

The “S” Word

Victoria Ingram
February 17, 2008

This week’s sermon title has resulted in more comments and speculation than any other I’ve preached since I’ve been here. Questions about the “S” word have been full of conjecture about what I would be talking about. I’ve enjoyed hearing your ideas and questions about this sermon. I’d like to take a short poll to see what you think this morning’s sermon might be about.

Who thinks that the “S” word is sin?

How about spirituality? Sex? Single-slice cheese?

Well, I’m afraid that those of you hoping for a sermon on cheese are going to be deeply disappointed, because my topic today is actually STEWARDSHIP. Now, I’m betting that some of you just mentally said to yourselves, “Well, that sucks! That’s not what I wanted to hear about!” However, I want to share with you today how I think great stewardship is like great sex. Does that sound a bit more interesting?

We’ll get to how I think that works in a minute. Earlier this week, I was talking with a ministerial colleague of mine, one with many years of experience as a UU minister. I was telling her about what I planned to preach about today.

“HA! Good luck!” she said. “There are two things that are almost impossible to preach on – one of them is money and the other is sex. I’ll be curious to hear about how you pull this one off.” Frankly, I’m sort of curious myself if I can “pull it off,” but I do see parallels, which I’m going to explore with you this morning.

First, however, I want to set a little context and put some things out in the open, so to speak, which could be a little dicey when we’re talking about sex, but need to be said in the context of stewardship. I know that, as a broad generalization, it IS very challenging to talk about one aspect of stewardship in Unitarian Universalist congregations - money. Whenever the topic is raised, some of us immediately put on our cranky pants. We get all excited and may even exclaim, “All you people ever talk about is money!” The hands go up and we say “Don’t talk about that!”

So, ministers, in an effort to be sensitive to this feedback, or because of our own discomfort with the topic, gingerly approach the issue of money once a year in the sermon that kicks off the pledge drive. They wrack their brains trying to come up with a palatable, perhaps humorous, way to approach the topic; everyone grits their teeth and endures the 20 minutes it takes to talk about why we should give more than last year. Then there is a big sigh of relief that THAT’S over and no one talks about it for another year. Sound familiar?

In fact, it is EASIER for UUs to talk about sex than it is to talk about money. We have a whole nationally-recognized, award-winning program of comprehensive sexuality education, written to provide clear, factual, age-appropriate information to help understand and enjoy the wonders of our bodies. It’s called “Our Whole Lives” – or OWL – and many of our middle-school age young people are participating in the program this spring with the youth at the San Jose church. UUs wrote the book on sex, and on how to talk about it at church.

As a denomination, we have no such comprehensive approach for understanding and appreciating money, or stewardship, for that matter. We don’t have an education program that helps us understand the wonders of money, like we understand the wonders

of our bodies. We don't work together to understand how money energy works in our lives and how to manage and balance the energy of income and outflow joyfully. We aren't familiar with how to nurture the energy of our resources and think about them in a context of flow and dynamism and interaction.

When we talk about sex, or we talk about resources, we are ultimately talking about the use of energy. I think that talking about the use of our energy is one of the most deeply spiritual and meaningful conversations we can have. How we want to use that energy - our gifts, our abilities, our time, and our resources - in the service of creating the joyful, satisfying, meaningful outcomes we desire is one of the ultimate questions of our lives. It should be a part of our spiritual, and community, practice. It's something we should talk about often, in the context of our whole lives and how we are choosing to use the precious time, talent, and treasure we enjoy.

Surveys show that more couples have concerns and issues, and fights, about money than they do about sex. Communities, too, often spend hours and hours of their thought and effort to address how they will manage, monitor, and maintain their resources. Certainly, money is a part of the conversation, but it's actually about much more.

So, this morning, I want to talk about the "S" word – about stewardship. Stewardship is about how we engage with, nurture, and tend to something, someone, or some resource that we care about. It's about how we use the precious gift of our energy and focus to create and maintain a desired outcome. It's about the commitment we make to achieve a goal, watch something grow to fruition, or sustain a desired state of being. And, to me, these are elements of creating great sex, as well.

