

# INTERVIEW WITH EVE ENSLER

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Eve Ensler, performer and writer of the Obie award-winning *Vagina Monologues*, is an active advocate for the rights of women and girls, especially in international efforts to end the violence of assault, domestic abuse, genital mutilation, and other forms of oppression. The organization Ensler founded, V-Day, helps to raise funds and awareness for the needs of women and girls in danger and distress, in part by sponsoring benefit performances of the *Vagina Monologues* by local organizers in communities around the world. In the process, the organization has often come into conflict with various religious groups that find the content morally objectionable. *BJTP* Editor Carolyn Roark is one of the local organizers for V-Day Waco, a small urban community where similar conflicts have emerged in other circumstances and continue to make the process of producing V-Day events a delicate balance. In the course of two phone conversations, Roark and Ensler discussed the spiritual dimensions of human violence, and the process of negotiating cooperative efforts that allow room for differences of faith or religious belief while focusing on the common goal of social justice for women and girls.

**CR:** How do we define violence as it refers to the relationships between human beings? Does it have a spiritual dimension?

**EE:** What I would say that we're talking about is inflicting anguish and pain on someone, taking something that isn't yours, invading somebody's particular space without being invited. Violating, going against them, doing harm to them, hurting them, raping them. And what's interesting is that I just finished a piece on the tsunami because I went to Sri Lanka for a few weeks right after it. It was a piece on grief, and I was looking at the nature of grief, and also the difference between the grief of the tsunami and the grief of war. Because they are different types of violence, obviously. One isn't personal. One is without agenda, without malice or forethought. It is just natural; it is a disaster. The other, war, is something which is against your person. It is against somebody's race, against somebody's clan, against somebody's **something**. And I was just looking at the difference in grief in those two circumstances, which is the way I'm looking at violence, and the difference in violence.

One of the things I think about when we talk about this kind of violence, and the relationship to spirituality is that it seems to me when you take something from someone that isn't yours or you hurt someone else, fundamentally, you actually do that to yourself. You actually unmake yourself, you work against your own being and your own matter. That to me is the greatest damage spiritually. In some way, it is who you then become as a spiritual being. You kind of end your own wholeness. You splinter yourself. You become parceled into "other" in order to live with what you've done. Actually, it is exactly the same thing that happens to the victim. You splinter that person, and you shatter that person, and they have to split off in order to tolerate what's been done to them. To me, that condition, that kind of shattering or fragmenting of the soul is at the core of everything in a way. Sometimes times I think of the human species as these pieces of people that are trying to assemble themselves. But each of us only has a piece, because other pieces have been so long ago shattered.

**CR:** Does God belong in the efforts of V-Day to end violence against women and girls or is this something that human beings should work out among themselves?

**EE** (laughing): Oh my. I don't know much about God. It is really a hard question for me to answer.

**CR:** (laughing): That's fair, I wonder if any of us do in the end. How have you been working to overcome objections to the play by religious communities in order to move V-Day forward? How do you seek common ground?

**EE:** Well, the people who seem to be opposed to the play, in my experience, are usually people who haven't been to it. So, part of what we have been working on is inviting people to come before they have objections. I think that it is always good to know what you are objecting to. We did a wonderful tour this year where I went to a lot of Catholic universities and colleges that were presenting the show. I went to Notre Dame and I went to St. Xavier's and it was fantastic. We had incredible dialogue with students, faculty members, and priests about contextualizing the *Vagina Monologues* within a Catholic university and I think that it was really good. I think that there were all kinds of interesting questions and completely reasonable discussions and one of the things that emerged was that a lot of people really didn't know what the point of the *Vagina Monologues* was and when they got clearer on it, that they were much more open to it. There were, of course, some things that they were not open to that are just difference in values and beliefs. For example; the *Vagina Monologues* does encourage masturbation and the Catholic Church does not. That is just simply a difference. The Catholic Church is against sex outside of marriage and the *Vagina Monologues* doesn't take a position on anything, it simply is stating and reporting stories that I have heard that I have turned in to literary matter. Part of what we are trying to do here is to say that the vagina is sacred, is honored, is to be cherished and is to be protected, and so in some ways, we are not at all at odds with the Church or any church. I think that our differences are that we

believe in speaking about it openly and it is important because where things remain hidden, and dark, and isolated, usually abuse occurs and usually some forms of perversion occur. The one thing that we talked about at Notre Dame is the fact that the highest legal fees incurred now in the Catholic Church are in defending priests from pedophilia cases. This might indicate that suppression and celibacy and cutting off discussion and doing things in a way where people are isolated does encourage, in fact, people to end up behaving in abusive or not healthy ways.

