

The Reverend Midge Squire called my late wife Becky and me into her office. Midge was the Minister of Religious Education at West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church in Cleveland, Ohio, and could be a bit intimidating. In our mid-30's, we had recently been married by Midge. She asked us if we would consider becoming instructors for the course About Your Sexuality, the precursor to Our Whole Lives. We would be teaching middle school youth. Yikes! Many things can inspire fear and trepidation, but high on my list was teaching a course on sexuality to youth. We said yes.

The course involved training. Becky and I went to a 2-1/2 day retreat where we learned about the course materials and explored our own attitudes and "knowledge" about human sexuality with about 20 other adults. We were all nervous.

I don't exaggerate when I say that that weekend was life changing. Becky felt the same way. I quote UU minister Arthur Vaeni concerning his revelation during AYS training: "I had made it into my late thirties without ever having been in a situation in which I could thoughtfully explore my conceptions about sex, sexuality, or even intimacy."<sup>i</sup> How many of you can honestly say that you have had that opportunity? How many of you wish that you had?

Vaeni goes on: "I believe that such education is among the most significant and wonderful offerings we have made, and can make, toward healthy development of our youth."<sup>ii</sup> For Becky and me that weekend, and subsequently teaching AYS for two years, helped us to create a much healthier and loving relationship.

In the 1990's the AYS curriculum underwent a major revision and Our Whole Lives, or OWL, was born. Our Whole Lives comprise curricula developed jointly by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ. OWL begins with the premise that our sexuality is a natural and joyful aspect of our existence through our entire lives and that it is nurtured through safety, knowledge and respect. We hope that we will soon be able to offer some of these age-based courses here at UUFC.

We have all had sexual education in school. It is state mandated. Sex-ed is not OWL. Sex-ed is about the anatomy and physiology of sexual health and reproduction. It may also address sexualization, things such as flirting, media messages about sex, sexual harassment and rape. In today's environment, it may, in some cases, address sexual identity. These are done in a classroom setting that I imagine is rarely a safe place to explore real issues. Did anyone here experience sex-ed as positive, something that helped them make real life value judgments regarding their sexuality? You don't actually have to answer that question.

OWL addresses so much more. OWL begins with the assumptions that we are all sexual beings from the time we are born until we die and that sexuality is good. Consequently, OWL offers six

curricula for different age groups. Early school (K-1), late elementary, grades 4-6, middle school, grades 7-9, high school, grades 10-12, young adult (ages 18-35) and adult.

OWL facilitators are trained to foster an intimate, safe environment where various aspects of human sexuality can be explored. Reaching beyond sexual health and reproduction, which are covered in detail, OWL curricula explore sexualization and sexual identity. Students learn, in age appropriate ways, about gender identity, gender expression, gender roles and sexual orientation.

A further assumption of OWL is that "sexuality in our society is damaged by violence, exploitation, alienation, dishonesty, abuse of power and the treatment of persons as objects."<sup>iii</sup> Students explore the ways in which the media sexualize, in unhealthy ways, what is appropriately a beautiful, even sacred, part of our being.

Participants explore what it means to be intimate and vulnerable in a mutually trusting and caring relationship. Sex is not just about intercourse. An additional assumption of OWL is that it is healthier for young adolescents to postpone sexual intercourse. Let me repeat that. OWL assumes that it is healthier for young adolescents to postpone sexual intercourse. OWL is most definitely not about the free sex of the 1960's that some of us grew up with, and it is not about hook-up sex. OWL differs from sex-ed in that it creates opportunities for young people to explore their values and to reach decisions that are not made in the heat of passion. Young people in OWL practice how to say no. The environment of OWL helps to instill self-confidence to do so.

OWL assumes that sexual behavior is something in which humans engage for reasons beyond reproduction. Human needs of caring and love, intimacy and connection, pleasure and relaxation can be met with appropriate and trusting sex, which, as I said earlier, encompasses so much more than the act of intercourse.

Why teach this in church? Why not? It was in the Christian church, after all, that sexuality in Western culture got such a bad rap. Beginning with Augustine, who unequivocally stated in the fifth century that sex was only for procreation and that sexual desire was a sin, human sexuality has had a bad name. This, by-the-way, is contrary to the Hebrew Bible, known as the Old Testament among Christians. It is also contrary to early Christianity.

The Rev. Dr. Debra Haffner is a UU minister and co-founder and president of the Religious Institute, a multi-faith organization dedicated to advocating for sexual health, education, and justice in faith communities and society.<sup>iv</sup> Earlier in her career, Haffner studied how sexuality was addressed in the Bible as a Fellow at Yale University. I draw from her article titled "The Really Good News: What the Bible Says About Sex."

