



Personal Reflection

Experiencing the Marital Bed

by Michele Thompson

Abstract

This paper examines the marital bed through existential themes of spatial, temporal, corporeal and relational experience. It is a collaborative effort in that it relates anecdotes contributed by twelve people who each described – in writing, in interviews and in conversation – very personal moments of life in the “marital bed”. Through other eyes, one sees that what seemed unique has echoes of a shared experience. The everyday noises and movements, the negotiations, even the sorrows of that particular place, are so familiar that, in recognising them as true to one’s own experience, one wonders, “Is it like this for others too?”

What is presented here is the culmination of researching a phenomenon by trying to capture it in writing and rewriting, in order to give form to the truth in an experience, while knowing that, by writing it, the real truth becomes limited. Phenomenological writing becomes a conversation which is at once both intimate and universal. The marital tales speak to a specific journey, but, as when one recounts details of any special trip – say Paris, for example – the listeners are drawn inward to their own experience. Personal remembrance enmeshes with public exposure so that the collective sighs, “Ah yes, Paris.” And therefore we know some small fragment of an abandoned bed as truly as we know the family bed.

Routinely, in making our bed, the action is only a rung on the climb to prepare for the day. Thoughtlessly, robotically, it is a closing act for the night of rest and readying for the night after the day to come. On busy days, I hurriedly make the bed, but my mind is “elsewhere”. On leisurely days, when time is not pressing, I may indulge in a more relaxed manner in the task of making or changing the bed. Then I release the latent ceremony, perform the celebration held at bay in ritual. The duvet is pulled off, the pillows thrown to the floor; sheets are tugged and discarded for laundry. With the mattress exposed, I reach for the fitted, tightly woven cotton, exerting

force at the edges, always pulling to expand the elastic to cover corners. Already I am relishing the freshly laundered smell of bed tonight! I hover to straighten wrinkles. The foundation for the top sheet is completed, and now I unfold the golden origami, and throw it open so that the air may catch and expand it, like a parachute softly landing. An ingrained urge to straighten and tuck intrudes in thought, and then evaporates. This bed serves two; my spouse prefers loose ends. As the duvet settles from its hover, I pull off the sodden pillow covers and throw the pillows – tossing, pouncing so as to reform plumpness. I anticipate how my head will touch this

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pillow tonight, momentarily holding, then drifting down while air quivers in release. I foreplay the ending of my day before I play its moments out.

On weekends I usually refresh the bed. While bundling the sheets for the laundry room, I ponder on the nature of this lumpy bed: a thing consisting of a frame and mattress, pillows and coverings, and all the details that comprise the shape and function of a bed as I know it. To this odd contraption I retreat every evening, and lie down for sleep to contract my day into blissful anticipation of waking up the next day refreshed. Of course, I am not alone in this bed. This is a marital bed, a shared bed. But what is being shared? We share our presence with each other, the moods and the touch of our bodies – yes, somehow the marriage is shared in this marital bed. But how is this sharing experienced?

Commonly, to “share” a bed means that the “other” will have an equitable portion of my bed. Share, in this sense, is a transitive verb which grammatically requires an object to receive the action. Therefore, the subject, always “I”, shares or apportions my bed with the other, you. Since I lie on this bed with my body, I may empathize with your sharing, listen to your sharing, but the experience of sharing is mine. You, my spouse, may join me. My son and my daughter both have been welcomed to share my bed, our bed. Yet the narrative must be told in the first person, using the singular first person pronoun, “I”.

People who share a marital bed have offered the following anecdotes. These anecdotes are tentatively organized around the existential dimensions of lived space, lived time, lived body, and lived relation. Each anecdote seems to point to some aspects of meaning of the phenomenology of the marital bed. Of course, these experiential accounts do not exhaust the variety of stories that can be told and the examples that can be given. But perhaps they may begin to bring the uniqueness of the shared marital bed into view.

