

**UUs on Love and Sexuality<sup>1</sup>**  
*Rev. Myke Johnson & Rick & Tirrell Kimball*  
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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Unitarian Universalists across the country have joined together in a campaign called: Standing on the Side of Love. Love calls us to stand for justice & compassion anywhere human dignity is at risk. Love also calls us to personal and relationship wholeness, including sexual wholeness. In today's worship we are going to talk about how our UU values shape our understanding of sexuality. In particular, we'll be hearing from Rick & Tirrell Kimball about our UU sexuality education program, which is called Our Whole Lives, or OWL for short. Rick and Tirrell have been teaching our youth at A2U2 for over 30 years. We will explore why we believe this work is important for a spiritual community.

***What We Carry from the Past***

***Rev. Myke Johnson***

Each time I participate in the parent orientation session of OWL, I find myself awash in feelings. Sadness, mostly. It's very personal. On the one hand, I feel such gratitude that we introduce our young people to sexuality and relationships in an affirming, supportive way. But on the other hand, I feel sadness for how it was when I was coming of age. Perhaps that might resonate with you. As we explore this topic together, I am mindful that we carry many diverse feelings about sexuality—joy, fear, gratitude, hurt, hope, sadness, delight, anger, humor, distress. I invite us to hold those feelings with tenderness in our hearts today.

Most of you know that I grew up Catholic. The role model for Catholic girls was the Virgin Mary. She was also the mother of Jesus, but they really emphasized the part about her being a virgin. We were taught that the ideal life was lived by priests and nuns who renounced sex and marriage. So that shadow was underneath whatever else might be said about sexuality.

When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, we had sexual education at my Catholic school. There were some movies. Nothing too explicit, I am sure, because although I was pretty familiar with menstrual periods, and even childbirth, I was incredibly naïve about actual sex. Earlier, when I was ten, a friend told me that if a woman who wasn't married had a baby—it was a sin. I couldn't understand how it could be a sin, since God gave her the baby. I think my mother gave me a little pamphlet then, which mentioned something called the “marriage act” that people did, which is where babies came from. And you were only allowed to do it if you were married.

Even after the movies in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, about the sperm and the egg forming a new baby, I still had no idea how the sperm and the egg got together. Was kissing involved? It certainly never occurred to me that grownups would take off their clothes with each other.

Most of the conversation in our sex education class was about what things were allowed and what things were sins. Was dancing a sin? Was sitting on your boyfriend's lap a sin? Was kissing a sin? At one point, the nun said that any activity that created sexual feelings was a sin. She said, “If it feels good, it is a sin.”

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You know what? That message is all messed up. I know that it took many years for me to piece together a healthy relationship with sex and sexuality. That is where the sadness and the gratitude come in. I am grateful that our youth have a better opportunity to learn about sexuality. Our Unitarian Universalist values are not so concerned about whether a couple has a piece of paper. But we do care deeply about healthy sexuality.

We care about mutuality and equality in relationships. We care about honesty and respect in communication. We care about joy and delight and generosity between partners. You'll hear more about our program in a few minutes, from Rick and Tirrell Kimball. But in closing, I would just like to say, to that 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher—here is what I know for sure: “If it *doesn't* feel good, then it probably is a sin.”

### ***The OWL Experience***

***Rick Kimball***

**The year was 1974.** The Unitarian Universalist Association had recently released *About Your Sexuality*, a new church-based sex-ed program for young teens. Tirrell and I and other young parents at this church thought it sounded wonderful, but our kids were not old enough to participate. So we took it ourselves, led by our minister Bob Wolf and his wife.

We were right. *AYS* was wonderful, so wonderful it made a very positive change in my own life. Here I was for the first time speaking openly with peers of both genders about subjects I had previously discussed only furtively, superficially, and sometimes sort of humorously with other same-aged males. How I wish I had experienced *AYS* as a youth.

My childhood education came largely from magazines older boys had left in the disused chicken coop behind our house, and from conversations held under the bridge in Orono, Maine. As I headed into adolescence, my father startled me with a book he thought I should read – its subject sex, its title now long forgotten, its messages, unfortunately, remembered still. Dad had borrowed it from the University of Maine library. The librarian must know where that book is, I thought. In Rick Kimball's bedroom. Maybe everybody in town knew I had it.

The book condemned solitary vices – but would not say what they were, something I was sure I needed to know. It cautioned against almost everything else as well. In those days I was questioning my own orientation. The book said nothing of that. I had no idea where to turn, what to do. All I could do was drift through life and see where I landed, and drift I did. What a difference *AYS* could have made.

