

In Context: A Study of the *About Your Sexuality* Curriculum and its Times

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This paper is an excerpt of the author's 2003 Master of Divinity Thesis at Harvard Divinity School. The full thesis, which includes 25 pages of research on the cultural, educational, and religious context of About Your Sexuality's development, is available from the author upon request.

This paper represents an attempt to understand the Unitarian Universalist curriculum *About Your Sexuality* (1971) in context. The notion of sexuality education in churches is still one that Americans find a little puzzling. What, then, enabled the Unitarian Universalist Association to create and promote a curriculum forty years ago that covered areas that other denominations, and the public schools, would not touch?

The sweeping cultural changes of the 1960s sexual revolution that set the backdrop for *About Your Sexuality*. A contraceptive revolution, a sexual revolution, a revolutionary youth culture – each required American religious groups to reevaluate and respond. In this era, Unitarian Universalists thoughtfully examined new frameworks for ethical decision-making, new methods for engaging children and youth in religious learning, and new ways of thinking about human sexuality. The values, ideas, and philosophies borne of these transformations form the basis for *About Your Sexuality*. They are, so to speak, its context. Further, this paper describes the process by which *About Your Sexuality* was created, and the ways that *About Your Sexuality*, served to ultimately transform this context, leaving a legacy in Unitarian Universalist churches and beyond.

The Birth of *About Your Sexuality*

“It all started very quietly,” remembers Hollerorth,

There was no inkling that creating the program would become such an extraordinary adventure, or of the influence it would have far beyond the UU community, and the courageous choices its development would require. When I arrived at the UUA in 1965 as Director of Curriculum Development, there were

already letters in my office file from local societies [congregations] inquiring if the UUA had ever published sex education materials for use with young people or if there were materials published elsewhere that the UUA recommended. The questions were raised because many UU's believed that our young people were struggling to make sense of their sexuality and that their religious community should help (*Claiming*, 1).

The sexual revolution was underway, and many Unitarian Universalist parents didn't know how to handle it. Roberta Nelson and Elizabeth Anastos, like many religious educators in Unitarian Universalist churches in the 1960s, witnessed that the sexual revolution was causing anxiety in parents. Nelson recalls that parents in her suburban Massachusetts congregation were anxious about communicating with their children: they wanted to "get through" to them enough to keep them safe in a period of rapid cultural change. Anastos recalls the anguish of parents in her congregation, deeply concerned about the affects of the newfound cultural openness on their teenagers. Both Anastos and Nelson were among the several religious education directors who discussed such concerns with other religious educators at meetings of the Liberal Religious Educators' Association (LREDA), a Unitarian Universalist organization of professional religious educators. Elaine Smith, a director of religious education from Seattle, Washington, was serving on the program committee in charge of LREDA's 1967 Fall Conference. Each year, the Fall Conference offered a series of workshops centered on a theme relevant to continuing education for religious educators. Previous LREDA Fall Conferences had focused on such subjects as teaching values to young people and educational methodology. In addition to working as a director of religious education, Smith taught at North Seattle Community College in the Division of Home and Family Education (*Hollerorth*, History 23). She had training in sexuality education, and the program committee decided that they would like the 1967 Fall Conference to focus on helping to equip religious educators to serve as resources to parents and youth on sexuality. Smith and an educator she knew from the Pacific Northwest, deryck calderwood,¹ were selected to be the program's co-leaders. Calderwood was, at that time, a graduate assistant to Dr. Lester Kirkendall, a noted sexuality researcher at the University of Oregon.

¹ deryck calderwood's name is intentionally spelled in lowercase letters. It was his personal preference, and he had it legally changed to such.

The conference Smith and Calderwood presented for LREDA, “Developing Sexual Sensitivity,” was received eagerly by participating religious educators. Workshops focused on helping participants become more comfortable with talking about sexuality, with each other, with parents, and with youth. Subjects included, among others, “the necessity of communication,” “the moral dilemma of sex,” “the need for adult education,” and “youth’s questions.” Rev. Eugene Navias, then on the staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s religious education department, describes a workshop from the conference.

