

2007-11-4 Our Whole Lives

Opening words from Our Whole Lives class. They were written by Mike Lange)

We are here
to center, to explore
to learn, to understand,
not to judge,
not to shun,
not to feel alone.

Together we'll do our best to learn and grow.

Thus we say:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we have kindled this light as the sign of our circle of life and love.

Naming Ceremony 9 AM Sequence

Before the sun and moon,
before the processions of time and stars,
before the Oneness that grounds the Many,
I pray: may I never be ashamed to be who I am.

If I disappoint someone who would like me to stand for someone else in their lives, let me not be ashamed to be who I am.

If my face does not match the faces on billboards, or if I do not resemble the runway crowd, let me not be ashamed to be who I am.

If I do not do what I sense others want me to do, let me not be ashamed to be who I am.

If I am not yet what I would like to become, let me not be ashamed to be who I am now.

If I do not believe what others want me to believe as a blessing on what they believe, let me not be ashamed to believe what I believe.

If I am not yet entirely comfortable when I dance, or refuse to dance; when I sing, or do not sing; or when I sit still during this span of deliberate silence, let me not be ashamed to be who I am.

silence

If I am not aware of how interdependent I am with those I love, those who love me, those who have gone before me and those I trust, or even mistrust, then why would I, or anyone, ever talk of the spiritual life, or understand the promptings of our inner life?

If I am not able to leave any sense of entitlement I may feel, and take my place in the larger circle of life and love, of which I am only one small part, then how will I face the reality of my limitations? Let our hearts and lips open now, that we might name in silence, or within this community, the lives with whom our own lives are inextricably joined...

naming

If you and I speak of love, of freedom, of joy, and are not aware of how music speaks still more eloquently of such values, then let our hearts open even wider now and receive...

The First Reading comes from the text *Sexuality and Our Faith*, which is a companion book to the curriculum *Our Whole Lives*, a highly praised curriculum on sexuality we share with the United Church of Christ. These words were crafted by a variety of Unitarian Universalists, and refer to our principles....

The inherent worth and dignity of every person..

Every person's sexuality is sacred and is worthy of respect, therefore it is not to be violated.

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations...

We treat others as we would want to be treated; therefore sexual exploitation and interpersonal violence are wrong.

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth...

Accepting each other as we are means doing no harm and fostering well-being in one's self and others.

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning...

In our relationship to others, our freedom of sexuality is as important as the responsibility for it.

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and society at large...

As a community and as an institution, we are responsible for creating a secure, safe, and nonviolent environment.

The goal of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all...

We have the opportunity to create the kind of environment that lends itself to peace, liberty, and justice in human interactions, and we can become a model for the rest of society.

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part...

When we respect each person's sexual integrity, we honor the wholeness of life and respect the web of all existence.

The Second Reading comes from the magnificent and most useful text, *Changing Bodies Changing Lives*. It's a poem by a high school student, Amy C. Rosen, and it's called *Lemon*

They try and tell me I'm not what I think.

They dye me and fill me full of their things.

Conform me. I am myself. I am fresh and sunny. Me.

They take me and reap me. Stamp me "Sun-Kissed."

They use my juice. Squeeze the life out of me.
They take my scent to clean dishes and make hands softer.
They use my seeds to grow more.
They throw away my skin, my shell.

Nothing left.

I want to peel the skin off and show you the sun!
Well, damn you. Yes, you.
I want you to see me.
Don't say I'm fake.
I'm not unreal.
I am me.

Sermon

It's hard to keep up around this place sometimes. There are so many events listed in our calendar, that I don't always know all the things that are going on around here, and I am one of your ministers. Concerts, lectures, classes, dances, special meals for special groups, business meetings, potlucks, covenant groups, bridge groups, meditation circles, films, rehearsals... the place is a veritable spiritual Times Square, abuzz and alive.

