

“What’s Love Got To Do With It?” By Rev. Lori Staubitz 2/15/09

It is often said of UU clergy that my role as prophet, preacher and pastor is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. However, today as we delve into the subject of spirituality and sexuality....we might find we are all squirming a little in our seats.

And why? Because we have all been influenced by western culture and religious ideas that separate our understanding of human sensuality from the idea of the holy.

Heavily influenced by ancient Greek Hellenism, our perceptions of reality are born from the concept of parts, separation and strict divisions:

Body from mind, mind from spirit, sensuality from spirituality, heaven from hell, male from female- dualism that has its origins in ancient western philosophy and religion.

Augustine: significant impact upon early church—was fearful of his own sexual drive sought to control all desire, concluding that sin was transmitted from parent to child through sexual union, therefore, child baptism became necessary and the ultimate path to the divine life was by way of abstinence: Hence the Catholic Priesthood as it stands today.

Most of the symbols and stories we have to help us discern how to be religious are revealed in images of virginity, chastity, modesty and a-sexual role models. Even in our own liberal tradition, we clergy joke that the official garb for female ministers is the ankle length sack cloth jumper and Birkenstock earth sandals!

As a result a great portion of who we are as passionate, sentient beings and our expression of healthy, human sensuality has been either oppressed or denied all together.

The Oppression of healthy Sensuality and Sexuality comes at a great cost to us all.

The injustices done to women, children and teens are of epidemic proportions. Prostitution, slavery, gender oppression, pornography and sexual abuse are ever present dangers and appear to be on the rise. Easy access to the internet, commercials and adult rated music, video games and movies teach our children and teens who they are as sexual beings, making them easy prey. It reduces human sexuality to genital sex and cuts all of us off from the deeper assertion of the life force within us that can be experienced in and through healthy,erotic human love.

If such suffering has been enabled by institutional religious ideas, It is with our religion that we must begin anew.

Many religious paths harbor a more hidden, wholesome tradition and history that has been veiled and oppressed. No matter how culturally diverse, this heritage is important for us to understand and embrace if we are to end sexual oppression and continue on our own faith journey toward wholeness.

Rev. Ken Collier points out in his sermon “Spirituality and Sexuality” “ The Song of Songs has been included in both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures from the very beginning.

This is a frank and sexually explicit series of love poems (dating from about 500 BCE to the 1st Century) The people who compiled these canons knew what they were doing, and I suggest that they knew perfectly well that they were including a celebration of human sexuality (on purpose) " "I think it was to suggest that our sexuality is a gift, when used properly can bring us into deep communion with (the spirit of life itself)

"There is a mitzvah- a requirement for married Jews to make love on the Sabbath. " "Much of the imagery and symbolism surrounding the Sabbath are of union, and veiled love making.

Why ? Because the Sabbath is a celebration of creation" Making love is, at least symbolically is the re-creation of the relationship between (the holy and the human)"

Collier goes on to tell of the ancient Sumerian, Babylonian temple priestesses –referred to as prostitutes in Judeo-Christian literature-were not prostitutes at all. Coming to the temple to make love with them was an act of worship that cleansed the soul" In fact, warriors, returning from battle, would visit the temple before returning home- to cleanse themselves of death and brutality by reconnecting with the regenerating forces of life and love.

Our purpose as a people of faith is to cultivate wholeness and to enable growth and depth of relationship.

Not only are we creatures compelled to reason, we are also sentient beings-made for love; love of the earth, love of art and beauty, love of fellow beings and the more intimate expression of love through sexuality and human intimacy.

Accounts of ecstasy brought about by the union of minds, bodies and spirits permeate the mystical traditions found in all most all paths of faith...stories of love and religious experience

From Catholicism there are many accounts of such union:

"St. Teresa revealed her own mystical encounter in explicitly erotic images: "Beside me on the left appeared an angel in bodily form, his face was so aflame that he appeared to be all on fire. IN his hands he held a great golden spear that he plunged into my heart many times. When he pulled it out I felt utterly consumed by love. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease...This is not a physical pain but a spiritual one, though the body has a considerable share in it."

Adapted from quote as noted by Rev. Ken Collier and from Women in Praise of the sacred

Sufism is often thought to be the mystical branch of Islam. Yet while there is truth to this, it's an incomplete truth. British author [Doris Lessing](#) reminds us, "the Sufis are not specifically Muslim. Sufi reality predates Islam [and] has always been introduced, secretly or openly, into every culture."

Well, according to [Dr. Alan Godlas](#) of the University of Georgia, the essence of Sufi purpose and practice is quite simple: "the Sufi surrenders to God, in love, over and over; which involves embracing with each moment the content of one's consciousness (one's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, as well as one's sense of self) as gifts or, more precisely, as manifestations of divinity."

