

A Long Summer to Ripen A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 11 February 2007 Chip Roush

OPENING WORDS Our opening words, and the poems we'll hear later, were translated by Daniel Ladinsky, in his book, "Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East & West"

Rabia of Basra was born in the year 717 of our common era. She was sold into slavery and prostitution as a girl, and later became an Islamic saint; she was a central figure in the Sufi tradition.

These are two quotes from her work, in her original, gendered, language:

"Show me where it hurts, God said, and every cell in my body burst into tears before his tender eyes. He has repaid me though for all my suffering..."

"What a place for trials and transformation did my Lover [God] put me, but never once did he look upon me as if I were impure. Dear sisters, all we do in this world, whatever happens, is bringing us closer to God."

May we feel and embrace that closeness.

FIRST READING John Money was born in New Zealand, in 1921; he died last summer. A psychologist and sexologist, some of his theories have been criticized, but he coined the phrase, "gender role" which allowed a wider understanding of how biology and society affect our identities.

This is adapted from his book, "Gay, Straight or In-Between":

p.134

"[Our experience of sexuality is often warped and split in two: love is declared] to be saintly and God-fearing, and lust to be sinful and of the devil. Love is pure, clean and wholesome, whereas lust is impure, dirty and unwholesome. Love is lyrical, romantic and spiritual. Lust is epic, animal and carnal. Love is...tender, affectionate and permitted in public. Lust is...brutal, pornographic and prohibited in public... Love is long-term commitment and fidelity. Lust is short-term exploitation and promiscuity. Insidiously, and far-reaching in its cross-gender implications, love is feminine and refined, and lust is masculine and crude."

SECOND & THIRD READINGS Mirabai was born in India in 1498. A Hindu mystic, she wrote poetry to the god Krishna, whom she experienced as husband, lover, and lord. Her ability to see god in all things enabled her to reject the caste system, and she took an untouchable cobbler as her guru. These are two of her poems:

--1-- [God] left His fingerprints on a glass the earth drinks from.

Every religion has studied it. Churches and temples use the geometry of those lines to establish rites and laws and prayers and our ideas of the universe.

I guess there is just no telling how out of hand—and wonderfully wild things will get
when our lips catch up to

His.

--2-- I tried controlling myself but it did no good.

My senses are
afame.

I heard You[, God] singing.
That started all my blessed madness.

I openly made love with everything in sight last night
and this morning

the constable showed up and wrote out twenty citations.

I guess I should not have jumped naked
on him in front
of his
wife.

The hypocrite, he wouldn't have complained
at all

if we were
alone.

SERMON How many of you have had at least one pleasurable sexual encounter, however you want to define that, and are willing to admit it publicly? How many have had at least one love relationship that turned out differently than you had hoped? How many learned something about themselves from those experiences?

Sex and gender and sexuality and sexual intercourse and relationship are all powerful forces. They affect us in very deep ways: they can change our understandings of who we are, and what it means to be human. Before we get into all of that, though, I have two caveats:

First, everything I talk about today should be heard in the context of consent. If this congregation is like any other that I've served, there are several of us here who are survivors of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is not about love or sex, it is about power and anger. And it is **not** what I'm talking about this morning. If anybody wants to come talk to me later about sexual abuse, I will listen and offer support. For this morning, please try to hear this sermon in the context of consensual, appropriate, adult relationship.

Second, there *are* asexual people in the world— people who simply do not experience sexual attraction. Some asexuals do experience attraction, even arousal, but they do not feel compelled to seek out sexual relationships. The Unitarian Universalist Association was the first religious group to recognize asexuality as a legitimate form of human sexuality. If there are any folks who experience themselves as asexual here this morning, I hope that the sermon also speaks to you, although some parts of it might feel like a sociology class.

Now unlike President Clinton, and any number of other leaders, in the public and private sectors, I believe that the concept of "sex" encompasses a lot more than just genital-to-genital contact.

For example, I think it is possible that people can make love without ever taking their clothes off. I believe we can have sex with just our eyes— that merely by staring meaningfully, we can create such closeness, and such joy, in each other that we can certainly be said to be making love.

