

Our reading today is from “*Dr. Tatiana’s Sex Advice to All Creation*,” by Olivia Judson.

Chapter Six: "How to Make Love to a Cannibal."

Rule number one: Never get eaten during foreplay.

"Dear Dr. Tatiana, I'm a European praying mantis, and I've noticed I enjoy sex more if I bite off my lovers' heads off first. It's because when I decapitate them they go into the most thrilling spasms. Somehow they seem less inhibited, more urgent--it's fabulous. Do you find this too?

signed, "I Like 'Em Headless in Lisbon"

Dr. Tatiana responds:

"Some of my best friends are man-eaters, but between you and I, cannibalism isn't my bag. I can see why you like it though. Males of your species are boring lovers. Beheading them works wonders; whereas a headless chicken rushes wildly about, a headless mantis thrashes in a sexual frenzy. Why can't he be that way when he's whole? Well, it's hard to have wild sex when you're trying to keep your head."

The Agony and the Ecstasy
Rev. Bonnie Dlott

It's a jungle out there. With respect to sex and sexuality, it seems that we humans have it pretty easy, compared to your average European praying mantis. A typical sexual encounter for our species involves some soft music, maybe a nice meal, perhaps a good bottle of wine, and a physical encounter that one might reasonably hope to be pleasant. In this encounter, it would not be usual for the male to be beheaded. Or eaten, for that matter, a common fate for many male spiders. Spider sex is apparently quite rough. In fact, “females in more than eighty species have been caught eating their lovers before, during, or after sex”, according Dr. Tatiana, otherwise known as Olivia Judson, the author of the book that Rick just read from. Olivia Judson is an evolutionary biologist who specializes in sex. In her book, *Olivia Judson, aka, Dr. Tatiana*, dispenses advice to various creatures, such as Mrs. Mantis, who wondered why sex with her mate was so much more interesting once her lover was headless. It turns out there is a good reason, as once he is headless, his naturally prudish inhibitions are released, and this increases his potency as a lover. She includes at the end of her response to Mrs. Mantis that human males are similar; apparently if you throttle them just a bit they'll get an erection, not from erotic pleasure but “because the “down boy” signals from the brain stop coming”. (pg. 100) And here I just have to say, as a guest minister, please don't try this at home.

After reading this book, I re-considered the common use of the term “The birds and the bees” as a way to refer to age-appropriate conversations with young people about sex. Let's take bees for example. Here's a letter to Dr. Tatiana from “Perplexed in Coverhill.” “Dear Dr. Tatiana, I'm a queen bee, and I'm worried. All my lovers leave their genitals inside me and then drop dead. Is this normal?” (pg. 16) Her answer is, yes, it is normal, *for bees*, but I wouldn't want that to be the first thing my child heard about the sex act. And bird sex hardly seems appropriate to discuss with young children either. Birds were once believed to be

overwhelmingly monogamous, but we now know that they are some of the most promiscuous creatures on the planet. Sure, they may be socially monogamous, but genetic testing shows that when birds leave their nests to forage for food, they typically use the opportunity to hook up with their neighbors, *all of them*, and this goes for the mommies AND the daddies. In fact, Dr. Tatiana says that true monogamy in the creature world is so rare that it could be considered “one of the most deviant behaviors in biology” (pg. 153).

Murder and promiscuity aside, because of course humans commit those acts regularly, I discovered when I read Judson’s book that “normal” sexual behavior in the animal kingdom includes necrophilia, bestiality, bondage, cross-dressing, masturbation, incest, and date-drugging. So when it comes time to talk to your little ones about sex, I personally wouldn’t recommend starting with the animal kingdom. It’s hard enough to explain human sexuality without involving other species.

