

Sexuality Through a UU Lens

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Recommended Time for All Ages Story

The Great Big Hug (2019) Isy Abraham-Raveson

Meditation

Please relax into a comfortable position for a spoken meditation from *Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education for Older Adults*. I invite you to participate with these responsive words:

My body is a container for love and pleasure; I am a container for wonder and joy.

Our meditation begins with the responsive phrase:

My body is a container for love and pleasure; I am a container for wonder and joy.

I accept that my body is different today than it was 1, 10, 30, 40 or more years ago.

My body is a container for love and pleasure; I am a container for wonder and joy.

I accept that my body may not move or respond like other people's bodies.

My body is a container for love and pleasure; I am a container for wonder and joy.

I accept that my mind may process ideas differently than it used to.

My body is a container for love and pleasure; I am a container for wonder and joy.

I accept that, like the flickering light of a candle, my sexual desire and abilities are changeable and beautiful.

My body is a container for love and pleasure; I am a container for wonder and joy.

Sermon "Sexuality Through a UU Lens" by Melanie Davis, PhD

I've often wondered what it would be like if we taught young people swimming in the same way we teach sexuality. If we told them that swimming was an important adult activity, one they will all have to be skilled at when they grow up, but we never talked with them about it. We never showed them the pool. We just allowed them to stand outside closed doors and listen to all the splashing.

Occasionally, they might catch a glimpse of partially clothed people going in and out of the door to the pool and maybe they'd find a hidden book on the art of swimming, but when they asked a question about how swimming felt or what it was about, they would be greeted with blank or embarrassed looks.

Suddenly, when they turned 18, we would fling open the doors to the pool and they would jump in. Miraculously, some might learn to tread water, but many would drown.

These words by Elizabeth Canfield are read during trainings of future facilitators of Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education to impress upon them the importance of the task they are about to undertake. Whether they will be working with kindergarteners or 80-year-olds, they will be entrusted with providing education that is sensitive, compassionate, bonding, challenging, life-affirming, and empowering. The facilitators' job will be to keep people from drowning in sexual ignorance.

Our Whole Lives – or OWL – is a lifespan curriculum co-published by the Unitarian Universalist Association (the UUA) and the United Church of Christ (the UCC). OWL has been in use since 1999, when it replaced the About Your Sexuality curriculum developed in the 1970s.

OWL is one of the most successful programs the UUA has ever offered. It is used in religious and secular settings throughout the US and Canada, with culturally appropriate adaptations used in the Philippines and being pilot tested in Tanzania.

We speak more about OWL in a moment; first, let's consider why we discuss sexuality in our congregations at all.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has been committed to sexual rights and health for nearly 50 years. Congregations and national leaders rose to the personal and political challenges of the AIDS crisis. We led interfaith coalitions in the movement for marriage equality. We continue to hold a place at the forefront of the ongoing struggle for gender and reproductive justice.

Our bylaws and practices recognize many identities and types of relationships as well as the need to prevent sexual abuse and misconduct, including misconduct by our clergy.

UUism sees sexual expression as an affirming part of the human experience, and we support everyone's right to learn about and engage in sex in consensual, pleasurable, developmentally appropriate ways. We also acknowledge that sexuality in our society is damaged by violence, exploitation, alienation, dishonesty, abuse of power, and the treatment of persons as objects.

Our faith tradition doesn't maintain a list of "shalt nots"; rather, we offer opportunities to learn about sexuality, to engage in dialogue, and to gain spiritual perspectives on sex so that we make decisions wisely, ethically, and in accordance with our personal and faith values.

Our embrace of sexuality as a core element of human experience has proved to be life-saving, literally, for people who have emerged from religious traditions that shamed and diminished them. They have found that Unitarian Universalism encourages them to discover or reconnect with the rich and vibrant beauty of their sexuality.

