

LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS ~ Erika Hewitt

*You do not have to be good
You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.¹*
As we enter into worship, put away the pressures of the world
that ask us to perform, to take up masks, to put on brave fronts.
Silence the voices that ask you to be perfect.
This is a community of compassion and welcoming.
You do not have to do anything to earn the love contained within these walls.
You do not have to be braver, smarter, stronger, better
than you are in this moment to belong here, with us.
You only have to bring the gift of your body,
no matter how able;
your seeking mind, no matter how busy;
your animal heart, no matter how broken.
Bring all that you are, and all that you love, to this hour together.
Let us worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Skin You Live In* ~ Michael Tyler
(Looks at how our skin holds us in and connects us to others...we're the same and unique)

READING *Nine Things I Wished I'd Learned...*² ~ Dr. Martha Tara Lee

When did you first become aware of your own sexuality? Who taught it to you, and what were the lessons you learned? This is the perspective of one sexologist, Dr. Martha Tara Lee, about what she WISHES she had learned in sex ed.

“Growing up in a relatively typical Chinese family in Singapore, I received very little sexuality education. Let me give you the context: I did not know that what I had "down there" was called the vulva even though I had the "bits." I did not attempt to pronounce the word penis until I was 26, and as if that by itself was not awkward enough, I was then told that I said it wrong!”

Here are nine things that Dr. Martha lists that she wishes she had learned in sex-ed as a teenager:

¹ From Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"

² <http://www.yourtango.com/experts/dr-martha-lee/9-things-i-wish-i-learned-sex-ed-part-1-4> (abridged)

1. The correct anatomical names for the genitals. Without knowing what is 'down there' and resorting to using pet names or blushing every time we refer to our private parts, just how comfortable can one be with one's sexuality, much less sexual expression? Being able to give the correct anatomical names to your genitals is part of healthy sexuality.
2. Adults do not talk to you about sex because they are afraid of being responsible for telling you the wrong things. But mostly, it is because they are not comfortable talking about sex themselves. Forgive them for never being able to give you a straight answer or dismissing you. Let that go.
3. Do not believe everything you hear from your friends, family, or anybody else for that matter about sex. Most of the time, they are just passing on what they heard from somebody, who heard it from somebody else.
4. It is ok to seek out information about sex and sexuality. It does not make you any less of a person, but instead better prepared to make the right sexual decisions for you. The more you actually do know about sex and sexuality, the more comfortable you will be in owning and expressing your sexuality.
5. Sexuality education does not encourage the early start of sexual intercourse, the frequency of intercourse, or even an increase in the number of sexual partners among the young. Instead, understanding sexuality can actually delay the onset of intercourse, reduce the frequency of intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners, and increase condom or contraceptive use.
6. Sexuality education has very little to do with the sexual act, but is actually a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values of one's sexuality. It encompasses sexual development, sexual and reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles.
7. Our desire for sex is natural, but the act of sex itself is learned. Like much of everything we know, we acquire the knowledge, practice through trial and error, and perfect it so that it becomes a skill which we 'own.'
8. Though it can be for some people, sex is not just a physical act. Sex is usually a physical, emotional, mental, and even spiritual act. Your intention has everything to do with what sex is like for you.
9. Your skin is your biggest sex organ, and your brain is your most powerful sex organ. Use both, and let go of any guilt! Enjoy your body, enjoy being alive...and breathe!

MESSAGE

Enjoy being alive. Breathe!

I named this service "Let's talk about Sex" when in actuality, it should have been "Let's talk about sexuality education." 'Sex' is used to mean intercourse, or sexual relations, to the end that 'sex ed' is too easily presumed to mean 'intercourse instruction.' That is a false assumption, so I apologize for using the 'sex-word' to entice you, as to do so participates in a

misunderstanding of what sexuality is, misunderstandings I would hope to correct rather than perpetuate.

According to the World Health Organization, sexuality is “a central aspect of being human throughout life, encompassing sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.” It is so much more than the act of sex. It is a central aspect of being human.

