

Why We Teach About Sexuality in Church
Rev. Vanessa R. Southern
The Unitarian Church in Summit
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Introduction

by Tuli Patel, Director of Religious Education:

This morning our service is on why we teach and talk about sexuality here in this house of worship. It is a sermon timed to coincide with the programming – with teaching and talking about sexuality that is taking place here this winter and spring, as it does every year. Earlier this month, we began sexuality education for our eighth-graders, a program called Our Whole Lives, or OWL for short. In the next few weeks, our second- and fifth-grade Our Whole Lives sexuality education program will begin, as will our adult program, which we are doing for the first time in conjunction with the Plainfield congregation. In fact, right now the Rev. Tracy Sprowls-Jenks is preaching on the same topic as Vanessa, and sign-ups will take place after the service.

When I first broached the topic of adult sexuality education as a course that I could offer along with a co-facilitator from Plainfield, I was asked by many, “Will it improve my sex life?” and “Don’t I already know all I need to? I’m a grown-up.” Today we’re going to talk about some of that, but in a larger sense, why this piece of our lives so often relegated to bedrooms and late-night movies on adult channels is part of our religious lives – our whole lives, as it were.

Many of you have heard me speak of how training for sexuality education sold me on Unitarian Universalism. I’d been introduced to UUism when I first came to America 22 years ago and flirted with it, flitting in and out of congregations in Massachusetts, Chicago, Missouri and California. And the fall I started here, I thought I’d help out for a bit while Summit conducted a search for a director of education and I kept looking for teaching jobs.

What changed that plan for me was when I went to the sexuality education training for the Our Whole Lives curriculum for middle schoolers. I came away from the weekend feeling that any religion that embraced such a topic and was able to put together a curricular course that covered so much of what it means to be human deserved more from me. It deserved a closer look, a more committed stance. I learned things about myself and my family that I had not considered, and I found myself thinking more deeply about a range of issues than I had in a long time. Luckily, Summit liked me, and so we got together, as they say.

That first year that I taught, I was amazed by the urgency, the relevance and the fundamental necessity of sexuality education and its deep connection to spirituality. It was apparent from the first day that the health classes our children were receiving in school were not satisfactory – evident in the kinds of questions the children asked us. Apparently they did not feel safe enough to ask these questions or have them answered in a matter-of-fact, rational way. The challenges they faced then and continue to today are tremendous – to engage in sexual

activity at younger and younger ages; to be intolerant of diverse sexual orientations and to conform to gender stereotypes; to make hasty decisions under the pressure of peers.

For our youngest ones, second-graders, the program starts them on the road to accurate information, highlighting the fourth principle of our search for truth and meaning. Three years later, as fifth-graders, our youngsters explore what it means to be accepting of a wide variety of sexual orientations even as they consider their own changing bodies, upholding the first, second and third principles. Three years after that, our young teenagers examine for an entire semester the decision-making, the values, and the implications of what it means to be sexually healthy adults and the depth and range of human sexuality. All throughout the process, and perhaps most importantly, we answer the kids' questions – about their own bodies, about relationships, about families – and we facilitate conversations between them that help them discover their own values. And this is why we do not have substitutes for sexuality education – sex education is spiritual education. It deepens our connections to one another, to our own bodies and to our understanding of the world.

The process is never one-sided. I learn every year – not only a range of very interesting vocabulary, but I find myself confronting my own stereotypes, my own growing edge of what it means to be UU, deepening my spirit, and challenging me continually to affirm and reaffirm what it means to be human.

Reading

from *Honoring the Body* by Stephanie Paulsell:

Isn't this what we want for ourselves and our children? Relationships so intimate and satisfying that they draw us out of ourselves and more deeply into the life of the world? Relationships in which pleasure is given and received with joy? Relationships in which knowledge of the body is sought with care and gentleness, in which the body is pronounced beautiful over and over again?