Elaine and Deryck told us that if we were going to talk with teens about sex we had to become comfortable with the words the kids knew and used. We could not simply speak about the body parts—penis, vagina and clitoris [. . .]. Nor could we limit the kids to using such action words as foreplay, masturbation and intercourse. Elaine and Deryck wrote the medical terms on pieces of newsprint, sprinkled them about the middle of the floor, and asked us to write down all of the slang words we knew. Can you imagine us dignified religious professionals writing down the words we actually knew and never said in polite company or certainly in our professional meetings? Timidly and then more assertively and finally gleefully we wrote [the words] down [. . .] That exercise was part of the liberation—helping us to talk about what was usually silent or whispered, that led to the development of *About Your Sexuality*. We could now begin to talk about sex—a vital first step (2).

It was at this conference that the idea for a course for young people emerged—and specifically, a course that would address the realities of young people’s lives in the sexual revolution. After the conference, Anastos was among the religious educators who brought a proposal to the Unitarian Universalist Association suggesting that a sexuality education curriculum be developed for junior high youth.

Two key staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Curriculum Director Hugo Hollerorth and Educational Consultant Eugene Navias, shared the newfound conviction of the conference participants. Hollerorth worked through the appropriate channels to get permission to convene a development team for a new sexuality education curriculum. The team consisted of Hollerorth, Navias, Rev. Ronald Mazur (author of *Commonsense Sex*), and Elaine Smith, as well

as individuals with backgrounds in youth programs, family life and sex education, psychiatry, psychology, and health services. The team had ten members in all.

Deryck calderwood, known to the team as the facilitator of the LREDA Fall Conference, was selected as curriculum developer. Having finished his graduate work with Lester Kirkendall at Oregon State University, calderwood had moved to New York, where he had taken on a new role as an education consultant with Mary Calderone's organization, SIECUS—a position which he held for two years before joining the faculty at New York University as associate professor of health education.

Calderwood's training and preferred methodology proved to be a good fit with the prevailing educational methods employed in the Unitarian Universalist Association's curriculum series. Having been exposed to educational methodology similar to the discovery method, and having experienced multi-media approaches to sexuality education, calderwood seemed an ideal choice. Calderwood and the development team chose to create the curriculum based on "a four stage educational model, a version of the inquiry method advocated by the School of Education at Columbia University in New York," Hollerorth writes. "The model affirmed the premise of the discovery method that effective learning occurs when learners have an opportunity to intuit principles from actual experience but it encouraged and supported more divergence" (History 11). Therefore, the new program would engage with students on a variety of levels, encouraging them to formulate their own values and ideas about sexuality.

The curriculum, initially titled "Living One's Sexuality," was designed in a format similar to the Unitarian Universalist Association's other curricula. Calderwood and the team developed teacher booklets, student workbooks, visual aids, records, and filmstrips designed to help junior high students explore and understand the many aspects of human sexuality. All of these resources were organized into a series of units designed around the four stages of the inquiry method. Each lesson would begin with an "initiation stage" in which information is introduced. "Inventories, games, visual aids, readings, records, and role-playing are among the materials and activities used in the initiation stage of the various subject areas" (calderwood 17). The initiation stage of the unit "Femininity and Masculinity," for example, employs a short essay by a 17-year-old girl, entitled "I'll Get Married Only if they Change the Laws," as well as the song "A Boy Named Sue" by Johnny Cash. Each of these pieces introduces information about sex-role stereotyping and cultural reinforcements of femininity and masculinity. Leaders then

solicit reactions and opinions from the group, a process which brings in additional information about young people's own ideas of gender roles.

The initiation stage is followed by an "interaction stage," during which the teachers take on the role of discussion leaders, engaging youth to express their attitudes and values about the subject matter, and increasing their comfort in communicating with peers about human sexuality. The "Femininity and Masculinity" lesson has teachers dividing participants into small groups to categorize activities such as "baby sitting," "motorcycle riding," or "playing Monopoly" as "feminine," "masculine," or "human." This categorization is followed by discussion, in which participants compare their lists and highlight their reasoning in assigning each activity a category.

Following interaction, teachers would facilitate an "investigation stage," where students "determine what they still need to find out, assign priorities to their needs, and participate in gathering new knowledge and exploring its significance for their lives" (17). In "Femininity and Masculinity," this stage involves presentation of the dictionary definitions of feminine and masculine, as well as an activity that gathers information from the group. Students each anonymously write down 15 things they did in the last 24 hours. They then shuffle and redistribute the lists, and the class tries to guess from the lists which authors are female and which are male. Discussion follows.

