

## Sexuality and Spirituality

by Glenn Koenig

A few years ago, I was standing near the juice table out in the Vestry, at coffee hour. I was looking up at our Welcoming Congregation banner which was hanging up on the wall.

I turned to another member of this church, and asked her if all four words listed there, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender, were arrived at all at once. No, she agreed, each word was added to the list over time, then it was discussed further until finally the congregation voted on it.

So, then I asked her what she thought the next four words might be. She responded, "Oh, I don't really want to think about *that!*" \* \* \*

There was a time, probably, when many of us in this room would have responded the same way, even to those four words; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. "Oh, ... I don't really want to think about *that!*"

So, we've made progress.

The vote to become a welcoming congregation took place before I began attending services here, back in the late 1990s. From what I'm told, it was quite controversial. For some, even those four words were too much to accept. Sadly, some folks left First Parish for good.

But why did we become a welcoming congregation? I gather it's because of our commitment to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, according to our first principle. If that's true, then what, exactly, made it so difficult? When we commit to, essentially, love every person, what gets in the way that keeps us from *actually* doing that?

Well, let's say for starters that our *general discomfort with the topic of sexuality* seems to be one factor. And I'm not going to stand here and blame you for having that discomfort. You probably have it for a great variety of reasons. So I'd like to talk about some of those reasons for a moment.

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One issue is that sex, like love itself, is not really logical. You don't sit down and add up two columns of figures and say, "Ok, 139 points on this side and 65 points on that side, so I have no choice but to conclude that ... I'm wildly turned on." That would be silly.

So, how does it work? What *is* that factor? What was it that got Elvis Presley, "All shook up"?

Well, it's something on a level that we feel rather than decide. And the interesting thing is, ... that it can be different for each one of us. What turns you on could be very different from what turns me on. Your "Aha" could easily be my "blah." Or, even worse, my "ugh" or "ick" or, in pre teen speak, my "eeeew, gross."

So that's one reason why you might say to me, "Well, I just don't want to think about *that*." As much as I've studied sexuality, there are things that I just don't want to think about, either.

But they're out there. People do them, just the same. So, we have closets in which to hide things. And we have little groups of people who dress up in leather or whatever they do. And our agreement is, you do what you like, just please don't fill me in on too many of the details, OK?

But that is part of our challenge in being Universalists. We are saying that even if I feel "Yes!" about something that you feel "Ick!" about, we're all still loved and accepted ... by god or the great spirit or the universe, ... or at least by each other(!).

But, in sexuality, we are, in fact, experiencing something that is indeed very powerful. Powerful feelings and potentially powerful results. So it may be difficult for us to have a calm and accepting attitude when it comes to dealing with so much power.

On the feelings side, we seem to live in a society that values rationality, structure, and control very highly. Well, guess what? Sexual feelings are irrational, unstructured, and sometimes seem very out of control.

On the results side, well, a lot can happen. First and foremost, you can create a new life. And that is a huge thing, both rationally and irrationally. Rationally, because you're going to need a bigger house or apartment, along with a bigger budget to raise a child. And on the irrational side, you're going to have feelings - lots of them - I want a baby, or I don't want a baby, or I love my child deeply, or I can't get any sleep with my child crying, and on and on. No matter how you look at it, a new human being arriving on the scene is a very big deal, one of the biggest in all of life.

So, with sex, you can create life.

Then, on the other hand, there is the spread of disease. And that's huge as well. Throughout history, we've been either one step ahead or one step behind diseases that can be transmitted by sexual activity. Right now, we're behind. There are a whole host of things, and although not all of them are deadly, some of them in fact are, and some have no known cure. And just to make matters more interesting, you can be contagious and not know it. And neither will those with whom you engage in sexual activity.

So, with sex, you can also harm or destroy life as well.

And then there's the issue of love. Ah, love. That either pesky or glorious adjunct to sex. Like it or not, sexual desire brings people together. And this can, but not always, bring on feelings of deep intimacy. And that's natural. But these feelings of deep intimacy can have a profound impact on your life. You may be married to, or what we call "in a relationship" with someone and yet be attracted to someone else. If our society isn't prepared for you to be deeply intimate with more than one person in your life, then you're stepping out of bounds.

So, with sex, you can lead yourself to love, with everything that implies.

