

National Coming Out Day Service — Sunday, October 9, 2005
Given to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie, Wisconsin

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Words of Courage and Inspiration Appropriate to
National Coming Out Day

"All great truths begin as blasphemies."
—George Bernard Shaw

"All truth passes through three stages: First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident."
—Arthur Schopenhauer

"Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, can never bring about a reform."
—Susan B. Anthony

to be nobody but yourself
in a world that is doing its best
night and day
to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle that any human being can fight—
and never stop fighting
—e.e. cummings

I want to start out by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to make the trek to the Chippewa Valley on this glorious Autumn day, and for being rash enough—or naïve enough—to ask me to speak to you about topics dealing with sexual and gender perversity, neither of which are normally talked about publicly in polite society. I thank Fate that Unitarian-Universalists are notorious for being neither “normal” nor (necessarily) polite! Indeed, the last time I was asked to speak at a U-U church on National Coming Out Day was at my own congregation—and I’ve not been asked to share the pulpit there since, supporting the old adage about a prophet never being honored in his own land. That talk was, however, well enough received that it resulted in my being asked to teach the Our Whole Lives Sexuality class to our 8th-graders. Those who have ever taught—or raised—that age group realize just how ambiguous an “honor” that invitation was; which supports another old adage, “No good deed goes unpunished”!

Note that I just made reference to sexual and gender perversity, not diversity. That was not an accidental slip of the tongue. “Diversity” has been a social and corporate buzzword for far too long. At the risk of reinforcing a stereotype, I proudly assert that one of the primary social benefits that gay men confer on our society is informing it when something has been in fashion just a bit too long. Given the tenor of the times, with neoconservative ideologies now in seeming command on all fronts of America’s perennial “culture war”, it is, I believe, time to replace the

oh-so-last-year demand to embrace diversity tolerance with an insistence on embracing perversity tolerance. As my contribution to that new challenge, I want to talk today about why, despite all of the significantly progressive gains in social acceptance of sexual and gender minorities, we live in a society where homophobia and gender rigidity continues to be rampant.

Tuesday is National Coming Out Day. It is a day on which sexual and gender minorities are encouraged to make that facet of our lives known to all of the significant persons who aren't already aware of it—to let our families, friends, and co-workers know us as true and whole persons; and for those of us who are not yet comfortable enough with that fundamental aspect of our being to have revealed it to anyone else at all, National Coming Out Day is an invitation to take that next step toward authenticity.

Having said that, I must acknowledge my personal sorrow and frustration—undoubtedly shared by many of you—that it is still necessary to put time and energy into such an observance. So, as a framework for my main topic, it behooves me to pose two very much inter-related questions: “What will the world look like when both National Coming Out Day and this kind of service are no longer necessary?” And, second, “What must be done to arrive at a day when sexual orientation and gender identity no longer are matters of either personal or social consequence?”

In sharing my vision of the answer to the first question—what will that world look like—I ask you first to revisit with me a memory. Over twenty years ago, I was invited to attend the wedding of two of my law school classmates. The reception was a festive affair, well attended by family and friends of the happy couple. Many of those guests were single men—several of which I considered to be very attractive.

I became aware of a growing sense of both sadness and resentment that despite the fact that the modern gay liberation movement had been in existence for over a decade at that point, I was still not comfortable letting my friends know that I was gay. And even if I had been, it was still socially unacceptable for me to ask one of those good-looking men to dance, without risking untoward consequences ranging from a disparaging retort to a broken jaw—or worse. I distinctly remember thinking to myself, “I want to live in a world where anyone can ask anyone else to dance, and have a bruise to their ego be the only injury that they risk.”

Fast forward about fifteen years. By then, I had long before let the important people in my life know that I am gay, including the boyhood friend with whom I am now walking around Lake of the Isles. Ahead of us are two young mothers, pushing their children ahead of them in strollers—one a boy, the other a girl. We are close enough behind them to overhear one of the mothers say to the other, “Wouldn't it be wonderful if Tiffany and Brian ended up getting married when they grow up?” My friend (purely platonic, and who is a card-carrying heterosexual but very much an enlightened being) looked at me, and, with the look of mischief in his eyes that I had learned to both dread and relish, loudly said to me in his deep baritone voice, “Gee, Richard, do you think our moms wished that for us?!” The young women in front of us turned around, saw us, and gave us that indescribable look that combines confusion, disgust and embarrassment. Once again, I found myself thinking, “I want to live in a world where parents take as much delight in fantasizing about pairing up their child with a same-sex friend as an opposite-sex one.”