Finally, teachers lead students into an "internalization stage," in which students summarize and evaluate their new knowledge and attitudes, considering their "implications for their personal behavior and relationships" (17). "Femininity and Masculinity" employs an artistic activity in which participants create a collage with images from popular magazines that make a statement about gender roles. Following this, each student creates a chart that depicts who various people in their lives "want them to be," e.g. Mom wants her son to be a football star, Uncle wants his niece to be pretty. Thus students relate what they have learned in class about gender and gender roles to the contexts of their own lives.

The conviction that sexuality is "an enriching force in life," combined with a philosophical commitment to "child-centered," religious education led Calderwood and the development team to include topics in the curriculum that teens wanted to hear about—topics that were either ignored or condemned by other sexuality education programs. Before working on *About Your Sexuality*, Calderwood had gathered a list of questions that young teenagers had

asked about sexuality. He had introduced these sample questions to religious educators at the 1967 LREDA Fall Conference, and he later included several of these sample questions in *About Your Sexuality*. The youths' questions pertained to several aspects of sexuality, including the conventional subject matter of puberty, as well as the unconventional subject matter of masturbation, lovemaking, dating, sexual response, and homosexuality. Before beginning work on *About Your Sexuality*, the development team reviewed existing curricula to look for the subject areas in which they believed youth were interested. They found that sexual anatomy, conception, birth control, and venereal disease were included in several programs, however, "most materials were strangely silent about normal expressions of sexuality such as petting, masturbation, homosexuality, and lovemaking which those of us who worked with young people knew were the source of agonizing complexities" (1). Initially, Calderwood and the development team organized the curriculum around six foci: homosexuality, masturbation, intercourse, petting ("touch talk"), interracial dating, and gender identity (Hollerorth, *Memorandum 1*). These areas expanded as development and field-testing proceeded, eventually also encompassing the subjects that other programs covered: contraception, sexually transmitted disease, conception and childbirth. In the process, "petting" and "interracial dating" got absorbed into other units of the curriculum. The unit titles at publication in 1971 were: Birth Control, Femininity and Masculinity, Love Making, Making Out, Male and Female Anatomy, Masturbation, Same-Sex Relationships, Conception and Childbirth, and Venereal Disease. Each unit's topic, developers indicated, related to young people's need to get sexuality information from authoritative sources on topics that concerned them.

Two years later, in response to a new commitment by the Unitarian Universalist Association to understand and educate about homosexuality, Hollerorth and Calderwood added a topic area concerning "Homosexual Life Styles." A resolution passed by the 1970 General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations sought the eradication of discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and urged "all churches and fellowships, in keeping with changing social patterns, to initiate meaningful programs of sex education aimed at providing more open and healthier understanding of sexuality [. . .], and with the particular aim to end all discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals" ("Discrimination"). Therefore the resolution gave a mandate to revise *About Your Sexuality*.

The Unitarian Universalist Association was the first denomination to pass a resolution of this kind, responding with support for gay rights just one year after the incidents at Stonewall² that launched the gay rights movement into national visibility. The vote on the resolution, however, was not unanimous, and did not yet represent a consensus among Unitarian Universalists that homosexuality and bisexuality represented normal and healthy orientations. Though opinions were shifting quickly, it had been just four years since a denominational survey by the Committee on Goals indicated that 87% of Unitarian Universalists believed that homosexuality should be discouraged (Tapp 89). In the 1973 introduction to this new and controversial unit, calderwood writes, “There is probably no area of sexual behavior where objective fact is more clouded by myth, misunderstanding, fear and guilt.” So that teachers might avoid re-inscribing these clouds, calderwood recommends supplementary readings, and cautions teachers to avoid condescension in their approach to the subject. Teachers are not to assume all of their students are heterosexual—based on Kinsey’s statistics, it is likely that each class includes some students who are homosexual or bisexual.