I remember a long-ago conversation with a friend, the mother of two sons. "I hope they will grow up to be good lovers," she told me. I was too immature at the time to understand what a profound hope that was, too young to understand what she was teaching me about being a parent. Her sons are grown now, and I imagine her hope has been realized. For when she and her husband spoke to their sons about sex, which they did freely and often, they did not give them a list of unexplained do's and don'ts. When they set limits, they set them in the context of their hope that their sons would one day know deep sexual satisfaction with someone whose life and body and spirit they cherished (pp.148-9).

Sermon

Every year there comes a time when Tuli does the introduction for the eighth-grade Our Whole Lives curriculum. In earlier years of a child's life, the focus of the program is on knowing our bodies, respectful touch, the right to declare boundaries around what makes us feel

safe and what feels good. It's all very easy for parents to see the place of all of this in their children's self-understanding.

Eighth grade is where we take up not just sexuality but sex. Sexuality, of course, incorporates much more than sex. Sexuality incorporates love and personal identity, holding hands and hugging, our relationship with our own bodies, and, in the largest sense, you might even say the erotic, creative, generative urge in the world. It involves our understanding of intimacy, our sense of self and how we relate to others; it is so broad as to include our ideas about what we see on TV ads and the images we are bombarded with daily.

Sex is related but different. As James B. Nelson wrote in his book *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, "Sex is a biologically based need which is oriented not only toward procreation but, indeed, toward pleasure and tension release. It aims at genital activity culminating in orgasm." *Sex* is where the Our Whole Lives curriculum and our UU commitment to the place of sexuality in our kids' lives seem to hit our growing edges sometimes. Pardon the pun, but it is where the rubber often hits the road in this piece of our religious education.

I'm always amazed, though I shouldn't be anymore, that when it comes time for "The Slides" to come out in that eighth-grade year – the slides that show the different positions in which people can have sex – that is when our normally bold, progressive parents become strangely puritanical. Everyone comes to church normal those evenings, but every year, a few seem to put on stiff-laced parson's collars halfway through the demonstration.

Of course we do, because we come right up against the unofficial curriculum of our childhoods.

I know a woman whose older sister, the oldest daughter in the family, thought she was dying when she had her first menses. She was sent home by the school nurse with no more information than her own mother had given her, wondering how long it would take her (from this mysterious illness with no name) to bleed to death. The woman I knew benefited from her sister's painful discovery of some of what it meant to enter womanhood, but *all* that they knew was what they were able to find out themselves. Certainly there were no slides showing what sex might be and what one could expect, let alone nuanced conversations about sexuality – the power of touch or yearning, the choices and how to make them, and how complicated our feelings could be.

I know my parents – as children of the '60s and '70s, living in Los Angeles and even for a while in a commune, no less – struggled to be more open with me than their own parents had been, and that in many ways they were better prepared to be that way. However, I also know that no family can leap across their inherited patterns and make light years of progress. Current research says that kids learn the most about their sexuality first from their parents and second from their friends. That puts the burden squarely on us parents, and secondarily on their peers – which is why, by the way, I sometimes think our Our Whole Lives classes deserve to be classified in part as outreach. We prepare all these kids and youth to be health educators in their

neighborhoods, the best informed and the ones folks turn to when they need balanced, accurate information.

Without that kind of holistic sexuality education, we have to wonder what information our kids are sharing with each other. Forget about eighth-grade street wisdom – I remember a college-educated, 25-year-old friend once telling me her secret for not getting pregnant, and I knew from AP biology class that the real secret behind her system was pure luck, for there was no science at all in her technique.