But some of the best things that go on around here are not listed on the kiosk out in the Gallery. I am thinking particularly this morning about the curriculum we are now offering to our junior high youth, which addresses aspects of human sexuality.

The name we give to this curriculum, *Our Whole Lives*, does not necessarily tell you that it has to do with sexuality. The phrase could be a line in a poem or a prayer; there is nothing particularly suggestive of anything in that title of any particular theme, it's so global in scope.

But nonetheless, this most excellent curriculum is about sexuality. And the title is indeed significant because sexuality is not something added to our lives, but rather, something that touches all aspects of our lives...our emotions, our whole bodies, our intellects, our relationships, our decisions, our boundaries, our senses, our health, our yearnings, our self-esteem and self-doubt, our fears, our desires, our imagery, our stereotypes, our hopes, our dissatisfactions, our values, our joys and our capacity for pleasure, affection and love.

The course was put together by two religious associations, our own, namely the Unitarian Universalist Association, and our historical cousins, the United Church of Christ, which some of you may know better by the name it was called throughout most of its history: the Congregational Church.

Our Whole Lives is used widely in both religious groups. You'll find only a few language differences, usually centering on theological reflection. The course work addresses different age groups, in age-appropriate ways. *Our Whole Lives* courses (or *OWL*, as it is sometimes called) have been written for younger children, ages 5 and 6, and they have been written for adults. It's often most associated with younger teenagers, since the reality of sexuality usually begins to impact that age group in a particularly powerful way.

But sexuality itself pervades all of life. And it is not something confined to our biology: that birds-and-bees business, and plaster cross-sections of the male and female bodies. Sexuality touches on all the

questions of life. No matter your age. No matter your gender. No matter your temperament. No matter your resistance to it.

When students in grades 7 to 9 take this course, for example, they start off with questions that seem at first to have little to do with sexuality, as it is commonly understood. Yet sexuality in some form or another touches every one of these questions.

For example, let's do one of the warm-up exercises found in the workbook. I will ask you to rise, as you are willing and able, and face the center of the room. I want you to be able to see each other as much as possible. I will ask some questions, and then I would like you to raise your hand if the answer is yes, and keep your hands at your sides if your answer is no. If doing something like this is really uncomfortable for you, you are most welcome not to raise your hand at all, but do notice the number who do, when I ask these questions. There is always something to learn.

How many of you:
Grew up in this area?
Have grandchildren?
Use the internet?
Had an argument with your child or children this week?
Are the oldest child in your family?
Are the youngest child in your family?
Are the middle child in your family?
Are the only child in your family?
Have a parent living with you?
Are a single parent?
Have a good friend of a different race or ethnic background?
Have a good friend who is gay, lesbian or bisexual?
Received a good sexuality education at home?
Received a good sexuality education at school?
Can talk openly about sexuality at any time?

---congregation does so-----

You have noticed that sometimes you were almost alone, and at other times, you were part of a majority. There is learning in that. You may have noticed that you felt more uncomfortable about some questions than about others. There is learning in that too. And *Our Whole Lives* is a tool for just that...learning.

Now of course, not all the learning comes from answering questions about personal experience. There are days where exploring the language and biology of sexuality is pretty straightforward. There are also formal brainstorming exercises, such as where the student is asked, "How do stereotypes hurt females?" and "How do stereotypes hurt males?" When the lists are made, the workbook offers even more suggestions about the high price we pay for a lack of consciousness.

Many people I know seem to think that stereotyping is primarily something men do to women. But men often accept stereotypes from women, and from their fellow men, and the culture at large. And these stereotypes are deadly.

For example, did you know that when boys accept stereotypes about what it means to be male, they (1) are more likely than females to be heavy users of alcohol and drugs; (2) less likely to seek help (for anything!); (3) less concerned about their health than females; (4) have fewer friends than females; (5) are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors; and (6), are far more likely to die from suicide than females?

These are the sobering realities a good sexuality education needs to provide once you get past the *vas deferens* and *fallopian tubes* in human bodies.

