

Sex, Love, and Shame on Valentine's Day 2021

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Feb. 14, 2021

Some years ago, I started asking every sex educator I met the same question: If you had a room full of clergy, what would you tell us to make us better ministers?

Now, I asked this question of every big-shot sexuality educator I encountered. I asked Carol Queen of the Center for Sex and Culture in San Francisco, I asked Megan Andelloux from Rhode Island, and Charlie Glickman, and Reid Mihailko and David Jay, and Joani Blank, Alex Morgan and Monique Darling from San Francisco; Laura Antoniou, and Mollena Williams from New York; Annie Sprinkle, and Tristain Taormino from LA. I talked to academics and activists, sexologists and sex workers, porn stars and bloggers. I talked to people in all kinds of places and in all sorts of venues. And a remarkable thing happened. They all had almost exactly the same response:

1. Wow. Nobody's ever asked me that before.
2. Thank you
3. Let's start with shame

Let's start with shame, they said, and let's look at the role organized religion has played in perpetuating a culture where people are disconnected from their bodies, divorced from pleasure, embarrassed by their own arousal.

Let's talk about creating healthy clergy, they said, clergy who are comfortable in their own sexual identity and expression, who are educated and can offer solid, fact-based advice that does not violate the values and tenets of their faith.

We cannot talk about sex, love, and relationships without addressing shame. Even in our enlightened 21st century, even in our safe and affirming Unitarian Universalist spaces, we must talk about shame when we talk about sex and sexuality.

Shame is what keeps us silent, shame is what prevents us from really communicating with our partners about what we want. Shame is fed by our fear of being judged as wrong, or sick, or unworthy in some way.

Shame is projected anticipatory rejection: it is the voice inside that says "if you really knew me, you would not love me."

Shame can keep people who love each other in the dark, making each guess what the other wants or likes or doesn't like. Until we can let go of shame and communicate clearly, we are stuck trying to read our partners' minds and that's always a losing game.

Sexual shame has been normalized and institutionalized by thousands of years of church teaching, which not coincidentally, served to shore up the power structure of patriarchal church hierarchy.

Perhaps the most significant influence into the west's culture of sexual shame was Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was a 4th century scholar of philosophy and religion born in what is now Algeria, on the northern coast of Africa, across the Mediterranean from Italy. As a child, Augustine witnessed his father's brutal treatment of his mother, and once his father died, his mother shifted her focus to managing and raising her son as her life's purpose. Eager to get out from his mother's smothering attention, Augustine saved up his money and took a boat in the middle of the night to Carthage where he sought to study rhetoric, or philosophy. He did not let his mother know where he was bound, or even that he was leaving, which had a devastating effect on her psyche and a liberating effect on his.

As a young man in Carthage, Augustine is said to have indulged in all the pleasures that a cosmopolitan city had to offer a young man alone and away from home, and it is during those years that he is said to have penned perhaps my most favorite prayer: "Lord, grant me chastity and temperance. But not yet."

While there, he joined a series of sects and organizations that held relatively rigid and extreme ideas about theology and morality, but never connected deeply with them and instead existed at the edges, filling low-level positions.

Augustine met and set up housekeeping with a woman, having a child with her, and by all accounts settling into a happy life in Milan. It wasn't glorious or flashy, but it was a happy life.

And then Augustine's mother arrived. She was outraged by his situation, living with a woman no better than himself, and apparently lacking in any ambition to improve his situation. In short order, she arranged for him a more suitable marriage to a woman of significant wealth and reputation. She told her son to rid himself of his partner and their son in order to marry this other woman. And he did. He sent them away and was alone for two years until the girl his mother had chosen for him came of age to be married.

And all of that broke him, body, heart, and mind.

He married, moved back to Africa, and after his mother died, he sold all of his belongings and withdrew into a life of asceticism and study. I have found no significant explanation of where his new wife and son went when this happened.

Augustine entered a monastery, later founding his own order, the Augustinians, and he studied voraciously and wrote prodigiously. It is said that he kept two scribes employed

full time simply writing down everything that came out of his mouth on subjects ranging from his personal spiritual journey to theology, sin, morality, redemption and salvation.

His conversion to Christianity and subsequent embrace of asceticism was a complete reversal of the indulgences of his younger years. It is as though he woke up with a painful sexual hangover, and with the zeal of any new convert, insisted that all those around him adhere to his brand of newly discovered truth.

Augustine is credited with developing the concept of original sin, in which every person born carries the shame of Adam and Eve's first disobedience in Eden.

He claimed that after that sin – the fall – Adam and Eve became lustful, sinful beings, and he even went so far as to say that no sexual intercourse was possible without sin because of the sexual passion necessary for copulation. He believed that a penis was not within the control of the body it was attached to, arguing that both erections and impotence were effected by not just the innate sinful nature of men, but by women's evil witchcraft.