**CR:** I am a professor at a Baptist university myself, and I was one of the local community organizers for V-Day here in Waco. We firmly believe that V-Day is worth doing every year. One of the difficulties that I found, of course, is that within my university and community, there is some debate about whether or not this is an appropriate way to talk about violence. Initially, last year, we had some trouble even finding an organization to take the money; they were afraid of political backlash from conservative and religious groups. We have been working to try and change that opinion. One of the first things that I did was approach our university dormitories and ask them to serve as Rape Free Zones. Well, really, I said, "You all need to do this. It's important. Would you, please, consider it?" They were a little unsure, so I said "Let me tell you, I believe firmly that it is the task of all Christians to work toward the end of violence because all of us as God's children deserve to live in a safer world." They thought about that for a second and said, "Oh, that makes sense."

So, How can community organizers—like myself— respect differences of moral opinion even within our own religious communities and still seek the their involvement in V-Day? How do we avoid potential distractions like the Catholic debate over "The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could" and some of the other monologues that perhaps raised some of those religious eyebrows?

**EE:** I guess my feeling is you are at an educational institution where, in theory, we are being taught to look at all kinds of ideas, not just the ideas we "believe in" or support. I think that is the point of education. So, if you look at *The Vagina Monologues*, there are going to be monologues which speak to you, ones that upset you, ones that you disagree with, and ones that really excite you. That is the point. The point is not just to create text that everybody says, "that's me!" and there is one line of thinking that we all agree to. That would be tyranny wouldn't it? I think what we are supposed to do is think and open and keep going deeper into ambiguity and complexity. What I would argue is that real spirituality is the ability to keep encountering two opposite thoughts at the same time and still maintain some kind of morality and perspective in the world. It is not the elimination of one side of the equation or the elimination of what you don't like; it is the investigation of everything.

**CR:** How are Islamic audiences responding to the play? Who is the V-Day reaching and impacting in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq?

**EE:** Well, the play has been done in many countries in the Islamic world. It has been done in Pakistan and Lebanon and Malaysia. It has been done in parts of Africa. It has been done in a lot of places such as Palestine, and Cairo and in many ways it is not different in the response of the Catholic or Baptist or the Christian communities. Where there are people who have a kind of fundamental belief in something, usually, if something comes in that isn't sharing that belief, they get agitated. There have been communities where they have shut it down and there are communities where they have embraced it. There are communities where they have shut it down and the next year they have performed it. Uganda had filled an 800 seat theater—actually Uganda is Christian—and they shut it down. They had a two week discussion in all the press and I think that it was fantastic dialogue and I bet that they will end up doing it next year. So, I don't think it is dissimilar, I think that wherever there is a basic fundamental doctrine and you bring up vaginas, there are usually issues around it. It seems to me that in many fundamental religions, there is unfortunately, the undermining of women's voices and women, sometimes, when they have an opportunity to speak out and say that they actually talk about their sexuality and talk about what is going on, they get accused of actually doing the opposite of what they are trying to do, which is in some way to hold their being in sacredness, to honor their bodies, to feel an agency over their bodies and their right to their bodies, which is being taken away in the dark.

**CR:** This maybe a naïve question, but I am curious to know how are men in these Islamic countries responding? Are reactions varying much along gender lines?

**EE:** I don't think that there is a difference between them and Christian men. You have men who really completely respond to the *Vagina Monologues* and there are Christian men who don't. I don't think that it is any different in the Islamic countries. I have met men in Pakistan who have told me that it was a life changing experience for them. I have met a man in Cairo who came up to me and kissed my hand and said that he had no idea about any of it and it has completely changed his thinking about women in literally the two hours that he sat there. I have heard of other men, who don't think that this should be done or spoken out loud in Islamic countries. So I think that there are different people everywhere and I think that one of the things that I have learned about the *Vagina Monologues* is that there is no monolithic anything. There is no one Christian, there is no one Islamic. I find that, actually, relieving.

**CR:** It has made a big difference in some of the work we do here, too. Where would you like to see V-Day celebrated that it currently is not?

**EE:** I would love to see it happen one day in Iraq. We are supporting women in Iraq, as you know, we have a spotlight there. The conditions of women there were terribly desecrated and undermined by the U.S. war, The conditions are just so terrible right now. I would like to see a day where women are free in Iraq again. I would like to see that day come in Afghanistan. I would like to see it being done all over America in Christian communities where it is embraced and people understand that it is not anti-

spiritual, but that it is, in fact, a celebration of the spirit and celebration of women's beings and birth and everything beautiful that happens inside and outside of vaginas.

**CR:** You have spent a lot of time asking women questions about their vaginas, about themselves, and about their lives. When you meet God at last, what will your first question for her be?

**EE:** Well, I don't know that I believe that I am going to meet God. So that is a hard question for me. What I believe is that we have this extraordinary spirit inside ourselves, which for me is our Buddha nature. I believe we are in the process of opening and getting closer and closer to our Buddha nature and stripping away all that is covering it. I don't think I'm going to end up meeting this one being up there or out there. I think to be honest, that being is inside. I meet that being in so many people that I meet everywhere in the world and when I do meet that being, in other people, what I want to ask is "How do we keep opening ourselves so that we can become as vulnerable and as willing to live in the deepest complexity and ambiguity and truth that we can?"

