

## The Voice Break Choir and the Crossroads of Puberty

Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

Beacon UU Congregation

June 19, 2022

Of all the minefields of puberty, having your voice break may not be the most perilous, unless you are a member of the Stockholm Boy's Choir. Caspian, a 14 year old member of the laments that, "I feel like I'll lose something when my voice breaks. I like my soprano voice." Its for Caspian and his cohort -young male singers at the crossroads of puberty – that this choir exists. The ensemble is intentionally designed to allow them to keep singing through the squawky cracks and register changes."

When I read about the Voice Break Choir in the *New Yorker* last November, I recognized a gorgeous metaphor the Our Whole Lives sexuality education program we offer our Unitarian Universalist youth. We offer them a vehicle for navigating the crossroads of puberty, self discovery and self respect in a way that is strengthening, rather than ugly or uncomfortable. We enable them to sing their way forward.

We are a religion that celebrates, or at least strives to celebrate, our whole lives and our whole selves; mind and body, flesh and spirit. We affirm and welcome people of all sexual orientations (note the rainbow flag outside our door); we promote safe congregations through codes of sexual ethics.

In the Our Whole Lives (or OWL) program which Andy and Dru spoke about, we teach our youth -- with respect, care, and creativity --the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about human sexuality– its beauty and its perversions. We do not equate sexuality with "sin." We believe our bodies are good. Yet, once again, we UUs are truly unorthodox and atypical in this regard. My colleague, the Rev. Alan Taylor has noted astutely that "Our culture is sexually traumatized. We are bombarded daily by an unnatural, highly commercialized and immature sexuality that exploits and objectifies men and women alike.

Advertising, video games, and movies glorify a youth culture that believes sexual people have perfect bodies, are young, and not religious. If children grow up to believe that they should be ashamed or uneasy about their sexuality, consider their developing attitudes of experiencing sexual pleasure or developing healthy relationships?"

What are the factors that brought about this neurotic fear of the erotic and the deeply embedded and counterproductive duality between sexuality and spirituality in our mainstream religious culture? And how has progressive religion (such as ours) countered this by recognizing the essential interdependence of body and spirit in fostering whole and full-embodied lives?

Let's take a look. Some years ago, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur observed that there have been three major stages in the Western understanding of the relationship of sexual and religious forces. The earliest stage closely linked the two forces, incorporating sexuality into religious myth and ritual, often with a prominent role for female deities.

In the second stage, accompanying the rise of Western religions, the two spheres were split. The sacred became increasingly transcendent while sexuality was demythologized and exiled to a small corner of the earthly order, namely procreation within institutionalized marriage.

Sexuality's power – its sacred fire – was feared, restrained, and disciplined. The third phase heralded a reassessment of this split and brought sexuality partially out of that dark corner. Despite the poetic loveliness of the *Song of Songs* from Hebrew Scripture (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine) much of the sexuality in Hebrew Scripture is quite ghastly or manipulative. On the surface, *The Song of Songs* qualifies unequivocally as erotic poetry, yet its primary objective was to promote a kind of hot monogamy/procreativity for a culture that eagerly engaged in polyamory.

Noah's sons "uncovered his nakedness," which is a Hebrew idiom for incest; in Genesis, the Egyptian eunuch Potiphar clearly buys Joseph as a sex slave for himself, only to have his wife spend an entire chapter trying to seduce him. Great King David's son Amnon cunningly and brutally rape his half-sister Tamar, and David dismisses the act with a slight wave of the hand. The prophet Hosea weds a prostitute; Jacob marries for convenience and then lusts endlessly for his sister-in-law. Oy vey!

Jesus doesn't really have much to say about sexuality. As we know, his big themes were love, justice, and compassion. With Saint Paul began the dualism that has marked much of Christian development. Ever since, the loathing of the erotic, sexism and patriarchy have thrived. How did this happen? Beginning with the Church Fathers of the earliest centuries, men have identified themselves with the higher faculties (the spirit/mind) and assigned women the lower (body/matter), thereby assuming the need to demonize and control them. (I spoke about that in depth in my sermons about Eve and about reproductive justice)

As a result, Christians have inherited a disembodied notion of piety and salvation. Saints were idealized as asexual beings, without sexual needs or desires, and sometimes even without genitalia. Often, women were depicted as either virgins or whores; former pagan goddesses were recast as Catholic saints; Brigid for one. What a shift from previous religious that had associated female sexuality with the spiritual. And, how ironic that "God" or "the sacred" was embodied as a goddess far longer than God has been a male.

The repressive bonfires of the Church destroyed many things, but among the most tragic of their victims were the poems of the lesbian writer, Sappho. Sappho's books were burned by Christians in the year 380 A.D. at the instigation of Pope Gregory Nazianzen.

The reason that the Church wanted Sappho's works eradicated is not certain, but from the surviving fragments, we know Sappho wrote splendid sensual hymns in praise of the Pagan Goddesses, particularly Aphrodite, and love poetry of great sophistication, passion and deep understanding of the human heart.

