

Those Who Stand in the Gap: Sexuality Education for All

The Rev. Ian W. Riddell

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Las Vegas

Sunday, November 16, 2014

Time for All Ages:

Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes

Responsive Reading:

based on the "Open Letter to Religious Leaders about Sex Education"

<http://www.religiousinstitute.org/responsive-reading-about-sex-education/>

We are committed to the spiritual, emotional and physical health of all people.

We seek to develop the wisdom, values and morality that promote our sexual well-being.

As people of faith committed to justice, we speak out for comprehensive sexuality education for the young people in our community.

Our commitment to truth-telling commands us to seek full and honest sexuality education.

Our young people struggle in a culture that models sexuality without responsibility.

They need to know there is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.

We will not leave our young people alone on this journey.

As people of faith, we commit to education through the lifespan, so that all may affirm the goodness of creation, our bodies and our sexuality.

We will not leave anyone alone on this journey.

We call for sexuality education that respects the whole person, honors diverse values and promotes ethical human relationships.

We pray that all will celebrate sexuality with joy, holiness and integrity – with understanding, respect and responsibility.

Sermon:

It was late on a Thursday afternoon late last month and people had started gathering for a meeting of the Clark County School District Board of Trustees. The room was full of excited tension. I had arrived early and watched as the seats around me quickly filled, the whole room filled up. It was clear that the corridors outside the room were filling up quickly as well. Those gathered were a wide mix of people — mixed in age, race, gender, and style of dress.

Eventually, the Board members took their seats and the meeting began. It seems that all municipal meetings like this begin with ceremonial activities and general reports and this day was no different, but eventually we got around to the time set aside for public comment. Everyone in the room knew what the public comment was going to be about. It was all over the news and had been dominating discussions by and about the school board for weeks. We were here to talk about Sex Ed. Specifically to talk about changes the Clark County School District was attempting to make to its current Sex Ed curriculum.

This is always a controversial topic — and especially so here in the wake of anger and accusations from parts of the community over the way the school district had initially handled beginning its deliberations and in the wake of sensationalist media coverage of that anger.

I was #18 on a list of more than 50 who had pre-registered to speak. As I waited my turn to speak, I tried to listen carefully, and humbly, to what those before me were saying. Parents, professors, current and former students were there to speak. I was not the only clergy there — I sat with the minister of one of the United Church of Christ congregations. We were both there in our collars, though it's likely other clergy were there less conspicuously.

Some spoke in support of the need for change, of the inadequacies of the current curriculum for needs of our youth and our community. These tended to be the current and former students. Most, though, at that early point in the meeting, spoke strongly in support of the status quo - and shared confusion and anger and mistrust at the changes in the curriculum.

Some echoed misunderstandings and miscommunications about the guidelines that the Clark County School District had set out to use as a basis for their changes — guidelines that were misrepresented as curriculum, that were wrongly accused of teaching kindergarteners how to masturbate.

Fears and concerns were raised that we would be exposing our children to issues and ideas and practices that they needed to be protected from.

And, over and over again, I heard something like this. “The state and the school board are saying that there are gaps in the curriculum and these changes are needed to fill these

gaps. Well, I don't see any gaps. There are no gaps. The curriculum is good the way it is. What are these gaps you're talking about. I don't see any gaps!"

If you've ever travelled to a city which has a subway system you may have noticed something. After the train has pulled into the station — when the doors open, in many cities — London especially — you will hear a voice come over the PA and say calmly, but insistently, "Mind the gap. Mind the gap." Pay attention to the space between the train and the platform lest you fall or trip. "Mind the gap."

And today, I'd like us to "mind the gaps" together. To pay attention to something we may have missed and that may trip us up and cause injury and pain. Because, those gaps that speakers at the school board meeting claimed not to see, claimed didn't exist? There are people living in those gaps. People who are ignored by a curriculum that teaches only anatomy and basic reproductive functions. People who many of us refuse to see or think about.

So, who is it that's living — in those gaps?

- boy struggling with the fact that he's not attracted to the girls he sees around him, but the boys, and is fearful of the reaction of his peers and family and wondering what hope there is in his future.
- girl who was abused by a babysitter when she was younger who is worried about what that will mean for her development and what it says about her as a person and how she could ever talk to anyone about that
- kid who is deeply uncomfortable conforming to their parents and friends expectations of how they present themselves and their gender, who feels alone and isolated in this worry, and wonders how they'll ever figure out how to live their life well in the face of those expectations
- boy who is in an emotionally abusive relationship with a partner who belittles and controls him and is demanding more and more sexual intimacy
- girl who fears she has become pregnant with her boyfriend and has no idea where to turn for support and information to figure out how to deal with this and what it will mean for her life

These are just some of the human beings that are living in the gaps that people are claiming don't exist. They are the people that many in our society always refuse to see or acknowledge or tolerate — and they are also many many children and youth and adults whose complex lives demand more nuanced, broader, more inclusive, and more affirming education than we are often providing. I grew up in those gaps and I know that many of you did as well.