Now I will demonstrate my psychic abilities. I know for a fact that some of you are thinking, "But it's 2005. We've pretty much arrived at that world. After all, there are laws against sexual orientation discrimination. And here in the Unitarian-Universalist fellowship, gays and lesbians are fully integrated into the fabric of the church. We serve, openly, on committees, All-Church Councils, Boards of Trustees; we teach Religious Education classes; we attend services with our lovers, and, in many cases, our kids. It's no big deal here anymore." But the gap between "pretty much arrived" and actually being there is a wide one indeed. Even among U-U'ers, there are members who retain a discomfort about us. For example, I am told that shortly before the Gay Pride service in my own congregation a few years back, a prominent congregant phoned one of the service planners and conveyed her opinion that the planned presentation on polyamory was "just not appropriate" for us to hear. And a recent special offering in my church taken for the Twin Cities' community center for sexual minority youth received substantially less money than all the other special offerings taken that year.

Granted, America has come a long way in its acceptance of sexual minorities since that wedding reception I attended in 1979. But legal protection against sexual orientation discrimination does not exist at the state-wide level in 37 states; in 29 of those, there is not even one city or county that has a law protecting sexual minorities from discrimination. Only three states (Minnesota being the first of them) and a small handful of localities offer legal protection against gender identity discrimination. And not only is there NO federal legislation prohibiting discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, both the federal government and more than 3 dozen states have passed either statutes or constitutional amendments (or both) denying same-sex committed relationships the same legal status as opposite-sex marriages.

A more disturbing contemporary example of the limits of acceptance of sexual minorities can be found in the hallways and classrooms of schools all over the country, where the word "fag" and the phrase "that's so gay" have become ubiquitous as general terms of derision and ridicule, to the point where they have become generic insults for any form of difference displayed by disfavored students regardless of their actual sexual orientation. We clearly are not yet in that world that I, and most of you, dream of living in.

So, how do we get there? As someone who taught sociology for ten years, specializing in gender studies and human sexuality, I'm going to offer a few specific suggestions.

In order to solve any problem, one needs to know what has caused it. There are two primary pillars that underlie and prop up prejudice against sexual and gender minorities in American society: Christianity's centuries-old demonization of sexuality in general, and our historical and still-present denigration of females.

As to the first of those pillars: How do our historically negative views of sexuality contribute to homophobia? The early Christian church had two general approaches to sexuality, which were succinctly (and wickedly) summarized by Lesbian comedian Kate Clinton as follows: "Sex is dirty and nasty—save it for the one you love." (Or, as one of my fellow sociologists once stated it, "Sex is sinful—it's a gift from God.").

This erotophobic perspective has been inculcated into generation after generation of adolescents, who then perpetuate it in their own progeny. It is rooted in millennia-old Platonic, Zoroastrian, and Gnostic dualistic philosophies which claim that the universe is sustained by an eternal

conflict between the forces of good (the spirit) and the forces of evil (the flesh); the greater the pleasure which is derived from a given physical activity, the more “evil” it is, and thus the more strenuously it must be resisted in order for “good” to triumph. Because sex is not merely a function of the flesh but one of the most intensely pleasurable ones of all, dualism teaches that it must be fought with the greatest vigilance of all.

The traditionally-accepted Christian version of spirit-flesh dualism was propounded by Paul of Tarsus and refined by his philosophical heirs, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas: All eroticism is “evil” *per se*, a troublesome aspect of a fallen humanity; Christians should avoid it, but if it must be indulged in at all, it must be sinless. This evolved into the doctrine that sex was sacred and mystical—provided it was procreative and in the context of monogamous marriage.

The result is a view of sexuality that is irreconcilably schizophrenic—i.e., psychopathological: It is simultaneously considered to be both the ultimate sacred act and the ultimate profane one. According to scholar Gayle Rubin, “Sexuality in Western societies has traditionally been structured within an extremely punitive social framework. Sex is always treated with suspicion, and almost any sexual practice is construed and judged in terms of its worst possible expression; sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent.” Even in the most conventional heterosexual settings, says Rubin, “one violates basic codes by pursuing sex for fun, for variety, for conquest, and for still other ‘purely’ erotic and personal desires. To do so is to hear charges of shallowness and adulteration—if not the adulterations of one’s marriage then of love itself, frequently with lectures on what constitutes ‘mature’ relationships. In short, the philosophic basis of our sexuality is still essentially ascetic, with the curse fully lifted off of sex when, and only when, it is transcended by affection and social commitments.”

To this day, even the most progressive and enlightened among us still profess that sexual activities and feelings are qualitatively “special”, being integrally bound up with ideas of love, romance, privacy, etc. Indeed, a recent article in our own U-U World magazine contained a lengthy exhortation from a member of my own congregation calling for a new U-U theology of commitment that would define healthy sexuality as existing only within an exclusive pair-bonded relationship. Only the most radical (including myself!) would say that going to bed with someone should be no different from having a meal with them.