The World of the Marital Bed

The Experience of “Lying”

Here I lie upon this bed. And, as my eyes roam the textures and cracks in the white ceiling above, I recall so many times of lying down when sleep would not come or was not my goal. This same mattress that receives my body has been my world of marriage. This bed has history. It knows of love and loneliness, compassion and pain, play and boredom, gentleness and anger, comfort and fear.

The Guest Bed

My husband is away for work, so I invite a childhood

friend visiting from Australia to come for supper so that we can catch up on each other’s lives. As it is getting late, and after a few too many glasses of wine, she agrees to stay the night. When we lie together, and I listen to her tales from Australia, I am a young girl again, having a sleep-over. The bed ceases to be a marriage bed. And yet this is my bed. I have full dominion over the space and secrets of this bed.

The Empty Bed

I awake in pitch black. I am far on my side, facing away. Even so, I suddenly realize she is not there. I don’t need to turn, or move my foot to prove her absence. I feel it. Her slow quiet breathing is missing. There is no slight indent in the middle of the bed. I sense she’s gone because I feel her absence. Now I reach out in the dark void, stretch my hand across the bed to find cool, rumpled sheets. She’s gone. I turn on the light to check. I must go to find her.

Invasive Joy

My daughter jumps and slams her body playfully upon the bed amidst my squeals of “You’ll break it!” But I, too, am already playing. The bed almost groans, receiving both bodies like a one-two pounding in the gut. It exhales our weight slowly. She is taller than I – all limbs and flying blonde hair, pinning my arms and legs to render me immobile. We pause to breathe, but I manoeuvre my arms to tickle her and wrestling begins again. We oust the decorative pillows in the grabs and bounces, and tousele the once tidy bedspread into rumpled clumps of cloth. Finally, the wails cease and we fall depleted, side by side. I glance at her; she is hot and flushed, breathing deeply. I reach my hand to hers, twisting my shoulders to reach further down the bed. We both stare at the ceiling, catching air. I close my eyes to sear this game into my being, even as the vibrating steel springs have quieted. The sacredness of my marital bed temporarily invaded with childhood pleasure and joy ... Does she realize? (It was in this bed that you, my daughter, were conceived and nurtured.)

The Haggard Bed

I dread climbing in beside him. I settle in tentatively, waiting for the snoring to begin. I sigh inwardly, aware that I must find space between his snores to fall asleep. The guttural sounds begin to swell, increase in violence. I feel angry that there is no place of rest, of sleep, for me upon this bed. I grasp my pillow, sit up on the only bedside that I will ever own, and groggily seek the couch. I resent the constant negotiation of sharing a bed!

The spatial world of the bed is experienced in terms of its landscape for our bodies to lie down. We are

now of-the-bed as much as in-the-bed. Rather than seeing the bed we may see the world from our bed. For example, the smooth, stippled or contoured ceiling may reflect memories of wakeful nights or boring times when sleep would not come, or moments of loving ecstasy.

Sometimes the bed invites our fatigued bodies to its soft embrace. Or we may retreat to the bed as if it were an easy chair where we read a book or watch television. Sometimes the bed accommodates or calls us, as marital beings, to our bedded lives. In being bed for us, the bed allows us to “be in bed”. My spouse and I indent the bed; impress ourselves, our habits, into the softness of the springs of foam and cotton. As the bed fills up with us, we fill up our bedded existence: prone bodies, spread out or curled up limbs, the face seeking comfortable contact with the pillow or sheets, the body seeking its untouched privacy or touchful contact and community with the sharer of our bed.

The term “marital” establishes an exclusive membership to the realm. So, while the bed invites, it is also “by invitation only”. A history of permissions is evident in a child’s carefree jumping; one that suggests a mother’s generous extension of belonging rights. The teen’s excess energy is partly released in the spiral coils, in the compression of air in upholstery fabric, so that the object absorbs a physical force the parent could not contain. Both bodies are safe in this momentary place of play.