Despite all its challenges, it’s really important to talk about sex, and not just with our children, because sexuality is central to our lives, and affects just about everything we do. I first started thinking about the significance of sex and sexuality when I was a graduate student at the UCLA School of Medicine studying human genetics. That is not to say that I didn’t think about sex before then, just its significance, its meaning. That’s an important part of my message to you today, that we do it long before we actually think about it. Like Dr. Tatiana, I thought a lot about sex from the perspective of an evolutionary biologist. Through that lens, it is a fact that having sex is the *second* most important thing we do in life. The only thing more important for us to do is to survive long enough to have sex. Judson says, “If you fail at either, your genes go with you to the grave. If you succeed at both, you pass your genes on to your children. Inevitably—such is life—some organisms do better than others at surviving and reproducing. . . . And insofar as a particular gene confers an advantage in terms of survival or

reproduction, that gene will spread.” (pg.2) And passing on your genes is the name of the evolutionary game. It’s survival of the fittest, right?

Those of you who have studied biology will recognize this process as the principal mechanism behind evolution, known as natural selection, and natural selection absolutely depends on genetic variation. Without genetic variation, we would have no way to adapt to changing conditions in the environment, and species lacking the ability to adapt to change are inevitably wiped out. So you see, the persistence of life on this planet depends on its ability to adapt to change, through seasons, years, and millennia.

But what does genetic variation have to do with sex? Well, lucky for us, it turns out that sex is the best way to generate variation. Now in this discussion when I use the word “sex”, I mean the combining of genetic material from two different parents. That means genes from mom contained in an egg, and genes from dad contained in sperm. Now we’re talking. Combining genetic material from two sources drastically increases genetic variation, and therefore increases the speed with which we are able to adapt to environmental changes. It really does take two to tango in the ballroom of life.

All this is to say something you probably already know; we need sex to survive. Despite what your priest or Sunday school teacher told you, without sex, we are doomed as a species. So at our most basic level, we are just like every other species; we arrive pre-programmed with an overwhelming drive to have sex. This is the result of millions of years of evolution, millions of generations of organisms who managed to survive and procreate, by hook or by crook, or some ingenious combination of the two. One of the most interesting, and perhaps regrettable things to me about sex is that from a biological perspective, we don’t have to understand it to reproduce. We also don’t have to know or consider its consequences, or even to aspire to have offspring. We simply have to follow our

instincts. In this way, we are not so different from the European praying mantis. I'm thinking that it simply occurred to Mrs. Mantis that her mate's head was a tasty and convenient snack; she probably didn't do it because she knew she his body would nourish her as her babies grew. From her perspective, she just felt like doing it. And this is precisely what is most dangerous about sex. Beyond our desire to survive, which compels us to eat, drink, and seek shelter, our next most powerful drive is to have sex. This is not a rational impulse; we just feel like doing it. And at some point, the drive to have sex becomes even more important than the drive to survive, as illustrated by the headless male mantis, or the honeybee, who becomes a willing sacrifice during the act, or Bill Clinton, and if any man was ever in danger of being beheaded by his mate, it would be him. The point is, he wasn't thinking. He did it because he felt like doing it. It felt good.

I'd like to think that we humans have evolved a little further than other species in terms of our ability to observe and learn. I think most of us feel sexual desire, and yet, we also have the potential to understand its consequences. We've evolved social conventions and techniques that increase our control over the natural outcomes of our sexual behavior, such as restrictive courtship rituals, monogamous partnering, birth control, and methods to prevent infection. But none of these practices have any effect on our underlying drive; whether we are partnered or not, whether we are young or old, gay or straight, rich or poor, in sickness or in health, once we reach maturity, the vast majority of us want to have sex with other people, preferably as often as possible. And we do, partnered or not, married or not, appropriate or not, intentionally or not, legally or not, honorably or not. There is no way to simply *think* or *will* ourselves out of our desires. This is why the "just say no" approach to sexual desire is so ludicrous to me.