Because Unitarian Universalist curricula of the era had filmstrips, calderwood and the team developed filmstrips for the new sexuality curriculum. However, the subject matter made the presentation of filmstrips more complicated than it had been for curricula on history, or anthropology. The team favored the idea that the filmstrips wouldn’t simply be “about sexuality”—they would depict sex, they would be sexually explicit. To do anything less, some felt, would subvert the intent of the curriculum. In the introductory notes that accompanied *About Your Sexuality*, calderwood wrote, “It would seem obvious that the omission of explicit sexual visuals serves to enhance the concept of sex as dirty, sinful, and forbidden” (5). Sexually explicit filmstrips, therefore, were conceived as bolstering the curriculum’s emphasis not only on open communication, but also on the goodness and health of sex acts. The filmstrips are to be used, calderwood notes, “as aids to the development of sound and healthy attitudes toward human sexuality” (6).

Calderwood was familiar with the use of sexually explicit visuals for a similar purpose in the Sexual Attitude Restructuring (SAR) seminars pioneered by Rev. Ted McIlvenna and the National Sex Forum. SAR seminars employed sexually explicit audiovisuals to educate nurses,

² Stonewall, a gay bar in New York City, was the site of a rebellion by patrons against police harassment. The Stonewall rebellion is often credited for launching the contemporary movement for gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights.

doctors, and other health care professionals about sexual behaviors and lifestyles they were likely to encounter in their patients (Allyn 115). The SAR combined presentation of erotic books and photographs, sexually explicit music and poetry, audio, visual, and audiovisual depictions of sex acts, with facilitated discussion to create an environment for adult sexuality education (Glide 354). Later writings of Calderwood indicate that he had been impressed by the effectiveness of the SARs' explicit visuals in "working with attitudes." He felt that exposure to these sexually explicit materials caused emotional reactions that could, in an educational environment, facilitate re-examination of attitudes and values (*Educating*). The SAR enabled health professionals to competently recognize and address a spectrum of sexual expressions. However, the SAR had only been used with adults—nothing of the sort had ever been attempted with junior high youth.

For the field test of "Living One's Sexuality," Calderwood and the team assembled a series of slides that portrayed sexual images culled from artistic collections. Employing paintings, sculptures, and photographs, the team created sexually explicit slide series concerning anatomy, lovemaking, and masturbation. However, the slides were not well received. "During the field test, the young people objected to the photographs, maintaining that they were of little assistance in helping them visualize what went on during various sexual behaviors" (*History* 25). The slides were, to them, confusing and inconsistent. From feedback during the field-test, the development team gathered that the young people wanted visual information that was more sequential, showing the progressive stages of making out, foreplay, and lovemaking.

It was in response to this feedback that the team decided to use live models for the curriculum's filmstrips—a decision that was to later generate public controversy and a court challenge. The team considered developing filmstrips with explicit illustrations, rather than explicit photographs. This option, however, could unintentionally reinforce shame about sexuality by implicitly stating that sexual activity is too "dirty" or "taboo" for realistic depiction. In addition, they argued, by Junior High most youth were already exposed to full-color photographic pornography. The team agreed that youth needed alternative, value based sexual information, presented in an educational setting, that would satisfy their visual curiosity.

The team chose to recruit live models and develop explicit photographic filmstrips. With some trepidation, Hollerorth telephoned art schools in Boston to inquire whether any of their nude models would be interested in being photographed masturbating or making love to their partner. To Hollerorth's surprise, within a week four suitable couples had come forward. Each

was heterosexual—the same-sex lovemaking filmstrips that would eventually accompany the curriculum were not created until 1973 (Hollerorth, Interview). Mark Schoen, a sexuality education photographer/filmmaker from New York, was hired to do the photography, and the new filmstrips were created in time to be included in the second round of field-testing. Hollerorth reports that this time around, the visuals were “received enthusiastically by most of the young people and their adult leaders” (*History* 25). However, no data were collected to indicate whether or not gender or age played a role in students’ response.

These filmstrips, because they were both sexually explicit and visual, required more justification than other parts of the program. Out of the context of the curriculum, they could be seen as pornographic. Thus extra care needed to be taken in explicating the reasons behind their inclusion in the program. The justifications provided in the curriculum, however, needed to go beyond youths’ positive response to the filmstrips in the field test. In the “Introductory Notes” to *About Your Sexuality*, Calderwood explains:

Today’s youth are visually oriented. They have become accustomed to photographic presentations of everything from fetal life to space exploration. Visual aids have become an integral part of the formal educational process in every subject except sexuality. The absence of explicit visual presentation in most sex education materials is the ‘norm,’ despite the fact that young people often have access behind the scenes to pornographic materials, and are exposed to sexual materials in settings that give them a distorted perception about human sexuality (5).