The most well known Expressions of this erotic devotion is witnessed in the Sufi [whirling dervishes](#) and dances as well as in the works of the thirteenth-century mystic poet Rumi:

a sensuous poet as well as a religious thinker, offering great insight into the struggle of the mystic with physical existence:

In a mode that may be seen as virtually erotic, Rumi writes:

I would love to kiss you.
The price of kissing is your life.
Now my loving is running toward
my life shouting "What a bargain, let's buy it!"

A story from "[The Way of the Sufi](#)," by Idries Shah shares the tale of how Moses rebuked a man for offering to comb God's hair, wash His robe, and kiss His head.

God, however, rebuked Moses saying: "Thou hast driven away a worshipper from the nearest to Me that he could approach.

What better time than Valentine's to explore love poems that invoke both the spiritual and the sensual.

Reading # 1- [Senan Brady](#)(Adapted for length) **Poem by Judy Graham from Life Prayers Initiation and Courtship**

He called her :Golden Dawn

She called him: the wind whistles

He called her: heart of the sky

She called him: message bringer

He called her: mother of pearl, barley woman, corn maid, all maker

She called him: fawn, stag, courage, thunderman, keeper of the forest, my-love-rides

He called her: the tree is

She called him: bird dancing

He called her: who stands, has stood, will always stand

She called him: arriver

He called her: the heart and the womb are similar

She called him: arrow in my heart.

Reading # 2- Read by Denise Lourette Brady

Bibi Hayati was born (circa mid 1800) in Kerman province of Persia-now Iran. Her poems offer to us another Sufi realization of the "Beloved" as it shines in and through the whole of life. This same intimacy is found in the Hebrew Psalms; Song of Songs.

Many Sufi love poems invoke images of human love and divine intimacy. This poem is adapted from "Women in Praise of the Sacred" by Jane Hirshfield

Is this darkness the night of Power, or the black falling of your hair?

Is the rising light daybreak, or the reflection of your face?

Is this boxwood gathered in the orchard or the rose garden's cypress

the Tree of Paradise, or the shape of your standing?

From the moment of Times' first drawn breath, Love resides in us,

Before the first seed broke open the rose bed of Being,

an inner lark soared through your meadows,

Heading toward Home.

What can I do but thank you, one hundred times?

Your face illumines the shrine of (my) eyes,

Constantly present and lovely.

Reading # 3 Read by Jade Stewart Campbell

"I Want Us"- written by Sufi Poet Hafiz mid 1300's

-100 years after the poet Rumi –adapted for inclusive language

I want us

To start taking about this great love

As if you and I and the Sun were all (committed to one another)

And living in a tiny room

Helping each other to cook,

Do the wash,

Weave and sew,
Care for our beautiful animals
We all leave each morning
To labor on the earth's field
No one lifts a great pack alone.
I want us to start singing like
Traveling minstrels
About this extraordinary existence
We share,
As if
You, I, and (the divine) were (united)
And living in
A tiny
Room.

Reading # 4 Read by Steve Van Abbema

This Love poem by Lois Wickenhauser offers insight into the deeply sensual Human experience. The poet invites us to envision to embrace our innate, natural intimacy with life even as it transcends even personal death.

Sensuous during life do not deny me in death!

Wash me with scent of apple blossom.

Anoint me with essence of lilac.

Fill my veins with honeysuckle nectar.

Sprinkle me with perfume of purple violets.

Envelop me in shroud saturated with fragrance of freshly mown meadow hay.

Rest me in moss velvet earth.

Cover me with soil exuding flavor of maple and oak leaves.

Command a white birch to stand guard!

Reading # 5 read by Dana Van Abbema

Poems by Hadewijch of Antwerp: 13th c. Flemish mystic expressed her spiritual experiences of divine love in terms that were grammatically feminine.

Her works were lost and only rediscovered by scholars in the nineteenth century amidst medieval manuscripts found in Brussels.

“The Madness of Love”

The madness of love is a blessed fate;

And if we understood this

We would seek no other:

It brings into unity

What was divided,

And this is the truth:

Bitterness it makes sweet,

It makes the stranger a neighbor,

And what was lowly it raises on high.

Anyone who has waded

Through Love’s turbulent water,

(first) ,feeling hunger and (then satisfaction),

Is untouched by the season

Of withering or blooming,

(For)r in the deepest

And most dangerous water,

On the highest peaks, Love is always the same.

Who we are as sentient, spiritual beings is deeply related to how comfortable we are in our own skin. Knowing this, we as a progressive people of faith have ventured far into the "taboo" topic of sexuality and have done much over the years to bring together these seemingly opposed aspects of our human existence:

"Religion and Sex"

How well have we addressed sexuality in relationship to our faith in the past: That is an evolving area of our ministry.

