

The Ethics of Sex
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
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Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

Reading: Choice by Alex Kapitan [Choice | WorshipWeb | UUA.org](#)

I chose this sermon's theme for the month of Valentine's Day, a month when we often think of devotion and romantic love. I grew up with fairy tales that all ended with the princess finding her prince, getting married and living happily ever after. I became engaged in college to someone I should not have been. Fortunately for me, I realized that before we married. But I had bought into the cultural narrative. I was in my twenties. My friends were getting married. It was what I was supposed to do.

I wish Munch's [The Paper Bag Princess](#) was a story I had been told in my childhood. Perhaps I would not have so easily bought into the dominant narrative.

At the beginning of the story the heroine is devoted to her prince. They are going to marry. When the dragon captures him, she sets off to rescue him. But by the end of the story, she realizes that her Prince Ronald is not someone who is deserving of her devotion. She does not marry him.

As a child and teenager my parents and school made sure I knew the plumbing aspects of heterosexual sex and of reproduction, but my sex education did not include any information on homosexual sex or discussions on verbal, emotional or physical abuse in relationships. Today sex education is more likely to include information on gay and straight sex, but still not likely to include information on the range of gender identities, and, unfortunately, I expect that still today little to no discussions on verbal, emotional or physical abuse. But our societal norms can set us up for such abuse.

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in a piece titled "We Should All Be Feminists" says, "We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage....But by far the worst thing we do to males- by making them feel they have to be hard -is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The harder a man feels compelled to be the weaker his ego is.

"And then we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of males.

“We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller.

“We say to girls: You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man,”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc. Adichie is assuming a gender binary, but she is right about the way society often indoctrinates those of us identified as men and those of us identified as women.

These societal norms often set us up to join abusive relationships. The young man I was engage to in college reacted to my breaking the engagement with emotional abuse. He regularly put hate mail into my college mailbox. I was a witch, a whore, a Judas.

The boyfriend of one of the neighbor girls with whom I played as a child went further. He murdered her. I told this to a friend, and he shared that a childhood friend of his too had been murdered by her spouse. How many of us in this room know or know of someone who was killed by a spouse or partner?

In June of 2013 Elizabeth Flock reported for U.S. News that, “About 40 percent of women killed worldwide are done so by a partner, according to the World Health Organization's first global review of violence against women.

“The problem isn't nearly as bad for men, who are six times less likely to be murdered by a partner than women, according to the review,”

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/06/21/who-study-forty-percent-of-murdered-women-killed-by-their-partners>.

More recently the World Economic Forum reported that, “Six women are killed by men every hour in a ‘global pandemic of femicide’ that is being partly hidden by COVID-19 – and the United Nations is calling for urgent action.

More than half of women and girls killed by men are murdered by their current or previous partners, according to UN data,” [This is how many women are killed by a partner or family member each year | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#).

That anyone, man, woman or genderqueer is murdered by their partner is not good. Though we may not be getting it, we all need sex education that includes learning about power dynamics and abuse in relationships.

Today many Unitarian Universalists are teaching their children and teens about the physical aspects of heterosexual and homosexual sex and about how to protect themselves from STDs as well as from unintended pregnancies and about the range of gender identities, but, I am afraid, even we liberal Unitarian Universalists are not doing a great job of teaching our children or ourselves about healthy power dynamics in sexual relationships and how to protect oneself from unhealthy ones. We are trying. I will give us credit for that.

The sex education curriculum developed by the Unitarian Universalists and the United Church of Christ together, Our Whole Lives or OWL for short now has curricula for all age groups from preschool to senior citizens. But many of us will not have the opportunity to take the course, so on this Sunday morning in the month of Valentine's Day I want to talk about an ethics of sex that takes power dynamics seriously.

When I was 9 and 10 I used to be able to win a prize at every carnival. All I had to do was go to the person who was guessing ages. That person almost always guessed 14 or 15. The body that allowed me to win a prize at the carnival, however, also put me in uncomfortable positions with boys. I was a naïve ten-year-old who didn't know how to deal with the bag boy at the grocery store hitting on me. And, he, of course, did not know I was ten. But, then there was the boy we used to pick up and take to Sunday School with us. He did know I was ten. I remember waiting in the car with him for the rest of my family when he asked me if I was ticklish where his girlfriend was ticklish as he touched me inappropriately. I was shocked, but I didn't tell my parents. My reasoning at the time was that if I told my parents they wouldn't take him to Sunday School, and he really needed it. A reaction I now know was not helpful.

I knew about menstruation. I knew how babies were made. I did not know how to deal with an older boy who touched me without my permission or consent. I was ten. Many a grown woman who reads Cosmopolitan and Elle still doesn't know what to do with the boss who touches her inappropriately. In March of 2015 Nico Lang wrote on the Upworthy webpage, "While a recent Cosmo survey showed that an alarmingly high 1 in 3 women reported being sexually harassed in the workplace at some point in their lives, the prevalence of mantouching is likely much higher, simply because no one ever talks about it. Many of the women I talked to didn't speak up for fear of being told that they're overreacting or being hysterical. If they do speak up, the response is usually the same: Stop taking everything so seriously. It's just a compliment," <http://www.upworthy.com/why-men-touch-womens-bodies-without-asking-men-like-joe-biden-and-john-travolta>. Woman, man, genderqueer, straight, gay, it is not a compliment. It is a violation of our bodies and our space.

