

Loving Our Whole Lives
The Unitarian Church of Montreal
Rev. Diane Rollert, 1 March 2009

The first time my husband and I taught a human sexuality course for teens at our church was probably back in 1992. It is hard to imagine how different we, and the world, were then. We'd only just arrived in Concord, Massachusetts, with two small children in tow. During a first coffee hour in our new congregation, I innocently mentioned to the director of religious education that, right before we moved from New Jersey, David and I had signed up to be trained to teach the Unitarian Universalist *About Your Sexuality* program.

Within months we found ourselves sitting in an *About Your Sexuality* training workshop with 20 other adults, facing the scary prospect that we would actually have to talk about, ah-hem, sex with 12, 13 and 14 year olds. Somehow, the news was printed in the church's Sunday bulletin: "Diane and David are at a sexuality training program this weekend." We got a lot of good-natured ribbing about that when we returned. "We didn't know you needed training. Did you have fun?"

We laughed and we cried during that intense weekend workshop. As prospective teachers, we were a bit nervous. The topic of sex does provide lots of material for humour. The majority of us were straight, white and middle class. Most of us had been children during a time when any talk of sexuality was taboo. Our early sex education was learned from other children on the street, not from our parents or in the schools.

Many of us had come of age during the sexual revolution of the early 1970s before the spectre of AIDS. We enjoyed the freedom and we lived with the scars of our experiences. Many of us had a lot to face as we prepared to teach: latent homophobia, past wounds, struggles to answer the question "why would you teach about sex in church?" By the end of the workshop, the group had faced many demons and celebrated many joys. David and I came back ready to teach.

The program was, and still is, brilliant. We found that our students were more concerned about their own physical and emotional changes than anything else. They wrestled with questions about making good decisions. There were activities that got them to see where their own knowledge was lacking; that got them to think about honouring and loving who they were, rather than living by what the media or peers demanded of them.

As their teachers, we didn't have to moralize. The youth figured it out for themselves. That was the miraculous part. There was always this transformative moment when the students would begin to see each other as equally human and equally vulnerable. They became an ethical support network for each other. What better way to come of age in a challenging world?

To teach this program was an honour and a blessing. Our students were thoughtful, deep and fun. They were inspiring. As we went along, we did learn a lot ourselves. When as an adult do you get the time to talk about these things? In 1996, when I became the director of

religious education at First Parish in Concord, David and I were both sorry we had to let our teaching go. My role shifted to recruiting and supporting other teachers.

During my first year as the new director, we had a very large class of 13 and 14 year olds participating in the program: 22 students with two teachers. Midway through the year, two sets of parents became upset about some of the program's visual materials. It was a story that began in our small town and ended on national TV. Yes, national TV. CBS.

In those days, the program for teens included a series of filmstrips. Filmstrips, for those of you too young to remember, were these long strips of film that were passed through a projector, one frame at a time – pretty much like looking at a slide show. No movement, just still photographs. Among these visuals, there was a filmstrip on anatomy, as well as several filmstrips on lovemaking. Yes, these were explicit, and yes they included straight, gay and lesbian couples.

For a series of complex reasons, we had failed to show these materials to the parents. We had made a mistake, but by the time we rectified the situation it was too late. These two parents had launched a campaign to discredit the program, the minister, the chair of the religious education committee and me. It was a hard time. Angry, accusing letters were sent all over town. Explicit details of the materials were printed in the local papers, and became a source of gossip on the soccer fields, at cocktail parties and coffee klatches. Everyone, I mean everyone, was talking about the Unitarian church and sex.

That summer we got word that a new television “news” magazine called “Public Eye” hosted by Bryant Gumbel had decided that a story involving a church, sex and teens was the perfect foil for raising their ratings and viewership. Hello 15 minutes of infamy. Here we were in the heart of Puritan country, in a church with a history that went back to 1636, and we were about to be literally and figuratively exposed.

I'm proud of how the congregation handled the situation. We formed a task force. We began showing the filmstrips to all the adults in the congregation. We put the visuals into the context of the program and explained all the good reasons why these materials were used. That was a fearful time. What if the congregation was shocked and appalled by what they saw? What if this crisis pulled us apart? We lived in a puritanical and homophobic world. The conflict could have destroyed us.

As the congregation saw these materials and discussed them, the response was overwhelmingly positive and supportive. Yes, there were those who expressed their discomfort. But the majority remarked how wonderful it was to see normal people, not airbrushed, not frighteningly thin, expressing their love. How wonderful it was that we were speaking openly to our youth and providing them with accurate information.

Debbie McLean Greely, the widow of Dana McLean Greely (former minister and president of the American Unitarian Association), must have been in her eighties by then. She stood up during an information session and pounded her walking stick on the ground. “We should have offered this program 50 years ago!” Another member, also in her 80s, told me that she wished she'd had access to such information when she was younger. “I wouldn't

have had six kids!” These were prim and proper New England ladies – so much for my assumptions about the stereotype.