We might invest a make believe “as-if” into an emptied spot in the bed. The woman whose spouse is away could make it a dormitory, or spread her books to make an office. She may take possession of the whole, or may arrange pillows to keep a smaller, cosier living space. If a spouse is away on business, his spot is saved at home. Or perhaps snuggled into if he is especially missed. But what of his bed in a hotel room? Van Lennep (1969/1987) reminds us that the hotel room “is free from all historic meaning, from all habit and tradition, duty, and obligation” (p. 213) and is therefore, unlike the bed at home, an invitation to adventure. Yet, the businessman or woman may lie in that generic bed missing spousal closeness, too. There are now two empty spots. He is remembered, his body missed; yet, for him, she too is absent, elsewhere, even though she has not left their home. These feelings of nostalgia are reminders that the bed is a unique space where the individualities of our practical existence are suspended, where we experience oneness, togetherness, the sharedness of our lives.

Yet, the limited physical space of the bed may proffer challenges with which married partners must contend.

How do we react in close quarters? Small movements and noises resonate in confined areas; so loud snoring, for example, becomes an overwhelming sound. The being of the other, the wheezing partner, becomes a noisy object, an obstacle to rest that a spouse cannot overcome. One flips and sighs while the other’s snorts resound from wall to wall. At times, one partner seeks freedom in a distant room, upon a smaller, yet wholly owned, couch.

Bedtime

The Nostalgic Bed

Gabriel, the middle-aged, self-satisfied husband in James Joyce’s “The Dead”, mourns woefully when he learns that he never was the true love of his wife:

It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life. He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife. His curious eyes rested long upon her face and on her hair: and, as he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange friendly pity for her entered his soul. (1914/1982, p. 223)

The Angry Bed

If she dares lean over to kiss me “goodnight”, I will pretend to sleep. I can hear by her breathing that she is not sleeping yet. I can’t believe her words, her venom. I need space; I am suffocating here. I will not move. I don’t recognize her. Perhaps if I extend my arm to touch her, send a sign of reconciliation ... No, she turns her back and slides to her edge of the bed. Besides, my arm weighs a ton. Shall I move to the couch? I need more air. I’m hot. Will she think she got to me? I won’t move. Time passes slowly and I notice my pressed breathing. I can’t sleep like this. My hand gradually crosses over the bed that lies between us until it finds her arm. Her fingers touch my hand. I exhale, relieved. Then sleep comes and takes me.

New Life

I awake, instantly anxious about leaving the bed. My son and daughter watch cartoons beyond the closed door. They normally climb on the bed to wake me, but there is a new presence beside me – this man, a husband. I lie here, fully knowing the potential for disaster by willing this new marriage. For years, I apologized to my son and daughter in all my efforts to imitate normalcy. Between despair and pretending to hope, I have found what I think is the real thing, real hope. I readjust my arm to watch my new husband. I know by his breathing that he is awake, and I do not

break the secret. My children increase the television volume. He turns toward me, holds me, and I soften. He has been held under the microscope of relatives and friends, and they concur he is a man worthy of the fragile gift of family. Still, fear nags me. There are no guarantees ...

What is our sense of time in the marriage bed? When it is time to go to bed, sleep tends to come by overcoming us. We experience less falling asleep than waking up. But how is time experienced before we fall asleep? When we lie idly, arms bent, hands under our heads, daydreaming, we are fully engaged in another time (past or future), but one that is still “re-present-ed” in the now. When we do not want to meet the day, or hope to stave it off a while, we linger under the covers to “buy some time” in bed. Maybe we lavish it like a gift on our partners. “Just stay a while longer.” Sometimes, we must consciously prioritize our lovemaking, and “steal” time. Jim Croce’s (1972) lyrics speak all lovers’ romantic angst about time:

*If I could save time in a bottle,
The first thing that I'd like to do,
Is to save every day
till eternity passes away,
Just to spend them with you.*

Our attitude toward the other in bed can seemingly expand or extend the length of hours passing. When we are engaged in “pillow talk” or reading, or watching television, it seems our bedtime moments pass in unison. Van den Berg (1970) says, “It isn’t likely that a marriage will last if the times of man and wife are too divergent. Two different tempos permanently at the same table, not to mention the same bed” (p. 124).