How does this relate to homophobia? Consider the observation of author W.H. Auden, who once wrote, “As a rule, it is the pleasure-haters who become unjust.” A society that represses even “normal” sexuality (i.e., the heterosexual variety) will even more vigorously punish non-conforming sexuality. Now, here's my ESP again: For those of you who see the saturation of sexual imagery in popular culture and are silently asking me, “How can you say that our society fears sexuality when we see it all around us, everywhere?”, allow me to remind you of the psychological phenomenon known as the “allure of the forbidden fruit” (no pun intended!). When something that people have a great natural need and desire for is widely suppressed on an official level, by formal rules and laws and by every major social institution, it will be pursued and manifested in equal measure; i.e., in an artificially exaggerated fashion. As a Buddhist aphorism puts it, “What we resist persists.”

So how does sexism fit into this picture? Although there are many sources of homophobia in American society, I believe that the primary contributor to it is the two-fold nature of sexism. First there is androcentrism: the cognitive belief, most common among males but inculcated by

generations of socialization into most females as well, that males are intrinsically or “naturally” superior to females. Second, there is misogyny: the affective or emotional hatred and/or fear of females. Again, as the result of socialization, this is not an exclusively male phenomenon: All too many females engage in misogyny toward themselves and/or other females. These two components of sexism, although analytically discrete, tend to blur together in everyday life: As but one example of their blending, remember who Christians historically have blamed for all the pain and travails of humankind: Eve, for being Satan’s accomplice in tempting Adam. (Curiously, in a society that currently fetishizes personal responsibility and accountability, Adam’s abdication of free will in refusing to “just say no” is striking for its absence from religious and popular discourse!)

Sexism has, in turn, produced the phenomenon of gender roles: the construction, attribution, and social enforcement of behavioral traits to persons on the basis of their sexual anatomy. Socially acceptable males must perform the assigned role of “men” and must behave in a suitably “masculine” manner; socially acceptable females must perform the assigned role of “women” and must behave in a suitably “feminine” manner. The relationship to homophobia is obvious: Author Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted that “...a damaging bias toward heterosocial or heterosexual assumptions inheres unavoidably in the very concept of gender.” Social psychologist Nancy Chodorow says that, “Before we can imagine what heterosexuality would look like without homophobia, [we have] to figure out what normal, non-defensive masculinity is. The fact is that ordinary masculinity depends not just on heterosexuality but male-dominant heterosexuality.”

In other words, if our society truly valued its female members, it would punish neither males who are perceived to “act like” women (and are therefore presumed to be gay), nor females who are perceived to be usurping the privileges of “real men” by trying to take on men’s mannerisms or roles (and are therefore presumed to be lesbian), nor those individuals whose gender (and, therefore, their prescribed social position) are unclear or mixed. This popular equation of sexual orientation deviance and gender nonconformity is exemplified in the cover story in this week’s Time magazine, titled “The Battle Over Gay Teens,” which says that “Conservatives hope their ‘ex-gay’ message will keep some [teens with same-sex attractions] from embracing a gay identity.... On one of its websites, the Christian group Focus on the Family has warned that boys as young as 5 may show signs of ‘gender confusion’ which requires ‘professional help’.”

This circular reasoning constitutes the foundation of current opposition to same-sex marriage as well as to allowing same-sex couples or even singles to adopt children. Behind every pronouncement that children “need both a mother and a father”, behind every parental attempt to confine a gay child in so-called reparative therapies, and behind every enrollment in an “ex-gay ministry” of a person who fears or loathes their same-sex erotic attractions, lies the desire and the design to enforce traditional gender roles. Indeed, if you ask opponents of same-sex marriage or child adoption why children “need” a parent of each sex, they will look at you as though you are brain dead or from another planet, and sneer—as if the answer should be obvious—“So that boys learn how to be men and girls learn how to be women.” (In that regard, I find it striking that the neoconservatives never acknowledge, at least publicly, the obvious, logical, and presumably unacceptable conclusion that having to so vigorously and aggressively coerce, compel, and “teach” sexual orientation and gender orthodoxy must clearly mean that humans, in a state of nature, would prefer polysexuality and gender fluidity!)

So, having all too briefly diagnosed the root causes of homophobia (this is normally a topic that takes me half a semester to teach!), let me suggest a few prescriptions for it —prescriptions that I encourage all of us to take. For, as Mahatma Gandhi said, “We must become the change we wish to see in the world.”