It is also possible to have aural sex— that's a-u-r-a-l, sex by sound. Whether on the telephone, or in the same room, we can make love with just our voices and our ears.

Of course, there are many other body parts that can get involved, but I will mention only one more. It is the most important body part, the biggest sex organ of all— the brain. Creativity, and imagination, and memory, and knowledge of one's partner can be some of the most delightful parts of lovemaking.

Our brain can also help make sex spiritual. I agree with Saint Rabia, whom we heard in our Opening Words this morning: "all we do in this world, whatever happens, is bringing us closer to God."

Sex can bring us closer to God, or to the sacred, however you name it. When we are responsible, when our lovemaking is safe, sane and consensual, then it can be a holy act. Sexual intercourse is one part of our evolving universal consciousness bringing joy to another part. If Henry Nelson Wieman located god in human interactions and conversations, then surely it is present in sexual interaction. But why go on talking about lovemaking, when we can actually **make** a little love? Let us honor the sacred spirit inside us, by giving it a little pleasure.

In a moment, I will invite us all to make love to one of our hands. As always, in a UU church, you can decline to participate, and hold your head up proudly, standing in our long tradition of individual freedom of conscience.

If you are uncomfortable with the idea but you don't want others to know that, you might still stroke your hand, with the sole purpose of increasing circulation and bloodflow, which is beneficial to our health, after all.

For those of us who are comfortable with the idea, I invite us to imagine that we are Mirabai, making love to Lord Krishna, or to the goddess Lakshmi, or imagine whomever would most thrill you.

I invite you to tenderly caress your hand. Stroke the back of it, or the palm, or the fingers, or some combination of all the above. Pay attention to how nice it feels, to run your fingers over the skin and knuckles and veins of the hand.

{hand sex, for at least 30 seconds} Now keep going, and imagine that Lakshmi or Krishna or whomever you would most prefer is caressing your hand. Notice how good it feels to have loving attention paid to your hand, Close your eyes, if you would like, and feel the healing, invigorating power of human touch.

{more hand sex, another 30 seconds}

And over the next few moments, I invite you back into this shared space, into the presence of these friends and these fellow seekers.

You can continue caressing your hand, but at least pretend to pay some attention to the sermon again.

How many of you found that pleasurable? How many found it at least a little awkward, and too difficult to really enjoy in public? How many would be willing to do that in a *more* public setting, like a restaurant or the beach?

In our culture, there is a strong feeling that sex should be a private act. This is due at least in part to the fact that the church distrusted and demonized the body & its desires, and also in part because the philosophers of the western Enlightenment identified with the head and thinking, and rejected the heart and our emotions. So, our culture, and at least a few of us in this room, tend to split our experience into "love" and "lust" like in the first reading. We often find it both necessary and difficult to decide, whether we are feeling love, or lust— mostly because it's an artificial distinction, after all— so things can get really complicated. We may feel ashamed or anxious about all kinds of natural human desires because that artificial line between love and sex gets drawn differently by different people, and even drawn differently in the same person at different times. This leads to such ridiculous behavior as kicking nursing mothers off of airplanes (because we must quote-protect-unquote other passengers from accidentally seeing a human breast), and to a theater in Atlantic Beach, Florida, this week, changing its marquee to advertise the show as "The Hoohaa Monologues" instead of "The Vagina Monologues."

Of course, it isn't always that ironic, and often rather more tragic, as in the 43 states that have laws defining "marriage" as strictly between one male and one female, including 26 states that amended their constitution to do so.

Combating the ridiculous with the ridiculous, a group in Washington state is trying to pass a law dissolving any heterosexual marriage if the couple has not produced a child within three years. Of course, marriage is not merely about procreation, but when people defend other childless marriages, it will be harder for them to attack same-sex marriages on that point.