As I've been thinking about these issues over the past few months I've been pondering the notion that for our more conservative neighbors there is a real sense that the world is not the way it should be. That our ethics and morals have slipped away, decayed — or are regularly chipped away at by the secular, seducing world — and that the job of parents and of public educators and public policy is to guard against that decay, to equip our

children and youth to simply reject the seduction. No context (other than the divide between married and not married), no nuance, no compromise. A simple and unwavering NO to any and all sexual or sexualized behavior and attitudes until marriage. And a simple and unwavering NO to any and all non-heterosexual behavior. Any deviations are to be guarded against, denied, and shunned with no quarter given. Sex exists to bring new life into the world in the context of the heterosexual, nuclear family. The sexual urges of our bodies are a distraction at best, a dangerous enticement at worst. Any small compromise is a step onto the slippery slope of relativism. Youth must not (no one must, actually) be exposed to ideas of different possibilities lest they be led to believe that these are acceptable choices. Children and youth are to be presented with these imperatives and expected to live up to these standards, making only the choices that fit this pattern.

This is a generalized, simplified description of the conservative point of view on these issues. There is nuance out there, there can be compassion, but this is the distillation of what I have heard lately.

The progressive sense is that our bodies and our sexualities are integral, beautiful manifestations of our selves and our relationships. We come into this world and develop in myriad and diversely rich ways. Progressives agree that we are often seduced and objectified by entertaining and advertising media, but that the solution, the armor, is not denial and rejection of ourselves and our reactions but development of self-understanding, thinking skills, and compassionate and respectful relationships so that individuals and groups can make healthy, safe, and affirming decisions about their bodies and their sexual behavior. Relationships are good and healthy when they are consensual, safe, mutually enjoyable, and nurturing of individuals involved. Individuals should be able to protect themselves from abuse, manipulation, and discrimination and parents, public schools, and public policy should equip and support individuals in making these decisions for themselves and with others with understandings of the consequence of their choices for themselves and for others. Expectations that all people will fit limited, specific norms are restrictive, destructive, and abusive to all people, and especially those who do not fit traditionalist norms. Youth must be prepared to encounter and discern for themselves about a wide range of ideas. Children and youth are to be presented with the facts of biology, human diversity and difference, and equipped to make decisions that lead to health and wholeness for themselves and their partners and families.

Now, these are not either/or positions. Not all those we might class as conservative are in agreement on everything I just talked about. And not all liberal or progressive people feel exactly the way I just described. There is a continuum of beliefs and understandings. And all ways of thinking are being asked right now to respond to the facts of the world as we see and know them.

What are those facts?

- The National Conference of State Legislatures reports that:¹

¹ <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/health/TPinNVJusttheFacts1213.pdf>

- 3,867 Nevada teens, or approximately 45 of every 1,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19, became pregnant in 2011 - of those 3,048 gave birth
- Although the numbers are improving, Nevada still had the fourth highest teen pregnancy rate in the nation in 2008, the most recent year for which 50-state comparable data are available.
- Our partners in the Nevada Teen Health and Safety coalition report that
 - In 2013, 43% of Nevada teens reported having sex. Yet only 84% of them used contraception.
 - Teen birth rates are highest in the Latino community. 63% of teens ages 10 – 14 who give birth are Latino.
 - The highest teen birth rates in Nevada are in North Las Vegas.
 - STI rates, specifically chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, are on the rise among youth in Nevada.
 - 88% of youth do not believe they are at risk for HIV.
- The CDC reports that²
 - A nationally representative study of adolescents in grades 7–12 found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers, with a rate significantly higher among transgender youth.
 - Another survey found that LGBQ youth were more likely than heterosexual youth to report high levels of bullying and substance use;
 - Students who were questioning their sexual orientation reported more bullying, homophobic victimization, unexcused absences from school, drug use, feelings of depression, and suicidal behaviors than either heterosexual or LGB students;
 - LGB students who did not experience homophobic teasing reported the lowest levels of depression and suicidal feelings of all student groups (heterosexual, LGB, and questioning students); and
 - All students, regardless of sexual orientation, reported the lowest levels of depression, suicidal feelings, alcohol and marijuana use, and unexcused absences from school when they were in a positive school climate and not experiencing homophobic teasing.

