

Testimonial  
June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019  
Karen Caputo

Good morning...I have to tell you that this is ABSOLUTELY the last place I'd like to be right now, you see, the mere thought of speaking in front of ALL of you... sets off my fight or flight response...so, right now...my legs are like jello, my heart is racing, my palms are sweaty and I'm brain is telling me to bolt out that door.

But, I'm here, WHY? Because the program I was asked to talk about is THAT important and the subject is one that is often referred to at WUS as "the one we don't talk about"!

OWL, or the OUR WHOLE LiVES program at our church is THAT important! And I want you all to know that the fact that we offer this program is one of the many things that makes me both proud and grateful to be a member of this church!

You see, I'm the parent of two teens who have been through the program, I'm also a trained OWL facilitator and I often talk to people outside of our congregation about the program whenever it's, well?...appropriate to do!

So where do I start... well...I believe OWL can sometimes be misunderstood as and equated with being merely a sex ed class. But, OWL is SO much more than that. In the OWL program the leaders are trained as FACILITATORS not teachers. The lessons are presented as WORKSHOPS not lectures.

OWL Workshops are extremely interactive, designed to be experiential, full of activities that are aimed at encouraging teens to delve deeply into very sensitive and often taboo topics. This is often accomplished in a fun and playful way. Did you know you could learn about the transmission of STIs using M&M's or Skittles?!? Learn about the difference between prophylactics using feathers, or learn about consent by asking to give a fist bump.

These workshops can be both fun and transformative by allowing teens to discover something of vital importance...their OWN feelings, thoughts and values on the topics presented. Where else can you hear a group of teens contemplating how they would each handle a unplanned pregnancy in a non-judgmental and supportive space.

Helping teens discover and articulate their own feelings, thoughts and values is, I believe, a vital part of this program. With this self knowledge teens are more equipt to navigate the challenges and joys of being a sexual person. After almost a year of talking about these topics within the safety and security of the OWL room they become at least “a little” more comfortable talking about them and hopefully better able to advocate for themselves within relationships.

OWL shares evidence-based and medically accurate information, it dispels myths around sex and sexuality, it explains the range of sexuality and the interaction between biological sex, gender identity, sexual attraction, and physical appearance, explains that sex and sexual activity should always be consensual and mutually pleasurable, it shares all legal options to manage an unplanned pregnancy, it’s inclusive and validates the LGBTQIA experience as perfectly normal. And these represent only a fraction of the workshops!

I believe that in a society that often perpetuates shame around sexual activity, homophobia, sexism, legislating female bodies, and toxic masculinity the OWL program can be viewed as an inculcation against these unhealthy forces, I will even go so far to say that the OWL program is kind of radical that way, it’s certainly transformative and it can actually be life saving. It’s also not new...we’ve been offering OWL since 1998!

I happen to think we should all be very proud that we support this program! Instead of being the program we don’t talk about in church, we might want to consider shouting it from the rooftops!

Thank you for listening...and now I can bolt!

(Update: WUS had offered a sexuality program called AYS (About Your Sexuality) for teens since the 70’s before OWL began in 1998...even more impressive!!)

“Birds, Bees and Owls: The Gospel According to Our Whole Lives”

The Rev. Heather Janules

Sometimes people who grew up or were married here at the Winchester Unitarian Society return to this special place.

Intern Minister Marianne and I recently met with such a young woman who, as a child, attended religious education classes here. We will call her Sandy. She reached out as she and her husband were about to have their first child. Sandy remembered that as a kid, their family dog was recognized in an animal blessing service. “Do you bless babies too?” she asked. So Marianne, Sandy’s husband – who we will call Matt – a very pregnant Sandy and I met to talk about a child Dedication.

Before we explored their vision for the ceremony, I wanted to know their daughter’s story from the beginning. “Have you always wanted to have children?” I asked. Sandy came alive in that moment, eager to share her child’s origins.

Sandy explained she had a disease that made conception difficult. She and Matt had explored medical options but they began by just...trying. Just before they were to begin the clinical protocol, Sandy sensed they should just keep trying. And that is when she became pregnant. Matt and Sandy shared the name they chose for their daughter, a name they held from loved ones until the birth. But Sandy called her daughter by another name, their “miracle baby.”