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So, to summarize, you can create a new life, an extremely powerful thing with wide ranging implications. Two, you can spread disease and death if you're not careful. Three, our motivation to engage in sexual activity seems to be quite powerful, something that may seem irrational and difficult to understand the true nature of. And fourth, there is that little something called love.

So, with all this power and all these feelings, how have we, as human beings, reacted? With great power comes a great potential to experience and do wonderful things. But great power can also cause great harm. And if you concentrate on the potential for harm, you can end up with a lot of fear. Has fear been an important factor in the creation of our cultural norms surrounding sexuality today? You be the judge.

In classic Catholicism, lust is one of the seven deadly sins. Just having the desire, whether or not you do anything about it, is a sin. A thought in your head or a feeling in your body. Many of today's protestant sects, which broke from the Catholic Church hundreds of years ago, still carry many of these same attitudes toward sex. Today, we find groups in this country fighting for 'abstinence only' sex education programs.

In parts of the world, there are places where a woman can be put to death just by appearing in public without wearing a burka or for simply for casting a glance at a man to whom she is not betrothed. I'd call this a very strong reaction to sexuality.

OK, what about the rest of culture, beyond religion? Sex is referred to as dirty, smut, the devil's playground, and all sorts of other things. Even the fictitious character, Austin Powers, in his movies, calls it "doing the nasty." We use the four letter 'f' word for both sexual activity and one of the most forceful words to denote anger, frustration, and rebuke. So, what's with *that*?

If anything, our society has divided sexuality from everything else, to the point that when I tell someone I've just met that I'm studying the relationship between sexuality and spirituality, they often respond that cannot see how those two things have anything to do with each other. I believe they cannot because they have been *taught* not to.

So, perhaps it all comes down to this question. Can we be trusted with our own sexuality?

Is it so powerful a force in our lives that the only alternative is to adopt a "just say no" policy? Must we give sex a bad name ... and yet ... allow it to be dangled in front of our eyes on a daily basis? Did human beings *need* these cultural practices to survive for the past six million years of human evolution?

Somehow, I don't think so.

I think we can adopt an open, loving, trusting, and supportive approach to our sexuality. One that doesn't divorce it from our hearts. One that is consistent rather than conflicted. An approach that respects the power we have without trying to scare each other nor treat each other with suspicion.

In fact, I think sometimes we are already doing this, we just don't realize it.

For instance, right now, at this very moment, everyone in this room is celibate.

Now, you may be thinking, "Wait a minute there, I didn't take any vow of celibacy when I was getting ready for church this morning." And I say, foey on that, you certainly did. You just didn't think of it that way. Nobody is engaging in any sexual activity here ... and that's entirely on purpose. We *decided* not to. Every one of us.

I say this to prove that in spite of the problems our society seems to have with sexuality, most of us are not 'out of control' or acting to endanger ourselves or any other such thing. For the vast majority of us, sex is not necessarily either all good or all bad, but we do have our limits. Even the most so-called 'sex positive' person has limits and imposes them on themselves throughout life. We can do this, people. We can make decisions that are life affirming and yet allow us time to enjoy ourselves. Within limits.

So, perhaps your belief system includes the idea that we human beings can be trusted with our sexuality. You think it's possible to experience sexual desire and even engage in sexual activity and not be guilty or sorry.

But if that's your theology, what do you use as your guide? How do you decide what to do with those thoughts, those feelings?

My theology says something pretty much like our first principle here in the Unitarian Universalist church, to focus on "The inherent worth and dignity of every person."

And that includes me. I have inherent worth and dignity. I'm valuable. I deserve the best treatment I can give myself and others with whom I come into contact. And that includes pondering and exploring my sexuality with great respect for it, as part of my power and capability as a human being. I encourage you to recognize your own worth and dignity as well.

And yes, in spite of widespread rumors, we still do in fact have a brain left to think with. We can learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. We have technology that allows us to choose when to create new life without having to forgo sexual activity. We can act to prevent the spread of disease. And ... we can stop to consider that our sexuality can bring with it wonderful feelings, and be enjoyed immensely, ... yes, alone or with others. (pause).

When we feel strong feelings suddenly, we can stop to experience them for a few moments before deciding what to do about them. With such feelings, we may enter a private space, perhaps not unlike the space we reserve for meditation, or the time we might take when receiving unexpected news.

What I'm trying to say here, is that how we feel, how we experience sexuality may be as profound as any other experience we might have, or any other endeavor in which we might engage. And I do want to think about *that!*

(turn it over to Linda)