

**“Too Important, Too Beautiful, Too Dangerous:
A Sermon on Sexuality and Spirituality”**

September 18, 2005

Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley

The Reverend Judy Welles©

First Reading

West Wind #2
Mary Oliver

You are young. So you know everything. You leap into the boat and begin rowing. But listen to me. Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me. Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and your heart, and your heart's little intelligence, and listen to me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile away and out of sight, the churn of the water as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting about around the sharp rocks—when you feel that unmistakable pounding — when you feel the mist on your mouth and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls plunging and steaming — then, row, row for your life toward it.

Second Reading

Two Eagles
from *The Lakota Way*, Joseph M. Marshall, III

I was privileged to witness two eagles performing their courtship and mating ritual. They began their dance high above the Earth, where they soared and came together in an embrace that locked one to the other. Holding fast to each other they plummeted toward the land. When I thought they would surely crash into the ground, they let go of one another, gained flight and altitude, and then did it all over again. In utter awe and fascination, I watched this breathtaking aerial display, realizing suddenly that I was watching life keeping itself in balance while the eagles were fulfilling their purpose and honoring their destiny.

The world works best in balance. To every action there is an opposite and equal reaction, so the scientists say, a dry, unemotional premise that suggests a dynamic truth. Up and down, back and forth, night and day, cold and hot. In balance and symmetry is beauty and strength.

Sermon

Too Important, Too Beautiful, Too Dangerous

Two bathroom stories:

During our sabbatical in the winter of 2004, Duane and I spent a lot of time at Starr King School for the Ministry, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, California that we both attended. The first day we arrived there, my attention was drawn to the signs on the doors of the restrooms in the front hallway. One sign said “Women and Transgender” and the other said “Men and Transgender.” And I thought to myself, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas any more.”

Flash back to when I was in the fifth grade. I was out for dinner with my parents at a local restaurant. When I went into the women's restroom, I was *scandalized* (and definitely titillated) to notice that there was a vending machine on the wall which sold women's sanitary supplies. I could hardly wait to get home and call my friend (the one who had taught me about menstruation) and say "You'll never believe what I saw in a *public* bathroom! This is incredible!"

How I've changed in fifty years. And of course, the times have changed as well. Fifty years ago, if anyone even knew what "transgender" meant, they certainly weren't talking about it in public, and you couldn't have ordered a restroom sign with that word on it. There's reason for hope that public awareness and acceptance of human sexuality in all its ramifications is growing, and that matters never, ever discussed are finding their way into some kind of public discourse.

And of course there is reason for despair as well. The anti-gay movement is alive and well, its current manifestation being the signs appearing here and there around the Gulf Coast proclaiming that Hurricane Katrina is evidence of God's hatred of our country because we tolerate gays among us. The birth rate of babies to unmarried mothers continues to skyrocket. Abortion rights, while still protected by law to varying degrees, are vulnerable to political pressure, while the availability of reliable, low-cost contraception is equally threatened and vulnerable. Truly comprehensive sexuality education is seldom available in our public schools, while the federal government will only supply funding to programs which teach abstinence and nothing else. (And incidentally, current research indicates that there is a higher incidence of sexually transmitted disease and unplanned pregnancy among kids who have had "abstinence only" as their only sexuality education.)

Why is this still true, here in the early years of the twenty-first century? Why is human sexuality still such an emotionally charged, ambiguous, difficult subject? There are myriad reasons, of course, and the reasons for our ambivalence about sexuality reach into many spheres of our private and public lives. Ironically, this is simultaneously an intensely personal and an extremely public issue. There is fear, there is ignorance, there is patriarchy, there is the abuse of power at every level of human interaction, there is a growing movement to deny or ignore the validity of science, there is religious fundamentalism, there is greed, there is misogyny.

This is far more than I can address this morning in this context. I'll touch on some matters that I feel are important to air in the context of communal worship, but there is so much more to think about and to say... With that awareness, Dot has prepared a "lesson plan" for the Small Group Ministry groups to take the conversation about sexuality and spirituality deeper than we can manage here. This year, Duane and I and the Worship Associates will be preparing several lesson plans based on sermons, so that the Small Group Ministry participants can engage with them more deeply.

