



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"The Facts of Life"

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It's been a little more than a decade since I signed the membership book at my home congregation in Columbia, Maryland. And this summer will mark the ten year anniversary of my first OWL training.

If you hang around in Unitarian Universalist spaces for long, you will likely hear about OWL - which stands for [Our Whole Lives](#), a lifespan curriculum encompassing human relationality and sexuality at every stage of life. There are OWL classes for people ranging from kindergarten age through to older adults. Our Whole Lives was jointly developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ in response to two very real needs: the need for comprehensive sex education and the need for sexual health and sexual WHOLENESS to be a part of the sacred work of our faith.

I remember very distinctly when the Director of Religious Education at my home congregation approached me to ask if I would like to train to teach OWL. "Great!" I said, because I was so eager to get involved in my congregation, "What's OWL?" She told me, and I couldn't stop grinning. "Of course I will!" I told her. Because OWL sounded exactly like something that I had needed when I was young.

I was trained in the elementary school levels of OWL, and was soon partnered with an excellent friend and collaborator to teach our congregation's first-ever K-1 OWL class. It was a delightful jumbled adventure each week, with me keeping us on book and my co-teacher in charge of general chaos wrangling. Now, since it was the first time we ever offered OWL for kids that young, at the

parent orientation session there were lots of questions. What exactly does sex education mean for five and six year olds? We were happy to explain that the early elementary curriculum covers things like the many different ways families can be made, safety, consent, and proper biological names for body parts and functions. Our first set of parents bravely signed their children up. We started teaching, and we waited for feedback.

One week, a mother with two children in the class came to share a story with me. She was always on board with OWL because she was a doctor, and knew her kids would get accurate information shared compassionately and lovingly. Last week, she told me, her kids were playing with Matchbox cars. They were racing them, and her daughter was proud of her winning car. She triumphantly showed it to her mother and said, "My car's name is the Vulva 3000!!" As she told me the story, the mother and I both laughed - but I also said, "I guess it's working, because I absolutely didn't learn that word until much, much later in my life." And she agreed.

It's a funny story, one I've shared often, but to me the most impressive thing isn't just that her daughter thought of a kickass name for her Matchbox car - it's that she learned that word as a fact of life. Not a thing to giggle about or be ashamed of, and not a "dirty word."

And that's at the heart of the Our Whole Lives curriculum. And that's why it's a part of religious education (although the curriculum is also used by a number of secular institutions).

Some of you were fortunate enough to grow up Unitarian Universalist, and you went through OWL classes or their precursor AYS - "About Your Sexuality." Maybe you, like me, grew up in a religious tradition that gave you some very strange messages about your own body and your own sexuality. Maybe you grew up confused about certain aspects of your body and your sexuality because you weren't sure who to trust with your questions, or because you had received messages - both explicit and implicit - that these questions were things to be ashamed of. That your own body or your own sexuality were

things to be ashamed of. My Catholic faith put human sexuality in a very constricting box, and honestly for me it became something to be afraid of.

In the faith of my youth, we would not have read a story like [Julián's](#). In the faith of my youth, we would never have opened with a prayer that sounded like today's Chalice Lighting. Again, the ending lines of that [reading](#):

"Your sexuality is holy and sacred and an integral part of who you are. You are whole and welcome here.

As Unitarian Universalists, we will side with you, love you, and fight for your rights.

We seek to create a world where sexuality and sexual diversity is celebrated with holiness and integrity."

Holiness and integrity. Both of these words, at their separate etymological roots, refer to *wholeness*. "You are whole and welcome here" is the refrain of our opening prayer and is one of the great aspirations of Unitarian Universalism. Brene Brown, renowned social science researcher and TED talker, says that "Integrity is choosing courage over comfort; it's choosing what's right over what's fun, fast, or easy; and it's practicing your values, not just professing them."

Starting with something as simple-on-the-surface as teaching children the correct names for parts of their body, we encourage all to be able to name those parts which make up their whole, to develop knowledge of and comfort with those parts, so that they can grow into the fullness of their bodies with a deep and whole understanding. When we understand the sanctity of our own bodies, we learn to recognize it in the bodies of others. When we recognize the sanctity of our own bodies, we learn to care for them, learn about what they need best to stay healthy and to bring us delight.

