

Address: Sex and Spirit
LREDA Fall Conference
The Rev. Sarah Lammert, October 23, 2016

Before I dive into my subject this morning I just want to acknowledge that this is a particularly poignant time in our culture and in the life of our faith movement to be celebrating healthy and sexuality here at our LREDA gathering. At a time when Brock Turner has already left prison after raping an unconscious woman and being caught in the act; at a time when a candidate for president feels free to belligerently announce that bragging about molesting women is “locker talk; at a time when the pitch and roar of misogyny is at a frightening high; and at a time when many of us are still grappling with our own history of ministerial sexual misconduct in the wake of the Berry Street Conference – it is to say the least a fraught and even fearful time. Sexual violence is not about sex but about exerting abusive and harmful power over a more vulnerable person. Reclaiming a healthy sexuality becomes even more of a religious imperative in times like these, and I am grateful to all of you for being willing to look inside and lead our faith in this effort.

Talking about sex in church is always challenging proposition! What other subject brings up so many conflicting feelings and thoughts? Sex is a powerful frontier of human ambiguity, longing, excitement, boredom, fulfillment, creativity, connection, violence, intimacy, soulfulness, and desire. We don’t generally talk about sex in public, and certainly not in church (at least not outside of the OWL classroom)– at least I don’t remember it ever coming up in the church I was raised in! Sex and sensuality is fraught with anxiety and moral ambiguity in our culture, even as it is also linked with our deepest, often hidden, desires. In the end, though, our sexuality is a part of us no less than our minds, our hearts, or our spirits. When we banish Eros from our houses of worship, we banish human wholeness.

Religion has not on the whole served humanity in developing a healthy relationship to our sexuality. If anything, at least in the monotheistic traditions, the message has been to repress ones sexuality, denigrating all things physical as impure, while idealizing the disembodied realm of spirit. But Unitarian Universalism promotes the fullest celebration and exploration of what it means to be human. What is suppressed in our humanity often becomes twisted into dark shadows – we see this in the ways that sex and violence are so intertwined in our world. If we are to live out our tradition’s values of embracing our worth and dignity, and working towards a world that is just, equitable and peaceful, we will need to begin to unpack what it looks like to have sexually healthy lives, both as individuals and in community.

It is for this reason that I, along with some five thousand clergy from fifty religious traditions have signed onto the Religious Declaration on Sexuality, Morality, Justice and Healing.¹ It reads, in part:

¹ <http://www.religiousthought.org/religious-declaration-on-sexual-morality-justice-and-healing>

Sexuality is God's life-giving and life-fulfilling gift. We come from diverse religious communities to recognize sexuality as central to our humanity and as integral to our spirituality. We are speaking out against the pain, brokenness, oppression and loss of meaning that many experience about their sexuality.

Our faith traditions celebrate the goodness of creation, including our bodies and our sexuality. We sin when this sacred gift is abused or exploited. However, the great promise of our traditions is love, healing and restored relationships.

Our culture needs a sexual ethic focused on personal relationships and social justice rather than particular sexual acts. All persons have the right and responsibility to lead sexual lives that express love, justice, mutuality, commitment, consent and pleasure. Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, color, age, bodily condition, marital status or sexual orientation.

How many of you have trained to be OWL facilitators? OWL is one of the best things we do in UU (thank you Judith Frediani and Melanie Davis!). It equips our children and teens with tools to know themselves, be able to make wise choices, and feel empowered across the wide spectrum of our sexual and gender identities. But let's face it – most of us don't really have the issues handled, now that we are adults. The single people among us think the married or partnered people are having sex, and the committed relationship folks definitely think the single people must be having more sex than we are. We are all sure that celebrities are having all of the sex we could have if we were only sexier! Sex is used to sell just about everything, it is the topic of tabloids, movies, books and the huge pornography industry, yet we don't have intelligent, open conversations about sex. Many of us barely talk to our sex partners about sex. We feel guilty about our fantasies, and we wonder secretly if we are inadequate. How much could we all benefit if we could make peace with our sexuality, embracing it as a life-enhancing gift, integral to the human journey and deeply connected to our spiritual lives?

Thomas Moore, in his book The Soul of Sex writes:

We have a habit of talking about sex as merely physical, and yet nothing has more soul. Sex takes us into a world of intense passions, sensual touch, exciting fantasies, many levels of meaning, and subtle emotions. It makes the emotions come alive with fantasy, reverie, and memory. Even if the sex is loveless, empty, or manipulative, still it has strong repercussions in the soul, and even bad sexual experiences leave lasting, haunting impressions. (p.3)

While the monotheistic religions have diminished sexuality, in Greco-Roman myths, and in many Pagan and indigenous traditions, there are always stories about sex among the Gods, and between Gods and mortals. The story of Eros and Psyche is among these.

As you may remember, Eros was the son of the Aphrodite the Goddess of Love, and Ares, the God of War. It makes a certain amount of sense that the God of erotic love would reflect the combining forces of beauty, sensuality, and destruction.