Because sexuality is about our whole lives, not just about certain parts of our bodies.

Sometimes people are shocked that *Our Whole Lives* addresses kids as young as kindergarteners. But this shock is based on the old social mythology that human sexuality begins with puberty, and that children are simply not equipped to deal, at an age-appropriate level, of course, with the realities of relationship, gender and curiosity about bodily differences. My two oldest godchildren, Adam and Toby, for example, were raised by parents who recognized there is not one whit of evidence to support the rather dangerous mythology that children should be exempt from any discussion of issues around sexuality. Adam's and Toby's parents never once stooped to red-faced shame when answering any question their sons had, even when they were two years old. As a result, both of my godsons are healthy, responsible young men who live without stereotypes about women, about sexual minorities, and who live without shame about their own bodies, their own feelings and their own values. Are they perfect? C'mon. Who is? But do they live without shame and ignorance? Absolutely.

And make no bones about it. Everyone in this room *receives a sexual education somewhere*. They tinker one together from their friends, and whatever embarrassment their family, the media and their religious institutions hand them. The education may be full of misinformation, like that dazzling new museum down in Kentucky which, based on fundamentalist teaching, asserts that dinosaurs walked in the Garden of Eden alongside Adam and Eve, only a few thousand years ago. But just as the museum impresses almost everyone with its well-crafted, if cruelly erroneous, exhibits, so the dazzling sexuality education many of us receive at the hands of well-meaning but uneducated peers can lead to disaster. For example, the mother of my godsons used to be a counselor in a health clinic. A bright young woman with an excellent college education came to her to express her dismay and surprise that she was pregnant. "You are surprised that you are pregnant," my friend noted. "Do you think your birth control methods failed this time?"

"Well," said her client, "it's not my fault that I am pregnant. I practice birth control. After all, I did stand up after my husband and I had made love." My friend didn't quite understand what that meant, and said so. "Well," explained the young woman, "everyone knows that gravity pulls everything toward the earth, so naturally, if you stand up after you make love, you can't get pregnant. The sperm can't make it to the egg because of gravity."

My friend was dumbfounded. But she learned, that day, the power of the sex education youngsters get out on the street...the sex education of hearsay and fantasy...is real and rampant. And that an education about science, the arts or engineering does not educate you about sexuality.

A lot of sexuality education has to do with learning to accept yourself for who you are. Are you tall? Closer to the ground? Shy? Covered in freckles? Is your hair glossy or curly or straight or thin or cowlicked or that shade of red that everyone likes to mock? Is your body larger or smaller? If you are a girl or woman, are you concerned about your figure? If you are a boy or a man, are you concerned

about the plenitude or absence of body hair? Do you worry about your strength, or virility? Do you accept yourself as you are?

I think of the moving, angry poem written by Amy Cohen, a high school student. She perceives, quite accurately I think, that it's easy to fall into being ashamed of who you are, especially around the area of sexuality. Just like they dye lemons to make them a conforming yellow, so does modern society tend to suggest that conformity would be better for us all. And that we should be ashamed if we are not ashamed to be who we are.

*I want you to see me, says the poet.
Don't say I'm fake.
I'm not unreal. I am me.*

Wanting to be seen for who we are, not for whom others think we should be, is the basis of healthy self-esteem. Without comfort in our own skins, without self-acceptance, life is about ten times more difficult than it need be. A good sexuality education helps students to learn that not only are they not fake, not only are they not unreal, they are precious and lovable, and do not have to pretend to be someone other than they are in order to get through life.

A good sexuality education, like *Our Whole Lives*, suggests that people, younger and older, already know an awful lot about themselves, and that they should learn to trust that information, not sell it to the person who promises to love them if they will conform to them. I think of all the years when young transsexual high school students...a small minority, yes, but a significant one...have said things to adults like, "I feel like a woman trapped in a man's body." Or vice versa, depending on the gender. And everyone tended to tell them just to shut up, and, like Joan of Arc's tormentors told her, "Just conform, stop talking nonsense and wear the 'right' clothes."