Delight is also not something I personally heard a lot about in church when I was younger. It was certainly not present in conversations about my own body. And yet if we cannot delight in our bodies, in what they can do and where they can take us, the ways they can bring us information and sensation - knowledge and pleasure - if we cannot inhabit our bodies this way, what is the alternative?

Shame. Doubt. Fear.

Will we ever feel the strength of the courage of our convictions - will we ever feel ready to live with integrity, to trust our bodies with the knowledge and embodiment of our highest values - if we are filled with shame, doubt, and fear? About the appearance of our bodies, or the ways our bodies align with or differ from external perceptions, or the ways our bodies move and change with time, or the ways our bodies move and change in relation with and to other people to whom we give loving and enthusiastic consent...if those things are fraught and weighted with shame and doubt and fear, then we disconnect from our sense of wholeness. And holiness.

That's a lot different from what we named the facts of life when I was small.

Let's turn our attention to our reading today as well, Pádraig Ó Tuama's poem ["The Facts of Life."](#)

"That life is real  
and if you can survive it, well,  
survive it well  
with love  
and art  
and meaning given  
where meaning's scarce.

That you will learn to live with regret.  
That you will learn to live with respect.

That the structures that constrict you  
may not be permanently constricting.

That you will probably be okay.

That you must accept change  
before you die  
but you will die anyway.

So you might as well live  
and you might as well love.  
You might as well love.  
You might as well love.”

The structures that constrict you may not be permanently constricting. “That  
you will learn to live with regret. / That you will learn to live with respect.”

The facts of life - and the facts of love, and the facts of sex, and the facts of  
being embodied in a mortal body that will die - are so much more than we  
colloquially use that phrase to refer to. If the facts of life are simply a hurried  
and hushed recitation of the incoming struggle of puberty, just a way to  
quickly rush through the complexity of that sperm meeting that egg that led to  
you... well. What does that say about the richness of life? Not much.

Our faith calls us to grow whole and holy humans - to reinforce wholeness and  
holiness within ourselves and others - because the facts of life are so much  
more than a biology lesson. Because the facts of life shape us along the way,  
help us to make choices for ourselves, help us to respect the boundaries that  
others set and to set our own boundaries, to gain a sense of self that is not  
diminished with the changes that time brings to all bodies.

Our faith also calls us to heal the wounds that have been wrought by other  
spaces, ideas, and people that did harm - whether intentional or not - by

rejecting some part of who we are. Our faith calls us into learning and loving more than we think is possible - to honor the wholeness and holiness of ourselves, of others, even of the ones who did harm. It is not easy or fast to live our values or to heal the wounds that would seem to mar our wholeness. But beloveds, those wounds do not remove your wholeness - they add to it. It is not easy or fast to learn to love the whole person - whether ourselves or another. The facts of life aren't about being easy. They're about being real.

“That life is real  
and if you can survive it, well,  
survive it well  
with love  
and art  
and meaning given  
where meaning's scarce.”

In weekly worship, we turn our attention to that which is of highest worth. Human wholeness, human holiness, human thriving for all regardless of age, sex, gender, gender expression, ability, sexual or affectional preference, marital status, race, ethnicity - what could be worthier? In a world where we continually witness the negation of the other, gun violence, legal rejection of the bodies of our beloved transgender siblings and selves, wanton disregard for the bodies of our Black siblings and selves, inequity in access to health care, housing, education, and nutrition for far, far too many - the act of revisiting and rededicating ourselves to this human wholeness and holiness is the most sacred work. In a world that wants to dehumanize your neighbors, know the beauty of all that it is to be human. That is what Our Whole Lives teaches and preaches.

“That life is real  
and if you can survive it, well,  
survive it well  
with love  
and art

and meaning given  
where meaning's scarce."

This is the holy act of making meaning together. This is the holy act of  
celebrating the wholeness of who we are.

So may it ever be.