After we discussed the ceremony, we toured the building so they could decide if they wanted the Dedication in the sanctuary or the chapel. Matt had never been here but Sandy had fond memories of this sanctuary. I sensed that being here was like coming home.

I got this sense again when we entered the chapel. If you haven’t been in the beautiful little sanctuary downstairs, the chapel is just as...“churchy”...as this room, featuring a pulpit and three stained glass windows along the wall. The window images aren’t just biblical; they capture the most tender scenes from Jesus’s life. Jesus with young children. Lambs and flowers.

Entering the chapel, Sandy got nostalgic again. In the illuminated glow of these innocent images, Sandy exclaimed, “I think I learned about sexually transmitted diseases in this room when I was in junior high!”

Young people. Talking about sex...in church? Aren't faith communities the places where sexuality and spirituality are enemies? What kind of congregation embraces human sexuality?

I remember my minister, Kim Crawford Harvie, telling a story about attending a conference for clergy. In a room with hundreds of attendees, the keynote speaker asked people to raise their hands if they entered adulthood with a healthy understanding of themselves as sexual beings. A relative few put their hands in the air; maybe ten percent. The speaker then said, "Please keep your hands raised if you grew up Unitarian Universalist." Only a couple hands came down.

The speaker then addressed these Unitarian Universalists. "There is something about your faith tradition that fosters a sense of sexual wholeness in young people."

You have heard me tell the joke before: "In the Catholic church, you can talk about money but you can't talk about sex. In the Unitarian Universalist church, you can talk about sex but you can't talk about money." This morning, I am inspired to make good on our cultural openness to acknowledging human sexuality, to name the values that support our practice of offering comprehensive sexuality education as articles of faith.

With Karen Caputo's testimonial as a beginning, today I celebrate the Our Whole Lives curriculum, providing age-appropriate, affirming and medically accurate information about sexual health, identity and relationships. I name the progressive theology that is the "good news" implicit in OWL's teachings. In this time when conservative churches and state governments together are working hard to provide abstinence-only education to young people – which is less likely to actually foster abstinence than comprehensive sexuality education<sup>1</sup> - to criminalize abortion and limit insurance coverage for contraceptives, the Gospel According to Our Whole Lives, as Karen says, needs to be sung from the rooftops.

Let's begin with some self-reflection. Drawing from Kim Crawford Harvie's conference experience and a primary resource for this service, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber's latest book, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, I ask you this

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/21/abstinence-only-education-doesnt-work-were-still-funding-it/?utm\\_term=.b4eba53b95c8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/21/abstinence-only-education-doesnt-work-were-still-funding-it/?utm_term=.b4eba53b95c8)

question: Did the faith tradition of your childhood offer you positive and helpful lessons in understanding and navigating your sexual development? If so, please raise your hand. [Few hands go up.] Perhaps this is why people are surprised to hear that young people can openly talk about sex at church.

I did not grow up attending church and was fortunate to have a mother who believed in explaining “where babies come from” in simple language, grounded in biology, not myth or euphemism. But I do remember the dreadful “sexual education” module of my high school health class. Taught by the gym teacher, all I remember from the class was Mr. Markus saying “There are certain things you should do...to prevent certain things from happening.” Then followed a slide show, featuring close-up photos of weeping sores and warts from sexually transmitted diseases. The message was clear – We can’t be trusted with detailed information about how to prevent disease. All we need to know is sex is dangerous and may lead to our bodies turning into something repulsive.

Fear of human sexuality has deep roots in Western thought, reinforced by both culture and Christianity. This, in itself, could be the subject of the whole sermon or an entire sermon series. Not wanting to give much pulpit time to sexual shame - it gets enough promotion in other pulpits – I draw from Nadia Bolz-Weber’s book for a broad overview.

Greco-Roman cultures, in which Christianity began, saw the soul as divorced from the body. Bolz-Weber identifies early Christian theologian, Augustine of Hippo, as an important figure in shaping the institutional church into an antagonist to human sexuality.

