

## **The Juicy UU Challenge to the Creedal Ones**

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Chestertown Unitarian Universalist Church, Chestertown MD

Rev Dr. Beverly Dale

A few years ago as I struggled with my fears of being true to my calling as a pastor I had an amazing dream. You see my calling has to do with naming the erotophobia in the Christian Church in particular and, by extension, in the US culture at large. I have had a strong passion about helping people release themselves from an anti-sexual Christianity and have more erotically enriching lives in an anti-sex culture. This comes about primarily because of my own background, which I will share more of later, but first, the dream.

I have known for some time that there are anti-sex forces that want to squash all sex positive and woman friendly teachings, thoughts, or public policy. This is primarily because of irrational fears about sexuality and fears of women having control of our own bodies and our own sexual lives. I am quite aware that as I speak out for women's sexual autonomy and for a positive sexuality, and, as I call for public conversation about what constitutes a healthy sexual ethic, I can and will become a target for those who are homophobic, sex-phobic, and misogynistic. Believe me I considered quite a while about the possible personal consequences of this call. I have been afraid of becoming the poster child of the Christian right wing. After all, those who would gladly silence positive public conversations justify their positions as being Christian. It is Christians who make up the bulk of this anti-sex movement and I am an ordained clergy in the Christian Church. That makes me dangerous to them.

After grappling with my own fear and anxiety I had a dream one night that I was preaching at First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia. I have filled their pulpit several times in reality. But in my dream I was being very bold in talking about sex, from the pulpit. And as I was preaching I realized that what I was saying was rather unheard of in churches and yet, as I looked into the faces of my listeners, it was not registering as outrageous at all. In fact, everyone was rather matter-of-fact about it. When I awoke, I was struck by how this acceptance in my dream was actually not that much different than what I would expect from this particular Unitarian congregation. That is when it hit me. The Unitarian Universalists are, at least in my experience, outside the fracas of the sexual storm. It doesn't mean that the cultural impact isn't the same. It means that the religious bigotry that upholds narcissistic fundamentalism (quoting Marty Klein) does not pervade this church. It was at that moment I knew that when, or if, I got into trouble with the rabid Christian right wing, or perhaps my own denomination, the UU's would always offer me hospitality. I interpreted this as a message from the Divine. It is because you exist with all your seven humanistic principles that I feel I can be true to my own calling as a Christian clergy. So I thank you for existing. ☺

I believe that at least two of the UU principles serve us well in the conversation on sexuality; they are: Principles #1 and #7 "The inherent worth and dignity of every

person;” and “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

In the Christian tradition that is biblically based those principles are found in the Genesis story where we learn that all humanity is created in the image of God and it is all good. We learn that all creation comes from the same source. And secondly, we are all part of the body of Christ each having differing gifts and skills with differing parts to play. (Most Christians would limit that perspective to only Christians inside Christianity, and that is indeed how the Apostle Paul was using that insight, however, I think it is instructive to apply it to the human race.) (2)

When we recognize the worth and dignity of all we immediately shift into the radical egalitarianism of Jesus’ ministry. It means we won’t get caught up into telling our neighbors how they have to live or seek to censor their personal choices or preferences. Personal freedom undergirds this principle even as it frees us from the hierarchies of gender, class, age, handicap and so forth. This is the juiciness of the gospel and it is the juiciness of the UU principles. This is what keeps a society running smoothly like oil in an engine. When we feel fear, it dries up our willingness to be free. When we are afraid we begin to look at difference and diversity, at the one who is “other” in mistrust rather than respect. Then we become so dried up that we begin to squeak. So let’s address the squeaking going on about sexuality in our culture.

### **The State of the Body: The State of Sexuality**

#### **Teen pregnancy and comprehensive sex education (3)**

A few weeks ago the Houston Chronicle carried a story of an eighth grade girl who miscarried in an airplane and she didn’t know she was even pregnant. Then, shortly after that, also in Texas, a 14 year old gave birth to a full term child and tried to flush it down the toilet at her school. This semester I talked with a social work intern who is placed at Frankfort High School in North Philadelphia. She told me of the extensive parenting classes that are offered to the students there. But before I could commend her about how progressive this school was, she noted that ½ of the girls in the student body are either pregnant or they are mothers already. What is wrong with this picture?

Because when I asked her about comprehensive sex education she said the school does not offer it. She was under the impression that the parents did not want it taught because they wanted their daughters (and presumably the sons) to abstain from sex. What is wrong with this picture?