Sex within marriage was not a sin, he said, although it did require producing sexual passion, which itself was evil.

Proper love, he argued, exercises a denial of all selfish pleasure and subjugation of all corporeal desire to God. How expected procreation to happen remains a mystery.

Augustine effectively eroticized abstinence and suffering.

And here we are, nearly 2,000 years later, in a modern culture still burdened with the lingering effects of his personal sexual shame.

Unitarian Universalism is often criticized for being a religion that operates from the neck up. This is an uncomfortable assessment, but it is not without merit.

Buried back in our cultural history is the reality that our religious faith has its roots in the exceptionally strict puritanical version of Calvinism brought to the North American continent by people seeking to escape the liberal influences of European society.

The early theologians and philosophers whose writings and musings evolved into what became known as Unitarianism sought to develop a spiritual identity divorced from the base and primitive passions of the human body. They believed that with the right kind of focus and effort, that humans would be able to transcend their own animal needs and evolve into higher, purely intellectual, or transcendent beings.

What is it that propelled them to seek such a goal? What could have driven them to attempt to ignore the very bodies in which they were destined to live out their lives?

Shame.

William Ellery Channing is considered by many to be “the father of Unitarianism” as we know it. His theological ideas were based in the elevation of logic and reason, and where reason and faith (in this case, doctrine, or dogma) collided, reason must win out.

I am not saying this is wrong. Indeed, it is correct.

But I do argue that this philosophy was driven by Channing’s own personal baggage, his childhood years spent in solitude, without friends, and his perverse and damaging efforts in young adulthood to rid himself of what he considered impure desires. He was a gay man in the 19th century, with no community of support or affirmation, and he drove himself desperately to be rid of his own physical, corporeal existence, studying until dawn, and sleeping on the bare floor without a blanket in his effort to cleanse his body of its need for pleasure.

Is it any wonder that this man sought to experience spirituality only within his intellect? The man was terrified and ashamed of his own body.

It is a rare thing to find someone unaffected by shame, particularly in the arena of sexuality. Maya Angelou was a celebrated poet and novelist, awarded a Doctoral degree, the Nobel Prize for Literature, and was poet Laureate of the United States. And at one point in her life, she was a sex worker.

That’s right: as a young woman and single mother, Maya Angelou was a sex worker, a prostitute. She was a madam for lesbian prostitutes and she danced on tables for money. She wrote about those years in her book “Gather Together In My Name,” and spoke publicly about her experience in many interviews. Yet, when she died, many publications scrubbed those lines from her obituary. It is interesting to consider that newspaper editors were more ashamed of Angelou’s past than she had ever been.

Today is St. Valentine’s Day. Valentine’s Day is a curious tradition. Started by the ancient Romans, Lupercalia it was initially a fertility ritual in which drunken men sacrificed a goat and a dog, and whipped women with the hides of the freshly sacrificed animals. Women who were struck were believed to be blessed with ease in childbirth that year. There were other rituals associated with the three-day feast of Lupercalia, including a lottery of names drawn from a jar to determine assigned sexual pairings that lasted either the length of the festival, or, if the two people actually liked each other, a full year.

In the 5th Century, Pope Gelasius I co-opted the pagan revelry with a celebration of two martyred Christians named Valentine, and made it a more polite, clothed, and less drunken holiday. The part about romantic love came from the pens of Shakespeare and Chaucer, and when Hallmark printed its first line of Valentines’ Cards in 1913, well, you

see what has happened. A once sacred drunken revelry of lust and fertility has been twisted into a saccharine coated commercial event celebrating heteronormative patriarchal monogamy and bland chocolate in heart shaped boxes.

Far too often, religious leaders have a way of mucking up things that are holy if just left alone to be appreciated as gifts from the divine.

Let me speak plainly and truthfully now:

Sexuality, and the diverse and wondrous ways humans express it, is a gift from the divine. Creative forms of sexual expression can be just that: creative forms of expression of intimacy and connection. All expressions of empowered sexuality are ok and not things to be ashamed of. All of it – so long as it is consensual and all parties have agency – is a gift from God.

To force anyone – and coercion counts – to engage in any sexual behavior they don't want is not "wooing" one's partner. It's sexual assault. And nobody deserves it. No means no. If your partner doesn't respect your "no," drop me an email or text. We can talk about what you need and if necessary, connect you with some support.

In this day and age, we receive lots of messages about what sex, love and relationships ought to be. I cannot tell you what your love life should look like, nor should I. What I can talk about is healthy boundaries, agency, respect, and consent. Sex should not hurt unless you want it to. What matters is that you are respected, happy and fulfilled, and not attempting to live up to a false standard established by popular culture.

The bottom line is that sexuality, however we may experience and enjoy it, is a gift from a joyful, loving creator. Like any gift, it can be misused and abused, but it is still a gift, and ideally, to be treasured and cherished and enjoyed. Without shame.

May it be so.