

Local woman teaches art of sacred sexuality—Tantric sex blends spiritual, physical

By RHONDA PARKS MANVILLE
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Raised as a Mormon, Pamela Madison was devoted to God, to the church and to the practice of her faith. She embraced the religious life wholeheartedly until she became an adult and found that fear and shame kept her from enjoying sex.

Ms. Madison remains devoted to prayer and spiritual practice, but not in the church and not in a conventional sense. Instead, she is focused on the art of sacred sexuality and teaching women how to integrate their sexual and spiritual selves.

"A lot of women want to feel sexually alive," said Ms. Madison, 36, a native Santa Barbaran. "Many of my clients have been working on spiritual and emotional growth issues for some time, and they're very sophisticated. But when it comes to sex, we're all kindergartners. We're all beginners."

Ms. Madison is not a therapist; she's a licensed acupuncturist and has studied Chinese medicine. Her work on women's sexuality was forged out of her own struggles to reconcile the religious teachings of her childhood and her sexual yearnings as an adult.

She founded the Women's Sexuality Center on Mission Street in Santa Barbara, and teaches workshops there. Since she began her practice in 1993, she has taught thousands of women around the country about the intricacies of sacred sexuality, the G-spot and Tantra — a spiritual tradition common to Hinduism and Buddhism for couples.

Her local workshops — intended to raise sexual self-esteem and empower women to take charge of their sexual selves — are held



"A lot of women want to feel sexually alive," says Pamela Madison

in a cozy, candlelit room and begin with prayer, meditation and cups of herbal tea.

The women tell their personal stories, and Ms. Madison leads them on exercises in breathing, sharing various ways they can develop greater intimacy with their partners and awaken the chemistry of love. There is no nudity or sexually explicit activity, but the talk is frank and often humorous.

Ms. Madison's work has garnered respect from several local physicians and therapists, and they refer patients who are having difficulties with sex to her.

"Women are often reluctant to discuss certain things, such as sexual dissatisfaction and incomplete fulfillment, with their physicians," said Dr. Dan Joseph of Solvang, a recently retired ob/gyn practitioner who has referred many patients to Ms. Madison. His wife, Sara, has also attended workshops.

"I felt I didn't have the expertise. I knew that with Pam my patients would be honored and cared for, and the feedback I got was that they were very satisfied. Pam not only taught theory, but she got down to the nitty-gritty of the thing. But more than that, she taught women about honoring themselves. A lot of disfunction comes from lack of respect and knowledge."

Clients learn in the workshops that they are not alone in feeling that there is something missing from their sex lives. Their teacher speaks of this from first-hand experience.

"I was a poster child for sexual repression,"

Ms. Madison says of her attempts to engage in sexual relationships in her early 20s. "I got into bed and right back out. I got very embarrassed and very nervous. After reading and talking to friends, I saw a therapist and it didn't help."

Growing up, Ms. Madison was devoutly religious — easily the most religious member of her family, according to her mother, Carol Anderson of Goleta — and she loved spending summers with her grandmother in Utah, the home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to which the family belonged.

But at a certain point in life, Ms. Madison discovered that the church's teachings about sex — which prohibited thinking about sex or engaging in it before marriage — filled her with guilt and shame and made it impossible for her to engage in loving relationships as an adult.

She bought all the sex books she could find at the now-closed Earthling bookstore, but sexual confidence and satisfaction eluded her — until she found a book on the Eastern practice of Tantra, or sacred sex, as it is practiced in Eastern religions.

Something clicked.

"It made sense to me that this was what my wound was — I didn't want to be sexual until (sex) could be part of my spirituality," said Ms. Madison. "I was thrilled that this could be part of my spiritual world."

As an acupuncturist, she specialized in helping women and learned that many were just as unsatisfied with their sex lives

and just as "blocked." She started sharing what she had learned about the Eastern spiritual practice of Tantric sex and healing, and found that many women were interested in knowing more.

Some women she worked with had suffered from traumatic events, such as rape and incest, and one young woman from Africa was trying to recover from the effects of female genital mutilation.

"That was a turning point for me," said Ms. Madison, a single mother. "I vowed then that I would never abandon my effort to

help women be sexual and free." A support group was formed in 1993 with 16 women, and Ms. Madison's practice has grown rapidly by word of mouth.

"I don't think I can describe it without crying," she said as tears welled up in her eyes during a recent interview in her Mission Street office. "We were all so starved for being able to open up in a safe and conscious environment, and to let everything come out."

Some of her clients come to her wanting to enhance their sexual energy, but others are

recovering from strict religious upbringings and sexual trauma.

"It's really difficult to articulate how powerful it is," said one client, 42, who was excommunicated from the Mormon church at age 16 because she had engaged in a sexual relationship. "I could be sexual from the bottom down, but not from here up," she said, gesturing to her waist, "with my head, heart and body."

In Ms. Madison's workshop, "it felt safe. The first class I was sobbing and felt ashamed – there was a lot darkness. I feel I have been lifted from the darkness."

'I became electrified'

By RHONDA PARKS MANVILLE
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Several of Pamela Madison's students said the proof of her work is tangible in the form of better, more satisfying marriages and relationships.

They shared their stories in a meeting at Ms. Madison's office one recent evening, choosing not to give their names for privacy reasons.

"It's the best thing that ever happened to me," said one young woman, a member of an Eastern Orthodox church.

"I wasn't comfortable with the sexualness of me," she said. "But through the work, I came in touch with the deep heart. I became electrified."

One man said his wife attended a class and then invited him to join her in a couples workshop. He did so gladly after experiencing the changes in their love life. Married 19 years and with three children, he said their sexual relationship has gone from routine to extraordinary.

"We used to make love every day, and then it dwindled to one or two times a week," he said. "We always made love in the dark and often when we were tired." Now they make time to lie close

together every day, not necessarily for sex, but to have a spiritual and physical connection with one another.

"Sometimes my wife lays there naked and I just look and appreciate her," he said. "Here I am, almost 50, and we make love almost every day, sometimes twice a day. It's a time to play with the energy...to connect with my wife."

Nurse practitioner Sara Joseph, who worked at her husband's practice and now works at Planned Parenthood in Santa Maria, said she took several classes with Ms. Madison and thoroughly enjoyed them.

One evening, the women all dressed up in costumes to express hidden parts of themselves, and some women danced for their classmates.

"It was a blast and a lot of fun – you could be as wild and as sultry as you wanted. For some it was terrifying and dressing up was enough. But it was very liberating to discover something about yourself that you didn't know before," she said.

"Pam is a real gutsy lady with a lot of knowledge and sensitivity and courage," Mrs. Joseph said. "It's a field of work that a lot of people don't want

to talk about or even know about. But her services have helped a lot of women heal from past wounds and that has allowed them to become comfortable in their sexuality, whereas before they felt it was wrong or bad."

Ms. Madison, a single mother with an 11-year-old son, is passionate about her work, but says it can be lonely and isolating. Her mother, Carol Anderson, is very supportive, but her father disapproves. Any mention of her work is prohibited at family gatherings.

"When I grew up, people never mentioned the subject," said Ms. Anderson. "But I've talked to several people who said Pam saved their marriage. Everyone tells me what a great teacher she is. I am very proud of her."

Ms. Madison said women who are in touch with the wisdom and beauty of their sexual selves typically find more fulfillment and happiness as mothers, working women and partners.

"My whole life I felt like I had a destiny and a purpose," she said. "It's elating and as thrilling as can be to do your purpose work. I will have done my job if in 50 years we talk about sex as being from a sacred, integrated place, to see it as a beautiful, normal, healthy thing that can also be a lot of fun."