Within our society and most societies throughout the world men have more power than women. There are unfortunately far too many women who not only put up with men touching them in the workplace but also with husbands and boyfriends who call them bitches, say they are no good, accuse them of cheating, hit them, and more. That does not mean that there are not men in straight relationships who are abused by women or that there are no gay or lesbian relationships in which there is abuse. There are abused men. There are abused genderqueer people. There is abuse in some gay and lesbian relationships. In any relationship where there is abuse the abuser wields some kind of power over the abused.

A few years back in another congregation as I was preparing a presentation on the ethics of sex, I invited people to let me know areas they would like me to address. I was not

prepared when I was asked to address sadism and masochism. I had to do some research, but in sex play that includes bondage, dominance, and discipline the participants agree on a safe word so that the person playing the role of the less powerful has the power to stop the game. Participation in sadism and masochism would not be ethical without that word. It puts the power to protect oneself in the hands of the one playing the part of the one with less power.

We need to find real life safe words. “No” ought to be one. Unfortunately, it is not. It is up to all of us to make it one. Looking the other way when we see an abuse is not an acceptable option.

Sometimes we look askance at the reports of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, but we have had our own issues. Every year at Ministers’ Days before the annual General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association a minister is asked to give the Berry Street Lecture. In 2016 Rev. Gail Seavey spoke about clergy sexual misconduct and the complicity of the structures of the UUA in hiding it instead of addressing it. In just one example, Seavey said of a woman who made her report against a woman minister to the UUA in January 2005 that in 2016 this complaint had still not been resolved. <http://www.uuma.org/mpage/BSE2016>

Seavey says in her essay, “Ministry is a role. We are given certain powers by the communities we serve so that we can meet their religious and spiritual needs.... Vulnerable people, longing to feel special themselves, may sometimes seek affirmation from ministers as individuals, confusing the significance of our role for personal importance. We abuse the power given to us in our role when we use people to meet our own personal needs. It is our job as clergy to respond with loving behavior, which means to nurture them towards their own full and mature power embedded in a community of relationships. But our culture systematically rewards vulnerable people with the dignity of those with prestige if they serve those prestigious people’s needs. It becomes the vulnerable people’s job to protect the prestige of the powerful whose needs they meet. If the vulnerable people complain, their dignity is removed. If they still complain, they are exiled....” <http://www.uuma.org/mpage/BSE2016>

You can replace minister with teacher or president or editor or boss. It is our job as clergy, as teachers, as editors, as bosses to respond with loving behavior, which means to nurture those under us towards their own full and mature power. But our culture systematically rewards vulnerable people with the dignity of those with prestige if they serve those prestigious people’s needs. It becomes the vulnerable people’s job to protect the prestige of the powerful.

Suppose Princess Elizabeth in The Paper Bag Princess was not a princess, but just Elizabeth. Would she still have had the self-confidence to turn down marriage to a Prince even if he denigrated her? Or would that title “Prince” keep her from claiming her own full and mature power?

I regularly give blood. In the educational materials that need to be read before giving sexual activity is defined. It is laid out very clearly that anal sex and oral sex are sex as well as penile vaginal sex. I expect that that clarity is due to the words of denial and the actions of a past President of the United States. Presidents who have sex with interns, ministers who have sex with congregants, teachers who have sex with students, coaches who have sex with athletes, doctors who have sex with patients; all of these are abusers of power.

Our sex education for ourselves and our children needs to include ways we can stand up to others' power. We need to be able to recognize when those who look like princes or princesses are acting inappropriately, call them out, protect ourselves and protect others. We must change societal norms so that no one thinks someone's high title allows them to take advantage of others.

I end with a prayer by Unitarian Universalist minister Lisa Bovee-Kemper.

"Holy one we call by many names, and sometimes by no name at all, there is a space between our breaths where we find the still small voice within. Let us seek together that place of calm.

"For anyone who has experienced sexual assault or harassment, you are loved beyond measure. You are good, right, and beautiful. Your lives are more than the sum of the moment or moments that changed you. Whether the violation occurred yesterday or decades ago, may you find ears to listen, hearts to believe your story, and may gentle hands reach out to clasp yours in solidarity and support.

"For (men, women and gender queer your bodies are your own), your agency is paramount, your health should never be compromised, and your body is not disposable.

"For leaders and holders of power across this country, may your eyes be clear, may your hearts remain open, and may your resistance to the status quo be fierce.

"For anyone who is wrestling silently with personal demons or challenging situations that are out of your control, may you be held in the embrace of the most holy. May you find ways to be empowered, and may you find comfort in the fullness of time.

"May this community hold us, a calm place in the storm.

"May we each strive to be the hands that gently reach out, and the fists that rise in solidarity: fierce and strong.

"May it ever be so."