Ministers preaching notes:

1950-1960's

Kinsey Report: Human sexuality rocked contemporary culture and the notion of personal sexual freedom within our congregations.

I believe reduced human sensuality to sex acts- focus on individual desire/ freedom of expression- genital sex and created an environment of "love the one your with"...reckless freedom that had devastating effects upon marriages, relationships between congregations, clergy and our integrity within the greater religious world.

AYS- About your sexuality program 1975: Addressed sexuality in all its forms and diversity with our teens. Teaching responsibility as it pertained to birth control and mutual consent, but did little to frame the decision to enter into sexual relationships with one's spiritual life and greater relationship to community.

90's- shift from sex for sex sake to reflection upon spirituality, sexuality within loving, mutual caring relationships.

Films "Last Temptation of Christ" and "The Divinchy Code" broke with religious taboos and prohibitions on sexuality in relationship to divine revelation.

How are we addressing sexuality today?

OWL: 2000- Fidelity to loving principals, relationship and Commitments to health, shared, mutual respect in addition to a comprehensive, insightful introduction to healthy human sexuality in all its diversity, forms and expressions and faith based values of inherent worth, conscious, informed choices, understanding of mutually supporting relationship and the use of personal sexual power.

Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Bi-sexual diversity and need to be a Welcoming Congregation

Marriage Equality Maryland: Marriage rights as human rights: As a people, we stand on the side of loving relationships no matter a person's race, religion, sexual orientation, culture or class.

Teaching ourselves and our children about Gender diversity / Human Rights:

SUPPORT EXPANDING ANTI-DISCRIMINATION PROTECTIONS IN MARYLAND TO INCLUDE TRANSGENDER INDIVIDUALS.

Why is it crucial to protect transgender individuals?

Every person in our state deserves an equal opportunity to make a life for his or herself free from discrimination and violence regardless of the chromosomes with which they were born, the hormones to which they were exposed in the womb, or the medical procedures they've undergone since.

In Maryland, transgender people are not included in state laws prohibiting discrimination. Only Baltimore City has a civil rights ordinance covering gender identity and expression. When unchecked, discrimination can lead to chronic unemployment and homelessness, and in turn can render its victims more vulnerable to violence. When discrimination prevents or hinders a person from gaining or keeping employment, many other problems develop. Rent doesn't get paid, which leads to eviction.

Transgender individuals may be denied access to social services like shelters or rape crisis centers; refused treatment, ridiculed, or denied recognition of their gender identity by health care professionals; or refused service at restaurants or stores.

How big is this problem?

The Washington Area Transgender Needs Assessment survey estimates that 42% of transgender people in the DC Metro Area are unemployed; 31% have incomes of less than \$10,000/year; and 19% do not have their own living space. The most common barriers cited by those who lack housing are their economic situation (38%), housing staff insensitivity or hostility to transgender people (29%), estrangement from birth family (27%) and lack of employment (23%).

Who would be covered under this law?

Any person who has or is perceived by others to have a gender identity or expression that might be considered different or inconsistent with the person's assigned sex at birth, whether or not that person self-identifies as transgender. For example, a woman who presents with "masculine" characteristics would be protected from discrimination under this legislation, even if she did not consider herself transgender, as would a man presenting with "feminine" characteristics.

According to a Gonzalez poll taken in August 2006, more than half of Maryland voters favor making it illegal in Maryland to discriminate against transgender people.

According to a study released Dec. 29th from a researcher from Johns Hopkins who extracted data from a larger Federal Study- teenagers who pledge to remain virgins until marriage delay sex longer than average, but are as likely as their peers to have premarital sex and less likely to use protection. The report cast grave doubt upon the abstinence only sex education programs which received 204 million in government funding this past year.- Time January 12, 2009.

We have within our charge, many children and teens who will look to us for guidance...We will need to first let them know that they can come to us with their questions of sexuality and spirituality....

How we answer them will have much to do with our own comfort in integrating our human sensuality with our religious ideas and values.

I offer you this....that our willingness to take the step to offer Our Whole Lives...is one that will not only effect our children's experience but ours as well....as together we traverse the tough terrain and rough seas of becoming whole, loving, thoughtful and responsible human beings...to the end that each shall be made whole and all shall live as one. Amen.

We use the term *transgender* to mean a broad range of people who experience and/or express their gender differently from what most people expect — either in terms of expressing a gender that does not match the sex listed on their original birth certificate, or physically changing their sex. It is an umbrella term that includes people who are transsexual, cross-dressers or otherwise gender non-conforming.