

## ***Sex & UU Values (Just Say Know)***

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship  
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### **RESPONSIVE READING**

When I am called upon as a person of faith, how will I answer?

May I echo the ancient refrain: **HERE I AM**

*When violence tears into this community, may I be a source of deep calm. Lest fear rob me of courage, I declare: **HERE I AM.***

When disease breaks body and heart, may I know unbroken spirit. Lest fatigue stop my eternal witness, I declare **HERE I AM.**

*When healing is needed, may compassion pour from my words and acts. Lest self-centeredness block my giving of myself, I declare **HERE I AM***

When the world would choose not to remember my history, may I recall those who came before me. Lest denial allow my existence to be forgotten, I declare **HERE I AM**

*When it seems that reconciliation cannot be found, may I speak the truth in love. Lest anger cause me to forget I am connected to all, I declare **HERE I AM***

When it is time for celebration, may I dance with joy.

Lest despair cause me to forget each person's divine spark, I declare: **HERE I AM**

*When people cry out for liberation, may I stand among them. Let my voice cry out in echo of the ancient refrain: **HERE I AM.***

Human Rights Campaign

### **MESSAGE**

This fall, our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders embarked on a comprehensive study of sexuality using a curriculum called “Our Whole Lives” or O-W-L also known as OWL. One of the reasons I’m impressed with the curriculum and those who teach it is the depth of training required to teach the class. In the course of an intense weekend trainers and future accredited teachers talk about creating a safe environment for conversation about:

Relationship skills

Recognizing unhealthy relationships

Consent

Power and control

Gender roles

Gender equity

Reproductive rights

Making safer choices

Body image

Sexuality and aging

Sexual diversity

And family planning.



And beyond the intellectual exploration of these issues, they learn how to bring up the reality of how our attitudes, values, and feelings shape our experience in each of these areas.

I have not received that training but with so much to cover, I'm guessing that they don't go into what these words—Our Whole Lives—can mean poetically. But when *I* think about it, I see at least three deeply important meanings in the word “whole.”

First: sexuality is something humans engage with over our whole lifetime, so there are OWL curricula for groups from kindergarten to adult.

Second, “whole” can mean intact or complete—as in “keep the circle whole.” And since sexuality is one synergistic dimension of our complete physical being, we hope to help people understand and embrace this part of their lives, like all the other parts, without shame.

And finally, “whole” can be a spiritual quality that we seek for ourselves, and hope for, for others. We want whole lives: rich in meaning and in relationships, and with our sexual dimension *integrated* with our values into a cohesive unity.

I'm very proud that BUF has made OWL a priority—investing a great deal of volunteer time, and money too, for the training and materials—in order to provide this important service. I'm also very happy, as a parent, that my own kids had the benefit of comprehensive sexuality education informed by Unitarian Universalist values—which they've told me was very different from what they got in school.

So the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders are studying *now*, with what is the most comprehensive of all the curricula just as their physical and emotional development make sexual questions inescapable. We also teach at BUF an age-appropriate curriculum to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders on alternating years.

We are not currently teaching the high school curriculum, the adult curriculum, or the Kindergarten-grade 1 curriculum, but I mention all of these to point out the breadth of what is available, and to note that these courses build upon one another, so as BUF grows in capacity to offer these other pieces, with financial and volunteer support, we'll ensure that our lives and our children's lives will be even more whole-ly.

One more curriculum that we are offering for the first time is the Young Adult course for ages 18-35, beginning this winter.

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An earlier UU sexuality curriculum was called About Your Sexuality. It was developed in the 1960s. It and OWL have been taught here at BUF for decades, with materials and trainings updated on a regular basis as the sexual landscape has changed. How can something as fundamental as sexuality change? Well, since the 1960's, we've witnessed an explosive public debate over abortion; AIDS; a growing understanding of sexual abuse; the rise of social issues around gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights; and the growth of sex ed programs in our public schools that are based in shame and fear.

Though OWL was developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association in conjunction with the United Church of Christ, it is written in secular language, without reference to specific religious doctrine, making it accessible to anyone.

So then why do we bother to talk about it here? Why are sexual ethics relevant to a religious community?

Because questions and decisions around sexuality can have deep personal and social consequences. Our responses to these questions shape our identity. They involve interpersonal engagement in which there is an enormous opportunity to stand up for our own personhood, saying **HERE I AM**, while also respecting the personhood of another. And finally, they remind us that it is through relationship that we are best able to change the world.

Consequences, identity, personhood, and relationship—all very important aspects of the religious journey.

We teach about sexuality at BUF because it is an integral part of our being, from the day we are born till the day we die. It relates to our desire to be connected, to be known, valued, and loved. It arises from our quest to express our authentic selves, and to recognize ourselves as part of the miracle of creation.

So comprehensive sexuality education is a crucial opportunity to teach and to learn—within the framework of the principles we affirm as UUs—an opportunity to teach and to learn that even in the most intimate and private aspects of our lives, we can, and we must live out our values. It's an opportunity to learn how to love well.

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Each week when we gather we speak of love; freedom & responsibility; personal wellness; integrity; patience; sensitivity; restraint; openness; accepting consequences; communication; self-expression; commitment; personal growth and self-worth; joy and celebration; sharing; dealing with conflict; honesty; accountability; and the spirit of life....

These are all life issues, and sexual issues. Each calls us to find a balance between competing ideals. For example:

- Should we protect ourselves, or let ourselves go?
- Should we trust, or proceed with caution?
- Should we surrender to the moment, or plan ahead?