In the end, 19 students remained in the class. When “Public Eye” made it clear they were only planning to interview the two aggrieved families, our task force succeeded in getting the producer to also interview the other families. The day the film team arrived in our fellowship hall, they were shocked to find ten parents and ten teens waiting for them. They’d never had to mike so many people for sound before.

Of course, sensational TV is sensational TV, and as contrived and biased as you can imagine. Out of an interview that lasted more than an hour, only a less-than-flattering sound byte or two remained. All the thoughtful comments of our youth and their parents were dropped on the cutting room floor.

A week or so before the show was to be broadcast we called an open congregational meeting. We set up two microphones at the front of the sanctuary so that anyone could share their thoughts or concerns about the program and the upcoming broadcast. David and I had tears in our eyes as a large group of our former students presented a signed document to the community expressing their support. “We have gained a greater understanding of our lives, sexuality and religion...We are proud to say our church has stood for open-mindedness for generations.”

The next week, the staff and other members of the church gathered to watch our 15-minutes of fame. In a flash, it was over. The next thing we knew, the whole world was busy analyzing the meaning of the word “it” and the relationship of Bill Clinton to an intern named Monica Lewinsky. We were quickly forgotten. Though not entirely...

Suddenly, there were new families crossing our threshold. “Are you the church that isn’t afraid to talk to kids about sexuality? Help! Our kids are so bombarded by sexual information on TV and the Internet we don’t know what to do. When can we sign them up?”

“Are you the church that is open enough to talk about homosexuality with your children? Thank you. I can’t imagine how different my life would have been if my church community had told me that I am loveable, that I have inherent worth and dignity.”

We grew and strengthened as a community, and our children reaped the benefits.

Unitarian Universalists have been at the forefront of sexuality education since the early 1970s. Nearly thirty years later, the Unitarian Universalist Association, in collaboration with the United Church of Christ, launched a new program. After nearly a decade of hard work, they had redesigned and expanded our offerings to span a lifetime, naming the new series *Our Whole Lives*. It was a bold move to develop such a far-reaching program to address the age-appropriate needs of young children, young teens, older teens, and adults.

You’ll often hear the program referred to as *OWL*, but I really prefer the full name *Our Whole Lives* for the important statement it makes. Think about it. It is quite significant to say that sexuality is not something that begins when you are a teen and ends when you are

a young adult (a misconception some of us had when we were teens). Nor is it simply about intercourse. It is who we are throughout our lives, our relationships, our identity, our need for touch, for responsible caring, and for love.

These days we need this program more than ever. When David and I first started teaching, our students had no access to something called the Internet. Within ten years, the landscape had completely changed. Suddenly all our children could access a host of distorted and disturbing images, no matter how hard their parents tried to shelter them. In case you are wondering, the new program replaced the old filmstrips with slides of beautiful line drawings. (My favourite is a couple in their twilight years, wrapped in each other's arms, smiling.) These days, parents tend to be grateful for the rarity of positive images of loving relationships.

Our relationship to the program is very new here at the Unitarian Church of Montreal. Last year, for the first time, we offered the program to our 7th through 9th graders, while our older high school students participated in a series of intensive *Our Whole Lives* workshops at the First Unitarian Congregation in Ottawa. This year, we've introduced *Our Whole Lives* as an optional Sunday afternoon program for our children in kindergarten through 2nd grade. Perhaps someday we'll introduce the programs for young adults and adults.

One of the most important lessons I learned through my experience in Concord is that parents have to be actively involved in their children's sexuality education – the earlier, the better. Here, our children in kindergarten through second grade meet with their OWL teachers and their parents. They are growing and learning together. They are developing a comfort in communication that will serve them well as the children become increasingly independent.

Why do we teach about sex at church? A religious community at its best should be about living our lives as caring and just human beings. A major part of how we live our lives is related to our sexuality. What is our identity? Who do we love? How do we love? How do we act as responsible human beings, caring for each other, caring for our young? Yet many of us come from religious traditions that taught us that sexuality was something evil or wrong. We were taught that there was only one kind of loving relationship or only one way to make decisions about our bodies.

You could argue that many religious traditions treat sexuality as taboo. Yet, in silence you are teaching something. In silence you can teach shame and fear. All religious traditions make a statement about sexuality, whether explicit or implicit. If we aren't direct in how we teach our children about sexuality, within the context of our values, I assure you that someone or something else will. Would we really want to leave our children's sexuality education to someone else?

You could say that sexuality is something that needs to be taught at home, and this is true. But these are challenging times to raise children (I suppose all times are challenging). We need the support of our community to do it well. Believe me, the prevailing culture is strong. It envelops our children, whether we like it or not. Parents and those raising children need all the support they can get.

You could say that sexuality is something that should be taught at school, and when it is, this is great. Here in Quebec, teachers are expected to incorporate sexuality and morality education throughout the curriculum. Yet this assumes a level of comfort and training few teachers receive.

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We honour the whole person. That means understanding our responsibility to ourselves and to others. That means providing accurate information to our children and youth that keeps them safe, helps them to feel whole, and value others. That means each of us learning how to communicate, make decisions, assert ourselves in healthy ways in order to create meaningful and respectful relationships. That's how we express our faith, our values and our love, our whole lives.