Soon enough Allen Avenue had kids old enough for the course. As Bob Wolf prepared to lead it, Tirrell and I volunteered to jump in for the ride. What a trip we have had since then – leading *AYS* or its successor almost every other year – with relief from Cush and Karen Anthony and from Paul and Noel Genova when our own sons were involved, and with plenty of help from other leaders, sometimes from First Parish or the Yarmouth church when we combined our groups of middle school youth.

**Jump ahead to the eighties.** Life was more complex, more aware. We received a sexual abuse supplement for *AYS*, then another about AIDS and STDs. Now leading the course meant plowing through and combining a pile of books. We needed something better.

In the 1990s, the UUA and the United Church of Christ combined resources to create a new, larger program called *Our Whole Lives* - or *OWL* for short. I saw an ad seeking authors, and responded. Soon I began writing the adult curriculum – hired not because of my great expertise in the field, but because of my previous career developing school curricula. Possibly my gender did not hurt. At that point, I was the only male author.

**OWL is for learners** from kindergarten age through late adulthood. Its units, goals, and values are described on the insert in our order of service. Gidge and Tina Veilleux and Lynn Russell-Johnson led the grade 4 to 6 portion here once a few years ago. Tirrell and I led the high school portion once. But Allen Avenue has stressed the middle school piece, attempting to offer that for every seventh and eighth grader in our church family, and occasionally for others outside.

**Let me invite you into our opening session.** We are sitting in this room, in a circle, the leaders together in front of the pulpit, the youth semi-frozen and nervous before us, some wondering why their wicked parents forced them into this. The circle surrounds a small table with a chalice, a stuffed owl, and a heart-shaped question box to receive anonymous questions at the end of the evening. I rise to start things off.

“How many letters in sex?” I ask. Huh? The kids are not expecting this. But they are wise to the wily ways of teachers, and sense that the answer cannot be three. They ponder in silence. Finally, a timid voice speaks up to chance the obvious. “Three?” “No,” I reply. “That’s what I thought,” says the voice. Five? Seven? Six? No, I say, and explain. Sex is a nine-letter word. The full version is “sexuality,” which encompasses so much more than what we think of as sex. I could have said that sex is a ten-letter word, with “connection” the full version. Or a twelve-letter word with “spirituality” the full version. For sex as sex should be is reaching out, touching, connecting, with self, with other, with cosmos.

But the kids aren’t into that. The kids want the nitty gritty – even though they sometimes groan and insist they do not. Early in the course that ended here just a week ago, we talked about decision-making skills. Some youth found that boring, the question box informed us. They wanted to focus on physical sex, and they gave some specifics. We will get to those, we said, and soon did.

**OWL covers** just about every subject you can imagine of interest to middle school youth, from abstinence to pregnancy, from pornography to zoophilia – which is not in the course, but youth have sometimes asked. We build each session around a wide range of activities designed to be both informative and fun and to burn off energy along the way.

The youth make anatomical models from pieces of this, parts of that. They use M&Ms to study the statistical incidence of STDs, and bananas as models to explore safe sex techniques. They talk openly and frankly with adults and each other – most importantly each other – about vital life activities. They place themselves on virtual lines ranging from yes on one wall to no on the other, showing where they stand on difficult issues.

But wait – why am I describing all this? Why doesn’t Tirrell demonstrate what *OWL* does by leading an *OWL* activity? . . . While she makes her way up here, let me assure you that the activity is interesting but benign – not even PG-13. Pretty mild for *OWL*.

Each of you should have found a red and a green card in your chair as you arrived. If you do not have them now, please raise a hand and the ushers will bring you a set. . . .

My job is to make some values statements. Your job is to raise a green card to signal your agreement, and a red card to signal your disagreement. This is a forced-choice activity. There are no in-between responses.

In the real OWL world, we would be sitting in a single circle so we could all see each other's answers. And we would ask that the cards all be raised at the same time, so nobody could easily play follow-the-leader.

Also in the real OWL world, we would ask for discussion after each question, but we won't take time for that this morning. If that frustrates you, too bad. A little artificially induced frustration is good training for adolescence.

But I am not inviting you into adolescence - please respond as adults – not as imagined young teens.

Here's the first statement: *1. Sex Internet sites should be regulated.*

*[Wait for responses]*

Look around, if you like, to see how others responded. Here's what I see . . . *[And so forth through these additional questions]*

*2. Seventh and eighth graders should be allowed to get together at home without adult supervision.*

*3. A girl who wears sexy clothes to school is asking to be harassed.*

*4. Abstinence is the best choice for teenagers.*

*5. I personally think of sex in terms of spirituality.*

*6. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers should be allowed to attend school dances with same-sex partners.*

*7. Public schools should have dress codes.*

*8. Abortion should be legal.*

*9. It up to girls to make sure things don't go too far on dates*

So there's a taste of OWL. Thanks for your responses. And for enduring your frustration.

