

Sexual healing

INTIMACY

An 'intimacy, relationship and tantra' retreat sounded like former Catholic schoolgirl Marianne Power's worst nightmare. But, she says, it turned out to be revelatory

For years I've had a stress dream that involves me running around a department store with no trousers on. In this dream I'm going up and down escalators trying to find a way out, while tugging down the shirt I'm wearing in hope I can cover my knickers.

Two weeks ago I experienced a new variation of the dream. This time my bottom half was covered but I was wondering around topless while strangers looked at me. I wasn't in a department store, though, I was in a large house in Sussex and this wasn't a dream – this nightmare was real and in the form of a week-long tantra retreat, where I endured one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of my life.

When I was invited to attend a week-long workshop by tantric expert Jan Day, my first thought was: "No way".

I am a former Catholic schoolgirl – and not the fun, naughty kind but the repressed 'everything is a sin'

kind. Men, sex and intimacy are huge issues for me. I didn't have my first boyfriend until my late twenties and while I've had relationships through my thirties, they have usually been short lived. Even at 40, intimacy terrifies me. And so, my second thought was: "Do it".

I booked it and spent the next four weeks in a state of low-grade panic, wondering what the hell was going to happen. Was I going to walk around naked and have to have sex with strangers? What would my mother say if she knew? By the time I arrived at Florence House in Seaford, Sussex, I was so scared, I couldn't eat the veggie curry awaiting us. Instead, I looked at my fellow students – who ranged from their thirties to sixties, some in couples, most of us single – and tried to figure out if they were all perverts. They didn't seem to be but there were two men wearing necklaces. I caught myself judging and realised this is what I do: I always find

reasons to keep men away, whether it's something they're wearing or the sound of their voice. I've been known to ditch guys because they use emojis. It was just fear talking. And fear continued to shout at me all week.

The workshop began with some sober dancing. The aim was to get into our bodies but I felt stiff, awkward and self-conscious without two bottles of wine to loosen me up.

THEN WE WERE INVITED TO WALK AROUND THE ROOM AND LOOK AT EACH OTHER.

It is hard to overstate just how frightening I found this prospect. A man with huge brown eyes walked towards me and I willed myself not to run away, even though I was desperate to. I felt embarrassed by how scared I was and I didn't want him to see how vulnerable I felt. I made myself look back until he walked away, which felt like hours later (it was probably seconds).

After that the week unfolded in a blur of more eye-contact, dancing, meditating, talking, breathing and touch. Each exercise seemed to embody fears and behaviour I had in the outside world. In early touching exercises, we divided into groups of three or four and could invite others to touch us either on the hand, arm, hair or body. Though we were constantly told by Day that we must only do what felt right to us – including saying we wanted no touch at all – I kept pushing myself to let people touch me even though I didn't want it, for fear that people would think I was a prude.

Then when we were invited to remove some clothing. Even though I didn't want to, I did. As soon as I took off my top, I felt exposed and embarrassed. I told myself to "just get through it" and "stop being a wimp" but then I realised that this is always how I treat myself – making myself do things I don't want to do for fear of what others might think. But I looked around and saw that while some people were happy with no clothes on, others had stayed fully dressed and that was totally fine.

It turned out the biggest lesson was the opposite of what I thought it would be – it wasn't about pushing myself, it was about saying "no" and setting boundaries. It was a revelation to realise I had control, that I could go as slow as I wanted. I finally heard what Day had been repeating all week: I never have to do anything I don't want to do and that the most important thing was to "honour yourself".

In one exercise I repeatedly said "no" to any touching. I thought people would be annoyed at me but all I was ever greeted by was kind eyes. Being able to say "no" felt thrilling. Then, as I got braver, I allowed a man to stroke my face. We were told to say "yes" if we liked the contact and though I did, I felt embarrassed about saying it. Showing pleasure felt dirty and wrong. I saw just how strongly the years of Catholic conditioning live in me. Then he moved to touch my waist and I no longer liked it. Instead of suffering the touch for fear of being rude,

I said "no" followed by "goodbye" to signal the end of the encounter. He looked a bit hurt but it felt so empowering to look after myself in this way.

Day says that we are not doing anybody any favours by staying in situations that we do not want to be in – you are holding them back from being with someone who wants to be with them. I realised how dishonest I've been in relationships by not speaking truthfully and openly.

In both romantic relationships and friendships, I feel that I need to be everything that person wants without paying any attention to how I'm feeling. As a result, I give too much, get exhausted, shut down and run away. Ultimately I find it easier to avoid relationships altogether.

It's such a cliché but communication really is everything. After each exercise we had to share how it had been for us and even though that felt awkward at first, it got easier. It was surprising to find out that often people were not thinking what I thought they were. While I thought I'd hurt

the man I rejected, he told me he admired me for being so clear and that it made him feel better about approaching me in later exercises because he knew I would not do anything I didn't want to. In essence, he was thinking the opposite to what I had imagined.

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AS THE WEEK WENT ON AND I GREW STRONGER IN MY ABILITY TO SAY "NO",

I started to feel safer and my body began to open up to pleasure – simple, sensual and sexual. In the breaks we ran to the nearby beach and swam in cold, choppy waters, laughing and splashing like children. In the evenings we'd pile on the sofa and chairs together, giggling and hugging each other and it felt so natural. We talked about loneliness and the lack of touch that many of us had in our lives. With friends, physical contact is usually limited to pecks on the cheeks, and with the opposite sex all contact had to be a prelude to sex.

But here we touched each other just to be connected. Nothing more was demanded. It was open, innocent and beautiful. In one of the meditation exercises I found myself crying as I visualised my normal life as me locked in a cold, damp room cut off from the warmth of love. I could see that I kept myself in a glass cage in order to keep myself safe, but in doing so I was not fully alive.

With each day I was coming out of the cage and the feeling of love in the room grew. People started to say that I looked different. The hair that was scraped up in a bun was let loose. My eyes looked huge and I moved differently. And it wasn't just me – by the end of the week we had all blossomed. It was as if who we really were was shining out of us. All our masks had dropped and it was beautiful.

On the final evening, as a storm whipped up outside, we danced. This time, instead of being embarrassed, I was moving freely. I felt sexy, feminine, natural and free. Three weeks since coming home, I haven't stopped dancing. Janday.com