When time seems to make the bed a prison, we experience the bed as “doing time”. If one remains awake listening to the noises of the night, checking the fluorescent clock’s passing of minutes, it is a solitary dark. The insomniac endures a night that stretches on interminably while listening to the partner’s rhythmic breath. In beds of anger, we attend vigilantly to the moments passing. Our breath is meted out in altered tempo; every move is disguised covertly as if it were a perfectly normal routine. Illness can sentence us or our partners to long periods of pain, pain that consumes thoughts, pain that consumes time.

Sometimes, the blessed joy of sanctuary may be unbound in the marital bed. We call “time out”, and splay full limbs across the covers, ready for massage of aching muscles. In new second marriage beds, we

linger in renewed hope before stepping into the world of children and blending families. In journeys through grief that want to separate our lives, we hold on to each other, groaning, gripping each other, rocking to and fro like pendulums, rhythmically beating out time.

Midmorning, bright sun gleaming down, warming our bed and bodies, promising the luxury of uninhibited activity, may be the best time for sex. Except that the shade of late afternoon softens features, and cheese and red wine set the stage for robust nourishment between intercourse and snoozing. Notwithstanding, if I imagine my same lover in the dark of night, I recognize the best hours for lovemaking as the midnight hours. The best bed time for making love may be any time.

The Body Bed

Desiring Desire (In Vain)

I sense no desire in her. But I cannot help myself. Driven by a lustful hunger, I approach her unresponsive body. However, I cannot love without feeling desire. I shift back to my side of the bed, embarrassed. I have been too bold, too wantonly excited. Unguarded. She seems to lie frozen even though her thighs and breasts and lips summon me. Is she annoyed? Disgusted? Disappointed? Does she feel lost? I want to speak and talk about marital love. But I dare not and cannot speak any longer about dreams forgotten and betrayed. My heart is numb. My penis withers.

The Scented Bed

I love this bed, our bed, because it is impregnated with his smell. It's not just cologne or soap; it is his scent. Something commingled that makes the smell of him. That hint of him that I love is captured deep in the fibres of the pillow and sheets. It's not in any other bed, but my bed, our bed at home. It is this bed I want to share, this bed I want to play in.

The Fantasy Bed

I peek around the walk-in closet to where he lies on our bed. I am wearing the soft red T-shirt that turns him on, and black strappy high heels. Nothing else. I am a tease tonight. His eyes widen as he realizes that a confident, overbearing wench is coming to him, to the bed. “Oh, you know I like those shoes,” he chuckles.

Procreating

Between days 10-18 of my menstrual cycle, our bed becomes a different place. In preparation for sex, I dim the lights and roll up a towel to elevate my hips. This helps his sperm to channel to my uterus. I wait

for my husband to climb on top of me. I worry that the ritual, the duty, reduces his desire for me. It has been a year of trying. Does he see me as a chore on his “to do” list? Or does he join with me in love, in hope? I fear he’s only taking pity because he knows I want a child so badly.

Feeling Desired

And as she melted small and wonderful in his arms, she became infinitely desirable to him, all his blood-vessels seemed to scald with intense yet tender desire, for her, for her softness, for the penetrating beauty of her in his arms, passing into his blood. And softly, with that marvellous swoon-like caress of his hand in pure soft desire, softly he stroked the silky slope of her loins, down, down between her soft warm buttocks, coming nearer and nearer to the very quick of her. And she felt him like a flame of desire, yet tender, and she felt herself melting in the flame. She let herself go. She felt his penis risen against her with silent amazing force and assertion and she let herself go to him. She yielded with a quiver that was like death, she went all open to him. (Lawrence, 1928/1974, p. 225)

The corporeality of the bed is experienced in the way that the bed provides us comfort. It is the place where my bodied existence is confirmed (or denied) by the bodied existence of the spouse, partner, or lover – whether of dreams or infidelities – who shares this marital bed with me. Spousal sex in the marital bed calls forth the bed as “marital”. It is the space of erotic relations where lustful love remains the source of satisfaction of the marital bed. By being gazed upon in just this sexual way, we are brought to life by the consciousness of the other. In being brought to life as a sexual partner and a spouse, both persons orient themselves to a unity, that “interfusion between sexuality and existence, which means existence permeates sexuality and vice versa” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 196).