Now, recent studies at a significant and respected brain study institute in the Netherlands have shown rather convincing evidence that the brains of transgender persons in the hypo-thalamus area resemble those in the other gender completely, so that the phrase "I feel like a woman trapped in a man's body" is not a metaphor, but cool and accurate self-disclosure. As they always said. Why do we not listen to each other?

It has always troubled me that so-called civilization is often based on the destructive idea that others know more about you and me than you and I do, and that what we know of ourselves is self-delusion if it does not conform to some norm. A norm determined by folks who seem to live in an atmosphere of fear and loathing that must be as devastating to them as it is to the rest of us.

It has also troubled me deeply over the years when I hear critics of our free religious tradition...both inside as well as outside that tradition... suggesting that because we don't have either a creed or binding sacred book, because we encourage folks to feel good about who they are instead of encouraging them to imagine themselves as creatures who enrage a whimsical God by simply being born, that we have no firm ethical stance on things. That we are immoral. That because we teach principles and develop "values" instead of submitting to unbending regulations from folks who claim to know things no one can possibly know, we have no sense of limit or violation or yes, wrong.

This is, I'd say, delusional. At best. A delusion based on an abject terror of freedom's integrity. I think that the example given in the first reading, which unfolds our Unitarian Universalist principles as they relate to sexuality, responds, with simply and healing humility, to our arrogant critics:

Every person's sexuality is sacred and is worthy of respect, therefore it is not to be violated. We treat others as we would want to be treated; therefore sexual exploitation and interpersonal violence are wrong. As a community and as an institution, we are responsible for creating a secure, safe, and non-violent environment. We have the opportunity to create the kind of environment that lends itself to peace, liberty, and justice in human interactions, and we can become a model for the rest of society. When we respect each person's sexual integrity, we honor the wholeness of life and respect the web of all existence.

I have been thrilled all week as I have been reading the *Our Whole Lives* materials. I've been proud to be part of a church which offers such a loving, unashamed education to the younger set growing into their maturity. I've been almost envious about their luck in getting to learn in this way. Believe me, the sexual education I received from family, society, church and state was so distorted and misinformed that I am only now, at age 58, beginning to recover from it, and to accept myself for who I am, not for who folks would like me to be.

This church may be like Times Square, with a thousand things going on. I love to see the dances and potlucks, the earnest teaching and films, the meetings and creativity. There is some joy there, joy from which the larger world, as well as ourselves, might benefit.

But I think there is a deeper joy when any of us can be glad to accept ourselves as we are. I think there is a truer joy when we can face the truths of our unique and individual lives and not run away, but explore deeper. *There are numerous strings in your lute*; Tagore wrote in the song we sang earlier, *let me set my own among them*. Why? Because the string of my life is worthy. I need not be ashamed to be one of the necessary strings in the lute that plays the music of the spheres. Yes, that joyful music. That's the joy the German poet Schiller writes about, the joy which "lures the roses out of their buds, and the stars out of their orbits." It's the joy that makes the universe the universe, he says, the most important and basic joy in our whole lives. And I am here to say this morning that sexuality, in all of its dimensions, is one of the mainsprings of that joy.

For those who learn about their whole lives, and those who teach from within the context of their whole lives, and for those who now rejoice with me, my thanks in this month of thanksgiving.

Offering

No walls without a foundation.
No earth without sky.
No thirst when there is water.
No defeat when there is hope.
No joy without facing reality first.
No church without generosity from
those who agree to be a church.

Joyful, jazzy prayer.... (jazz melody interspersed)

That we are bodies with breath and the capacity both for pleasure and boundaries, joy!
That our minds flow with strength and vulnerability, joy!
That we can live by principle, and learn to love both self and others better each day, joy!
That we are alive, together, and can learn and not run from either truth or truth-telling in the sacred circle of conversation, joy!