Unitarian Universalists tend to shy away from conversations about stewardship, like we shy away from conversations about money. While I can't get behind the theology, one of the things I do admire about many evangelical churches is the open, straightforward approach they take to talking about stewarding the resources of their churches. They seem to have found joyful ways to enthusiastically engage in giving and receiving, tithing and service. They talk about money and stewardship all of the time.

For us, on the other hand, it's like some shameful topic that we shouldn't address in polite company. Hey, does that sound familiar? UU's have done a lot to bring conversations about sexuality out of the closet, so to speak. I'd like us to be as comfortable talking about our stewardship of our community's resources, including our money, as we are in discussing sexuality. I'd like to see us think about these conversations as a playful, creative, and joyful endeavor, not a duty or burden. I wish for our conversations and engagement with stewardship to move beyond grim obligation, beyond Queen Victoria's admonition to her young daughter on her wedding night - to "close your eyes and think of England."

So, what parallels do I see between great stewardship and great sex, you ask? As I got to thinking about the comparisons, I found that there was a lot I could talk about! Here are the ones I chose to share with you this morning:

Our discomfort with talking about money has historically led us, as a denomination, to keep the "dirty secrets" of our budgets and financial obligations hidden in notebooks that contain the minutes of Board meetings and treasurer's reports. "Don't ask, don't tell" in our congregations isn't about sexuality so much as it is about money, or about God. Just like we have opened the books on sexuality, we need to open the books

on the decisions, operating budgets, and financial needs of our congregations. Both sex and stewardship work better if you have information. It's better if you know what you're working with and how what you've got works.

The leadership of this congregation has made great strides in being more and more transparent about how the budget and resources of this Fellowship work. Along with the minutes of Board meetings, you can find the UUFLG budget on our website, updated monthly to share where our income and expenses stand. It's a level of transparency and openness that doesn't exist in all denominations or congregations. And, I think that kind of openness and transparency are vital for creating an atmosphere where people can engage with trust and confidence – an atmosphere that enhances sexual relationships, too.

I had a call a few weeks ago from a gentleman that does consulting with churches. It was a sales call, of course - he was interested in finding out about the potential of doing work with this congregation. He had spent quite a bit of time reviewing our website, and as we talked, he was very complimentary, especially of the fact that our budget and financial updates are posted and fully accessible online. He told me that he urges the churches he works with to share this kind of information, but often meets with great resistance. He was impressed that we were already making this information available at UUFLG.

I know that visitors to our Fellowship often have spent a great deal of time checking us out on the Web. They, too, often comment on the level of transparency and openness they discover in what we have posted there. It's an indicator of the kind of community we strive to be. It inspires confidence and trust. We want to be in places and with people we feel we can trust. I'm pleased we've posted this information on our website, and I think we need to continue to do more. After the service today, members of the Finance committee will be sharing information about the stewardship of the congregation, including information on income and expenses. As a member or friend of UUFLG, you need to know the commitments of this congregation. In stewardship and in sex, information is power. So, moving forward, we'll host these kinds of informational meetings periodically throughout the year.

We come together in community because we have an urge to be with others; because on some level, we know it's better when we don't do it alone. Oh, I know you can have a good time by yourself, but most people's definition of great sex, and great community, involve encounters with others. And, in that relationship, in those encounters, there is mutuality. It's better when we learn not only to give, but to receive. It's better when our focus expands to include the needs and desires of our partners in life's journey and when we learn to participate with them in jointly creating a satisfying and delightful outcome. We have a right to be loved, and a responsibility to be loving to others. We have a right to joy and laughter and pleasure, and we have the responsibility to make others happy, as well. Great stewardship, like great sex, involves a set of corresponding rights and responsibilities. Engaging at this level of commitment involves focus, attention, and being willing to fully show up in the relationship, in the moment.

In both sex and stewardship, a huge part of creating trust and intimacy involves communication. Being able to honestly and confidently speak of what we want, what we desire, and what we need leads to greater satisfaction, in both our intimate relationships and in our community of faith.