Our kids largely rely on us and their friends, unless we give them a place and a time for more. I know some parents hope they can spare their kids the details, buy them some time for being kids, thinking about kid stuff, but these days it is the ignorant parent who believes their kid doesn't yet need a place for these kinds of conversations or this kind of information. A recent study in the journal *Pediatrics* showed that by the time parents got around to “the talk,” 40 percent of the kids had already had intercourse. And in December, Indiana University School of Medicine reported a study of 386 urban girls between the ages of 13 and 17 found that most had sexual intercourse for the first time between the ages of 13 and 15, and by age 15, one-quarter already had at least one sexually transmitted disease. Moreover, from what our Summit superintendent of schools was saying a few years back about the rise of oral sex in junior high school, we are not protected by our suburban status from those stats. Not talking to our kids about sexuality only protects us from our own awkwardness. Our kids need information and tools.

What I love about our program is that it frames even the nitty-gritty information about sex in a larger framework around their whole sexual being in ways that are about helping them to be healthy and strong. One of my favorite examples of this is in the eighth-grade program, the discussion of sensuality. One piece of that section talks to the kids about something the authors call “skin hunger.”

Skin hunger is nothing less than the desire to be touched, the basic human *need* to be touched. You know that need. It is the one that, if it isn't fulfilled, means a baby monkey can shrivel up, fail to thrive and ultimately die. It's the same hunger that, when answered, makes anxiety melt away with a hug, or makes having a hand to hold feel so deeply satisfying, or that makes getting our hair washed at the barbershop such a treat, or a massage feel so wildly good. I never had anyone name the desire for touch as a hunger, but I certainly knew that hunger as a kid. I had a very touch-y family and I needed that, and even when part of me wanted to pull away from it as a teenager, I still couldn't resist curling up on the couch next to my dad and having him stroke my arm, or letting my mother run her fingers through my hair. Part, I think, of why I was never tempted to have sex early (too early for me) in my life was that this piece of me had a healthy outlet. And part of what we want our kids to know is that they have these real, natural, normal hungers, and then think of the healthy ways they get fed, so they don't offer themselves up for another's pleasure at their own expense because a little touch gets thrown in as part of the bargain. This is revolutionary and it is core and it is part of how we want to shape our kids so they can grow up in wise ways, ways of thoughtful choosing, ways that feed their overall health and wholeness.

But here's the irony: At that parents' orientation, what I feel is so often present is the legacy of adults who didn't develop this vocabulary about their own needs or level of comfort with their own bodies. How many of us have thought a lot about our own hunger for touch, and how normal it is, and how many of us think intentionally about the ways we might weave the meeting of it into our lives? And beyond that, what about conversations about pleasure and choice and the way we build intimacy and the role of sex and sexuality in all of that? I'd wager that many of us missed that kind of dialogue and exploration, but then we are the ones asked to be comfortable enough to help our kids get it.

Of course we feel scared when the slides go up. Most of us were told that was secret information, taboo, scary – not explicitly told that, but we picked it up in a culture or a family where the subject was avoided or joked about roughly or where we just picked up the conflicted feelings, the way kids know everything their parents don't want to tell them. We picked up these messages even though no one ever actually sat us down to tell us about how they felt about all of this – this sacred, tender, powerful, complicated part of their lives and ours. Rare, in my experience, is the exception to that rule. Many of us carry a legacy with us – often of distrust or fear – around our sexuality, or just plain sex itself.

And of course, religion has contributed to that legacy. It's not simple to trace the trajectory of all the world's religions and the place of sexuality in them, and I won't try here, but suffice it to say that in many religious traditions, body and spirit aren't thought to be playing on the same team, as it were. In the Christian tradition, mind is often seen as a vehicle to the divine, but in so many ways body is seen as an impediment. Mortification of the flesh – just the fact that *that phrase exists* says volumes about the history and traditions around the body that we inherit. To be fair, there are parts of the Bible that get racy, most notably Song of Songs, though it is still a miracle it made it through the canonization process: “Your lips distill nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue.” Having said that, there is no hymn in any Christian hymnal I could find (and I looked through five) that quotes anything from this book except an early verse in Chapter 2 ... about the beauty of spring! Mitchell and I did a deep dive into our hymnal too for hymns that celebrate the body or sensuality, and there too the content was sadly missing. I had high hopes for Hymn No. 335 because it had the word “passion” in the title, but its first line runs, “Once when I was *passion free* [my emphasis] to learn of things divine.” Because of course, that's how we learn of things divine – when we are *passion-free*!