During the development of *About Your Sexuality*, the curriculum team’s direction was bolstered in some ways by the release of the *Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, commissioned by President Johnson in 1967 and delivered to President Nixon in 1970. The commission recommended that “a massive sex education program” be undertaken in families, schools, and churches “to contribute to healthy attitudes and orientations to sexual relationships.” Further, such programs “should not aim for orthodoxy; rather [they] should be designed to allow for a pluralism of values” (54).

Concerning sexually explicit materials, the research of the commission indicated that it was quite common for young boys and girls to have viewed pornography, and that sex education would reduce interest in pornographic materials. The developers of *About Your Sexuality* viewed

two particular papers in the Commission's *Technical Reports* as supportive of the use of sexually explicit filmstrips in sexuality education. In his introduction to the curriculum, Calderwood points to a report prepared for the commission by Dr. John Money, an influential sex researcher from Johns Hopkins University. Calderwood quotes Money's assertion that because young people already have illicit access to sexually explicit materials, "Let us, therefore, be honest and bring these materials into the open for serious discussion" (342). However, Money's article, entitled "The Positive and Constructive Approach to Pornography in General Sex Education, in the Home, and in Sexological Counseling," recommends this open discussion of pornography in a college classroom setting and in a family setting. Although some of his comments could be interpreted as supportive for *About Your Sexuality's* approach, Money does not address its use in a classroom setting with youth. Further, Money's article describes gender differences among young people concerning their interest in sexually explicit visuals, with young adolescent males preferring pornographic pictures and adolescent females preferring "paperback seduction novels" (345). In his justification for explicit visuals, Calderwood did not address this potential gender difference in exposure to and interest in explicit visual material.

In an article written after the release of *About Your Sexuality*, Calderwood again drew on findings from the Commission to defend the explicit filmstrips. A review of the curriculum by Calderwood's former employer, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) questioned the appropriateness of the filmstrips. "We find the explicitness and honesty of the visual materials refreshing," they wrote, "However, given the wide range of physical and social development typical of 12 to 14 year olds and their immaturity and inexperience, we question the appropriateness of many visuals for many in this age group" (Baumiller 17). In response, Calderwood wrote an article claiming that the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography had found that sexually explicit pictures were the least likely sexually explicit medium to generate sexual arousal. He asserts that the Commission noted that of "three matched sets of sexual stimuli—explicit pictures, verbal descriptions and printed descriptions [. . .]. Explicit pictures were the least arousing," and further, that "Pictures are the most matter-of-fact method of presentation" ("Unitarian Curriculum" 9). A closer look at sources reveals that Calderwood's claims regarding the commission's findings are not wholly accurate. His claim that explicit pictures are "the least arousing" is derived from a paper prepared by the Glide Foundation *for* the commission—not a finding *by* the commission.

Further, the Glide Foundation data concerns their use of sexually explicit materials with adults in the context of a Sexual Attitude Reassessment seminar which involved a virtual bombardment with sexual images. It would be a leap to extrapolate their data as representative of the general adult population, let alone 12- to 14-year-olds.

In this light, calderwood's claim in the *About Your Sexuality* introduction that "Research in the methods of sex education has found the multimedia approach (with explicit visuals) to be the most effective method of providing information and developing open communication and positive attitudes concerning sexuality" (6) is speculative at best. The research simply did not exist. To be fair, however, in 1970 authoritative research on any form of sexuality education had yet to be conducted. The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography points this out, referring to "the almost total absence of empirical research aimed at evaluating programs of sex education" (35). During the curriculum's development, no method of sexuality education could be firmly backed by research on its effectiveness. However, rather than acknowledging this absence of evidence, calderwood sought to portray the use of explicit visuals as sound and scientifically-supported. The most solid support for use of the visuals came not from studies but from the development team's experience with the curriculum's field test. While not empirical, this "on the ground" experience assured the team that the filmstrips would be an effective and constructive part of the curriculum.