Augustine’s biography reveals that, as a young man, his inability to control his own body in intimate settings made him anxious. Being devout and theologically-minded, Augustine concluded that this “problem” was rooted in original sin. Had Adam and Eve not “fallen,” we could control our bodily responses. Thus, Augustine’s correlation between bodily desire and sin was rooted in his own self-disgust. As Nadia Bolz-Weber puts it – and I paraphrase her salty language - Augustine “basically [released waste from his body] and the Church encased it in amber.”<sup>2</sup> As Augustine influenced so much Christian belief and teachings, fear of the sexual self became woven into sacred doctrine.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/the-lutheran-pastor-calling-for-a-sexual-reformation>

If we step back further and see the even bigger picture, the operative word *is* “control” – control of women, control of sexual expression, control of minorities such as queer and transgender people who, by their nature, challenge gender roles. As what is deemed normative is heterosexual monogamy within marriage, I see traditional Christian teachings on sexuality as one of the places where patriarchy, misogyny and empire meet. Or, in the words of folk musician Butch Hancock, I see traditional Christianity articulating destructive paradoxes of body and spirit: “God loves you and you're going to burn in Hell. [And] sex is the most awful, filthy thing on Earth and you should save it for someone you love.”<sup>3</sup>

In Nadia Bolz-Weber’s book, she draws from personal experiences of her congregants to name the damage the institutional Church has done. In *Shameless*, we meet faithful Christians who waited until their wedding night to begin their sexual lives and, as the immature sexual beings they were, found sex stressful and unpleasant. We meet queer men and women, driven to living double lives, addiction and self-harm by the Church’s demonization of same-sex attraction. We hear how our sexuality sometimes connects to the center of our heartbreak through Bolz-Weber’s own stories of her divorce and, despite loving children, borrowing money for an abortion when she was young, poor and an active alcoholic. Why can’t the Church be a place where we heal our sexual wounds, not a place where they are made? Witnessing all these stories, including her own, Nadia Bolz-Weber calls for “a sexual reformation” in Christianity.

Perhaps Unitarian Universalism is not Christian enough to register with Bolz-Weber. I hope our partnership with the United Church of Christ in crafting the Our Whole Lives curriculum gives us some cred. Regardless, I see Our Whole Lives and its teachings as a healthy, faith-based response to the dire need Bolz-Weber identifies.

The gospel or “good news” of the Our Whole Lives curriculum is defined by four values: self-worth, sexual health, responsibility and justice and inclusivity.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch\\_Hancock](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butch_Hancock)

Self worth: Unitarian Universalism is defined by Seven Principles<sup>4</sup> and draws from Six Sources. The First Principle is belief in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

I see this prophetic affirmation of humanity as an echo of Unitarianism’s primary story – we all contain a divine spark – and Universalism’s recognition that we are all Beloved – our Creator is too loving to punish any human soul to damnation.

Both testaments challenge belief in original sin. So, when Marianne and I met with Matt and Sandy, we offered suggestions for their daughter’s Dedication – the traditional rose-without-thorns, the four earth elements, familiar readings. But we said one thing we could not do was symbolically cleanse their infant of sin as our faith is grounded in an understanding of inherent dignity.

OWL’s promotion of self-worth comes from this deeply-held religious conviction. And, by extension, it makes a prophetic assumption: human sexuality is a divine gift. While complex, sexuality is part of being a living element in the chorus of creation. Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us that just as we are called to be stewards of the Earth, we – and our institutions - are called to be stewards of sexual health, for ourselves and for one another.<sup>5</sup> By teaching what self-care, consent, honest communication and healthy relationships look like, OWL invites participants into an ethic of self-worth.

I understand OWL’s commitment to “sexual health” through accurate information about human development, sexually-transmitted infections and contraceptive options as grounded in the Fifth Source: “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit”<sup>6</sup>

Unitarian Universalists often value logic - telling the truth and telling it plain. Thus, OWL promotes an ethos of setting aside stories of storks for diagrams of reproductive organs, for using words like “uterus” instead of “tummy.”

