

20 May, 2007 ☩ “Healthy, Holy Sexuality”  
Rev. Erika Hewitt ☩ Live Oak UU Congregation

**Call to Worship**

*Holy One, says the author of Psalm 139,  
You knit me together in my mother's womb...  
I was not hidden from you when I was made in secret,  
Intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

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.

Let us gather this morning in reverence for the gift of these bodies --  
whatever their ages, their shapes, their abilities.

Let us remember these bodies, these blessings, intricately woven,  
and let us bring to them a sense of sacred caretaking.

As we are grateful for our physical selves,  
so too let us be grateful for the embrace of the Holy:  
the Presence that creates and sustains life,  
the Mystery that knit together each of our bodies,  
the force of Love that celebrates our desires.

**Sermon: “Healthy, Holy Sexuality”**

The year was 1996; the teenagers were from Rockdale County High School, in an affluent suburb of Atlanta. At first only a few girls were diagnosed with syphilis, and then the outbreak mushroomed. When epidemiologists traced the path of the sexually-transmitted disease, they discovered that over *two hundred* Rockdale teenagers had been engaging in all-night group sex parties. Youth as young as 14 years old claimed to have had over fifty sexual partners. In explaining their activities, the youth spoke of sex as a means of being accepted, of gaining social status among their peers. Girls reported that, the more outrageous the sexual act they performed, the more “popular” she was.

When this story broke eleven years ago, two things struck me – and still do. The first is that only two years earlier, Jocelyn Elders had been forced to resign as the U.S. Surgeon General because she advocated teaching children that masturbation is a part of human sexuality, and an alternative to sexual activity. The second striking fact is that when the Rockdale syphilis outbreak occurred, many parents denied their children's (and particularly their daughters') involvement. One mother insisted that her daughter was a

virgin, only to be told by a counselor that her daughter was pregnant.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to sexuality – whether it’s awareness of their teenagers’ activity or the conveyance of basic facts – the disconnect between parents and their adolescent children is nearly universal (and probably timeless. How many of us, as adolescents, found ourselves swimming in a mix of curiosity, embarrassment, bravado, and cluelessness?). Parents, of course, are their children’s primary educators about sexuality issues; that many parents are so overwhelmed by the complexity and emotional *oomph* of sex that they don’t teach their children is both understandable and forgivable. But when parents don’t talk to their youth about sexuality, *they are teaching them something about sexuality*. Silence is a message.

The Youth Radio interview<sup>2</sup> between Johanna Greenberg and her teenage peers bears out a nationwide statistic: although ninety percent of parents claim to have spoken to their teens about sex, only half of their teenagers agree. Whether our youth muddle through in ignorance or turn to the media and peers for answers to their questions, our kids rarely receive the information about sexuality that they need to stay safe, much less the skills they need to build healthy intimate relationships and to make confident decisions about their bodies.

This is not an indictment of parents, who have the toughest and most important job in the world. Rather, it’s a shared cultural failing that our youth are so miserably undereducated about sexuality – perhaps because we were likely failed ourselves, as teenagers, by our communities. Silence is indeed a message, and we perpetuate our failing as a society when we convey that message of silence. *We do it when silence* is our response to a sexualized culture, in which skin sells and sex is a commodity; when looking away is our response as the line between sex and violence is repeatedly, numbingly, blurred.

As Deborah Tolman, Director of the Adolescent Sexuality Project at the Wellesley College Center for Research, points out,<sup>3</sup>

We do not teach girls that they are entitled to their own sexual desire or sexual pleasure, that “good” and “nice” girls have sexual feelings, too. We teach girls to be the objects of others’ sexual longings. We do not teach boys that having a desire to be in a relationship or not wanting to have sexual intercourse does not make them less masculine. We do not teach

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<sup>1</sup> The “Lost Children of Rockdale County” documentary aired on Frontline. This fact taken from [www.everything2.com/index.pl?node\\_id=1206335](http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1206335).

<sup>2</sup> The interview aired on NPR’s Morning Edition on March 8, 2007. See [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7770258](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7770258).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/georgia/isolated/tolman.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/georgia/isolated/tolman.html)

girls or boys to link sexual feelings with their desires for intimacy; instead, we give sexuality to boys and intimacy to girls...We do not talk with adolescents about physically and emotionally safe ways to explore their developing sexuality; we just tell them not to “do it.”

I would argue, then, that we also perpetuate our collective failing to teach responsible sexual behavior when we cloak ourselves in *denial*: denial that today’s young people are any less sexual than our own animal bodies were, in our younger years. We fail our youth by transmitting our denial to them by counseling them to “just say no” to their volatile hormones, changing bodies, and impulsive desires. Denial is both expensive and (pardon the pun) impotent: reports show emphatically that the abstinence-only sex education programs into which our federal government pours \$176 million a year – do not work.<sup>4</sup>

There’s a cultural imperative, here... but for whom? Not just parents. As adults, as members of a village in which children come of age, we’re called to correct our cultural failings. If we don’t teach our children how to create healthy sexual relationships, our culture might lead them into harmful territory. We’re also – I might add – called to enhance our *own* health and well-being. We can’t teach responsible, caring sexual ethics to our youth if we haven’t developed them, and put them into practice, for ourselves.

Happily, we’re in a unique position to do that, as Unitarian Universalists: ours is a faith that says “yes” to sexuality and to our role as sexual beings in the world. It’s a fairly radical stance. Historically, religion has divorced itself from sexuality, its only response a “no,” or careful restrictions that narrowly confine the who, how, why of sex.