The values promoted in the *Our Whole Lives* curricula are summed up well in its description of healthy sexual relationships as: consensual; non-exploitative; mutually pleasurable; safe; developmentally appropriate; and respectful.

I'll repeat that. These are the qualities necessary for a healthy sexual interaction: it must be consensual; non-exploitative; mutually pleasurable; safe; developmentally appropriate; and respectful.

Consider as an alternative the mixed messages abounding in our culture, from one extreme: “sex is evil,” to another extreme: “sex just happens without any thought or consequence.”

One part of our culture pummels us with the message that human beauty comes only in a very slender range of body type. Another part of our culture repeatedly hammers on the message that the only acceptable form of sexual expression is one male and one female, having textbook intercourse [none of that kinky stuff!] and only for the purpose of making a baby.

Most of us were never encouraged to evaluate for ourselves society’s mixed messages. And yet as adults we have had to do so...and we have to teach our children to do so! [even if you don’t have children, this is a job for you too through your votes, your care, your advocacy, and your support for the Religious Education program at BUF—all of which make a difference in improving the lives of the generations to come.

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The lofty ideals of this approach to sexuality education are supported by tangible results. Studies show that comprehensive sexuality education programs increase communication between teens and their parents about sex. Such programs work to prevent both pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. And children who are involved in comprehensive sexuality education tend to delay sexual intercourse and have fewer sexual partners.

In one study of 500 eighth graders, participants in a comprehensive sexuality education program were 5 times less likely than those not in the program to have begun having sexual intercourse by the end of eighth grade (4% vs. 20%). In the follow up year, 39% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders had had intercourse, (the rate was 24% for those in the program). So they’re going to do it, with or without the program...but they’re more likely to practice safer sex if they’ve been told how and why.

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Physically safer sex. But we can hope, emotionally safer sex as well. A book called *The First Time* is a collection of 150 personal stories of women losing their virginity. The chapter titles describe some categories for these experiences: Wedding Nights (or almost); Pressure from All Sides; A Conscious Choice; Just Get it Over With; Violation in all its Forms; Women loving Women; and finally: The Romantic Minority.

I was hesitant to repeat any of these stories, here, because the experiences vary so much that it would be ridiculous to imply that there is anything like a “typical” first time. But in her conclusion, the author offers suggestions on how we can at least direct the next generations toward experiences like those of “The Romantic Minority.” So here is an interesting story from that chapter:

*“Growing up, boyfriends had mauled me—I never had sex with them, but it was a literal fight not to. I was very developed at an early age, and men and boys would comment and, in many instances, grab at me or even attack me. I was the girl who was always trapped in the back seat on the school bus as free game. Fortunately, I always somehow got out of these situations physically unscathed—but I was emotionally bruised.*

*I developed a hatred for and fear of men that I have to this day. I find that I’m attracted to what my mother calls ‘soft’ men. Over the years I’ve also had relationships with gay men, because there was no threat of their wanting anything more from the relationship other than intellectual and verbal stimulation.*

*Despite these negatives, my first sexual experience at age nineteen, with the man whom I eventually married, was wonderful. We went to a hotel for a weekend, because a friend was being married in another state; this somehow made it ok for our parents. We were completely in love, and I felt fine afterward. What affected me the most was that we had had plenty of previous opportunities to have sex, but Joe had insisted, ‘No—I want the first time to be special.’ And it was.*

*I’m thankful that I found Joe because he gave me a safe place to confront many issues revolving around sexuality. After much therapy, I have resolved my aversion to the typical man who views women as his property for sex and catering services. I have also come to grips with the damage that the Church has done to women. This happened when I was sending my own daughter to Catholic school.... She complained that the nuns were beginning to tell her that what she was feeling — sexual curiosity— was [immoral]. I listened and put her into another school without a strict religious curriculum. Through her I learned that I could not continue the cycle of having women demoralized for their sex. No way would I subject my daughter, who I wanted to raise with high self-esteem, confidence, and self-respect, to the convoluted ideals of the Church.”*

It is sad, though not surprising, that many people assume that a religious organization cannot teach healthy notions of sex.

Still, to balance the anti-Catholic sentiment of that story, I would like to state that my own sexuality education program in a Catholic high school was quite good—for its time. Our teacher didn’t want to talk about some things though. For example he suggested, if we had concerns about masturbation, that we should “talk to our counselors (who were priests) and that perhaps they could give us a hand.” We thought this slip of the tongue was pretty funny at the time. Today, instead, it conjures up images of clergy abuse, which is another thing we weren’t allowed to talk about then, but have learned we must deal with openly.

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The principles of healthy boundaries and mutually beneficial relationships are relevant to our children from their earliest years. So in our Religious Education program, we can do this good work long before the onset of sexual activity, and long past our sexual peaks. We do so by creating an environment of safety and trust. We can help each other learn to grow into healthy relationships simply by creating fun and purposeful opportunities to be together. We can create an atmosphere that supports asking questions instead of being embarrassed that we don’t know the answers. And we can shape our environment into one where we are all able to talk about important and intimate aspects of our lives without shame.

## **SENDING SONG**

*Let it be a Dance #311*

## **\*CLOSING WORDS**

With our children and with one another let us continue this dance of learning and caring: learning how to touch one another respectfully... learning how to breathe surely and steadily.  
Let us care enough to continue to grow: more trusting, more trustworthy, and whole.