So often the legacy around passion is of something to distrust in our search for the holy or divine. And certainly our sexuality, like every other piece of ourselves, has incredible potential for abuse and misuse, but certainly too it has far more potential than just that. Poet Audrey Lorde captured some of that potential beautifully when she wrote about the erotic. She wrote, “The erotic is that which allows us deep connection with others, giving joy, creative energy, and the capacity for feeling; that which empowers persons to change the world; that which is the deep yes within the self” (p.144, *Honoring the Body*).

Perhaps a piece of the heart of the matter surfaced for me right outside these doors a few weeks back. That morning, just before service, I stood in the narthex, the entrance to the sanctuary, and talked to a couple whose youngest son is applying to college. We talked about the pressure to figure out where you are going, and how hard it is to pretend to know so early

what you want, and how we each of us had dealt with all of these pressures in our younger years. The husband noted that he had left college and a college scholarship to boot, and shocked and dismayed his family by doing so, to go travel out west and do whatever he wanted to for the better part of a decade. “Those were my wild days,” he said with a smirk, and talked then about how ultimately he chose law school and it all worked out, and we laughed about what a staid suburban life he led now. “It must give you some relief from all that,” I said to him, “to say to yourself some days, ‘I may look like your average upstanding suburban dad, but inside I’m a *wild man!*’” We laughed, and then his wife said something in this quiet voice, in a moment of wisdom almost out of place amid the comings and goings of the lobby right before service begins. She said, “*Everyone needs to feel alive sometimes.*”

She’s right. We do need to feel alive sometimes, perhaps even a lot of the time, if we dare ask this much of life. And much of this need to feel alive, I would argue, is tied to what Audrey Lorde would call the erotic. After all, what is feeling alive but the desire to feel passionate about a person or a place or an engagement of some kind in the world; about feeling at home and alive in our bodies, sensually alive to the world – to taste and sound and touch – deeply connected to others, intimately connected, about being someone who can give and receive pleasure, be vulnerable, risk and find you are safe. This drive is one of the core and wild and wonderful parts of ourselves, and, make no mistake about it, it is a part tied closely to ourselves as sexual beings in all that our sexuality means.

Marriages and other relationships, when they go awry, very often do so, I think, because someone ceased to feel alive, and chose a desperate, not always well-thought-out way to break that deadness away. Part of why we talk about sexuality here, educate about it, is to be more in touch with that place that is central to that feeling of being alive, whole, excited, passionate, connected, embodied; that erotic energy that fuels creativity and the desire to heal the world. And we can *ignore* it, as generations and some religious traditions have for centuries, and we can *distrust* it, as generations and some religious traditions have for centuries, but we do so, if we do so, to our own detriment.

The erotic, sexual piece of us may just be as close to the core force at the heart of the universe as any other. The creative urge. The generative force. The desire to be more and more fully alive is so deeply human that we must wake to it. Moreover, we need to be in touch – wisely, intentionally, comfortably – with this, because we need to show our children how to find that place.

Stephanie Paulsell writes, “Our culture’s lore about The Talk that every mother has with her daughter and every father has with his son will not help us here. Not that there doesn’t need to be frank talk about sex. But talk that emerges in isolation from the rest of life, talk that happens in one conversation, covers all the bases, and then is dropped forever will probably not make much of a difference in anyone’s life. Only talk that arises organically within an ongoing practice of honoring the body can help us make ready homes and churches and communities of all kinds that reverence the gift of sexuality” (p.152, *Honoring the Body*).

So may it be for us all, and for us *here*. Amen.