#### **STI’s**

Recently the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that 1 in 4 teenage girls in this country has a sexually transmitted disease. What’s wrong with this picture? And when a vaccine is developed to prevent cancer (HPV) The erotophobic right wing Family Research Council says “giving the HPV vaccine to young women could be potentially harmful because they may see it as a license to engage in premarital sex.” (Klein p. 76)

### **Abortion**

Those who are against abortion are on a rampage about the increasing number of abortions at Planned Parenthood but the reality is that the increased anti-sex and anti-abortion fervor has caused more and more clinics to close making Planned Parenthood increasingly the only agency in a community where desperate women can get this medical procedure done safely. What's wrong with this picture?

### **Abstinence only**

In Pennsylvania we have a moderate Republican Senator Allen Specter who fully supports comprehensive sex education but who manages to get earmark funds for Abstinence Only funding for the state of Pennsylvania. And speaking of abstinence only, the research by the federal government itself found that abstinence-only programs do not work and are actually dangerous. (Some of the best Ab-only programs actually showed an increase in sexual activity!) The Bush administration did not want this published and worked hard to prevent it. In spite of its findings however, this funding continues even with Democrats supposedly controlling congress. What's wrong with this picture? Some State governments however listen to scientists research and are refusing these federal funds.

### **Censorship**

I could go on about the censoring of the internet and pornography. (Garrison Keillor of the Prairie Home Companion, was censored by a Kentucky public radio station because he used the word breast two times in a poem,"as in heart, as in soul, as in conscience." P 61) And, according to Omaha for Decency those who rent or sell adult materials should be jailed, because, "In the Gardn of Eden, the virtue of man was stripped away, and the only way that theat virtue can be returned is by Jesus Christ being Lord over our sexual desires." (Klein)

### **Homosexuality**

Or gay issues? In 2005 the American Family Association Sponge Bob Square Pants said this is part of the great "Homosexual indoctrination" of our children and according to radio host Janet Parshall "When two people of the same sex...adopt children...I think what you have in many responses is state-sanctioned *child abuse*." (4)

### **Miscellaneous Anti Sex actions**

This anti-sex movement means you cannot wear thong bikinis at Daytona Beach or sell a vibrator in Alabama or 6 other states. It means that in Georgia, a young man lost 2 years of his life in prison for engaging in consensual oral sex with a 15 year old before the Georgia supreme court finally overruled his 10 year sentence. (cnn.com Oct 27, 2007) And before we rejoice that justice was finally done, let's remember that court's vote was 4 to 3.

Just this month Anti-Sex forces were at work in the ongoing Texas polygamy case where 437 children were taken from their families and their insular culture and placed in group homes. While initially there was a report of a rape, by April 23rd the director of

Child Protective Services was saying, without any evidence to support it, "We just want to protect them from abuse and neglect. ..." (CNN.com April 23, 2008)

What seems to be obvious is that, according to Marty Klein, there is a war on sex going on in this culture. Why is that of concern to you and me? First, the persons and organizations that are behind it are a political force that use religion, specifically Christianity as a cover. Secondly, the intent is clear: Citizens for Community Values spokesperson says its mission is "to promote Judeo-Christian moral values, and to reduce destructive behaviors contrary to those values." P 92. Klein says "The Family Research council, Focus on the Family, and Concerned Women for America do not limit themselves to single issues; their goal is a broad transformation of American Society." (4) And that concerns us all.

What is wrong with this picture is that respect for the worth and dignity of all, respect for diversity and freedom of individual conscience is not valued and, in fact, is trampled on.

### **My story**

Moving from the societal issues, let's make it personal.

My own sexual history includes a mother who is afraid of sexuality and instilled great shame and guilt about our bodies to her family. My uncle got his sex education by taking advantage of the power he had over me, his younger niece never recognizing the damage that his coercive explorations did to my own sense of powerlessness. As a young girl I concluded my body is a source for male pleasure that betrays me by feeling pleasure even in the midst of my fear, guilt and shame. I began to see that I had no say in the matter anyway. This was his idea and my job was to go along with it. I disengaged from my body and it became his to use.

So I ask you, the church, "What about the body?"

But the church usually responds with silence. No answers. No permission. No comfort. No rescue. "Don't touch. Don't enjoy. Don't encourage. Don't experiment. Don't ask questions. Don't say 'no' when males ask. Don't tell when males take." The message was, "girls' pleasure is of no concern but her sexuality is certainly only legitimate with a legal piece of paper."