Scientific evidence is central to UU perspectives on sexuality. We trust statistics showing that education decreases rates of unintended pregnancy and improves health outcomes. We know that honoring each person's sexual identity can decrease self-harm.

We know that sexual expression is a developmental process that begins in infancy and lasts throughout life. We know that consent education decreases sexual assault.

The UUA is partnering with advocacy and support organizations to assist the trans and nonbinary communities and to resist hate rhetoric and legislation that harms the entire LGBTQIA+ community. Meanwhile, congregations can implement Welcoming Congregation and Welcoming Renewal programs to support LGBTQIA members and visitors.

The Under Your Wing video series helps parents be discuss sexuality topics with their young children; and the Parents and Caregivers as Sexuality Educators small group ministry supports parents of older children.

Monthly OWL Taking Flight sexuality educational webinars for facilitators, DREs, clergy, and the public. The UUA is developing an anti-racist, anti-oppressive sexuality training course for UU seminarians, ministers, and religious educators.

UUA presidents release public statements regarding gender and reproductive justice and they stand in solidarity with our clergy and members of UU congregations at protests and marches. We UUs are not afraid to make our values around sexuality public.

More than 60 percent of our congregations have offered at least one age level of the Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education curriculum over the years. As a secular, comprehensive sexuality education used successfully since 2000, OWL is a gift congregations can give our children, youth, and adults as well as our larger communities.

OWL's effectiveness is due in part to the values embodied within the curriculum. Values are ideals, beliefs, and attitudes that guide behavior. They explain what we understand to be good or bad, desirable or undesirable.

For example, in terms of gender and orientation, we are who we are -- we don't choose our sexual identity. However, our values determine whether we accept and appreciate our own and others' gender and orientation.

Our values are guided by the families and culture we grow up in, our faith traditions, and our life experiences. They affect the types of people we find attractive, which smells and sounds we find arousing, the kind of clothing or body modification we deem alluring or off-putting; our decisions on sexual health and parenting; and whether or how we will engage in relationships. Values shape our views about sexuality as a positive or negative part of our humanity.

OWL helps people of all ages explore sexuality within a framework of the values of Self-Worth, Responsibility, Sexual Health, and Justice and Inclusivity. These values honor sexuality as a good part of the human experience, even as we recognize that aspects of it can be misused and violated.

OWL values are reflected in every activity, reading, and resource within the curriculum. They are the music that sings throughout all levels of the program.

Self Worth is defined in OWL as the belief that people at all ages and stages are entitled to dignity and self-worth and to their own attitudes and beliefs about sexuality. Each grade level includes readings and many workshops include suggestions for songs that reflect the workshop topic and OWL values.

The OWL value of **Responsibility** calls us to enrich our lives by expressing sexuality in ways that enhance human wholeness and fulfillment and that express delight, pleasure, responsible sexual choices, love, and commitment.

The value of **Sexual Health** says that knowledge about human sexuality is helpful, not harmful. We all have the right to accurate information about sexuality and to have our questions answered.

We teach that healthy sexual relationships are consensual, nonexploitative, mutually pleasurable, safe, developmentally appropriate, respectful, and based on mutual expectations and caring. This value also acknowledges the many ways there are to express sexual feelings alone or with a partner, and that it is healthier for young teens to postpone sexual intercourse.

The **Justice & Inclusivity** value acknowledges that people of all ages, races, ethnicities, genders, backgrounds, income levels, physical and mental abilities, and sexual orientations must have equal value and rights when it comes to sexuality.

Essential to our ability to truly embody the value of Justice and Inclusivity is the UUA's and UCC's commitment to hire accountability readers during the OWL curriculum development process.

These readers provide feedback based on their personal perspectives of race, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation because it's essential to get OWL right. These programs may be the only place participants trust others enough to disclose their sexual identity or to ask questions that will keep them safe and happy.