These difficult issues around sexuality are very, very important to me — if I were to be identified not just in my ministry but in my life as having a "cause," this would be it. I believe that human sexuality is far too important, too beautiful, and too dangerous to be dealt with as badly as we are doing in this country at this time.

My deep concern about healthy sexuality comes from many sources. As a girl and teenager and young adult, I didn't get very good guidance from the adults in my life about what was happening to me and how I should handle it. Admittedly, my sex

education wasn't nearly as bad as some of what went on then (and now), no thanks to my parents, who handed me a book a few years too late and said "Ask us any questions you might have," and then fled the room. But I did get lucky the summer before I turned ten, when my best friend at sleep-away camp was a girl with three older sisters who had taught her what's what, and she in turn had taught me. Still, that early (and fortunately correct) introduction to my own anatomy and physiology barely scratched the surface of what I needed to know.

Some of my passion for healthy sexuality comes from having grown up in a Unitarian church, where you would think that good resources would have been available to me, but they weren't. However, my experience as a Unitarian teenager did put me in contact with a lot of smart kids and caring adults, where there was at least an environment of respect and open-mindedness that encouraged some beneficial ego development, if not always the wisest behavior between the sexes.

And of course, I'm a Mom. When you raise girls, you want them to be safe, protected; you want them not to make mistakes or get caught in situations that will compromise their options as they grow up. You want for them something better than you had. I'm sure this must be the same for men with sons: they want something better for those boys than they had. Comfort with their bodies, joy in their physical nature, loving intimate relationships, planned and welcome children — all these are what I hoped for for my girls.

Furthermore, I worked for Planned Parenthood for six years before I turned my attention to the ministry. I could talk for hours about my experiences supervising two Planned Parenthood clinics in southern California, and all the learning that came to me during those very full and exciting years. What stands out for me now is tremendous pride that I was part of an organization that really went to bat for young women who desperately needed what we could provide: low cost reproductive health care, clear and correct information, choices, respect. Even then, I understood at some level that my work with Planned Parenthood was a kind of ministry, and that my commitment to it was a call that came from a very deep place inside me.

And that leads to the final reason for my passion about healthy sexuality. I'm a minister now, and I see this issue as absolutely fundamental to a person's spirituality, their emotional health, the health of their relationships, their capacity for intimacy, their self-esteem, their sense of their rightful place in the world, and their relationship to the Divine.

Sexuality is an issue that touches on every aspect of our lives, so it's altogether appropriate — a stroke of genius, in fact, in my opinion — that the Unitarian Universalist sexuality education program is titled "Our Whole Lives." I'll have more to say about this excellent program in a little while, but right now let me say this:

I want all of you to know about this course which we will be offering to our 7th through 9th graders starting in October. And I want you to feel as proud of it as I do. Your religious community is doing something very important here, something in service to the wider world. It's remotely possible that news of this class will come out publicly in ways that scandalize more conservative folks; it's remotely possible that news of this class will come out publicly in ways that scandalize more conservative folks; it's remotely possible that UUCV will come under some criticism for offering this class. I want you to know about it and be prepared to explain why we are doing this. I

want you to remember that knowledge is power, and we are empowering our children to be responsible, well-adjusted sexual beings now and for the rest of their lives.

So it makes sense to start by talking about why church is precisely the right place for us to be teaching about sexuality. Dot has touched on this already in her invitation to worship.

When you look at the underlying principles that we affirm and promote as Unitarian Universalists, and see them through the lens of human sexuality, it brings a sharp focus to the reasons why I am talking with you about this subject this morning. Respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Acceptance of one another. The right of conscience. The interconnectedness of us all. What better context than these principles to develop a full understanding of the power and the beauty of sexuality, and also of the ways in which sexuality can be mis-used to do damage and cause harm.

Unitarian Universalists have a long history of being on the forefront of issues relating to human sexuality. This should come as no surprise. It seems like we're always out there on the cutting edge, bringing issues out into the open and taking public stands a bit ahead of the curve.