Prescription number one: Make the decision to discard all identity labels, whether given to you by others or self-imposed. All labels, all statements of identity, are inherently self-limiting and inhibit personal growth. Rather than saying “I am gay (or straight or bi)” or “I am a woman (or a man or transgendered)” or “I am a vegetarian”, or even “I am a Unitarian”, speak in terms of your beliefs, your preferences, and your behavioral practices. Say, instead, “I am attracted to _____”, “I like to do _____”, “I prefer to eat _____” and “I am a member of such and such church”. This is particularly essential with regard to sexual orientation and gender. Suzanne Pharr, author of the book “Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism”, says that in order for homophobia to be eliminated, “Heterosexuality would have to change. It would have to give way to a fluid sexuality, so that people might be engaged at different times with the same gender, or the other gender, or gender wouldn’t be an issue for them.” (Note that even as sophisticated a scholar as Pharr still gets caught up in the assumption that there are or must be two opposing genders!)

Prescription number two: Make a personal commitment to giving lots of loving and affectionate touch to each other from birth to death. That applies especially to adolescents, and especially to boys. Many of you have heard of research on monkeys that was done in the 1950's by Harry and Marilyn Harlow. The Harlows' research showed that when monkeys are deprived of being touched by other monkeys, they develop severely pathological behaviors including high levels of physical and sexual aggression, paranoia, and schizophrenia. That sounds distressingly familiar to us who have been observing an ominous rise in the problematic behaviors of juveniles over the past several decades.

Regarding the human branch of the primate family, I offer the advice of the late Dr. Leo Buscaglia—or “Dr. Hug”, as he was known to many—who rhapsodized about the joys of growing up in an Italian family where everyone hugged and kissed everyone else. And if you are concerned that forcing a hug or a kiss on a reluctant child or adolescent—especially, Heaven forbid, in front of their friends!—contradicts the message that they have the right to control what kind of touch they want to be subjected to, don't worry. As Buscaglia once said, “If we can make our kids clean their rooms, take out the trash, and go off to die in war, is it so bad when they gotta let Aunt Bertha kiss them?!”

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Julian of Norwich wrote that, “In our sensuality, God is.” Similarly, Meister Eckhart taught us that, “God is voluptuous and delicious.” So here's **prescription number three:** Make a personal commitment to de-shaming the messages that you give to yourself and others about the sexual component of human living. Don't refer to genitalia or sexual acts in derogatory terms. A friend of mine is a gay man who, with his lesbian wife, has adopted and raised five inter-racial children. I was visiting him once when he told one of his teenage sons to do his chores. The young man replied with a groan and the by-now familiar expression, “That sucks.” Aware of the clearly homophobic roots of that phrase, my friend immediately admonished his son, “How many times do I have to tell you? Never use one of life's supreme pleasures as a put-down!”

This should include a personal commitment to taking on the admittedly complex and time-consuming task of teaching our children that sex is not just capable of causing great pain, but is intrinsically and naturally pleasurable—and recognize that certain aspects of sexual expression are considered to cause injury only because they have always been considered harmful. Homosexuality is but one example of that phenomenon. We must acknowledge the reality that humans are sexual beings from before birth until death. Here's an eyebrow-raising perspective on that subject: When I was engaged in my doctoral studies, I came across research done in the 1970's by National Institutes of Mental Health neuropsychologist James W. Prescott comparing dozens of non-industrial societies. He discovered a very strong inverse correlation between the permission that a given culture gave to its children and adolescents to engage in sexual expression, and the levels of interpersonal violence in that culture. In other words, the 1960's expression “Make love, not war” has been legitimated by science!

The implications of these findings are clearly challenging to a culture that has perpetually handed down a “Just Say No” approach to sex. It will require great courage to abandon the cherished notions that nature decrees children to be sexual innocents. It will be difficult to forge a consensus on what forms of sexual expression are appropriate for our youth. But when sexual pleasure is not just acknowledged in the abstract but actively encouraged and permitted for all persons, by messages that start in childhood and are consistently taught thereafter, the oppression of sexual minorities will eventually disappear.

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My **fourth and final prescription** is this: Make a personal commitment to confronting individuals and institutions that display sexual orientation or gender identity bigotry. I am informed that two members of this congregation are engaged in a battle to adopt a little boy that they love very much, but who a sexist and homophobic judge wants to place with an abusive step-father. I applaud the efforts of Melissa and Mindy to do everything that it takes to keep Riley in their loving family. For when they finally prevail—and they will—their example will inspire others that they may never meet to take a similar stand for justice.

Of course, such acts always entail considerable sacrifices, both monetary and social. But I suggest that to be considered truly courageous, an act requires making—or least risking—such tangible personal losses. To repeat my quote of Susan B. Anthony, “Cautious, careful people can never bring about a reform.” White people have given or risked much more in the struggle against racial and ethnic bigotry; indeed, a white Unitarian minister, James Reeb, gave his life in that cause. I ask for no less a demonstration of courage by all of us in the cause of full social equality for sexual and gender minorities.

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