While some individuals and organizations openly supported the inclusion of explicit visuals in a curriculum for youth, this support did not represent the consensus of the sexuality education community. While praise for the curriculum's subject matter, its honesty, and its methodology was widespread among professional sexuality educators, the inclusion of sexually explicit filmstrips remained controversial. In some settings, the curriculum was taught without the filmstrips. These settings also included some Unitarian Universalist congregations. Though official figures are not available, Roberta Nelson, a long-time trainer of *About Your Sexuality* teachers, encountered several congregations that taught the curriculum with the filmstrips removed.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, particularly the explicit visuals, the launch of *About Your Sexuality* required several "auxiliary" programs to ensure its success. The Department of Religious Education developed workshops for parents, teachers, and ministers, and directors of religious education—four constituencies indispensable to the implementation of

the program. Rev. Gene Navias, a staff member of the development team, designed a parent orientation program for the curriculum that could be adapted to meet the needs of the parent group. Beyond the required one-session parent orientation, the design offered the option of extending the orientation into a more complete eight-session sexuality education program for parents. The orientation program was intended not only to introduce parents to the program their children were about to undertake, but to also help parents come to terms with their own sexual issues. The leader's guide instructs:

Although the adult program will consider the goals and contents of a course for youth, it should quickly move to the study of aspects of human sexuality at an adult level. The objective is to help *adults*. They may well get deterred from their own growth if they become limited to a role-playing or guessing game of what teen-agers think, feel, know" (calderwood, "About the Program" 33).

In addition, Navias created workshops for religious professionals—ministers and directors of religious education—to enable them not only to further understand the curriculum, but also to help them have an experience of sexuality education.

Finally, the program's success depended on well-prepared teachers, who could create the type of learning environment essential to the curriculum's philosophy. These teachers would form male-female teaching teams: the development team felt strongly that both genders needed to be represented in the teaching of the program. Every prospective teacher was advised to participate in a weekend-long intensive teacher training. Because the Unitarian Universalist Association wanted to ensure that this curriculum would be taught only by qualified, prepared, and congregationally-approved teams of adults, the weekend training was required before congregations could even purchase the curriculum kit. (However, once the curriculum was purchased, the system relied on teachers' and congregations' voluntary compliance with the training recommendation.) This requirement was novel for the Unitarian Universalist Association: never before had they published a curriculum that required teacher training beyond that which could be provided by brief congregational workshops. Congregations indeed recognized the need for teacher training, and paid for their prospective teachers to travel the sometimes-long distances to training workshops. Among the first wave of teachers selected by congregations to be trained was a preponderance of human services and health professionals:

doctors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists (Nelson). Congregations didn't want to leave sex instruction to just anyone—they wanted this curriculum to succeed.

About Your Sexuality as a Whole

“In *About Your Sexuality*,” Hollerorth writes,

Participants have an opportunity to use the process which is the Unitarian Universalist religion for relating to and dealing with the power of their human sexuality and the cluster of powers which intermingle with it. Employing the full range of human knowledge about human sexuality; creative interaction with each other in a relationship of freedom, love, sensitivity, and so on; and, diversity of thought, young people attempt to evolve a life-enhancing orientation to their sexuality (*Relating*, 31).

About Your Sexuality was largely affirmed by Unitarian Universalist congregations, several of which had been clamoring for the curriculum for years before its release. Because the curriculum's impetus came from parents and religious educators, many were pleased when the curriculum arrived. One of the aspects of *About Your Sexuality* that they most readily affirmed was its goal of relating religion to the concrete situations that young people face in their everyday lives. They affirmed the curriculum's inclusion of accurate and up-to-date research, and its engagement of young people to be concerned for their sexual health. Roberta Nelson recalls:

I honestly believe that [what was most easily affirmed by congregations] was the fact that it was open, was honest, and gave young people the opportunity to ask any question they wanted and to have that question taken seriously. I think many people affirmed it because even though they didn't fully understand it at times. [Parents affirmed it] because they really believed that their young people needed this information. And [parents knew] that they needed other adults dealing with this because they didn't feel comfortable dealing with it (Interview).

The curriculum gained support because it sought to help parents by taking some of the onus off of them for providing their children with an education on sexuality. *About Your Sexuality* could decrease parental anxiety by providing children with accurate sexual information within a context parents trusted—their church.