I can't say exactly where or how I got my sexuality education, though I have snippets of memories...a hodgepodge of experiences that added up to a less than adequate education.

I remember my joy at coming home from a 4th grade music competition...and telling my mother how nice the judge was. She responded with a warning about men who were nice....perhaps appropriate, but she also relayed unspoken meaning.

I remember the 'you're-entering-puberty' education in 5th or 6th grade...a shameful shuffling of the boys and girls to separate darkened rooms to watch filmstrips about the human body. We girls came away with red faces and pink cardboard boxes (You're a Young Lady Now) containing menstruation supplies...a box which lay hidden under my bed until I needed it. But there was no more talk about it.

There was some sexuality education in high school health class. I remember NO content, but rather the awkward way in which it was presented by the embarrassed football coach and the giggles it produced.

I remember an evening when my dad caught me and a boyfriend kissing (and maybe more) and being sent for a talk with my mom...who essentially told me how painful and awful sex was. This from a woman who by all appearances loved her husband and had six children.

And while my bedroom was next door to that of my parents' and knowing for obvious reasons that they actually had sexual intercourse, I never heard or saw any direct evidence.

I remember once being physically cornered by an adult boss. Thank god that he respected my 'no'... but still, that experience left me feeling betrayed and distrustful. I told no one about it until years and years later.

Now, I was not a sexually active teenager; it wasn't until I was in college that I had my first 'real' experience, and by then I'd been able to get my hands on the landmark "Our Bodies, Our Selves" which became something of a bible for me. But beyond that book, I had no one to talk to, no one to ask questions of...that is, IF I had had the chutzpah to speak of it at all...to anyone...ever.

So, my 'sex ed' happened only because it's impossible to come of age without learning something, but what I learned was that my sexuality was shameful, that it was to be hidden,

that acknowledging it any way would lead to pain and betrayal. Were I a parent, this is NOT what I would want my children to learn.

Did any of you have similar experiences? I know that my education, or lack thereof, was a product of both the 'vintage' of my upbringing and my parents' unpreparedness or inability to provide this education at home. Things have changed...and are continuing to change...and that's what today's service is about.

Effective last month, the province of Ontario has updated its curricula for sexuality education. There have been strong protests and concern among some parents and groups (the current Peterborough examiner poll shows 30% against)...reminiscent of other 'battles' over what is appropriate in schools...from teaching evolution, to saying the pledge of allegiance (in the US), to required prayers and religious instruction. With each issue, school boards make decisions, hopefully based on research and evidence, as to what they believe to be both in the best interest of the whole, and in the best service of quality and relevant education.

You and I, I'm sure, have not always been on the side of the school board in these struggles. This congregation has been active in matters of education in the past...in the 1960's, we prepared a submission on religious education in the schools to the Ontario government's Keiller McKay commission, as well as a Values Education proposal to the Peterborough Board of Education. Both of these actions addressed the place and manner of how religion is presented in public schools, which is completely appropriate since we are a religious organization.

So, why, and in what ways, might we involve ourselves in sexuality education in schools? To be honest, I'm not entirely sure, but let's explore this a bit more. It begs the question...to what extent is sexuality education a private issue, the purview of religion, or a matter of public interest?

"Our Unitarian and Universalist forebears tended to affirm new understandings in science and psychology, so we have a long history of thinking progressively on sexual matters," wrote Sarah Gibbs Millspaugh in an article for the UUWorld. "After a comprehensive study, the 1929 General Convention of the Universalist Church in America passed a resolution in favor of family planning. The American Unitarian Association stood in favor of 'the planning of parenthood' at their annual meeting in 1947."

In response to the dehumanizing ways in which Hugh Hefner portrayed sexuality, the UU theologian James Luther Adams argued in a 1967 Playboy article, "I prefer to appeal to what I believe is an authentic conception of love, an abiding affection that carries with it responsibility and respect for the other person in the context of a community. . ." (I guess Playboy does have good articles!)