We can respond to these facts and statistics with fear and retreat into calls for strictness and vigilance against difference. Or we can respond with hope and calls for right relationship and compassionate curiosity about differences.

We can respond by demanding adherence to restrictive and inflexible norms or we can respond by seeing the faces and needs and realities of the individual youth in front of us and choosing to be compassionate companions and fierce advocates for inclusion.

We can respond by continuing to proclaim the dangerousness of our physical selves and insisting that our sexualities were created to fill a singular, narrow role or we can respond by affirming the holiness of our bodies and our sexuality and advocating that we acknowledge our potential to create beauty as well as do great harm.

² <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm>

We can respond by ignoring the facts of bullying and homophobia, ignoring the truth of many lives or we can respond with affirmation and celebration of the diversity of human sexuality and emotional attachment.

I am talking with you about this today because of the conversation, debate, and dialogue going on in our wider community and to encourage you to get involved and speak up — to stand up for our values in the public square. I am also speaking about these issues today because we are preparing ourselves to offer Our Whole Lives starting early in the new year.

Our Whole Lives is an inclusive, age-appropriate, developmentally focused set of curricula designed to allow participants to learn and explore many areas of sexuality and relationship. Curricula for early ages concentrate on body awareness, physical safety, family relationships and variety. Curricula for youth focus on the kinds of things you'd expect a sex-ed course to focus on — but in the context of developing values of self-worth, self-understanding, honest relationships, trust, and questioning. Among other things, the curricula for junior and senior high focus on the changing body, making healthy decisions in relationships, birth control, contraceptives, and safe sex, and the diversity of human physical, gender, and sexual expression.

This material was developed over many years in response to the need we and the United Church of Christ saw in a culture where discussion of sexuality and sexuality education was increasingly being limited and influenced by very conservative voices and institutions. It hasn't been without controversy. But it has been profoundly transformative for many, many people.

I have no statistics, but I lost count of the number of people who I have heard say quite sincerely that it saved their life, that it made them safer and more secure in navigating decisions around sex and relationships, that it helped make them the go-to person in their dorm or circle of friends when issues of relationships and sexuality arose. For non-heterosexual folks and those who were grappling with their gender expression, the issues that are central to their lives are presented honestly, lovingly, and without the dismissive, marginalizing, or condemnatory language in other forms of education.

If you want more information about our offering of this curriculum starting in the new year or to hear more about the ways in which it answers the needs of our youth, please join us after the service for our forum.

Our Whole Lives is a good thing. It is one of the things that we Unitarian Universalists are and should be rightly proud of creating. And in the current situation in our community, it is more vital than ever that we provide and stand up for inclusive, medically accurate, and developmentally appropriate sexuality education.

And it's imperative that we — as members of a liberal religious tradition — speak up and make our religious voice heard. Because this is a religious and spiritual issue. Our religious values — the dignity and worth of each person, our understanding that we are not born in sin but in hope and possibility, our interconnection with each other and with all of life, our commitment to the responsible quest for meaning, our passionate championing of equity and inclusion — these religious values, your religious voices are so needed in our community.

I don't know if you saw the videos on Facebook of our Unitarian Universalist youth speaking up at Clark County School District forums this past week. A favorite moment of mine was when Kirsten spoke about how she'd learned proper information about certain contraceptives while at church camp. It elicited some uncomfortable laughter at the meeting and you could hear some people saying "what kind of church is that???" It means something powerful when Kirsten can get up in a public forum and say that she learned more about safe sex at CHURCH CAMP than in her school's sex ed curriculum — and that that church camp, that Unitarian Universalist church camp, taught her about making her own decisions and knowing herself well enough to do that

All of the youth of this valley need and deserve an education that will prepare them in the way that Kirsten and Cassie and our other youth are prepared: to step into their lives and their relationships knowing they are worthy, knowing they are strong, knowing they have the right and the responsibility to make decisions about their own body, their own relationships, their own pleasure, and their own future family — understanding that who and what they are — mind, body, heart, and spirit — is holy and a blessing.

May we be a loud, strong, compassionate, and fierce voice for that blessing in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our communities. May we work for trust and inclusion, for hope and for dignity. And may we devote our lives to the thriving of life and the triumph of love.