

## Dr. Joy Davidson

*This week, we get a little closer to one of our favorite sexologists, who tells us about the many parts of her multifaceted career and what inspires her to keep doing them.*

As we update our videos throughout the week, we want to ensure that they are consistently entertaining, stimulating, and informative—which is why we've featured Dr. Joy Davidson so many times. Her *Joy Spot* videos, the most accessible of her varied and extraordinary works, never fail to provide exactly what we need, because she has the ability to answer without condescension the questions we don't know how to ask. Certified by AASECT (The American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists—she also serves on their Board of Directors), Joy belongs to a group of professionals committed to ensuring that we are happy and healthy—physically and psychologically—in our sex lives. Her insight and general positive attitude make her truly invaluable, both as a practitioner and as a member of our community. The many paths she's taken—and maintained—have lent to a relatable and gestalt approach: from *Playboy* fans to Alpha Women, many are indebted to her advice. Working both in video and in print, she has reached innumerable people of diverse backgrounds with a wide range of issues.

There is much to learn from Joy: positions, techniques, myths, everything you'd ever want to know about the psychology of *Buffy*...but you can read about that below. Joy's particular assortment of interests and accomplishments make her an Alpha Woman worth paying attention to. Thankfully, she has also invested in her fellow Alpha Women, and this week opens up to us with ingenuous good will.

### **What led you to sexology?**

This is actually a rather long story—so I hope you don't regret that you asked! As I was growing up, the newly empowered women's movement forced issues related to sexual roles and women's pleasure to the forefront of public consciousness, and I was captivated by the changes. Later, when I was in graduate school, it seemed perfectly natural to organize my Masters degree in Counseling Psychology around a major in Human Sexuality. However, when I started working on my doctorate, I decided to emphasize a different area of psychology—the burgeoning field of creativity and the study of creative process. Eventually I merged both fields in my professional work, which is apparent in a lot of my book writing.

While I found the creativity work inspiring, circumstances kept me firmly on the sex-track. First, my work with clients influenced my choices. In the early years of my private practice I learned quickly that individuals and couples were dying to deal with their sexual experiences and histories, but often found therapists to be uncomfortable with the topic. I was very much at ease talking about sex, so it wasn't long before people began coming to see me for that reason alone. I soon realized that my formal education hadn't even begun to address the complex social-relational-physiological factors that impact our sexuality. I added courses and workshops, reading and research, and in later years was certified by AASECT as a sex therapist. Before that, however, a second event intervened: my work with *Playboy*. Yeah...*that Playboy*.

After my first book was published, Playboy contacted me about working with them on a series of videos for couples. Interestingly, my first book wasn't about sex, per se: it was about "drama queens" and was entitled *The Agony of It All: The Drive for Drama and Excitement in Women's Lives*. Two chapters in that book focused on sexual thrill seeking. (Ironically, I no longer agree with some of the positions that I took in the book. I hope to one day revise it.) Nevertheless, as a result of the book publicity, I came to Playboy's attention and was invited to write the scripts for what was at that time a very unusual new product: hot'n'spicy *educational* videos for couples. *Secrets of Making Love to the Same Person Forever* was a remarkable learning experience for me, soon followed by hosting and co-producing an interview show on the Playboy Channel. Looking back, I can see how these projects influenced my direction and trajectory. I admit, I also loved the nerve-wracking but exciting creative process of producing products for the public, and, as a result, I continued writing and making videos about sexuality. For nine years I was the sexuality columnist for both *Playgirl* and *Men's Fitness*, and I wrote hundreds of articles for print and online publications ranging from *Cosmopolitan* to MSN's *Women Central*. Currently, I consult and create articles for The Love and Health Information Channel, where my *Joy Spot* videos debuted.

### **What do you like best about your job? Is there anything you dislike?**

I love writing second and third drafts of everything! First drafts are torture—everything you've heard about facing the blank page is true! Second drafts begin to get interesting. Third drafts—polishing the language and making it pretty—are delicious! Unfortunately, I'm so often working against tight deadlines that the torment seems all encompassing and the fun short-lived! Along with the poetic side of writing, I also love video production: creating a concept and seeing it come to fruition. I love the shoot, itself: I like talking to the camera—but I hate seeing myself on video. I criticize everything!

I have found it very difficult to create videos that are the right length for the internet. I want people to walk away feeling that they are almost experts on the subject, too – but that requires more than 3-5 minutes! The first group of *Joy Spot* videos were really too long for this medium, so I'm adapting to writing shorter pieces. Next batch, I'm doing my utmost to pare down to the 5-minute internet max. We'll see.

My work as a therapist exists in an entirely different dimension from writing or producing, and the two can't really be compared. In a sense I have had two quite separate careers that intersected via their shared subject matter. As a therapist, there is no "product" or ideal outcome—rather, a successful result is found moment to moment in the process itself. Doing good therapy means being 100% present with my client, and gaining satisfaction from the intimacy, the honoring of another's deep inner process, and the excitement of their "aha's" and revelations. I feel honored to participate and add to my clients' integration of awareness, knowledge and change. Seeing them blossom is a pleasure. Seeing good relationships grow is a joy. Sometimes, seeing unhealthy relationships finally dissolve is a joy, in a paradoxical fashion.