Haffner found that "both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament directly address sexuality issues and send messages that are quite different from what most people are taught in their religious groups and denominations."<sup>v</sup> For example, the Bible is absolutely silent about

masturbation, abortion, birth control, oral-genital sex, and other sexual practices.<sup>vi</sup> Haffner has come to believe that many of the stories and laws in the Hebrew Bible contain information to help people understand the important [and sometimes dangerous] role that sexuality plays in their lives.<sup>vii</sup>

The Song of Solomon is the most overtly sexual book of the Bible. It celebrates erotic love between a man and a woman. The relationship is remarkably mutual. Although this has been interpreted by many to be an allegory for the relationship of humankind with God, or of Israel with God, or of Jesus with the Church, I'm not buying it. Nor are many contemporary theologians.<sup>viii</sup>

Here are some excerpts from Song of Solomon. If you have not heard them before, hold onto your seats. You are allowed to blush. I may.

My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,  
and my inmost being yearned for him.  
<sup>5</sup> I arose to open to my beloved,  
and my hands dripped with myrrh,  
my fingers with liquid myrrh...(Song of Sol. 5.4-5)

Or this:

How fair and pleasant you are,  
O loved one, delectable maiden!<sup>[b]</sup>  
<sup>7</sup> You are stately<sup>[c]</sup> as a palm tree,  
and your breasts are like its clusters.  
<sup>8</sup> I say I will climb the palm tree  
and lay hold of its branches.  
O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,  
and the scent of your breath like apples,  
<sup>9</sup> and your kisses<sup>[d]</sup> like the best wine  
that goes down<sup>[e]</sup> smoothly,  
gliding over lips and teeth. (Song of Sol. 7.6-9)

Whew!

While the Gospels are mostly silent regarding sexuality, the Apostle Paul provides insight into mores of the early Christian church. His letters predate the Gospels, being written only 15 to 25 years after the execution of Jesus. The First Letter of Paul to The Church at Corinth, known as 1 Corinthians, addresses at least 17 sexuality topics. Among these, according to Haffner, "First Corinthians recognizes the sacredness of the body and sexual relationships, reinforces that sexual

desire is part of life, and respects the importance of mutual and egalitarian pleasure and responsibility in intimate relationships. It affirms marriage and presents a brilliant description of love.<sup>ix</sup> How many of us are not familiar with this passage, used in so many weddings. From 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, verses 4-7:

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant<sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;<sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.<sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor. 13.4-7)

I return to our question, why in church? By offering OWL through our UU churches, we affirm values that we hold as UU's.

OWL helps people to respect the inherent worth and dignity of their own selves, including their bodies, and to respect others who may be different from them.<sup>x</sup> This affirms our first principle.

By addressing the elements of living equitable and healthy relationships and countering injustices such as homophobia, stereotyping and sexism, OWL promotes justice, equity and compassion in human relations, our second principle.<sup>xi</sup>

OWL promotes acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations, our third principle, by providing caring religious community that nurtures the spirit through ritual, discussion and respectful relationship.<sup>xii</sup>

OWL engages participants in values clarification and critical thinking in which a diversity of voices are heard, thereby upholding a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, our fourth principle.<sup>xiii</sup>

OWL encourages participants to value themselves, seek healthy relationships with others, and act on their values, thereby promoting our sixth principle goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.<sup>xiv</sup>

Our Whole Lives nurtures religious community and spiritual depth. Rituals of gathering and a time for closing reflection mirror what we do in worship and in many of our committees. Exploration of individual and religious values and our UU history of social justice action increase our connections with each other and with our wider faith community.<sup>xv</sup>

Finally, and this is important, OWL offers parent orientation and support programs concurrently with the children's programs. OWL affirms that parents are the primary sexuality educators of their children.

So how close is UUFC to being able to offer OWL? We hope that we will offer OWL to our 7-9 graders in 2017. We had hoped to do this next year, but our cohort of middle school children are one year too young to offer them OWL. I've spoken with my mentor, the Rev. Bonnie Dlott, who

is also a trainer of OWL instructors. She strongly recommended not dipping down into 6th grade for this OWL curriculum. She said the emotional maturity is just not there in most children.

With regard to other age groups, we are open to input about the interest in OWL. Contact me or our volunteer Religious Exploration coordinator, Heather Keller.

Debra Haffner says "we are called upon as religious people to acknowledge the inherent goodness of sexuality as part of creation and to respond to abuses of this sacred gift." OWL does this. OWL does an extraordinary job of this. All of my children have been through OWL. A program like OWL might have helped me avoid some of the mistakes I made as an adolescent and young adult. I once overheard one of my children talking with a friend, about a year after completing OWL. My child said to the friend "OWL was wonderful." How many of you could say that about your sexual education?

May it be so.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Advocacy Manual for Sexuality, Education, Health and Justice. Ed. Sarah Gibb. 1999. 29

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>iii</sup> What's Religious about Sexuality Education?, pamphlet, UUA.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.religioustheology.org/about-2/> Accessed 4/15/16

<sup>v</sup> The Advocacy Manual for Sexuality, Education, Health and Justice, 15.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. 19

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. 21

<sup>x</sup> Judith A. Frediani, Sexuality and Our Faith: a companion to Our Whole Lives for Adults, 2000, xi.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid. xi

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, xi

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, xii

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid. xii

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. xii-xiii