**(Back to “The OWL Experience,” Rick Kimball)**

Once, after quite a graphic *OWL* activity, today’s familiar opening words came to mind. *From its many uses of the week, we reclaim this sanctuary.* I chuckled and thought, “Wow we’d better really reclaim the sanctuary next Sunday.” Later I reflected on that. We also say that “love is the doctrine of this church.” And we speak, as our banner does, of “standing on the side of love.” *OWL* is about love, too. No reclamation necessary.

**All *OWL* sessions and activities** fit into themes reflecting not just the sexual interests of early adolescents but the values of Unitarian Universalism and the guiding light of love.

**Tolerance and acceptance** are among the themes, acceptance of and respect for diversity and other, acceptance of and respect for self. Some of our participants have helped with GBLT activities at their schools, despite nervousness about being identified personally as gay or lesbian. We applaud their activities, and address their concerns. What is wrong with people thinking you might be lesbian or gay, we ask. Those aren’t bad words, so what can be wrong with that? Knowing that the kids’ school classmates might sneeringly disagree, we talk about where to find adult support, and how to stay safe.

**Safety is another theme.** Safety from bullying, from STDs, from abuse, from peer pressure, from illegal misadventures with older partners and with porn. When considering such problems, youth have sometimes said they are getting scared by sex. “Great,” we leaders have thought. “The parents will love us.” But our answers are more honest than that. “Don’t be scared,” we say “Sex can be, should be, and we hope will be, a pleasurable, positive force in your life. *OWL*’s purpose is not to scare you but to help you make it so.”

**Decision-making skill** is a pervading theme. “What is a good age to start having sex?” some youth have asked. Gidge Veilleux responded to such a question recently. *OWL* advises young adolescents to postpone full sexual activity, he explained. “But we can’t give you an exact age. Our goal is not telling you how to run your life but equipping you to make your own good decisions.”

We do a short and amusing play at Allen Avenue suggesting that the proper starting age is 30, but the kids don’t seem to buy that.

I took another approach to the decision-making question recently. “I won’t be there when you sit on the couch and put your arm around your partner’s shoulder,” I said. “I won’t be there as you wonder and decide what to do next. ‘Good,’ came a voice from the circle. ‘Thank god’ came another. “I won’t be there,” I continued. “I won’t be there, but the owl will, and the owl gives a hoot. Remember that before your arm begins to move.”

In matters sexual as well as spiritual, our church offers youth information and ideas for reflection rather than didactic answers and directives. Our kids occasionally call our responses “UU answers.” Fair enough, but some UU answers are certain and strong. “There should be no sexual bullying in your schools,” we say, “because you will be there to help stop it.” That can be tough to hear if you are returning tomorrow morning to a school where “you’re so gay” is an accepted and common putdown. Standing on the side of love can be a great challenge in middle school.

**An overriding *OWL* theme** is love. “What are those people wearing?” we ask after showing slides of people in sexual activity. “Nothing?” comes the voice from the circle. “Wrong,” we say. “Those people are wearing smiles. That’s what good and positive lovemaking is all about.”

There are more themes, of course. This congregation could brainstorm them easily. Or experience them through an adult *OWL* course if members wish, and we will survey interest in that soon. The themes all relate to love, sexuality, connection, spirituality. And somehow the themes, or at least the subjects within them, keep multiplying. Humans have a special gift for complicating activities that even baboons can perform, making them ever more complex. Today we are adding subjects to *OWL* just as we did to AYS those years ago. Now they are subjects like sexting, Internet porn, Facebook, and sharing digital photos of your own naked body. The problems increase. Like electronic pictures in cyberspace, they never fade away. *OWL* will be needed for many more years to come, so Tirrell and I are delighted that new leaders have stepped forward to present it to Allen Avenue’s young teens

Gidge and Tina Veilleux and Cathy Walch this fall completed the training required to lead *OWL* for youth. They co-led this year’s course with us, and will lead future courses, too. We hope and trust they will enjoy the process as much as we have.

We believe they will find, as did we, that when the world weighs heavy on your shoulders and heart, when the wrong politicians take office, when you see or know pain, here’s a sure cure: Step into a room filled with seventh and eighth graders. Especially seventh and eighth graders you have invited to meet and talk about sex. Your life will be more positive, and *OWL* will have made it so.

One youth said as this year’s course concluded, “Even though I told my mom ‘I don’t want to go,’ I loved it.” And even though this room sometimes overflowed with energy and noise, we leaders loved it, too.

Blessed be.