Aphrodite is a jealous and vain Goddess, and you can imagine her displeasure when on Earth, people began to abandon her temples in order to worship a mortal, Psyche, whose beauty was rumored to rival that of the Goddess of Love herself. Aphrodite orders Eros to trick the lovely mortal Psyche into falling in love with an ugly beast, but instead he falls in love with her and sweeps her away on the wind to his own castle, where he secretly marries her. Their story is one of passionate infatuation sullied by betrayal and finally redeemed through persistence and love. Eventually Psyche herself becomes immortal, bearing a daughter Voluptas, whose name means “pleasure.”

In a sense when we experience erotic love, we incarnate the spirit of these archetypes, and sex at its best can be a sacred encounter. As Daphne Rose Kingma writes in her book Heart and Soul:

Through sex we enter the timeless, boundary-less moment. We partake of the one experience above all others in life which allows us the bliss of true union. Here ego and all its concerns are erased and the self is dissolved in utter surrender. To know, feel and discover this in the presence of another human being, as we are invited to do in making love, is to be brought face-to-face with one of the greatest mysteries of human existence – that we are spirit embodied, and that as human beings, we are partaking in this miracle.

In 2010, I was lucky to attend a UU Minister’s Convocation in Ottawa where Thomas Moore was the keynote speaker. During one of his talks, noting how obsessed we UU clergy seemed to be with ideas of truth, integrity and high ideals, he was urging the 400 of us present to embody more of the spirit of Aphrodite in our lives – her appreciation for beauty, her sensuality, her pleasure in earthly delights. He noted that Aphrodite is most often pictured just stepping out of water – the sea, her bath. “Spend more time in your bathrooms, pampering yourselves. Go stand in a mall and admire the window of Bath & Body Works or Crabtree & Evelyn,” he told us. “Truth be told” he said, almost whispering at this point “people need fancy shampoo more than they need your churches.”

What!! A gasp went through the crowd. What kind of a consumerist heathen was he anyway, this ex-Monk become Jungian Therapist and writer of all things related to Soul? But in a way, he was absolutely right. The world needs us to reclaim our appreciation for wonder, beauty, mystery, pleasure and worldliness. Not so we become self-indulgent narcissistic thrill seekers, but so we can reclaim something essential about our flawed humanity – the simple, restorative joys of bath and tea, oranges and sex, sunsets and sunshine. We have become so removed from the world through our technology, through our drive-through lifestyles, our information overloads, our loss of community and loss of connection to nature, that we are in danger of destroying our own souls, our own future.

Sexuality is perhaps one path back to mystery, to humility, to surrender, to connection with others, to our own deepest selves. When we celebrate Eros, we celebrate a powerful form of love. Sex offers us a way to transcend the mundane, but at the same time it is extraordinarily intimate, connecting us back to the ground of all being.

We lose ourselves in the oblivion of sex [says Moore], and find our soul in the spiritual place that is accessible through openhearted passion. This is Venusian [or Aphrodite's] spirituality, a transcendence of self achieved through intense, pleasurable union. At the same time, as is usually the case in religion, mystical transport leads us back into deep involvement in life and community.²

We are all in different places in terms of our sexuality. Some of us are happily celibate, others of us long for a lover, some may have open relationships with several partners, and others have the joys and challenges of long term exclusive relationships. But all of us have a body, and we could consider reclaiming space for a more sensual way of being - allowing Eros to extend beyond the bedroom into your experience of the physicality of the world, as well as into your spiritual lives. Eros offers a sense that the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life might be forged into a spiral – that at the heart of life there is profound joy and oneness. As the writer Terry Tempest Williams puts it so beautifully:

Erotic is what those deep relations are and can be that engage the whole body – our heart, our mind, our spirit, our flesh. It is that moment of being exquisitely present.

When Eros first brought Psyche back to his divine castle, carrying her there in secret on the winds of his desire, he gave her complete freedom and love if she would make one promise: not to look at his face. For five years they lived thus happily, meeting each night in their marriage bed in the sultry dark, until one day she is convinced by her sisters to break her vow. Fearing that she might be married to a monster, she gets up in the night, clutching a dagger in one hand and an oil lamp in another, prepared to plunge the knife through her husband's heart if necessary. When she shines the lamp on the sleeping Eros, she becomes entranced by his divine beauty and a single drop of hot oil escapes and burns his cheek. Enraged at her betrayal, he leaves her alone, where discovered by Aphrodite, she is put through a series of impossible and terrifying tasks before her love can be redeemed, and she herself made immortal.

Sex in our culture is fraught with betrayal, violence, terror, excitement and love, all knotted up together. While we can nest with our lover for a time in bliss, eventually one must deal with the corruption of our histories, our betrayals, jealousies, the physical diminishment that comes with age, time of boredom, broken relationships, the need for forgiveness, and new beginnings. Erotic love is not what is promised in the fairy tale movies, but it is still deeply good.

May you start with loving yourself.

² Moore, Thomas, The Soul of Sex p. 153.

May you love your body, just as you are, for you are a good gift.
May you find ways to refresh and renew yourself, be it in Aphrodite's bath, or the sanctuary of your bed, or simply sitting outside, taking in the sunshine.
May you allow the power of Eros to lift your spirit to the heights of ecstasy, and return you to the depths of your humanity.
May our words and our deeds be in the service of the greatest Love, always.
So be it, Amen.