Also in 1967, in part in response to the sexual revolution of that time, our religious educators dedicated their fall conference to human sexuality, and the UUA went to work developing a multimedia curriculum...About Your Sexuality...which intended to 'awaken young people's morality and critical thinking.' Described by the National Observer as "the most comprehensive, explicit and possibly controversial set of materials ever assembled," a controversy did indeed ensue, including an obscenity court case in Wisconsin. This only served to increase the UU commitment to sexuality education.

Then, at an ecumenical gathering in the early 1990's, the idea for Our Whole Lives was born, and by 2000, five (and now six) sexuality curricula had been developed for a range of ages...a curricula based in self worth, sexual health, responsibility, justice and inclusivity. A revision of the cornerstone Grade 7-9 curriculum was recently released.

While Our Whole Lives (known as OWL) is intentionally secular...and has been used by schools, and teen programs, and sexual health organizations...an accompanying supplement, "Sexuality and Our Faith," puts the program into the context of religious values.

Clearly, we have both a strong belief in, and commitment to, sexuality education as a responsibility of this faith tradition. (And, FYI, our UFP OWL team is meeting this week to begin to put in place OWL programs for the coming year, which we can hopefully offer to at least three age groups. Please speak to Kate Huband if you have an interest in furthering this effort.)

I think we can agree without even speaking about it that the home, in the hands of parents, is a critical place for sexuality education. And now we have seen that our faith tradition has embraced its role and responsibility in providing sexuality education and putting it into the context of values and moral choices. So, what place does sexuality education have in public schools?

To support public education is to support the role of society in ensuring that each child...regardless of income, class, ethnicity or gender...has access to quality, age appropriate, factually-based education, that will support them in creating and maintaining healthy lives. Understanding oneself sexually is critical to that. We may as individuals disagree on the details of what that entails, but the fact remains that schools exist for the edification of the minds and lives of the students...all of our children, our youth.

Let me tell you a bit (and you may know more than I do about this) about the changes in the Ontario sexuality education curriculum. First of all, this is the 1st update since 1998; the province attempted an update in 2010, but shelved it due to protests. Sexuality education, which the media coverage would lead us to think occupies nearly all of a child's day at school, in reality makes up just 10% of the "Health and Physical Education" curriculum. The "Healthy Living" section of that larger curriculum is designed to help children make healthy

decisions about food, exercise, about safety, about alcohol and other substances, and about sexual activity...that's where the new sexuality education curriculum comes in.

Why did it need an update? Aside from the previous version being the oldest in the country, two big societal changes necessitated the change. First, children are reaching puberty earlier, and second, the internet age has made it easy for children to access what might be both inappropriate and inaccurate information.

Here is some of what the new curriculum DOES cover, and not all of this represents a change. "It will teach students in Grade 1 the proper names for body parts. Grade 2 students will learn about the broad concept of consent by being told that no means no. Concepts of gender identity will be introduced in Grade 3, though the curriculum doesn't get explicit and positions sexual orientation as one of the potential qualities that distinguish people from one another. Discussions about puberty move to Grade 4 from Grade 5, while education about intercourse will take place the following year. Masturbation and "gender expression" will be taught in Grade 6, while kids in Grades 7 and 8 will discuss contraception, anal and oral sex, preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Students will also learn about online bullying and the dangers of sharing sexually explicit images electronically."

Does any of that make you uncomfortable? Would you be even a little worried about your child getting this education? My truthful answer is yes. You see, I am among those adults, alluded to in the article Jovanna read, who are still a bit uncomfortable talking about sexuality. I blame that on the lack of a proper and healthy education. Second, my personal belief is that sexuality... while also natural and human and biological...is a sacred thing, and I would want to both know and trust those who would be educating my child to treat it that way. Still, I stand in support of the new curriculum.