Roberta Nelson observes, however, that one of the pieces that was most easily affirmed by congregations was also the least easily affirmed: the curriculum's emphasis on an open-ended process of values clarification and decision-making. While Unitarian Universalists generally affirmed that the theories behind *About Your Sexuality*—situation ethics, the inquiry method, the multimedia approach—were valid and in keeping with Unitarian Universalist values, the sensitive subject matter of the curriculum put those theories to the test. Parents who had never had trouble with the theories when employed in curricula about culture or religion had concerns about the theories being employed in a curriculum about sexuality. Nelson found herself explaining to parents, “Remember that this curriculum is designed along the same lines as all the curricula in the Unitarian portfolio. It wasn't a change in direction. It wasn't a change in philosophy. It wasn't a change in what we believed was the right way to teach.” However, some parents wanted a curriculum that would make explicit statements about what is right and wrong in sexuality. “I remember a conversation with one religious educator who said to me, ‘Well, I just don't understand why we don't just *tell* them what we think they should do' [. . .] People did not understand that [the open-ended approach] was part of a conscious decision to teach values that way” (Interview). Nelson indicates that if families had participated in Unitarian Universalist religious education previous to *About Your Sexuality*, they were more likely to understand and affirm the curriculum's approach. However, if *About Your Sexuality* represented the family's first contact with Unitarian Universalist religious education, its controversial subject matter combined with its novel educational methods made it a challenging curriculum for them to accept.

Another aspect of *About Your Sexuality* that was hard for some to accept was the filmstrips. Although no official counts are available, Nelson recalls that in her decades of training teachers, she heard of “many churches” that chose either to exclude all or some of the filmstrips that accompanied the curriculum. Some congregations would show the heterosexual lovemaking filmstrips while excluding the homosexual lovemaking sequences; others would simply run the curriculum without any filmstrips. As a denomination based in the autonomy of each congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Association offices had no authority to mandate the use of any part of the curriculum—they could just make suggestions about the value of each program component. Decisions about curricular implementation lay fully within the purview of each congregation. If a congregation's leadership disliked *About Your Sexuality* enough, they

simply wouldn't use any part of the program. In addition, the filmstrips provoked strong reactions in some students of the program. No figures are available, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it was not unusual for some youth, often female, to drop out of the program after seeing some of the sexually-explicit filmstrips. Although several teachers took care to assure students that they could step out of the room or cover their eyes if they chose, some students chose to withdraw from the course rather than be around the filmstrips. However at the same time, other students, both male and female, felt that explicit filmstrips were essential to their learning in the course, and that the filmstrips represented the most valuable part of the program. Youth's reactions to the filmstrips were all over the spectrum, from highly negative to highly positive.

Beyond Unitarian Universalist Congregations

A long-term challenge for the Unitarian Universalist Association was the problem of keeping *About Your Sexuality* "in context." Materials in the curriculum, particularly the filmstrips, could be represented in sensational ways that were untrue to their role in the program. The filmstrips could be easily employed by the media for their shock value. It is likely that to the average American, the idea of showing full-color pictures of masturbation and sex to 12- to 14-year-olds would sound perverse, at best. In order to be understood, any media discussion of the filmstrips needed to be framed within the context of the curriculum and the congregation. However, this framing did not always happen to the Unitarian Universalist Association's advantage.

Two major articles, in *The National Observer* (August 23, 1971) and in *Newsweek* (December 27, 1971) introduced *About Your Sexuality* to the American public during the first months of its launch. The *Observer* article, published just before congregations began using the program, described the filmstrips, the philosophy behind the program, and the process of its development and introduction. It described *About Your Sexuality* as "the most comprehensive, explicit, and possibly controversial set of materials ever assembled for use in a classroom" (Shea 1). While the article itself refrained from taking an explicit editorial stance, several of the *Observer's* readers did not refrain from judgment. One letter to the editor read, "Why did you see fit to front-page at such length this utterly sickening account of a Sunday-school program whose entrepreneurs are—to their eternal shame—representing a religious denomination?" (Doran). Another read, "What can be said about a religion that will take all the beauty, mystery,

intimacy, Godliness out of love and reduce it to the level of a peephole Tom?" (McMahon). A few months later, after *About Your Sexuality* had already begun to be used by congregations, *Newsweek* published an editorial column in its Religion section arguing that with explicit filmstrips and a "do-it-yourself moral code," the "Unitarians seem to have taken the 'Sunday' out of Sunday school."

