed knew it.



Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb;  
honey and milk are under thy tongue.

Song of Solomon 4.1

According to historians, or at least according to Vaughn Bryant Jr., professor and head of the anthropology department at Texas A&M, the first erotic kiss was exchanged about 1500 B.C. in India. Apparently, there is no evidence that such a kiss occurred before then. The kiss doesn't seem to have been very

prominent in many cultures for a while after that, but leave it to our friends the Romans to make kissing popular. They kissed hands, they kissed statues of their gods, they kissed robes, they kissed each other -- my kind of people. It only makes sense that they went ahead and named the different kinds of kisses.

Though various ultraconservative Christian sects have seen kissing as sinful through time, there are all sorts of references to kissing in the Bible; many of them are simply kisses of greeting between Christian brothers. (The sisters aren't so much mentioned, I'm afraid.) But there is more than brotherly affection going on the Bible. Song of Solomon 1.2 says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine." Better than wine, huh? If you are tempted to think this kiss a peck, look at the same book in 4.11 (describing the same pair of lovers): "Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue." There is tongue interaction going on here, and this is a *basium* kiss for sure -- two lovers doing some intense, big-time kissing.



I had made the decision early on in my relationship with Ed that I was not going to talk him out of his decision about kissing: I didn't want him to end up resenting me for it, and I knew that if it wasn't his decision, he was going to regret it. But my frustration grew as I felt more and more like I was in an idealized relationship that I would never be able to live up to. We were passed the exciting pitter-patter of the heart stage, and real life has settled in. Ultimately, I told Ed that I was committed to staying in the relationship because I truly cared for him

and was enjoying his company, but I also told him that he needed to understand that one of my key needs in the relationship was not being met.



The moment eternal - just that and no more -  
When ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core  
While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut, and lips meet!

Robert Browning

Most people who like to kiss like it because it feels good. There is good reason for that, too. Kissing is a highly complex physical act that makes all sorts of stuff happen in the body. Kissing produces oxytocin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, the hormones that make you feel so good when you kiss. Oxytocin, incidentally, is also released when a woman nurses her baby; it is thought to establish attachment between the mother and child. Is it a coincidence that the attachment hormone is released while kissing? Probably not. Nature is looking to get people kissing and emotionally attached so that they will establish a relationship and carry on the human race. Pretty sneaky, if you ask me.

Another obvious reason why kissing is so sensual is that the mouth is loaded with nerve endings; anyone who has ever accidentally bitten their tongue or taken a baseball in the mouth knows that. According to the website *WebMD*, the mouth has so many sensors because it is so essential to survival: babies use their mouths to suckle their mothers' breasts, and all of our nutrition is first taken in through the mouth. The lips are even more sensitive than the genitals.



Ultimately, he decided that it was time to break the commitment he made, and we did end up kissing. It was wonderful and romantic, but I think the true lesson for both of us was not about kissing, but was rather about negotiation and sacrifice in relationships. Neither of us was wrong in our thinking – we were simply different in our thinking. The catch was that the difference was about an aspect of our relationship that involved us both. Kissing is a wonderful thing that can truly create connection (and fun) between two people. Strangely enough, I think it was the ongoing debates and compromise about kissing, not the actual kissing itself, that brought Ed and I closer in the end.

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