Here's a brief rundown of some of the actions taken by the UUA regarding sexuality:

In 1963 the General Assembly issued a call for the reform of abortion statutes, making abortion legal (note: this was ten years before *Roe v. Wade*). Similar resolutions were passed in 1968 and 1969. Then there was one in support of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which has been reiterated and intensified *six* times since then, also calling for Medicaid funding for abortions, wider access to abortion and family planning services, and better sexuality education to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

Another landmark resolution passed in 1970 (thirty-five years ago), calling for an end to discrimination against homosexuals, and encouraging better sexuality education toward that end. This led to the creation of the Office for Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender concerns at the UUA in 1973 — a fully staffed and funded department — and a resolution in 1977 in support of Gay Human Rights.

In 1980 the General Assembly insisted on the full assistance of the UUA in the settlement of qualified openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual religious leaders. That was 25 years ago; other mainstream Protestant denominations are still fighting over this one.

In 1984, a resolution was passed supporting ministers who conduct gay and lesbian services of union, and in 1987 there was a resolution asking that state laws governing private sexual behavior between consenting adults be rescinded, and supporting passage of laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. We created the Welcoming Congregation Program in 1989, in which congregations study gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues and then vote to be intentionally and proactively welcoming. There are now 484 Welcoming Congregations in our movement out of about a thousand, including twenty in Pennsylvania (and yes, we are one of them).

The current public action within the UUA concerns the right to civil marriage for

same-gender couples, another area where we have been very visible at the state and national levels.

This list makes it clear and obvious how we have differed from our more religiously conservative brothers and sisters. Of course, nowadays there are many liberal Christian churches which advocate for choice in pregnancy, some which advocate for gay rights, many which make allowances for sex before marriage or after divorce (or at least look the other way). So there *are* spheres within the religious life of this country where tolerance and acceptance has grown.

It hasn't always been this way, and in many religious venues there is still a lot of ambiguity and discomfort with sexuality, for we are the victims of a long cultural and religious history of separating the spirit from the flesh. The flesh has been seen for centuries in the Western world as that sinful earthly force which pulls us away from the higher, the nobler realms of spirit.

Let me say in no uncertain terms that this split is a lie, and perhaps the most pernicious lie in our cultural history. This lie makes us believe that if we choose the delights of the body, we are somehow desecrating the sacred, and so it attaches guilt to our lovemaking, and removes Eros from our houses of worship.

As for the history: This split between the sexual and the sacred did *not* start with women. Before the rise of patriarchal religion, there were no brothels, but rather Temples of the Sacred Prostitutes. Warriors soiled by combat would come there to be cleansed and reunited with the Divine, for war separated men from the Divine, and the sexual act was a means of re-entry into Divine presence. The sexual act was viewed as a means of cleansing, of achieving wholeness, and the sacred prostitutes were the priestesses.

And the split between the body and the spirit did not begin with the Jews. In Hebrew culture the human is a whole person, not split at all, and sexual activity between husband and wife is considered a *mitzvah* — the fulfillment of a divine commandment.

No, the separation of spirit and flesh started with the Greeks. Both Plato and Socrates believed that there is constant conflict as the soul and the mind attempt to be liberated from the prison of flesh. They agreed that any form of sexuality was inferior to abstinence and harmful to the soul's health.

Likewise, Stoicism, the dominant philosophy of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian movement, endorsed Platonic dualism — this same separation of spirit and flesh. A third influence that turned Christianity against sex and pleasure was the deeply pessimistic Gnostic philosophy, which demonized the body. The Gnostics taught that the soul was a spark of light chained to the dark dungeon of the body.

In the early fourth century, the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion and sexual abstinence and celibacy became central to Christian moral life. Augustine was the leading theologian of the day, and throughout history Augustine has remained the single most influential theological voice of Christianity. He had his own personal problems with sexuality — he had fathered one child out of wedlock, and gave up two mistresses when he became a Christian. But when he rejected sex, he did so with the zeal of a convert. He is the one who came up with the idea that original sin

is passed from parents to children at birth — how? By the passion and desire, and therefore the sin, of sexual intercourse.

So there you have it. Condemned by history. Surely we have an uphill battle ahead of us if we are to bring sexuality into our consciousness as sacred experience.¹

Sex is too important to be giggled at, ignored, denied or degraded. Sexual expression is part of being human, whether we are partnered or alone. We may not always be sexually active, but we are always sexual beings. Should we attempt to ignore or repress that aspect of ourselves, we will be shutting away one of the most powerful ways we have of expressing our aliveness and our connection to the life force.