Such subjects were anathema to the bigots and anti-sensual crusaders of the Dark Ages. Just such an anti-sensual bent which created tension between the flesh and the spirit continues to this day in the orthodox strain of the Western religious traditions. Examples abound. After all, the burkah, (the full-cover garment worn by devout Muslim women) is not a *fashion statement*. It is an enforced method of de-sexualizing women so that men will not be tempted towards lustful behavior.

Women pay the piper so men can maintain proper restraint. Outrageous! To this day, people (primarily men) with massive control issues want to control the bodies of others. Women (not just Catholic women anymore) with unwanted babies understand this. LGBTQ folks know this all too well. So, there we are. An unfortunate legacy, to be sure. Clearly, there is still much work to do.

In the positive column, we find Rumi, the Sufi mystic poet, whose work I've celebrated from this pulpit. Here we find a mystical form of Islam that breaks down the wall between flesh and soul, and recognizes the sacred beloved and the role of ecstasy in the religious life. In his poem, *One Whisper of the Beloved*, Rumi writes:

At times we flow toward the Beloved  
Like a dancing stream.  
At times we are still water  
Held in His pitcher.  
At times we boil in a pot  
Turning to vapor –  
That is the job of the Beloved.

We find similar paeans to sacred sexuality in the mystical strains of Judaism and Christianity. Listen to these words by the contemplative 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic Julian of Norwich (a nun, no less!): "Our sensuality is grounded in nature, in compassion, and in grace," she writes. "In our sensuality, God is." You go, girl!

And in Hinduism, the union of the deities Lahksmi and Shiva, both in its physical and spiritual dimensions, represents wholeness. Furthermore, the tantric tradition within Hinduism centers on the subtle use of energy within sexuality, thereby infusing physical intimacy with spiritual practice. Tantric workshops have never been more popular apparently.

I'd argue that sexuality and spirituality, at their core, are vastly more similar than they are disparate. Each requires us to learn how to respect and honor ourselves and

each other as sexual and spiritual beings. Both words embody a person's search for meaning and purpose in relationship to others and to Creation.

My colorful colleague, the Rev. Mark Belletini, pushes the connection to another important and provocative level when he writes: "Sexuality and spirituality are both forms of play, and play can forge and heal real relationships. Sexual responsibilities involving boundaries, and spiritual disciplines like yoga or mediation, are equal expressions of what I would call a mature religious education."

The pioneering OWL (Our Whole Lives) program that Andy, Dru, Grace Ditsworth, Cassie Dakan and others will teach with such skill and dedication to our youth this July, strives to engender just such an integrated and healthy understanding of flesh and spirit. Yes, OWL is known affectionately, if inaccurately, as "the sex course." And we've certainly garnered our share of biased and misinformed publicity as a result.

OWL began in 1968 as a course called *About Your Sexuality*. Back then, in an era of shame and fear-based sexuality education, our curriculum was considered radical and controversial. Why? -- because its primary goal is providing our youth with the tools to develop healthy attitudes about their sexuality. OWL is built on consent and communication and has its own set of values, in addition to reflecting the ethos of our 7 UU principles.

Helena Chapin, one of the developers of AYS views OWL as "justice work" in our sex-phobic albeit sex-saturated society. She writes that "when a five-year-old can show off his two mommies in Sunday School, or a trans youth can discuss what a refuge our religion has provided, or a returning college student can explain the link between self-respect and sexual behavior," we need to see programs like OWL as some of the most important faith education we offer in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. "

An OWL parent muses that "I never cease to be amazed as I watch our teens, with all the arrogance and self-centeredness that their age entitles them to, turn from peer-pressured copy-cats into thinking, well-informed decision-makers. It is unbelievably fulfilling to be able to witness this transformation, and to think that our church played a role in the blossoming of our youth." I saw that myself as an OWL parent to both of my children.

Sure, there are loads of alternatives to OWL: decrepit filmstrips in high school hygiene class; chatting with your local nun; Penthouse magazine's "letters to the editor," teen chat rooms, the Discovery channel, to name just a few. Given the options, methinks we should be doubly, *triply* grateful for OWL and its intrepid leaders. And, please talk up the OWL program, which is scheduled for July 29-31, to parents of youth completing the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grades. Dru would be happy to talk with them. All are welcome.

And, now we come full-circle to the whole point of this sermon in the first place – the notion that at the crossroads of puberty, a mature, mindful, full-spectrum, fully-embodied and grounded sexuality does not, should not be presented as boring, aberrant,

or un-spiritual.

In order to grow and to thrive, we need to understand and teach that mindful sexuality as a powerful embodiment of love; to frame sexuality as crucial to our holistic health as beings, who are not meant to live in isolation or loneliness, but rather require equal measures of communion and contemplation, passion and play and prayer, in order to sing out the fullness of a human life (especially in a voice break squeak).

In the acclaimed Toni Morrison novel, Beloved, the impassioned but world-weary character Baby Suggs knows this truth down to her marrow. “In this here place,” she explains, “we flesh. Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard... Love your hands! Raise them up and kiss them.

Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face... You got to love it, you! This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.”

So may it be. Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

©2022 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.