There are unique factors for each of us that enhance our ability to speak up. For most of us, we first have to feel like we have the right to be a part of the conversation. In our congregation, we strive to encourage each other to say what is true for us and to share this information in community. To speak up, we also must feel that what we have to say will be heard by our partner. We have a right to be heard, and a responsibility to listen. When we invest in taking the time and creating the space for communication, we enhance our experience of both sex and community.

In sexual and in community relationships, it's better if we can give feedback, if we can openly talk about what it is that is happening with us. We feel more engaged with each other when we know about our companion's deep longings and needs, and when we are confident that our partner knows what is important and had meaning for us.

We can be more loving when we know that we are not alone on the journey, that there is someone who understands us and accepts us and wants us to be happy as much as we want them to be accepted, understood, and happy. We can't know any of this about each other if we don't share time together and we don't communicate. We have to be there and be available. We have to make time to be with one another and keep our commitments to share the time we've set aside for our relationship.

Great sex and great stewardship involve risks. We take risks when we believe that the outcome will be worth the effort it takes to reach it. We are willing to risk when the energy we have to expend to reach our goal is less than the energy we believe we will gain from reaching that desired state of being. We have to be so committed to and excited about the outcome that we are willing to take the risk to show up, participate fully, and let ourselves be vulnerable with one another in service of creating the bliss we desire.

We've heard the phrase "use it or lose it" in relationship to sex and exercise and other body-related functions. Sexuality educators tell us that regular, planned sexual activity allows people to enjoy the pleasures of their bodies for many years, even as they age or become physically challenged. Stewardship works on the same principle. We want to remain a vital, vibrant community of faith. To sustain that, we need to engage in a regular practice of talking about and practicing stewardship. We need to enthusiastically share our joy about the good things that are happening in this community. We need to be there for each other in loving witness of what is challenging and true in our lives. We need to contribute our time, our talent, and our resources to continue to steward the community we've endeavored to seed, nurture, and grow. We need to see our practice of stewardship as the triumph of our hope over the sometimes bitter realities of life.

Good sex and good stewardship don't survive without commitment, without being willing to stick with it, even when you've hit a "dry spell." Everyone has an "off" day now and then, when we're distracted or preoccupied, and for whatever reason, we just can't be as fully present as we'd like to be. Good relationships and good communities can survive these moments.

But, we know when we, or others, are "faking it" – when our heart just isn't in it and we're merely going through the motions. At those times we need strategies for re-engaging and re-vitalizing our relationships, in both our intimate partnerships and in our community. We need to find the key to what will make us, once again, good and engaged stewards of the treasure we've found in this relationship. Where is the wonder, the delight? Where can we find an opening to explore something new and different?

How can we become re-enchanted and in love with life again, with each other, with the precious union we have created?

Good relationships, whether in community or in sex, allow for creativity and are open to the new. Nothing seems to damp down energy quite as much as the same old, same old. Yes, there's comfort and security in the known, the tried and true. But, there's also a vitality and renewal that comes from trying things out, being willing to introduce a little change, and making room for innovation.

And while we're on the topic of sex and stewardship, let's explore the issue of size. In answer to the age-old question, yes, size does matter. But in stewardship, as in sex, you work with what you've got.

So, when you're a small congregation, it's important to set your sights on accomplishing the goals and meeting the challenges that are doable for your community. It's a matter of scale. If you're in a larger congregation, there are more resources – more people, more space, more money, more options. While UUFLG is a small congregation, there are still many opportunities and options. It's about creativity. How do we make the best with what we've got? How do we use what we have to meet the needs of those of us who make up this beloved community? Now, just because we're small, we shouldn't give ourselves permission to not do. With commitment and creativity, there is still much that we can do to make our own community stronger and to impact the larger community, as well. American author and Unitarian clergyman Edward Everett Hale reminds us, "Because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." Again, it's a matter of making the best with what we've got.

My colleague was curious about how I'd "pull off" a sermon about sex and stewardship. You'll have to let me know how it went. You know, if we were at the end of an old Hollywood movie, we'd all need a cigarette about now.

So, here, I am at the end of my message on the "S" word. It was good for me. Was it good for you?