

Beyond “Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes”

A lay-led service for UUCC, 01 January 2006

by Terry Podoll, Ph.D.

WELCOME

Happy New Year! I am very pleased to be here today and I would like to thank the Sunday services committee for inviting me to guide a lay service this morning. I wish I had a story to tell you about how the topic of today’s sermon came to me because it would give me something to say right now. Instead I’ll tell you that influences from many sources coagulated in the jelly of my mind over the last 6 months to create today’s ‘flavor of the day.’ [Did you know that Otto only gives you about nine months to prepare for these lay-lead services, so you’ve got to be ready when duty calls!] Anyway, the flavor of this jelly is anticipated to be somewhat surprising and difficult to swallow, so to speak. I expect my words to briefly provide a seldom, if ever, heard viewpoint on human sexuality. Then again, I’ve never had the occasion to discuss this viewpoint with an audience as open-minded and intelligent as the one I am facing now, so maybe you’ve heard this all before?

It was really nice to hear the stories of belief a few weeks ago during the service given by the Chalice Lighter’s Covenant Group.

They inspired me and I feel that Studs Terkel, in his recent essay for npr, provides a good introduction to what I have to say today.

This I Believe Essay, “Community in Action”

By Pulitzer Prize-winning oral historian Studs Terkel

My own beliefs, my personal beliefs, came into being during the most traumatic moment in American history: the Great American Depression of the 1930s. I was 17 at the time, and I saw on the sidewalks pots and pans and bedsteads and mattresses. A family had just been evicted and there was an individual cry of despair, multiplied by millions. But that community had a number of people on that very block who were electricians and plumbers and carpenters and they appeared that same evening, the evening of the eviction, and moved these household goods back into the flat where they had been. They turned on the gas; they fixed the plumbing. It was a community in action accomplishing something.

And this is my belief, too: that it's the community in action that accomplishes more than any individual does, no matter how strong he may be.

Einstein once observed that Westerners have a feeling the individual loses his freedom if he joins, say,

a union or any group. Precisely the opposite's the case. The individual discovers his strength as an individual because he has, along the way, discovered others share his feelings -- he is not alone, and thus a community is formed. You might call it the prescient community or the prophetic community. It's always been there.

And I must say, it has always paid its dues, too. The community of the '30s and '40s and the Depression, fighting for rights of laborers and the rights of women and the rights of all people who are different from the majority, always paid their dues. But it was their presence as well as their prescience that made for whatever progress we have made.

And that's what Tom Paine meant when he said: "Freedom has been hunted around the globe; reason was considered as rebellion; and the slavery of fear made men afraid to think. But such is the irresistible nature of truth that all it asks, all it wants, is the liberty of appearing. In such a situation, man becomes what he ought to be."

Still quoting Tom Paine: "He sees his species not with the inhuman idea of a natural enemy" -- you're either with us or against us, no. "He sees his species as kindred."

And that happens to be my belief, and I'll put it
into three words: community in action.

SERMON

At our last congregational meeting, which took place in May or June of 2005, the members of UUCC voted in favor of becoming officially recognized as a Welcoming Congregation in the eyes of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA. I don't have an official update on the progress we've made toward that goal, but stay tuned! This is a journey we will continue to enjoy. I will begin by introducing the Welcoming Congregation program. In hearing the reasons why the program is focused on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) people, we'll have an opportunity to transition into the ideas we've engendered from traditional religious philosophies. After that I'll talk about the biological diversity of human sexual differentiation. I will also share couple of personal growth stories that I think could belong to anyone who's had an eye-opening experience, or a gay friend. In the end, I hope we can come back around to a common understanding of some pathways available to us as Unitarian Universalists, pathways to that transcendent experience when we feel closer to all humankind.

The Welcoming Congregation program was established in 1989 by the UUA to educate its members about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. It is a completely voluntary program that

each congregation adapts to best meet its goals. The program consists of a series of workshops developed by the UUA, some of them entitled:

- How Homophobia Hurts Heterosexuals
- Gender Socialization and Homophobia, and
- Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality

Why just GLBT? As explained in the Welcoming Congregation manual by Rev. Douglas Morgan Strong:

For centuries the church has been a leading force against sexual minorities. [So] it's not surprising that gay people are reluctant to reach out to [churches]. Yet gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people have no less need for the warmth, caring, and affirmation than anyone else who calls the liberal church their religious home.