Two bodies intermingle, hands search and caress, lips press and hold, limbs clutch and urge. In seeking ecstasy, one provokes it in the other. Finally, though we are in our own bodies, and while my experience is self-absorbed, I am in orgasmic existence contingent on the other presence. As Alphonso Lingis says, “the pleasure of the other excites the caressing hands: their pleasure is pleasure in the pleasure of the other” (2007, p. 1). Our bodies shudder, our fluids mingle, heart rates finally slacken. And then we recognize our lover as our beloved, our lover and love.

In our 20s and 30s, some bodies mechanically chart out the journey for procreation. When temperatures suggest fertility, the bed becomes the functional ground for making babies. Awkward angles, not generally assumed, are undertaken to enhance fluid motility, and desire’s satiation is not the primary goal. These partners are intent on conception, willing their future to children.

Parents lie side by side, talking about the events of the day, about the children, jobs, insecurities. To change perspective, or punctuate a story, one may lie on his side, supporting the upper body by leaning on an arm, the head resting in hands or on the pillow. Voices are kept low to contain these private conversations. The one leans into the warmth emanating from the other, absent-mindedly touching skin, or the bed fabric. Plans are made, with murmurs of acknowledgement. The one moves, the other adjusts in concert. This is the way of bodies in relation that know the other so intimately. Lips touch briskly, gently, to register permission to take the sleeping pose. Bodies now seek independence in the boundary of bed, a time of readjusting pillows, changing direction, or nestling restlessly, then slowly stopping to mimic sleep – until sleep comes.

Each of the bedded bodies knows the idiosyncrasies of the other during rest. Daylight’s civility is lost, and gas passes unapologetically, its odours unrepentant in dispersal. Suddenly, a muscle seizes up and, immediately, activity begins; the victim massages the leg and groans, the able-bodied applies cream, grabs aspirin and a heat source; both move the leg, working in unison until the cramp eases. Both must work in concert for either to regain slumber. After the flurry of movement, bodies lie parallel, cautiously allowing both sets of drowsy eyes to close.

The Other Who Shares My Bed

The Family Bed

I lie propped up by pillows beside my husband. He in boxers and I in a purple T-shirt nightie, watching television in an otherwise dark room. I embrace my son who leans at the side of our bed for a hug. “Goodnight. I love you.” Our 15-year-old daughter enters, she hops and crawls between us. I shift my body to make room while my husband tugs at sheets and groans about losing covers. We stare at the television in silence. My daughter nudges me: “Are you asleep?” My arm is wrapped around her belly, snug, protecting. There is her so loved face, framed by her long dark hair. There is her leg strewn across my husband’s. No inhibition, scrunched between her parents, certain of her place. “No, just closed my eyes.” Still pretending to watch the screen, she shares

her worries of the day. Facing one and then the other, she meanders through topics from school to our absurdity as parents, to boys. My husband begins to untangle his body from hers. I know he is exhausted. His strong arms encircle her "Goodnight". We kiss. We hug. My daughter manoeuvres her way off the bed, scooping up our dog, which has long been sleeping. She exits softly. My husband turns over and snores almost instantly. I press my back to his, and, lying foetally, resume my prayer of thanks.

The Abandoned Bed

She came to share my bed. I welcomed her with passion and delight. And she stayed. "I love you," she said when we made love, before we slept. How many ways she said "I love you" in this bed. We got engaged, sharing the premarital bed. I lie beside her now, so many months later, on this bed, my bed, knowing she no longer wants to be here. I lie still for hours, staring at her back. I used to reach for her, but now she stays cool, aloof, untouchable. I used to try, hesitantly, to talk to her, hoping for response. But never did she want to talk. I have been waiting in this bed, hoping she will share her love again. But now she says, "I just don't love you any longer." So I will leave, move to a different apartment. But I will leave her the bed. It has become unshareable for me.