On the other hand, love and sex are powerful forces, and we humans do some pretty weird things in their name. How many of you know which astronaut I'm talking about? This week, a married astronaut was charged with attempted kidnapping, among other things, when she drove 900 miles to confront a woman whom she felt was a rival for the romantic attention of another astronaut. It's kind of ridiculous, but it's also very sad. And it demonstrates how powerful love and sex are, in our lives. So there may indeed be a need for some set of guidelines for our personal behavior, to define what is and is not acceptable to keep our society moving along more smoothly.

One way we attempt that is to make a distinction based on time: long-term relationships, or behaviors intended to lead to a long-term relationship, are valued more highly than short-term relationships.

Now, I want to affirm the value of long-term relationships. We can learn more, about ourselves and each other, the longer we stay together. You know, the jokes that I tell, that I think are hilarious, that Becky thought were “cute” eight years ago, have now taken on a different aspect. Maybe she finds my jokes less “cute” now, and we have to discover and create a new way to be together. We are becoming deeper, and wiser, through our long-term relationship.

As the Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, wrote, “a complete marriage...needs a long summer to ripen in, and then a long winter to mellow and season it.”

How many of you saw the skeletons they discovered near Verona? They just dug up two intertwined skeletons, buried maybe 5 to 6 thousand years ago. The skeletons are hugging, lying on their sides, going into eternity in an embrace. It’s quite a touching picture.

That’s the goal that society suggests, isn’t it? We’re all supposed to get married, at least until “death do us part,” or forever and eternally, in Heaven, if you’re married in the Mormon tradition. Now that’s a long-term relationship.

I affirm that long-term partnerships are good and valuable, as they lead to deeper love and understanding.

And I affirm that some short-term relationships can bring learning or healing or simply a little pleasure into our lives.

John Money wrote that our society sees short-term relationships— especially the archetypal “one-night stand”— as exploitative. Certainly, some “quickie” romances are exploitative, but sometimes they offer all we are seeking. In the words of the Michigan-born wise man, Bob Seger, “I used her, she used me, but neither one cared.” Once in a while, all we need is a little pleasure, and a little companionship, and that will get us through.

Now, I am NOT suggesting that everybody go out and find a one-night stand this week. Especially if we’re part of an existing relationship, we ought to honor our commitments.

What I am suggesting is that we accept and appreciate the short-term relationships we may have had in the past, and any safe, sane and consensual short-term relationships we may have in the future. Society calls them lustful, and unwholesome, and shameful— I invite us, as long as we enter them with awareness, to honor the particular gifts they bring. Mostly, I want us to do whatever we do with intention. If we want a short-term fling, but our cultural programming insists that we seek only a long-term relationship, then we will likely be confused and disappointed. If we are seeking a long-term partnership, but we act as if we are out for a one-night stand, we will probably find something other than what we really want.

It will be easier for us to achieve our goals, if we learn what it is we want, and if we accept our desires as valid and worthy.

Long-term or short-term, romantic or carnal, there are no definitive rules, no hard-and-fast guidelines to guide our behaviors without error. Like everything else in life, it is by grappling in the grey areas that we come to understanding. All we can do is be as honest as possible with ourselves, and communicate as clearly as possible with others, as we seek our safe, sane and consensual relationships.

As long as it is in an appropriate context, sexual pleasure is good, and wholesome, and potentially even spiritual.

Which brings us to Valentine’s Day. Even if you do not celebrate this holiday, on principle, I invite you to do something really pleasurable for yourself, and experience it as a spiritual gift. When you first wake up, or as you go to sleep, or whenever you have the time and inclination, do something that honors and pleases the goddess or god within you. Take a luxurious bath, or caress yourself as we practiced earlier. You probably know what it is that you like, and if you don’t, go ahead and experiment a little. I’m told that Krishna and Lakshmi are very patient lovers.

If feelings of unwholesomeness— of guilt or shame or whatever—come up, try to accept them, too. They are there because they once helped you to survive. Accept your feelings, and try to accept the pleasure that you are experiencing. You are a good gift, and you worthy of feeling good.

If you have a partner or lover, do something to delight the god or goddess in them, too. Perhaps, getting in touch with your own divinity will free you to honor the divinity in your partner.

Whether alone or with someone, celebrate the holy and human expression of sensual pleasure this week.

So may we be.