Many of us feel we (UUCC) are already a “welcoming congregation” – why seek official recognition? According to the UUA, it allows us to open our church as a safe space for GLBT persons, to take an active position on oppression in our larger community and to accomplish outreach. By confronting our prejudices (conscious or unconscious prejudices) in a non-threatening, non-judgmental group we understand ourselves and each other better, leading to individual spiritual growth and congregational unity.

So what is Rev. Strong talking about when he says “the church?” What is “the church” that oppresses GLBT people? The world's 3 major Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have historically been the primary sources condemning homosexuality in the world. Many of you are familiar with the story of Adam and Eve: God, after creating Adam in His own image seeks a helper for Adam. So God removes one of Adam's ribs and forms Eve. Adam says, “ This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man.” Well, I think the implications are pretty clear here. There is man; there is woman, man is in charge. Rather than list the many biblical scriptures that are used to reference the abomination of homosexuality, or cite the atrocities committed against sexual minorities in the name of religious order, I have just 2 other brief points about traditional mythologies:

- 1) The sexism of the Judeo-Christian tradition is not just about Adam and Eve and the brutal condemnations. It begins with the personification of God, the He who is the creator in the mythological story. It begins with the idea of the masculine (God) relative to the feminine principle, which is reduced to an element, the water, in the Old Testament. God did not create the water, but instead, in the beginning “the Spirit of

God was moving over the face of the waters.” The water is the goddess.

2) Secondly, Eastern traditions do not share the same elements as those found in the West. In Hinduism many divinities are androgynous with some changing sex in the middle of the story! In the traditionally Buddhist areas of the world, their cultures have been historically unconcerned with the gender of sexual activity. This has become less true since Asia’s contact with the West.

“The church” to which Rev. Strong refers as an agent of oppression against the sexual minorities is very familiar to those of us brought-up in the Judeo-Christian traditions commonly found in North America, and is readily expanded to include Islamic traditions.

For me one of the most tangible problems of “the church” today is its inability to remain in the realm of symbolic imagery. For some reason the mythological symbols used by today’s various flavors of Christendom are interpreted as historical references. The imagery revealed to us in the story about the Garden of Eden is not a historical reference, but it is often confused as such. What does simple observation tell us about the biological diversity of human sexual development?

Humans cannot be divided into two groups males over here and females over there. Don't get me wrong; ♂ and ♀ are very useful constructs. The survival of our species undoubtedly depends upon the deep motivators that are associated with sexual characteristics. Additionally, I would suggest that it is best to retain this construct, ♂ and ♀, and allow everyone on earth to use one or the other without further details or exceptions required. This doesn't take away from the fact that human sexual differentiation provides as broad a spectrum as we have from blond-haired people to black-haired people, there are just fewer people in the grey areas between man and woman than there are in the highly populated grey areas between blond-haired people and black-haired people. Let's define what is meant by sex:

1. Chromosomal sex – XX vs. XY
2. Gonadal sex - ovaries vs. testes
3. Internal plumbing sex
4. Phenotypic sex (based on external genitalia), and
5. Psychosocial sex – how do we think of ourselves (this includes affectional orientation – whether one is hetero or homo or bi-sexual in their affections)

Putting that last consideration, psychosocial sex, aside for just a moment, I would like to introduce the term intersex. Intersex is a

term used to describe a person who has ambiguity with respect to any of these first four characteristics that differentiate one sex from another. Just about every imaginable ambiguity in human sexual differentiation is observed at some frequency in our population. If we collect all known intersex ambiguities into 1 category, then we can say that 1 in 1500 births result in an intersex person. In other words, there are approximately 200,000 sexually ambiguous people in the United States alone.