But sexuality involves more than just our behavior; it is also central to our identity. From a biological perspective again, our survival as a species absolutely depends upon the ability of individuals who can potentially make babies

together being able to recognize each other. Woe to the male peacock who does not have a gorgeous long tail. Never mind that this very tail makes him an easy lunch. Without that long tail, there is no peacock nookie, because you better believe it, the *ladies like the tail*.

And this brings us to gender. Our biological gender, determined by a combination of genes, hormones, and body parts, is central to the way we see each other as human beings. Think about it: we don't even have language that can be used to speak about a person until we can assign them a gender. And I use the word "assign" because there is actually a lot of gender variation in human beings that we *just pretend isn't there*. Trust me, I'm a doctor. Biological gender variety occurs at many levels, including chromosomal variations, hormonal variations, physical variations, and psychological variations, and these variations are much more common than you think. Some are visible, and some are not. The rate of variation is estimated to be as high as one in 25, which means that there are two or three persons in this room right now, who for some reason don't physically fit neatly into the "boy" or "girl" box. And if you think that number is too high, that's probably because these variations are scrupulously hidden or suppressed, so we can comfortably persist in propagating the idea that everyone can be neatly categorized as a "girl", or a "boy". Accordingly, we expect certain dress, certain hair, certain behavior, and certain patterns of sexual attraction, depending on the assigned gender. Its fascinates me that we can acknowledge that variation is the driving force behind our evolution, and vigorously defend the idea that diversity is enriching, but also insist on forcing all human beings into the category of either "boy" or "girl." Although we have made some progress in the area of educating about variation in physical gender and gender expression, we have a very, very long way to go. So where does all this leave us, first, as human beings, and second, as a community of faith? Well, first of all, as human beings, *we are screwed*. Here's why. Many of us recognize at some level that sexuality is central to our experience as humans,

and long to express our sexuality, but very, very few of us are comfortable talking about sex or sexuality. I think this is because we are sent a tremendous amount of conflicting and shaming messages about sex from infancy, including messages from family and church that sex inherently sinful, or that it is only for procreation, or that it will kill you, and that nice, polite people just don't talk about it. Most of us get the message that there is only one acceptable way to express our sexuality, and that is in the context of a committed, monogamous, heterosexual "marriage." On the other hand, we hear from advertising that products that enhance our sex appeal and sexual prowess are essential. Movies and television teach that sex is glorious and fulfilling and free of pesky consequences. Throw in the fact that we each like different things, but might have no idea what those things are or how to ask for them, and you've got a picture of where we are: we want it, we're afraid of it, we have to have it, we can't talk about it, some of us aren't sure what it is and no one will tell us except folks who want to sell it to us.

So what are we to do? I think one of the best things we can do is talk about it openly, especially to our youth. Many of us, including me, believe that it is best for children to learn about sex and sexuality in the safe, supportive environment of the family, by talking with parents. It is the primarily the responsibility of parents to prepare us for life, is it not? But really, did you want to talk about sex with *your* mom or dad? Huh uh, not me. And how many parents are prepared to offer this kind of education, having received none themselves? And how about families that are sexually dysfunctional? I mean really, whose isn't?

How about learning about sex in school? I wasn't willing to leave that aspect of my children's education up to adults I didn't know very well, because I figured they probably have very different values. I know from my own experience with the public schools that they do not present sexuality as the healthy, life-affirming, powerful force that it is. They focus on the agony part and mostly neglect the

ecstasy. Many middle-school aged kids, including mine, pick up on this, and conclude that the adults are pulling a fast one. They know it's an unbalanced, incomplete perspective, so they look elsewhere for information. They go to other sources like friends, the internet, and pornography, and get information that ranges from helpful and accurate to degrading and dangerous. How do they sort it all out? How can we support them?