But what about the body? That is what I want to know. Why must there be such rules and restrictions and why is everyone so very upset that I even pose the question? How can something as wonderful as these feelings feel so very dirty? It seems my body betrays me by feeling good. That is shameful. Feeling good is when others use one's body for their own reasons. Feel good and feel shame. Feel good and feel guilt. Feel good and be objectified and used.

In all the revivals I have attended, in all the church meetings, in all the Bible studies, why have I never heard exuberant praise for sexual pleasure as a good in and of itself? Why must my body be denigrated as carnal when my body longs for pleasure? Sensual pleasure. Wondrously intimate pleasure. The kind of abandoned pleasure that spontaneously arises from the depths of our being where the erotic sacred impulse safely resides. Surely, the intimate vulnerability of self-pleasure and shared pleasure opens the

door to divine communion with God. Surely, uninhibited laughter and joy brings us closer to the Divine.

So, I continue to ask the church, over and over, “And the body...? What about the body?”

And still, there is silence, radiating outward is the simmering undercurrents of guilt and shame. Silent disapproval. Dead silence.

### **The UU Response**

My ordination is in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This is a non-creedal church and yet we too also have a lot of baggage connected to two thousand years of misogyny and erotophobic biblical interpretations. We have a patriarchal scripture to grapple with, and we are. The United Church of Christ, our sister denomination, is out in front of us in terms of acceptance of diversity throughout their congregations tho they have to struggle with the same Bible and teachings.

So, to the UU's I say you have supporters in your openness toward sexuality. We are out there. Your sexuality curriculum partnered with the UCC's. It is the first to be developed and the only religiously based sexuality curriculum in this country encompassing kindergarten through adulthood. This is to be celebrated! The UU's were the first church to have a specific gay and lesbian office in the denomination, ahead of all the others. You are still ahead of the rest of us.

But you have the humanistic basis in your teachings, from your denomination's inception, that allow you to step outside the anti-sexual rhetoric and speak up for tolerance and respect as people of faith. In this culture, if we are to make any headway in “Americas' War on Sex” I am afraid the mantle of responsibility is squarely on the UU's to take it on.

Remember I spoke in the beginning about the 7<sup>th</sup> principle of the web of interdependence and the body. There is a book with the title, “Your Body Remembers Everything Your Mind Tells It.” It has been found that what the mind believes to be true, the body will often follow. If one begins to believe one is getting better from a sickness, the body often follows by sending good health. (and vice versa) The body that is the human family needs to have some positive sexual messages sent to it. We need to hear that; our bodies are good, that non-exploitive sexual decisions and actions are private, that our public policy must not be based on our fear of sexuality, and all our ethics must always include respect. What is wrong with this picture is that we do not hear that from those who are erotophobic. We do not hear that nearly enough from the Christian Churches who are still struggling to articulate it within our own erotophobic history and scriptural interpretations. But when we hear it, when our minds begin to believe in the goodness of our body selves, indeed in the sacred possibilities of intimate connection, then our wider body will remember and respond.

This needs to be woven into the web that is the fabric of our culture. It is the only way to heal. Let us remember our healing is linked to the healing of our neighbors. We are in this together. What about the body? I asked. It needs the juiciness of respect,

freedom, tolerance, as it relates to our body selves, our sexuality. It needs the juice of understanding of our connection. The UU's understand this. You teach this. Your very statement of mission includes it. As a culture we need your voices and your ministry desperately. May you fulfil your pledge to bring this message of hope to a fearful and a wounded world.



(1) Marty Klein is the author of “Americas War on Sex” 2007

(2) The Apostle Paul was attempting to make peace with a congregation in great turmoil and struggle. I extrapolate this teaching to a world that is equally divided by differences that spill out into wars. I think this teaching is instructive as it has possibilities for helping us overcome our tendency to get into ‘us versus them’ thinking. And, to the extent that this passage contributes to a self-righteous worldview, it should be challenged.

(3) A comprehensive sex ed program is age-appropriate, does not teach or promote religion, teaches that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy or STIs , stresses the value of abstinence but does not ignore that young people are sexually active, and provides comprehensive information about all contraceptives and methods as they relate to pregnancy and prevention of disease. They also teach negotiation skills, encourage family communication, and note how alcohol and drug use impact responsible decision making.

(4) All citations are from Klein

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