

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County
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Sex and the Sacred
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When Parabola magazine arrived at my home with its straightforward no non-sense title: “Sex,” I was delighted. I was grateful. The cover was all black. The word sex appeared in all capital letters in red centered on the cover.

The publication is devoted to myth, tradition, and the search for meaning. Inside the editors explained their decision about the cover. They said: “What image can encompass the enormity of sex? Two nudes? A snake in the garden? A peach?” They had tried them all when designing their cover. In the end, they said, “we felt that less was more.”

I understood that decision. There is the enormity of sex. No one image can quite encompass that. As G.I. Gurdjieff, who was an Armenian-Greek spiritual teacher, says, “Everything that people do is connected with ‘sex.’”

We arrive in the world as a result of sex. Our ability to create life is very powerful and essential to the continuation of our species and to family life. But of course sex is more than our genes. It is more than an act of procreation.

It has also to do with the spiritual, with the sacred, with God. These are not probably the traditional kinds of religious teachings most of you were learning in Sunday School or Religious Education classes. I know I wasn't. I imagine it is the rare minister to this day who is preaching the glories of sex rather than the prohibitions and dangers and evils.

Our culture and traditional religion tend to divide sex and spirit. The physical and spiritual are seen as separate. The physical world is understood as evil or fallen. The body, animals, and creation are deemed inferior to the spiritual.

One early Christian interpretation of the Genesis creation accounts believed sex was sinful. Only after eating the forbidden fruit do Adam and Eve recognize they are naked. They seek to cover their bodies.

Adam and Eve are banished from paradise. Eve's additional punishment is to experience magnified pain in childbearing. According to Augustine writing in the fifth century, Adam falls into sin through Eve who was made of his rib. All individuals ever after are born into sin as a result of Adam's actions. Sexuality came to be judged as sinful. There were other Christian interpretations, but this one proved most influential.

The Western world carries the seeds of this Augustinian interpretation in many of its attitudes toward sex. Most of us carry some of these attitudes whether we like it or not. This has sometimes led to a conflicted relationship to our bodies and sexuality.

Throughout history, we can identify some dramatic examples of sexuality being repressed and controlled. Puritan times and the Victorian age are two that come to mind.

By contrast, we live in a time of sexual freedom, sexual permissiveness, and sexual expressiveness. We might suppose this augurs well and indicates a greater level of comfort and a healthier overall relationship with our bodies and sexuality. But this is not entirely the case. Sex can cause pain as well as joy. And our culture is filled with too many examples of the injuries caused by sex. Consider sex trafficking, rape, sexual abuse, clergy sexual misconduct, and other sex-related crimes.

Our culture is saturated with highly sexualized messages and images that are damaging to our emotional, physical and spiritual well-being. For one thing, it is hard to live up to the standards of physical beauty.

Portrayals of sexuality are disembodied and anti-sensual. Many of them have little to teach us about what a loving, playful, and fulfilling sexual life might actually be like. They are more likely to make us feel shame, embarrassment, or low self-esteem.

In our sermon reading, Meg Barnhouse wrestles with this issue. Why is it we so often seem more comfortable with violence and Hollywood's version of sexuality than we are with sensual interactions between two loving individuals?

The backlash of fundamentalists and staunch conservatives on sexual matters such as same-sex relationships is strong. Most of us would probably agree that kissing is more family oriented than killing. We would agree that sexuality is to be appreciated and that we need more education about sexuality as it pertains to our values. We probably still all struggle with the limits and restraints needed on sexuality.

That is why we find it is so important to have good education for ourselves and our children. Our children are not getting this at school. They may be getting it at home, but even that is not always enough. They need to be in conversation with other adults and peers.

This year as part of our focus on being a congregation that is welcoming to people of all sexual orientations, we also offered the curriculum "Our Whole Lives" (known better to some of you by its acronym OWL) to our youth. It was taught by Keith Orts and Amber Brown. Both of them engaged in a weekend-long training program required for OWL facilitators.

The program is grounded in a holistic view of sexuality. It was developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ and reflects our liberal religious values and our UU principles.

Our youth received facts about anatomy and human development. But they also learned to clarify their values, build interpersonal skills, and understand the spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of sexuality. They had a chance to explore what is honestly a pretty

challenging subject in an honest and open way in a safe space with trusted friends and adults. What a gift!

