

Where We've Been

by Erin Fitzgerald

Within the context of religious education there has been nothing more important than our commitment to sexuality education. The two most often cited reasons by young people for staying within the denomination are the *About Your Sexuality* program and Coming of Age. Although as a former Catholic I immediately understood the importance of the Coming of Age process, which we called confirmation, I did not instantly recognize the importance of Sexuality Education within the context of religious community. I wondered what place religion had in the area of sexuality. I was a new UU and did not understand that I had joined a religion that would ask me to look at my life as a continuous stream, not in the fragmented fashion that I was accustomed to.

For those of you who are wondering what the *About Your Sexuality* program was and if it was so wonderful why we would need a new curriculum, let me begin with a little history. In 1968 the UUA undertook the development of a sexuality education program for Junior High school students. The curriculum was then published in 1971 when traditional American culture was being shaken by new sexual openness in music, dress, television, theater and public behavior. The program was a unique opportunity for young people to explore attitudes, values and feelings; improve communication skills; and become responsible decision-makers.

The program's openness to all areas of sexual questioning, congruent educational process, commitment to helping young people develop healthy, positive attitudes and feelings, and acceptance of a variety of sexual life-styles made it a pioneer in the field of sexuality education. Unlike other curricula of the era, the course was taught to boys and girls together in the same class with the teachers serving primarily as facilitators and resources rather than instructors. Other firsts were the policies requiring that a male/female team teach the curriculum, that all teams attend a weekend training session and a requirement that, in order to purchase a curriculum kit, the buyer had to agree to use the material only in an educational setting.

For over 20 years *About Your Sexuality* has been used in UUA and United Church of Christ congregations, and other mainline denominations. It has also been used in private schools, group homes, adolescent hospital units and prisons. Many community agencies have found the material to have value.

Despite the fact that the curriculum has undergone three revisions, congregations and religious educators have been calling for a complete overhaul. This need for a new curriculum has grown out of the AIDS epidemic, the increase in sexually transmitted diseases and the changes in treatment for them, the rising birthrate among teenagers, the continued and heated debate surrounding abortion, our greater understanding of sexual abuse in its many forms, and the presence of shame and fear-based sexuality education available in the general public.

That is the denominational history of the curriculum; however, I have my own experience with the *About Your Sexuality* program. In my family we have a long history with the curriculum. My husband Scott and his oldest sister Kathy were participants in the program in the 1970's. My

husband Scott became a teacher for the curriculum in the 80's and in the 90's our daughter Ariel has taken the program twice: once in junior high school and once as a senior high student. Our commitment and belief in this program now spans two generations in our house. I once asked Scott what his church school experience meant to him as an adult, he told me that it informed all of who he was. That his UUism was so deeply a part of who he was that for him there was no separation and so it was a question that he could not answer.

I have come to understand that the sexuality program that Scott and Kathy participated in as youth also helped to shape the kind of adults they had become. When I first met Scott and Kathy one of the things that most amazed me about them was the comfort that they displayed with their own and others sexuality. This was in stark contrast to my own family who never discussed sexuality at all.

My role with AYS has been a different one. I have been a religious educator for years serving four congregations and have coordinated the AYS program on four different occasions. I have been the one to educate the congregation as to what the AYS program would cover. I calmed nervous parents, anxious board members, and excited youth. This program has answered the questions that all human beings have: "How does this sex thing work anyway?" This program was extremely frank. We showed pictures and left nothing to the imagination. We had question boxes that allowed youth to ask the questions that they were afraid no one would ever answer. We trusted that if youth had accurate and complete information that they were capable of making healthy choices regarding their own sexuality.

Although this curriculum benefited my family and my community tremendously by giving them tools that we all need to stay safe, to make informed decisions, to have healthy relationships; it did not stop there. For there have been countless others who have benefited. Each person who has taken this curriculum has the potential for being the source of information for his or her wider community. My daughter Ariel has often been the only person in her circle of friends that has had accurate information regarding human sexuality. This information has often been life saving, or simply reassuring, but it has always been powerful. For knowledge is power.

Religion has always been a powerful medium. We can use our power for good or for ill, the choice is ours. We have exercised our power for good by attempting to make the world free from shame and fear. We will never know the true extent of this work; we can only guess at the numbers of young people who have been released from guilt and shame as a result of what I believe to be one of the seminal social justice endeavors of this denomination.