

Opening Pandora's Box

by Linda Hart

About a year and a half ago, I was serving on the Board for Planned Parenthood, and we had a retreat to do some longer reflective work that it is hard to accomplish in the monthly meetings. As a part of the retreat, Cheryl Lynn, the community educator, led us through a one of the training programs that she offered out in the community. The first part of it was for us to see a slideshow and hear about genital viruses. It is, as you might expect, not a pleasant topic, and the pictures are pretty gruesome, too. Cheryl Lynn told us as we groaned and hid our eyes from the full color, explicit pictures that we were like most of the groups where she had offered this unit. Often, when she did this in schools, teenagers would come up to her to let her know that they never planned to have sex of any sort if this was the possible consequence.

The slides, however, were the lead in to the real training which was in safer sex practices. Beginning, as they always do, by noting that the only way to be absolutely sure that you don't get pregnant or any of the many diseases and viruses out there is to be abstinent, she then began passing around various implements that could be used to have safer sex. She held up dental dams, and Saran wrap, latex gloves, and condoms of every color and texture you could imagine, and a few others that you couldn't even if you tried. Then came the really fun part. She pulled out two wooden forms, placed them in the middle of the coffee table, and let us know that we would have a lesson in how to put a condom on.

Now, you have to picture this. The group of people are mostly middle aged, and a few who were older than that. There are only two men in the room at all. We're in the living room of a luxurious home in one of the better neighborhoods in town. And Cheryl Lynn wants volunteers to put condoms onto these two wooden penis forms. Two volunteers finally came forward, one woman with grown children and a man in his 30's. The whole event was accompanied by laughter and discomfort. The woman noted to us that she had never touched a condom before in her life. Cheryl Lynn led them through the routine - check the date on the package, then check the air bubble in the package, pull the condom away from the edge where you will tear, tear, and figure out how it rolls, roll it down and get all the air out. We all shifted in our seats. We giggled nervously. We understood again how teenagers often feel when talking about sex.

It's a Pandora's box, a subject that's just fraught with discomforts and easy misunderstandings and offense easily taken. While it is possible to learn how to be more comfortable with conversations about sex, it's still very much a taboo subject, and many of us never learn how to speak about it without a joke or two, many of us never learn how to be simply straightforward about it.

There's a story my uncle used to tell about his favorite moment during his several years of teaching the *About Your Sexuality* curriculum. Erin will tell you in a few moments, AYS has been for nearly the last 30 years, the comprehensive sexuality curriculum that we used in Unitarian Universalist churches. One of the exercises that the classes might experience early in the curriculum was to have various body part names on big pieces of newsprint on the walls around the room. The teens were then asked to go around and list all of the slang terms that they

knew for each part. You know, you'd be surprised once you write them all down, how many names there are for each of your most private parts, at least that was how Bob always told it. Once the lists were as complete as could be, they would go around the room, asking the kids to read the lists out loud. This one time, they proceeded around the room until they got to a particularly reluctant young man. He had the fortune of reading the list for the body part vulva. He looked at it for a moment. He started to speak, but then stopped. He frowned, and pondered. Then, he asked, "Is that a two door or a four door?"

We're all still a bit uncomfortable with sex, and unsure how to talk about it without telling jokes, without a bit of a blush and a shuffle in our seats.

There's good reason for it. Sex is the most private and intimate that we ever get with another human being. It's where we are -- or perhaps should be -- at our most vulnerable, naked in every meaning of that word. Carter Heyward says it well: "To be faithful lovers is to touch and to be touched -- whether physically or otherwise -- with a depth and quality of tenderness that actually helps to create life where there is death, comfort where there is despair." It is intimate, private, and deeply powerful, life giving if done to create right relation, death bringing when it is an abuse of power or an expression of violence. It has such power that it is difficult to speak about, especially to our children.

What we want to do today is to open up the subject for our consideration. What brings us to speak of sex today is the introduction of *Our Whole Lives*, the new comprehensive sexuality curriculum developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ.

It is necessary for us to be talking about sex here, in this context, today and in the days to come.

It is necessary because sex has become so very dangerous, and the lives of our children, the lives of our children depend more than they ever have on our ability share information with them, accurately and without judgment. The lives of our children depend on our ability to share the wisdom of our own experiences, and to help them to understand as well as they possibly can the beauty and power of sexual intimacy. It is our role to help them to understand the gift of their bodies, of their love, of their intimacy, and to know how to give that gift in wholeness.

It is necessary, too, because sex has become so very dangerous, and it is impossible to know who among us might be at risk, and endangered by reckless behavior. We need to remind one another of the importance of right relations with each other. We need to be reminded of the gift of ourselves and our deepest privacy that is ours to share with a beloved, because it seems that it's too easy to forget that in our world that is saturated with cheap and easy sex.

It is necessary for us to be talking about sex, because this is a home for all that is precious and worthy, for all that is filled with love and loveliness. Surely, surely, the passionate intimacy of sex needs to be spoken into a home such as this.