Consider by contrast that I received no such education at church. What I remember most from my sexuality education at school is my young junior high school biology teacher. When she taught us the facts of reproduction, I felt sorry for her. She blushed a thousand shades of red over things we already knew.

There was no talk about values. It was science without spirituality. She taught us biology without talking about the lived experience. She had no training for teaching a bunch of adolescents the anatomically correct words for parts and processes of our bodies. She did not know how nor was she encouraged to connect these ideas to the rest of our young lives in ways that could have been meaningful to us.

We need this kind of education for our children. We need it for ourselves too. We need to be able to explore the interconnection of the physical, spiritual and emotional. What do our values have to do with the kinds of sexual relationships we have? How do we embrace the idea that everything we do is connected with sex? What does this mean to us?

And what does it mean when we say that sexuality is sacred? One of the most important ideas about sex that religion has to teach us is that sex can bring us spiritual awakening. We can be awakened to a union with the divine through sex. Sex is good. It is fun and playful. Sex is beautiful. Sex is spiritual. This is an idea that permeates nearly all of the world's religions. We so often hear the prohibitions from the religious world that this gets lost.

Goddess spiritualities, for example, honor the feminine divine and incorporate fertility and other sexual depictions of the female form. In the Tantric tradition in India and Hindu yoga, the sexual union of male and female are worshipped. The universe is recognized as expressing divine creativity.

Tibetan Buddhist art features the Yab-yum. The word means father-mother. The symbol represents the dual forces of male and female in union, thereby creating a transcendent unity.

The Hebrew creation account of Genesis 1 depicts creation, including the human body, as good. After making the world and everything in it, God deemed it good.

God also is said to have made humans in God's own likeness. We are *imago dei*, the image of God. Men and women are created in the image of God. How can that not be good! ("Sex and Spiritual Transformation," Parabola, Summer 2007). Our bodies are sacred. Created in the image of God, whether understood figuratively or literally, we are blessed.

I can't help but mention another Biblical reference from Genesis. God directed the animals and humans "to go forth and be fruitful." They were encouraged to be creative – to give birth to new life. In this congregation, we seem to be taking those words to heart. One need only look around to see the large number of babies newly arrived and also on the way.

In Christianity, there are interpretations that affirm a sacred view of sex. The United Church of Christ, for example, partnered with the Unitarian Universalists on the sexuality curriculum I mentioned.

Flora Slosson Wuellner, a United Church of Christ theologian, says that when she began to study theology she thought she would think less about sex. But that was not the case. She says, "As we abide more closely to God, who is the source of all creativity, the sexual feelings often intensify as we are made more whole." When sex is good, it helps make us whole. It brings us to God.

Our own tradition has rejected the idea of original sin. The physical is good or at the very least neutral. Human nature is neither fallen nor inherently evil. Our principles supports the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We see in human nature the potential for beauty and good.

Our principles also affirm the web of all life of which we are a part. We see humans as interrelated to all of creation. We do not reject nature or the natural aspects of ourselves as inferior. Humanists, for example, understand everything, including spirituality, as being part of the physical world not separate from it.

Respect for the sacredness of creation includes respect of our own bodies and of our own sexuality. Sex is what fires our drive for love, family, and unity. The wholeness of who we are, including our sexuality, is sacred.

Sexual love and sexual expression can give us access into God's nature and into the realm of the spiritual. It can be the means for us to encounter the divine. A fully engaged, fully human, and fully sexual love can bring us to union with God. It is one way we can experience the spiritual.

As we embrace the connection between sex and the sacred, we can open to a more profound spirituality. We can accept ourselves more fully as sexual beings with sexual energy. This energy is connected to divine sexual energy, to a universal energy.

It does not matter, by the way, whether we are sexually active or not. We still have this sexual life energy. And it gets channeled somewhere – into our relationships, into art, music, dance, literature, the creation of life, into expressions of love.

In the end, it seems to come down to love. The spiritual expression of sex is love. Last week, I saw Les Miserables in Philadelphia. This is the musical based on Victor Hugo's novel. One line from it sums it up for me: to love another person is to see the face of God.

Let us then love well. Let us hold sex sacred. May we let it infuse our lives with beauty and joy. May we use it to give birth to the creative possibilities of life.

Blessed be. Amen.