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles>

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[https://books.google.com/books?id=qeKCDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA53&lpg=PA53&dq=nadia+bolz+weber+sexual+stewardship&source=bl&ots=v1dlheZmoJ&sig=ACfU3U22ILLDDQfFxBOSTQc7N3QGrswJiA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi\\_o825IrfiAhWFq1kKHZ0TC08Q6AEwDHoECAGQAQ#v=onepage&q=nadia%20bolz%20weber%20sexual%20stewardship&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=qeKCDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA53&lpg=PA53&dq=nadia+bolz+weber+sexual+stewardship&source=bl&ots=v1dlheZmoJ&sig=ACfU3U22ILLDDQfFxBOSTQc7N3QGrswJiA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi_o825IrfiAhWFq1kKHZ0TC08Q6AEwDHoECAGQAQ#v=onepage&q=nadia%20bolz%20weber%20sexual%20stewardship&f=false)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/sources>

One of the most interesting moments in the OWL training is recognizing how the human body, its sexual organs and functions are cultural taboos. I remember listing all the slang words we could think of for “vagina” and “penis.” We were then asked for a slang word for another body part – “knee.” I couldn’t think of a word either. See how much shame is attached to genitalia and bodily functions? For who has ever said, “She is such a patella” or “Don’t be a spleen”?

I appreciate how Nadia Bolz-Weber names the complexity of sexuality. She affirms:

Sex can be procreative...It can be intimate, a way for love to be expressed between partners...It can be boring, mind-blowing, or regrettable. It can be a beautiful aspect of human flourishing, and it can be a humiliating aspect of human degradation. It can be the safest place we can go or the most dangerous thing we can do. It can be obligation or joy. It can be deadly. It can be life.<sup>7</sup>

The OWL value of responsibility seeks to both celebrate human sexuality while recognizing challenges and real dangers. I will never forget when a young man graduating from high school talked about his OWL class in our Youth Sunday service. One thing I love about our youth program is it attracts teens from all social circles. He was at the top of the food chain, captain of the football team.

In his reflection, Max shared how he used to participate in “locker room talk” with his buddies. But OWL taught him the importance of consent. Not only did he stop engaging in degrading gossip but he challenged other jocks to understand the harm they were doing, to others and themselves, through this behavior.

Max learned what it means to be a sexually responsible person and used his influence to promote responsibility among his peers. And he is not the only OWL evangelist. One member told me when her son was in OWL, it was a large group of thirty teens. As his high school had 300 students, at least ten percent of that class received comprehensive sexuality education, information many shared with kids outside the class. I wonder how many unintended pregnancies, sexual assaults and unhealthy relationships this may have prevented.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/talking-my-children-about-sex-without-shame>

OWL promotes justice and inclusion by transcending cultural norms and reflecting the full diversity of humanity. Another unforgettable thing is...the OWL video. I attend the parent orientation where we adults watch the video 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders will eventually see. Along with biological diagrams, it includes black-and-white drawings of explicit sexual acts. These images include heterosexual and same-sex couples, thin and fat people ranging from young adult to elderly.

These images are displayed without favor or judgment. Having read *Shameless*, I recall these images as a manifestation of Bolz-Weber's belief that:

To God, everyone is different but no one is *special*. You're not special for being straight. Or gay. Or male...Or asexual. Or married...We all have the same God who placed the same image and likeness within us and entrusted us imperfect human beings with such mind-blowing things as sexuality and creativity and the ability as individuals to love and be loved as we are.<sup>8</sup>

What is desire to you? Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "It is a wildness, part velvet, part forest fire. A wildness that desires in equal parts to consume and caress. Desire is tricky. It is destruction and insistence and risk and the...Easter bunny, all at once."<sup>9</sup>

I concur it is all these things...and more. To use Sandy's word, human desire is both a mystery and a "miracle," for people in heterosexual marriages and beyond.

Such a profound and vulnerable and risky element of human experience needs to be talked about and we cannot leave the conversation for Augustine's philosophical descendants – especially in places like Georgia, Alabama and Ohio. People of progressive faith have a theology of sexuality worthy to be practiced, to be shared and to be promoted.

And let the people say, "Amen!"

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<sup>8</sup> <https://contemplatrix.wordpress.com/2019/03/26/9435/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/talking-my-children-about-sex-without-shame>