I would want my child to have the benefit of an honest, thorough, sexuality education...but one that goes further than the small bits offered in the public school setting. I would want them to learn in the presence of a safe and supportive peer group. I would want my child, beyond learning facts about anatomy and development, to be assisted in clarifying their own values and developing their capacity for moral discernment; to build interpersonal skills, and to understand sexuality holistically. I would want them to be able to dismantle the pervasive understanding of gender as a binary system. I would want them to understand that sexuality is an individual expression and to accept, and respect, the wide diversity of those expressions. I would want them to learn to take responsibility for their own behaviour in the service of healthy and mutually respectful relationships.

So, in my mind, the provincial curriculum is not enough and doesn't go far enough.

What can we do? First, if you support the changes in the provincial curriculum, you let that be known. That might mean letters to and conversations with our MPP or letters to the editor, or informed conversations with our neighbours. It might mean working to dispel the many myths that are out there about the new curriculum. It might also mean supporting a parent's right to withdraw their children from these classes, because each of us would want that right.

Second, we can supplement what kids get at home and in school by offering sexuality courses, grounded in our faith. We can continue, and increase, our commitment to offering Our Whole Lives programming here. I believe we could become a community resource known for providing healthy sexuality training.

Because? Because the more information kids have about their bodies, the more they can stand up for themselves and come forward when things aren't right. Because we need to teach tolerance and acceptance. Because the alternative is that kids need the information to help them to lead positive lives, especially in the context of an over-sexualized and over-commercialized society. Because while sexuality has the potential to harm, it is, better understood, a great source of joy and fulfillment.

As I wrote this, I started dreaming of offering adult Our Whole Lives programming here. I started dreaming that you would tell your family and friends about this programming...for all ages...and that this building would often be filled with people from all over this community receiving healthy messaging about sexuality. All in the service of our beloved principles...respect for each person...and justice, equity and compassion in all our relations.

So be it.

MEDITATION *These Bodies, These Blessings* ~Erika Hewitt

Spirit of Life and Love, spirit breathing in us and through us and all around us...this morning we remember and celebrate our bodies, we remember and celebrate that each of our bodies was woven together in the depths of mystery:
cells multiplying, tissue taking form, organs taking up their function, all under the silky cover of skin.

We gather in reverence for the gift of these bodies, whatever their ages, their shapes, their abilities,

These bodies, these blessings, bring the world to life through seeing, taste, hearing, scent, and touch -- through movement and stillness and singing and silence....

May we bring to our intricately woven bodies a sense of sacred caretaking.

May we be grateful for them as we know that they are channels of the world coming alive through us:

May we be grateful for the embrace of the Holy:

that which creates and sustains life, the force of Love that celebrates our desires.

the Mystery that knit together each of our bodies.

May we bring to the world a sense of sacred caretaking as well
Respect for the bodies of others -- especially those who suffer across our planet
And respect for earth's body, too...
Spirit of Life and Love, spirit breathing in us and through us and all around us...
this morning we remember and celebrate our bodies,
each of us woven together in the depths of mystery:
cells multiplying, tissue taking form, organs taking up their function,
all under the silky cover of skin,
all blessed by the power and possibilities of being human.
Shalom, blessed be and amen.

CLOSING WORDS *A Blessing for Bodies* ~ Nancy Shaeffer

May we creatures of bone and tissue
know our bodies well:
the fourth rib, and how it rises
higher than the third, not so high as the fifth;
how it feels to the thumb, slow traced,
and under it, how the heart rests.
May we know that space where no ribs lie, and unshielded, we bend.
May we know the bottom of each
toe, and that tender arch where
no skin touches the ground;
also skin smoothed soft by clothing.
May we know the quick curve of the head
before it sits on the spine,
and the tiny hollow just behind the ear;
the length of the forearm,
lifting food to lips, and how lips become
a circle, waiting - and knowing this,
cease our study of war.

Indeed, knowing our bodies can be a pathway to peace...in our hearts, relationships, in our homes, in our community, and in our world. Go now, believing that your body is good...as your wonderful and beautiful selves...into these days of beauty and thanksgiving.

Blessed be.