Less than two weeks later, in response to a petition from 514 citizens who had read about the curriculum in the *Milwaukee Journal*, the District Attorney of Waukesha County, Wisconsin, asked to preview *About Your Sexuality* before the congregation in Brookfield began teaching it ("Wisc. D.A."). Concerned that the curriculum violated Wisconsin obscenity statutes, the District Attorney threatened prosecution if the congregation did not turn the curriculum over to his office for review ("A Church"). The congregation refused, and won a Federal injunction to block the District Attorney's actions ("Unitarian Church Wins"). The case eventually was heard by the United States Supreme Court, which upheld the federal judge's ruling that the congregation had a right to teach *About Your Sexuality*. The court case received coverage by papers nationwide, including *The New York Times*.

Each of these stories and events caused Unitarian Universalists to respond, both publicly and privately, to the claims being made about their curriculum, their values, and their religion. There is no doubt that the media coverage created embarrassment, even shame, on the part of some Unitarian Universalists, whether they agreed with the philosophy of *About Your Sexuality*, or not. But the controversies also strengthened Unitarian Universalist resolve to stand for the movement's open approach to sexuality education, its affirmation of human sexual expression, and its acceptance of homosexuality and bisexuality. The controversy gave congregations the opportunity to rally around their values. In the years that followed the publication of *About Your Sexuality*, Unitarian Universalists voted into existence an office at the Unitarian Universalist Association that would advocate for gay and lesbian rights, they supported the creation of an adult curriculum on homosexuality (*The Invisible Minority*), and they continued to publicly affirm abortion rights.

But these were also difficult years for the Association, for reasons both related and unrelated to the sexual revolution. Unitarian Universalist congregational membership was in decline. In the 1970s, several pockets developed among Unitarian Universalists in which adults engaged in partner-swapping and extra-marital sex, justifying their behavior in terms similar to

those of situation ethics, i.e., “if it makes us happy, then why not?” Although this was not unusual behavior for people of Unitarian Universalists’ educational and socio-economic profile at that time, the emotional damage done to relationships and to entire congregations during that era is still felt in several places, over thirty years later. The words of Rev. Robert W. Haney in the 1968 *Unitarian Christian* proved prophetic, asking whether situation ethics, and perhaps late 1960s Unitarian Universalism as a whole, was mistaken in assuming “that human nature is a good deal more benign and that individuals are a good deal less willful than history and personal experience teach.” Since the sexual revolution, Unitarian Universalists have learned some difficult lessons about the hurt that can be wrought by sexual relationships.

Summary and Conclusion

About Your Sexuality was a product of its times. Reactions to the sexual revolution and 1960s youth culture gave it its impetus. Situation Ethics gave it a moral framework. Novel educational theories gave it a methodology. A growing network of professional sexuality educators gave it research and resources. And the Unitarian Universalist Association’s curriculum office gave it a multi-media format. From all these sources, the curriculum team in charge of *About Your Sexuality*’s development assembled a curriculum that, throughout its three decades of use, bore the indelible mark of these early years.

When educators would talk about the need to understand *About Your Sexuality* “in context,” they typically referred to the importance considering the curriculum, its teachers, and its classroom processes as a whole, rather than just considering the filmstrips, or any particular classroom activity, divorced from this whole. However, some of the mystique surrounding the curriculum’s structure and choices is shed by considering its larger context—the cultural and religious context that gave it birth. In so doing, critiques as well as affirmations of the curriculum emerge for consideration.

About Your Sexuality is best understood as an experiment. In its time, all sexuality education curricula were experiments in some sense, as no proven methodologies had yet emerged from research. But further, the developers of the curriculum took risks. They could have employed more typical methods and media, but they felt called to step outside of those confines in order to reach young people in an unprecedented way. Of course, as in all experiments, some of the risks taken may not, in hindsight, look like the wisest choices. But overall, the experiment of *About Your Sexuality* was a grand success, as its nearly 30-year

curriculum lifespan suggests. Sexuality education for youth is now something several Unitarian Universalist congregations consider fundamental to their ministry and mission. Created for a certain time, the pioneering work of *About Your Sexuality* has had a profound effect on individuals, families, congregations, and Unitarian Universalism, impacting the movement far beyond the sexual revolution.

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