At this point in my dual career-life, being able to work face-to-face with clients is a rare gift. Because I travel quite a bit, I can't see clients on a consistent basis, so I only do brief, intensive

sessions with select clients from time to time. Thank heavens for Skype and iChat, so that I can stay in touch or even do sessions online no matter where I am geographically.

**Many of your colleagues, especially those who belong to AASECT, also do informational videos—why do you personally choose to make the *Joy Spot* series?**

When I started doing *The Joy Spot*, hardly anyone else in my professional community was doing online videos. And, like nearly everything else I have done, *The Joy Spot* began as one concept and evolved into another. Originally, I wanted to make videos for women that addressed some of our most pressing and disturbing sexual issues. My original goal was to cover sexual politics as well as sexual pleasure. I'm a passionate advocate for women's freedom of sexual expression and even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century women are still second-class sexual citizens. Consequently, my work is often dedicated to reversing that condition. Some of my longer videos deal directly with the social and cultural dilemmas that beset women: Sexual Dysfunction and the Pharmaceutical Industry for instance; or the video about women's body image. However, I discovered quickly that internet short-form videos aren't the best place for this kind of expanded social critique, so, while I still bring the social/cultural issues into all the videos, I can't do it as comprehensively or directly as I once intended. As I was learning what worked and what didn't in creating content for this format, feedback from viewers of the early videos poured in, too, and I realized that in order to make a real difference in the sexual lives of women, I'd need to speak to and about men as well. So, little by little, in the interests of format constraints and viewers' requests, *The Joy Spot* evolved— and will probably continue to evolve.

**Tell us a bit about the Couples' Guides and how you came to be involved.**

*The Guides to Sexual Pleasure for Couples* were the brainchild of my colleague, Dr. William Stayton. As a sex therapist and university professor, Bill was concerned that this unique set of exercises (sensate focus)—which have been used in sex therapy for decades—had not been captured on video. He proposed a series of videos to the company that sponsors The Love and Health Learning Channel, and they agreed to produce them. The videos can be used independently by couples or in sex therapy, and separate videos serve heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian couples. I consulted on the project and host two of them—the hetero-couple and lesbian-couple versions.

**What is “sensate focus?” Why is it so important?**

Well, you'll just have to buy the video to find out!

(Ok....I'm kidding!)

Sensate Focus began as a series of exercises developed by Masters and Johnson over 40 years ago to help partners pay deeper attention to their own senses of touch, smell, sight, hearing and taste. The exercises can add variety and heighten awareness of pleasure as well as guide partners toward greater sexual experimentation under safe, negotiated conditions. The videos film

genuine couples together and go beyond *Sensate Focus* to beautifully and explicitly show how practicing these exercises can lead to more intense lovemaking.

**From where did your interest in sci-fi—and specifically Joss Whedon productions—stem?**

I've been a sci-fi and paranormal-fantasy fan as long as I can remember, and I especially love the kick-ass-super-chic characters that grace so many books and films of the genre. Of course I was enthralled when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* first appeared on TV. The show was smart, funny, edgy, filled with arcane symbolism and populated with wonderful characters. I was enormously impressed by the levels of meaning and the artful crafting that Joss Whedon applied to what could have been a very cheesy concept if poorly executed. Following *Buffy*, Whedon produced other equally high-quality television series' of surprising psychological depth. When BenBella Books began developing its "Smart Pop" anthologies focusing on cultural phenomena in TV, film and literature, I was asked to contribute to a number of those books, including pieces about Whedon's creations, *Angel* and *Firefly*. That led to my involvement as Editor and contributor of my latest book, *The Psychology of Joss Whedon*, which highlights the myriad fascinating ways that Whedon's stories illuminate our personal and cultural psyches. Although it's written for mainstream readers, each essay is penned by a psychologist who loves Whedon's work. I think most of the contributors do a better job of exploring complex psychological theories than many graduate courses.

What plans do you have for future non-patient services like these videos?

I have lots of ideas...but time...oh, time...my perpetual source of struggle!

What can I say? I want to continue *The Joy Spots*, of course. I've also developed a concept for long-form downloadable content that I hope to implement in 2009. I'd also love to produce an erotic video that is both educational and very hot, with a storyline! I have a vision for this gorgeous project, and when the time is right I'm sure an "angel" will come along to help fund it.

**The Alpha Five:**

**1. Name one piece of work—novel, painting, movie, etc.—that really influenced/motivated you. Explain how/why.**

There are so many. When I was growing up, the basement of our house was filled to bursting with books, and I read everything I found—including books that belonged to my parents when they were kids. A few of those books were especially influential when I was in my early teens. One was Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, for its intellectual breadth and the revolutionary assumption (at the time it was written) that a woman could be tough as nails in business and soft in love at the same time. Since I didn't grow up knowing any female tycoons, finding them in books was a revelation.

Another influence was the now-classic *Story of O* which I discovered (in the basement!) when I was about fourteen. Reading it opened my eyes to startling ways of framing sexual experience

that, for some reason, didn't shock or scare me. In retrospect, it seems remarkable that I was able to absorb such an exotic story without either judgment or shame.

