

"Humility, Sex, and Choice"

Rev. Joe Cleveland, Interim Minister
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan
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Humility is a virtue. And I this sermon is basically centered on humility and how we need to cultivate it. But I'm going to start by failing utterly to be humble. Unitarian Universalists have been in the vanguard of reproductive rights for a long time.

We were the first religion to publicly support the right of a woman to an abortion, ten years before *Roe v. Wade*. Before abortion was legal, many Unitarian Universalist clergy joined the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion and helped refer women to safe abortion providers. Having clergy take such risks on behalf of women helped to change social attitudes about abortion. And the case that became *Roe v. Wade* started in Dallas, Texas, with encouragement from Unitarian Universalists, especially the Women's Alliance of the First Unitarian Church of Dallas.

"The congregation's leaders encouraged the lead attorney, Sarah Weddington, to pursue the case even though she was beginning her career and was not sure she wanted to be involved in such a controversial case. Weddington and members of the Alliance received the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation Ministry to Women Award in 2005 for their work."¹

And then there is Unitarian Universalism's commitment to comprehensive sexuality education. In 1967, the Liberal Religious Educators Association focused on providing resources for working with parents and youth on issues of sexuality. In the nineties, this became the program known today as OWL, an acronym for *Our Whole Lives*.

And it actually is a curriculum for our whole lives -- there are curricula developed for ages from kindergarten through adulthood. In 2008, a curriculum for young adults age 18-35 was released. But you wouldn't necessarily know that OWL is for anyone other than 7-9th graders in a lot of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Here's your chance to pat yourselves on the back. This congregation is rare in that it people trained in all the grade levels of the Our Whole Lives curriculum. This winter, this congregation is offering the K-1 curriculum (expanded to include second and third graders, too) on Sunday mornings and the 4th-6th grade curriculum on Sunday evenings.

This is really remarkable. Lots of congregations only teach the curriculum for 7-9 graders. It's an important curriculum that really equips young people with tools for making decisions that respect the worth and dignity of themselves and others. But you aren't only a sexual being with a body from the 7th through the 9th grade.

I was raised Catholic and needless to say, I didn't get much in the way of real sexuality education from my church. So when I was training for the ministry, I really wanted to learn about OWL and so I took an OWL training session and co-taught the 7-9 curriculum. I learned a lot and utterly failed in my goal to teach it without blushing.

What the curriculum did was much more than teach anatomy and epidemiology. These young people had a chance to ask questions that they had previously been afraid to ask. They had opportunities to really think through different situations that they might find themselves in and rehearse how to honor their own values. It increased their capacity to make healthy choices.

The young people I was working with really responded to the role-playing activities that are part of the curriculum. They didn't just theorize about things. They got to practice in a situation where the pressure wasn't real. They got a chance to work through some of their own questions and doubts and misgivings. They got a chance to understand what choices could be

¹ "Unitarian Universalists Commemorate 34th Anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* Decision."
http://archive.uua.org/news/2007/070117_roevwade.html

² "20-Week Abortion Ban Would Threaten Latina Health." November 8, 2013.

available to them and what it might take to make a choice that honors their values and who they are.

I don't think that choice is something that is easy to come by. What come to mind for me are some of the stories that women have told me. Several have told me stories of getting pregnant in relationships that were not based in respect and honesty and dignity. Most had abortions. And I'm glad that they had access to that option.

So many efforts have been introduced to limit women's access to abortion. They claim to be supporting women's health and safety -- 24-hour waiting periods, increased requirements for clinics and doctors -- but none of them are supported by doctors or organizations with medical expertise. Legislation was just introduced not even two weeks ago to establish a ban on abortions after the 20th week. In response, Planned Parenthood has released some heartbreaking interviews with women describing how, because of severe developmental abnormalities revealed at their 20-week ultrasound, they needed to have abortions because an abortion was the most humane choice they could imagine. I hope people are listening to those stories.

The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health issued a statement in response to that legislation in which they point out that

Latinas and other women of color are disproportionately impacted by these types of abortion bans, which make it more difficult for us to plan the timing and spacing of our families. This is especially infuriating given that many in our community, including young, immigrant, and low-income Latinas in particular, already face severe barriers to accessing affordable, quality health care.²

At the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 2012, the delegates chose as a congregational study/action issue "Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling." The phrase "Reproductive Justice" comes from organizations like the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health and SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, organizations led by women of color and indigenous women. Reproductive Justice is a term that helps us to see the complexity of what's involved in a person's reproductive health. Reproductive health and reproductive justice -- the ability and opportunity to choose -- happens at an intersection of issues of race and class and gender.

One main reason for Unitarian Universalists to take up the issue of reproductive justice is because the opposition to reproductive justice is almost exclusively (though not always explicitly) religious in nature.³ And so one of the most important things we can do is not be in support of reproductive justice and also be Unitarian Universalists, but to be in support of reproductive justice *because we are religious*.

Rev. Rob Keithan of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice points out that alternative that Unitarian Universalism has to offer to religious language based in moralism. Moralism, he says, "means that it's legitimate for some people to impose their beliefs on others.[...] Moralism is based on fear, shame, and self-righteousness. It's based on regulation, judgment and punishment."

What Unitarian Universalism has to offer, Keithan continues, "is a theology of pluralism, a theology of love, a theology of liberation. Our theology says that all people have value and should be able to make decisions about what happens to their bodies. Our theology says that bodies are good, that knowledge is good, that sexuality is good. Our theology says that there is strength and beauty in imperfection; that diversity is a blessing ..."

For insight into the divine, and if you want to know the truth, there is no one place to look, says Unitarian Universalism. The author Jennifer Baumgardner talks about being "Pro-

² "20-Week Abortion Ban Would Threaten Latina Health." November 8, 2013.

<http://latinainstitute.org/media/releases/20-week-abortion-ban-would-threaten-Latina-health>

³ Rev. Rob Keithan. "Why Reproductive Justice Makes Sense for Unitarian Universalists."

https://org.salsalabs.com/o/1272/images/ProphGen_sermonguide.pdf

Voice." "By that she means, being open to and encouraging the multiplicity of reality [to let] people tell their stories, give voice to their pain and joy, and speak of their fears and hopes."⁴

Being open to multiplicity, to a plurality of voices, means having the humility to listen, especially to those whose voices we discount because of who they are: Women, women of color, indigenous women.

My colleague the Rev. Dr. Linda Peebles concludes: "This is my faith stance: There is no one 'right' answer to what a woman should do when she is pregnant. But there is the 'right' imperative to support a woman in her deepest experience, in her full and complex humanness, so that her personhood is not lessened by another."⁵

May we speak out as people of faith and against legislation that has not listened with compassion to the stories of women caught in difficult situations, to the stories of their deep experience. May you as people of faith continue your advocacy of comprehensive sexuality education. May we work together toward a world of justice where choice is a reality.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Linda Olson Peebles. "Personhood." January 22, 2012.

<http://www.uucava.org/page/personhood-by-rev-dr-linda-olson-peebles-jan-22-2012>

⁵ Rev. Dr. Linda Olson Peebles. "Personhood." January 22, 2012.

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