Eleven years ago I was introduced to this information for the first time. I was very proud to have been named a National Service Award Fellow at the Cecil and Ida Green Center for Reproductive Biology Sciences at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. That's a lot of words, so it looks pretty good on a resume. At the time I was there to do my post-doctoral purgatory as quickly as possible and move on. So I was perturbed to be interrupted from my daily interactions with the biochemistry of *E. coli*, DNA, enzymes, and drugs to attend mandatory meetings with other fellows of The Green Center. Most of the others were snooty M.D.s, I thought, not that I actually took the time to get to know them. Eventually I figured out that Cecil and Ida were not just members of the high society Dallas elite looking for a place to put their names. They had founded Texas Instruments and, not having been able to have children of their own, wanted to give back by donating to research in infertility. After a few weeks of hearing

case after case from the young M.D.s at the Center trying to put together a proper diagnosis and prognosis for a baby that can be referred to as neither a boy nor a girl, I was touched by the efforts put into this challenge and happy to have had such a broadening experience. Time will not allow me to explain the details of even one of these amazing biochemical events that result quite naturally into a person that quite uniquely “sees the species as kindred” as Tom Paine was quoted earlier. A person who is intersexed may not easily associate with male nor female readily. In some cases they may readily be viewed as, and associate themselves with, one sex at birth and not learn of their biological condition until after puberty, at which time they have some interesting choices to face. I think that being able to “see their species as kindred” could be a healthy way for them to view our bimodally distributed world.

I have one final note on this topic. It is not intended as a political message, but rather a rational voice amidst a sea of pulpit-inspired intrusions into the laws of our society today. Knowledge of the truth of biological diversity in human sexual differentiation places the act of defining marriage by law as being between a man and a woman soundly in the realm of ignorant, sanctified chauvinism.

Getting back to the somewhat less biological realm of sexual determination - that of psychosocial sex - I have one more story I

would like to tell before making some closing remarks. This is the story of Bob and Bill. I met Bob during my freshman year at the University of Texas. Like many, we met while living on the same floor of a dormitory, and after getting to be close friends, we decided to share a 2-bedroom apartment together during our sophomore year. It's a good thing we were friends because this apartment was tiny. It was actually an efficiency apartment with a couple of walk-in closets attached. You actually had to walk through one bedroom to get to the other. I didn't mind because Bob's girlfriend at the time was very cute and I had no problem sharing space when she came over to spend the night. As that Fall semester progressed, however, Bob's affectional orientation (as I now know it to be called) changed and I was suddenly living in very close quarters with a gay man. It took some getting used-to. It's not as though there were never uncomfortable moments, but overall I look back upon it as a very normal living arrangement. A couple years later Bob and I lived just down the street from one another in Austin. I was living with my long-time girlfriend and he with his long-time boyfriend, Bill. We shared a lot of time together as couples and became very close. Bob and Bill were guests at my first wedding and so of course we talked many times about marriage. Bill was very active in the fight against AIDs, working to secure funding from the state government for the afflicted in Texas. I had no idea how personal his motivations

were. Eventually we all moved-on though, as often happens to people in their twenties. I was attending graduate school in Seattle a couple of years after my wedding when I had the pleasure of receiving a phone call from Bob. He had moved to Los Angeles and informed me that Bill had died of AIDs just a month before.

I remember Bill as a tall, strong, handsome, square-jawed, leading-man type of person with a broad smile. It is difficult to imagine his rapid physical decline. I have spent hours thinking about Bill because I don't know what the end was like for him. Bob told me that he was surrounded by friends until his death. He had worked as long as he could before becoming a benefactor of the governmental assistance that he helped secure. Still, I wonder. What mythological tradition guided Bill through his final transition from life to death? Did he choose to ignore the prejudiced voices of many religious communities and find comfort there? Did he find another way? Did he refuse guidance of any kind, afraid of the familiar voices of prejudice? I don't know.

Those are two stories that I hope give you a glimpse of my personal journey. These transcendent moments in my life have brought me closer to humankind. In this brief time I intentionally shared with you these stories to suggest a path that we may all take together. Unitarian Universalism has a lot to offer to all people. I

think this sermon relates especially to our principles; we believe in the worth and dignity of each human being; we believe there is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge; we believe in the ethical application of religion. I am very proud to be a member of this church because we make our values, the values encapsulated by the Unitarian Universalist Principles, real. By showing our overwhelming support during our congregational meeting for pursuing the path of being recognized as a Welcoming Congregation, we have invited each other to go further on our collective journey. In becoming a Welcoming Congregation we can foster individual spiritual growth and congregational unity. I look forward to this journey with all of you and I hope that after today we all have come closer to embarking on this journey together.

Benediction:

And now may our hearts be open to all the children of the generations of humankind, that the circle of love and peace may grow forevermore.