In the Christian tradition, sexual desire is “the surest sin of humanity’s sinful nature.”<sup>5</sup> Sex and sin were first linked in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE by the prolific Augustine – he who formulated the similarly enduring doctrine of Original Sin and the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.” In Augustine’s view, “righteousness is perfect obedience to the will of God,” whereas sin is disobedience, or the “human desire to live without control... [and] sexual desire [is] the most extreme expression of human rebelliousness.”<sup>6</sup>

As a result, orthodox Christianity has for over sixteen centuries viewed sexual energy, *eros*, as destructive and as a threat to faithfulness to God. Although sexuality is deemed safe, as moral, within the confines of heterosexual marriage, usually as a means of creating new life, rarely is anything more acceptable. When sexuality bleeds outside of

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<sup>4</sup> The results of this decade-long study were released in April 2007. See for example [www.abcnews.go.com/Health/Sex/story?id=3048738](http://www.abcnews.go.com/Health/Sex/story?id=3048738).

<sup>5</sup> “You Shall Be Like a Watered Garden,” p. 42, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, by Rebecca Parker.

<sup>6</sup> “Making Love as a Means of Grace,” by Rebecca Parker.

these narrow lines, it becomes sinful energy.

This is not our theology, as Unitarian Universalists.

We don't believe that *eros* is threatening or shameful, but rather a life-giving, life-enhancing gift. So too are our bodies a gift, the handiwork of the Holy. Years ago, the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ boldly decided that sexuality doesn't belong in the realm of shame or secrecy. Our two denominations hired education and sexuality experts to construct a comprehensive lifespan sexuality curriculum called *Our Whole Lives*.

Far more than a set of lesson plans, *Our Whole Lives* is based on values about healthy, responsible relationships – *all* relationships, not just married, heterosexual ones. The curriculum addresses the sexual health of our bodies, and how bodies – *all* bodies, not just young, thin, beautiful, perfectly functioning ones – are vehicles for sexual pleasure and intimacy... what we might call “healthy, holy” sexuality.

(Last fall, Live Oak sent three of our members to be trained as leaders of this curriculum – Susan Ferguson, Jan Ross, and Andy Stull. Our senior high youth are in the middle of the curriculum now; our junior high students will begin their unit in the fall.)

Here are a few of the assumptions and proclamations underlying *Our Whole Lives*:

- We're sexual beings from birth to death
- It's natural to express sexuality in a variety of ways
- Sexuality is a good part of the human experience
- Sexuality in our society is damaged by violence
- Sexuality includes much more than sexual behavior, and encompasses many aspects of our lives.

Just as each of us, as a *whole person*, has many intersecting identities, so too is our sexuality an intersection of physical, emotional, and spiritual components: contraception, gender identity, sexual desire, and emotional intimacy. When we define “sexuality” this broadly, two things happen:

1. we expand our acceptance of the “goodness” of human sexuality to include all expressions of gender and all sexual orientations;
2. we become aware of where acceptance is lacking in our culture, and where that intolerance has created harmful oppression.

There is potential for harm in sexuality, in fact, as every person who has pursued intimacy has learned, often at great cost. Many of you will resonate with the UU

theologian Rebecca Parker when she says,<sup>7</sup>

The goodness of sexuality can be undermined by any number of means: the use of sex to overpower or coerce another, sexual abuse of children by adults, addiction to sexual intimacy as the exclusive source of one's sense of worth, sexual intimacy as a ritual reinforcement of domination and submission.

And there are times when, due to choice, circumstances, or age, sexual activity is not part of our lives... Furthermore, even our best sexual encounters are subject to human foibles or failures. We are blocked by fears and past hurts, insecurities, embarrassment,... physical limitations, or illness...

But, in its proper place, and when it is not being abused, sex can be a means of grace, not only within the bounds of marriage or even within the bounds of committed relationship but in many forms.

What does it mean for sexuality to be “a means of grace”? It has to do with our roots, as Unitarian Universalists, in being a relational faith. Our history is grounded in covenant – relationship – rather than creed or scripture. We UU's are unique because as a relational faith, we discover not just our truths, but also our healing and salvation within the arena of human relationships.

Here's another way of looking at it: In contrast to orthodox Christianity, which views *sexual desire* as sinful, Unitarian Universalists define sin (when we define it at all) as the brokenness that appears in our lives “as loneliness, powerlessness, and worthlessness... [when] our relationships with one another are characterized by power struggles and violence.”<sup>8</sup> This brokenness is manifest in us as anesthetization to violence; the fears that pit us against each other; our revulsion to aging and our bodies' natural shapes and sizes and desires (for we also commit violence against ourselves).

How do we mend these broken edges together, as a people of faith? Through “relational power”<sup>9</sup> – for Unitarian Universalists believe, above all, in our power to heal one another, teach one another, listen each other into wholeness, to re-discover our connection to one another and to Life itself. It's a belief we bear in our communal relationships as well as in our most intimate pairings.

“Through loving and being loved,” writes Rebecca Parker, “we can learn to embrace

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<sup>7</sup> Parker, “You Shall Be Like a Watered Garden,” pp. 46-7.

<sup>8</sup> Parker, “Making Love as a Means of Grace.”

<sup>9</sup> Parker, “You Shall Be Like a Watered Garden,” p. 49.

the gift of our own lives.”<sup>10</sup> Sexuality is just one of many vehicles for that love; one of the many ways we rejoice in our connection; one of the means that we find joy and pleasure together.

May this be one of the many legacies of our living faith, imparted to our searching young ones:

that we hold a reverence for our bodies,

affirm the goodness of their desires,

and offer gratitude for the joy that arises from them.

May it be so.

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<sup>10</sup> Parker, “You Shall Be Like a Watered Garden,” p. 50.