This is where our community of faith comes in. In my opinion, there is *no better place to learn about sexuality* than in a community like this one, among caring people, in the context of our shared principles and values. Well, it just so happens that lots of Unitarian Universalists agree with me. If you are new to this faith, you might not know that our denomination, in partnership with the United Church of Christ, has been doing sexuality education for over thirty years. The curriculum we use, which is called "Our Whole Lives" or OWL, is a comprehensive, progressive sexuality education program with four main goals: 1) to provide accurate information about human sexuality; 2) to provide an opportunity for participants to develop and understand their values, attitudes, and beliefs about sexuality; 3) to help participants to develop interpersonal skills; and 4) to help participants to exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships, including what it means to consent, what constitutes abstinence, and how to resist pressures to become prematurely or inappropriately involved in sexual intercourse.

I would like to highlight a few of my favorite features of Our Whole Lives for you, the first being the philosophy that sexuality education should be a life-long process beginning at a very young age. Six OWL curricula are available, including one for kindergarten and first grade, fourth through sixth grade, middle school, high school, young adults (18-35), and adults over 35. Each curriculum includes age-appropriate information on a broad range of topics related to sexuality. The program emphasizes decision-making and critical-thinking skills, and

includes information about abstinence as well as about contraception and disease prevention. It asks students of all ages to think about sexuality in light of the values we hold up as Unitarian Universalists, like human dignity, justice, and inclusiveness. It acknowledges that sexuality in our society is damaged by violence, exploitation, alienation, dishonesty, abuse of power, and the treatment of persons as objects. But it also teaches that it doesn't have to be. It empowers participants to change that.

My husband Rick and I have been involved in teaching Our Whole Lives for about ten years now. It has transformed our lives and we have seen it transform the lives of others, including our own children. We have traveled to Boston on three occasions to be certified as trainers for Our Whole Lives, which means that we are qualified to train the facilitators who teach Our Whole Lives in congregations. Today after the service we will be available for a question and answer session with any of you who are considering having your youth take an OWL class.

Our Whole Lives is not just a series of lectures; learning is participatory and experiential, and group reflection is a critical part of each lesson. The first curriculum, for kindergarteners and first graders, focuses mostly on what makes a family, and is taught with parents in the room. From the sixth grade level on, participants learn in a safe and supported environment how to talk about sexuality, and to consider the consequences of various behaviors, for themselves and for others. Topics include sexuality and values, sexual development, sexual health, communication, intimacy, body image, communication, gender issues, family dynamics, sexual diversity, relationship skills, consent and boundaries, and sexuality as it relates to spirituality.

The middle school and high school students engage in role-playing activities that gave them an opportunity to gain practical skills, such as asking someone out on a date, and gracefully accepting or declining an invitation. The high

school students practice breaking up with each other, after brainstorming how they would prefer to be broken up with. We bring in a panel for the sessions dealing with orientation and gender expression, in an effort to challenge unfair and inaccurate stereotypes of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. High school students are given a tour, either virtual or in person, of a family planning clinic, and learn about the services that are offered there. Adults examine the relationship between sexual fantasies, sexually explicit media, sexual activities, and values. I've never seen a religious education curriculum that even comes close to Our Whole Lives, with respect to its ability to empower us to live our values in the world as Unitarian Universalists.

My challenge for you this week is that you *think about sex*. Please consider how your values as a Unitarian Universalist are embodied or not embodied by your feelings and attitudes about sex and sexuality. Are you focused on the agonizing aspects? Or do you see sexuality as a fundamentally life-affirming, positive, creative, spiritual aspect being human? And if you are interested in learning more about the Our Whole Lives program, come to the meeting after the service.

I'll finish today with the last few words from Dr. Tatiana. "I leave you with these thoughts. I hope that having seen the prodigious variety of sexual practices out there, you'll be more tolerant of the predilections of others. Speaking for myself, my years as a sex advisor have definitely broadened my horizons; I confess I envy some of you. (Who? Sorry, that's a secret.) In any case, I hope I've helped you to put your problems in perspective—and above all to relax and have fun. Wishing all of you . . . lots of great sex in the years ahead. Signed, Dr. Tatiana." (pg 234)