OWL programs transform a cultural climate of confusion and fear about sexuality into a new reality in which every person's inherent worth and dignity is valued. This is especially true when congregations incorporate material from a companion guide called *Sexuality and Our Faith*, which adds religious ritual such as chalice lightings and hymns – or Biblical references for UCC programs – and adds faith-relevant discussions to secular sexuality education.

This faith companion is important because liberal religious sexuality education gives children, youth, and adults a safe forum in which to make meaning of their lives. Participants learn to feel good about themselves and their sexuality while they clarify their own values and faith values, apply those values to their decisions and

experiences, and learn about their bodies, feelings, identity, behaviors, and relationships.

OWL employs Experiential Learning Theory, which is a process of completing an activity before sharing observations about it, reflecting on what was learned, and considering how that new knowledge can be put to use. This model fits well with our Unitarian Universalist affirmation of each person's search for truth and meaning.

In the elementary grades, OWL brings these experiences home with drawing and reading activities that supplement what children learn in OWL workshops. This supports parents as their children's primary sexuality educators.

In OWL for grades 7-9, one experiential activity uses grab bags of differently colored candies to teach the impact of contraceptive and barriers on the statistical likelihood of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Programs for high schoolers and young adults dive deeper into decision making and justice issues related to sexuality.

In OWL for Adults and OWL for Older Adults, topics include dating, relationships, sexual health, family dynamics, changes, losses, and pleasures.

Participants may not recall the specifics of OWL workshops later, but they will recall the experience of being fully accepted, conversing comfortably about sensitive topics, and learning how to make values-informed decisions that respect their own and others' sexuality and worth.

The Elementary and Secondary levels of the curriculum are the most often used, but the Young Adult, Adult and Older Adult curriculums are also excellent. Some of you may wonder what could be left for adults to learn, but we are never too old or too experienced to keep learning about sexuality.

When UUA OWL Program Manager Dr. Melanie Davis was traveling by train a few years ago, she entered into conversation with a Jewish man in the dining car. They shared their professions – his as a cantor, hers as a sex educator.

He disclosed the tension he felt being married to the mother of his children while being sexually attracted to men. He said he read a book that claimed his same-sex attraction was due to his having been damaged by bad parenting.

For the next 30 minutes, they discussed sexual orientation and the implications of religious values and psychological theory. Dr. Davis didn't challenge his religious beliefs, but she did point out the flaws in the theory he referenced.

If he had been in an Adult OWL program, he would have been invited to examine the values he was taught, and he would have learned that his sexual orientation didn't make him damaged goods but was rather an intrinsic and good part of his humanity.

Another illustration of the value of sex ed for adults comes from a woman in her 70s who mistakenly walked into an OWL for Older Adults workshop at her congregation. When she realized her mistake, she told the director of religious education:

“I don’t need this class. I’m a widow and I’m not even dating anyone.”

Her friends encouraged her to stay, and she remained throughout the 14-week program. At the end of the program, the woman proudly told the group,

“I just tossed out my ratty old pajamas and bought a pair that feels wonderful against my skin. I now know I deserve that kind of pleasure and don’t need someone else to appreciate it.”

What a wonderful result! OWL for Older Adults was created to help older adults feel more confident, more hopeful, and more empowered in their right to sensual pleasure and sexual expression in whatever form that might take, from buying new pajamas, to coming out of the closet, to protecting sexual health, and experiencing more joy.

Blessed be! We are part of a faith tradition that values us as sexual beings throughout our whole lives.

We may express our sexuality in different ways, and we may not always understand each other’s identities and behaviors, but if we consider sexuality within the context of our UU Principals and the Our Whole Lives values of self-worth, responsibility, sexual health, justice and inclusivity, we will treat our own and others’ sexuality with respect, acceptance, and joy.

May it be so.

Closing Words

I invite you to place your hand on your heart and feel connected to everyone in this sanctuary, online, and beyond.

May you will see that you are loved today, at whatever age and life stage you find yourself, and may you know that you will continue to be loved tomorrow and all the tomorrows to come.

Blessed be.