Sex is too beautiful to be overshadowed by guilt and confusion. As an expression of love, sexual activity invites us to experience wholeness, joyfulness, and creativity. If we can look into the face of our lover and see there the face of the Divine, we will have achieved the combination of trust, respect and devotion that can take us to a deeply spiritual place, where we understand what true intimacy can be.

And sex is too dangerous to be dealt with badly. Anything this beautiful and this important has the power and the potential to cause damage if it is not handled with care and respect. Sexual abuse or harassment, sexual exploitation, an over-emphasis on looks, eating disorders, rape, pornography, homophobia, gender stereotyping, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancy, dysfunctional families — all of these troubling issues in our society today can be attributed in some part to a misunderstanding or a misuse of sexuality.

As a community that cares about one another, and cares about fostering the growth of healthy, high-functioning adults from the children among us, we have a responsibility — not just an interest, but a *responsibility* — to educate our children and ourselves about sexuality. This, too, is part of our mission to transform lives and care for the world. Because we all know that the world needs better than it's got right now.

And here is where Our Whole Lives, or OWL, comes in. Five years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ collaborated to create a lifespan sexuality education curriculum with separate units for five age groups: kindergarten and first grade, grades 4-6, grades 7-9 (which is the one we will be offering starting next month), grades 10-12, and a curriculum for adults. Each of the two denominations also has prepared a companion volume for each age group, titled *Sexuality and Our Faith*, which supplements the lessons with the specific teachings of that faith community. This is most emphatically *not* a “values-free” curriculum; it wholeheartedly emphasizes the values of respect, justice, caring, compassion and tolerance that lie at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist principles.

The class goes far beyond anatomy and physiology, far beyond what children will learn in even the best program at their school. It deals with issues of language, puberty, gender roles and gender stereotyping, disabilities, sexual orientation, relationships and dating skills, lovemaking, masturbation, pregnancy and childbirth, abstinence, contraception, sexual decision-making, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and acquaintance rape. This is the real world; our kids will

¹ Sewall, Marilyn, “The Soul of Sexuality,” a sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon on October 14, 2001. Found on the Internet.

have to deal with at least some of these issues in their lives, perhaps soon. We want them to be empowered to deal with them well, and knowledge is power. So we want to give them knowledge — true, straightforward, unambiguous, clear knowledge.

I am beside myself with pride and excitement that we will be offering OWL to our 7th, 8th and 9th graders this Fall. Kathy Ellis and Jim Freeman have taken the weekend-long training required for OWL instructors (as Jim joked, "...so that the instructors will learn everything the kids already know.") Because our numbers are small, and — more importantly — because we recognize the value of this in-depth education, we also want to make OWL available to young people outside of our church community whose parents are aligned with its values and ours. If you know of young people in grades 7 through 9 who are ready for an in-depth, comprehensive sexuality education, and you would like to invite them to participate in OWL, please talk to me and get an invitation letter for their parents.

The parents have an important role to play in helping us to make OWL a success. We are inviting parents to attend a meeting at the end of the month where Jim and Kathy will describe the program and give examples of the material to be covered. No child will be allowed to participate in OWL whose parents don't attend this meeting and sign a permission slip. There will be absolutely no exceptions to this policy. The curriculum material is explicit and the language is frank; we don't want any parents to be surprised by what their children tell them they learned in OWL.

At this point, we're offering OWL for our 7th to 9th graders because this is the time in their lives when they are most in need of good information about sex and good relationships with adults whom they can go to with questions. I look forward to the time when we can also offer the program to younger and older kids, and heck, what about having it available for us adults as well? After all, don't we really want the same things for ourselves as for our children?

We want to have balance in our lives, like the eagles who answer the call of nature in their mating ritual with grace and beauty. We want sexuality to have its rightful and well-deserved place in the wholeness and fullness of our whole lives, not over-emphasized with titillation and prurience, not ignored out of ignorance or fear. And we also want our kids to be prepared for the ecstasy of physical pleasure and the intensity of intimacy that can be theirs as mature, wise, knowing adults. Isn't it true that we all want to row for our lives toward love, toward life, and toward the way life says yes to itself in the marriage of sexuality and spirit that can be ours? Of course it is.

May it be so. Amen.

Closing Words

i thank You God
e.e. cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth

day of life and love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)