The Secret Dream Bed

As I awake from a vivid dream, his embrace lingers in my sleepy but quietly aroused body. I ache with desire, and try to slip back, belly-to-belly into the arms of my unexpected lover. This dream libertine seems familiar to me; I struggle briefly to identify him, but I cannot capture his face. Still, in the midst of our passionate embrace, I feel vaguely on guard. I feel guilty; this is sinful pleasure, but I want back into his domain, even while I lie next to my sleeping spouse. In this trance between awake and asleep, I hear my husband's voice, "Are you okay?" I answer quickly, afraid I may have betrayed my secret through movement or sound, "Yes, just a dream". I turn toward the wall, isolating myself from this marital bed, hoping to reconnect.

The Mortal Bed

I am terrified to lie down beside him in our bed. Released from the hospital just a few hours ago, where he was attached to monitors and tubing, now he wants the closeness of my body to calm his fears. I dread causing him pain while I gingerly place my limbs upon our mattress. My breathing cannot find a rhythm. Medication has taken him to sleep's other time, but I am on guard, frozen. Images of waking beside his dead body assault my thoughts. He looks fragile, foreign. I think up possible scenarios, as if I could prepare. Will I know if his body is lifeless? Or

will I cuddle up to him, carefree in dreams, not knowing he is gone?

We explore the marital relation in lovemaking. Pulsating motion has moved us gradually before we are aware that body parts are slamming headboards, or fingers grasp at mattress edges, or anchored covers, to save a body lost in union from careening to the floor. Part of bed fun is almost falling, leaning over an edge. Even for vigorous play, movement for both is constricted, since there is nowhere "to go". When bodies tire, the plane of play turns into the plane of rest. Bodies are always only an arm's length distance apart.

When both lie down calmly, it seems the terrain widens! While prone, our lungs automatically expand for deeper breathing, muscles relax, and our bones no longer need to support our weight. We may sink into our mutual space when we lie together, each person attuning movements to the other, mirroring or contrasting, expanding or contracting, always relative to our space. Hardly any space calls forth more intimacy than the bed – a place that is wide and yet cosy and snug.

Aging partners live through the phases of each other's bodies in their shared bed. When once they chose the spoon position, scrunching up to the other's warmth, now her menopausal, radiating heat oppresses him. He pushes her away gruffly, no longer requiring her contact. She opens the window so that a night breeze can fan her scorching skin. Later, he makes several nocturnal journeys to the bathroom, and, upon return, runs his chilled feet along her legs, crashing wakefulness into her trance.

The relationality of the bed is constituted by the other who shares this bed both physically and virtually in our preoccupations, meditations, cravings, love or longings. For some, the bed is the nostalgic memory bed of youth's passionate lust-filled cravings. It is the bed in which we conjure memories of our smooth and nubile bodies entangled with another and shuddering in orgasm, when coupling was ferociously romantic. For others, it is the bed that never was; it is the bed of marital disappointments.

Now I'm Going to Bed

I, the author of this text, I am going to bed now. This bed has held two of us for 20 years, well over 7000 nights. As I pull the covers back, and place my body down to rest, the tensions of the day release and I am easy. I imagined this moment earlier, but now I live it. The sheets are crisp, my pillow fluffed, but I wait, not quite ready to give up to sleep. Then he opens up his

covers, and tucks in behind me. This man incarnates what I have come to identify as “husband”; he dwells with me in life. I have also dedicated my life to loving him, because I trust his discovery of himself to align with what I believe I know already. We have set a place of dwelling apart from others, where we may be

safe and gentle. Within this bed – our bed – we establish ourselves anew as husband and wife, father and mother. He believes and I believe that we have the courage to constitute this relationship anew every morning that life offers us. Therefore, I dim the lights and lay my arm upon him.

About the Author



Michele Thompson completed her Master of Education in Drama at the University of Alberta in April 2009. Her final course, Phenomenological Research and Writing, co-taught by Dr C. Adams and Dr Max van Manen, introduced her to hermeneutic wondering. She worried at night, in bed, that she had nothing to add to an academic conversation about pedagogy or phenomenology, until she was struck by the obvious.

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