Third—and probably most important—was a novella written by Kathleen Winsor. Just one line from the story stood out, and it still resonates now. The sentence was framed as advice from a sophisticated older woman to a young lady. She said, “Regret what you *do*; not what you don't do.”

Given the context of the story, I understood this to mean *don't risk looking back upon your life with regrets because you feared going after what you wanted*. Better to regret actions taken than to play safe and then agonize over what might have been.

That concept burned itself into my brain, and, whether consciously or by instinct, I have lived by that credo ever since. I am eternally grateful for that single line of advice from a fictional mentor.

## **2. What is the biggest challenge/obstacle you have encountered thus far?**

I think that my biggest obstacles have been internal. I am, without doubt, my own towering brick wall. Sometimes I'm too demanding, too aggressive, too self-critical; sometimes I'm not patient enough or speedy enough, or “something” enough. The adjectives may change, but the pattern of pressure from within remains. And it has gotten in my way.

Of course, I have had many other life challenges, but in retrospect they seem almost pale beside those I've created for myself.

I think I've finally reached the point where I can either laugh at or quickly dismiss the harsh inner dialogue. At least I don't carry on a long monologue anymore! I trust myself to work on issues that really matter to me, and I do my best to change what needs to be changed. I've come to believe that whatever doesn't merit my action doesn't warrant my whining, either!

## **3. What is your biggest regret?**

You know what? I don't have any “big” regrets! I have small regrets: those moments when I wish I had done something differently. It would probably be more accurate to say that I have sorrows, not regrets. I wish I'd had the foresight to avoid difficulties that have had ripple effects over time. But I can't “regret” what I couldn't have controlled without the benefit of spot-on psychic powers.

## **4. Describe what you envision your life to be like in 10 years: what has changed and what has stayed the same?**

I'm having trouble coming up with an image. Maybe it's because, over the past 10 years, I've changed in many ways I could not have foretold earlier, and I expect to change just as much over the next ten. If I were to carry out this exercise, my vision of life 10 years from now would be

coming from and reflecting ideas anchored in the “me” of today—which means they’d be disconnected from the “me” of tomorrow.

I’m probably being way too logical about a question that was meant to be fun and spontaneous!

**5. What is the one piece of advice that you feel has been the most valuable to you and which you would like to pass on to others?**

There’s the aforementioned “regret what you do,” of course. More recently, though, I’ve come upon a corollary, an idea that originated with the TV show, *Angel*, created by Joss Whedon. Some people might not consider a popular TV show to be an impressive literary reference, but the ever-brilliant Whedon gave birth to a statement that had a profound effect on me and those with whom I’ve shared. The line goes like this:

“If nothing we do matters, then all that matters is what we do.”

Without reciting chapter and verse of the story that explains the quotation, let me share my interpretation. To me, the line is a reminder that our *deeds* define us and give meaning to our lives. Put another way: we aren’t defined by our jobs, our families, our bank balances, our wardrobe, our philosophies, our moral codes, our religious dogma, or even our good intentions. In a world that is increasingly chaotic and uncertain, where it sometimes seems that, quite literally, nothing we do matters, what actually means the most is what we choose to do in each moment. Purpose exists in what we do *right now*. The actions we take to help or hinder, show love or contempt, inflict pain or display tenderness, and nurture or deprive—these all give significance to our lives and define who we are.

We’ve all met people who say things like, “I am a loving person,” or “I am a kind person,” or, “I am a practical person.” Their words are meant to tell you who they are, but their words usually tell you who they want to be, or who they think they should be, or maybe who they think you want them to be. To know someone well, we have to know him or her beyond their words. I begin to know people when I see the choices they make, the way they care for others, the kind of courage they display, the beauty they create, the responsibilities they take on, the work they take pride in.

If we are what we *do*, then my best advice to women is to examine your own actions and avoid wasting precious time in over-analyzing other people’s veiled meanings—especially in romantic relationships. There’s wisdom in viewing others through a lens wiped clean of preconceptions and mists of hope. Let me give you an example that I suspect every reader can relate to. Recently, a friend who had been in a downward spiraling relationship sent me an email reporting a litany of what I refer to as, “what-he-said” — i.e., convincing excuses, rationales, and vague promises presented in lieu of concrete actions. “Well, that sounds compelling,” I replied, “but if you ignore the pretty words and just look at what he has done lately, what do you get?” Her response: “Nothing. I get nothing.” A few days later, after more “he said” poured in, my friend wrote to tell me that she had repeated my question to herself at least a hundred times. Asking, “But what did he *do*?” saved her from confusing mere words with real change, and kept her sane during a very hard time.

“When nothing we do matters, all that matters is what we do,” is my mantra, and it keeps me honest. It keeps me moving forward when I want to stop; it helps me rise above tempting complacency, and it reminds me that my excuses are just as empty as anyone else’s. That doesn’t make me virtuous, by a long shot, but it does keep me from wearing blinders too often or for too long. In the end, although actions may not always be louder than words, they are invariably more revealing.