

Hungry Hearts

BY DARCEY LAINE, PARISH MINISTER OF THE UU CHURCH OF ATHENS AND SHESHEQUIN, CONSULTING MINISTER OF THE UU CHURCH OF CORTLAND, NEW YORK



What do you want? If I had a magic wand and could give you your heart's desire, right now, what would it be? This is actually a hard question for most of us. Even if you are healthy, if you have food to eat and a warm safe place to sleep at night, there is still a sense of wanting, of a desire for something more that haunts us human beings. There is a hunger in our hearts asking us for...what? When I began my training as a spiritual director some years back, I thought of spiritual practice as something I *should* do. If it seemed dry and boring, that was only as I expected it should be. Imagine my surprise when our teachers suggested we set aside those "shoulds" and instead follow our desire. Now, as a UU I was raised to believe that each of us has inner wisdom that we should follow. But as human beings living in community, we all get the message, probably many times a day, that we should set aside our desires in order to fulfill our obligations to one another. Remember when you were little and wanted to be a ballet dancer, a pilot, a professional baseball player, a fire fighter? We are taught from a young age that to be a responsible adult we must set those desires and dreams aside and do something practical.

It's not just our big desires we are taught to ignore, but the little ones, too. Your body wants to run outside on a beautiful spring day? Ignore that—you are at a business meeting. You want to doodle during the long, boring sermon? Ignore that—someone might see and think you are rude. You want to paint your house pink? What would people think?! After a while we learn to ignore the voice of desire, and it learns to be quiet so well that when someone asks *What do you want?* that part of you that used to know so clearly that you wanted to be a singer and live in a treehouse with your best friend doesn't even bother to answer.

When folks come to me for spiritual direction they often confess, perhaps with some guilt or defensiveness, that they don't have a regular spiritual practice. Why not? Because it would be boring and dry and they don't have time for it anyway. But most people *do* have something that makes them come alive, that restores them when they are drained: an afternoon sailing, walking through the woods, an evening by the fire with family, or just pausing to wonder at a beautiful bird.

How would you feel if I suggested that following your desire in these ways *is* a spiritual practice?

What if we believed, with UU minister Arvid Straube, that "Prayer is simply being in touch with the most honest, deepest desires of the heart."

To do that we might have to re-examine our assumptions about who God is and what spiritual practice is. I think maybe our puritan ancestors left us with the assumption that anything that feels good is probably bad for us. We suspect that God wants us to be uncomfortable and bored. After all, church is often boring, so that probably means God prefers us that way. Our desires are temptations that keep us from stoically doing what we are supposed to do.

On the other hand, in some religious traditions that feeling of desire is an invitation—an invitation to move into deeper relationship with oneself and with the oneness of all that is. What if our deepest desires come from the divine, and lead us back to the divine? Is this some new Unitarian blasphemy? Actually, St. Augustine, early church theologian, bishop and church father, described this kind of desire: "restless is the heart until it rest in thee." He believed that we long for a

Quest

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I have a deeply
hidden and
inarticulate desire
for something beyond
the daily life.

—Virginia Woolf

A monthly for religious liberals

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closer relationship with the divine, that we all have a kind of spiritual hunger built in, and that we feel restless all our lives as we try to move into closer and closer relationship with the Spirit of Life. This holy desire is found in the words of mystics of many faiths. The Sufi poet Rumi writes: “I once had a thousand desires. But in my one desire to know you all else melted away.”

But, says Bob Kimball, who was my theology professor in seminary:

For many the desire becomes lost, or at least hidden or covered over, or perhaps so frightening it is as if lost. However it happens, many people lose touch with a request which is their own. They give up a want which is their right. They may even become comfortable living without this depth of themselves. But this inner realm of request does not disappear and the restlessness can only be covered at a cost.

The Jungians would agree, suggesting that our addictions and neuroses are, in fact, the cost of ignoring or trying to drown out the restless desire for our truest deepest self, the self that is connected intimately to the web of life, to the divine.

When we ask that question *What do you want?* what we usually mean is *What do you want to consume?* What do you want to eat, smoke, drink or buy? I’ve noticed that car commercials are particularly clever at this, articulating our deepest hungers and then implying that a cool new car will finally fill that hunger in our heart. Anyone who has struggled with addiction knows that next drink will not cure the restlessness of our hearts. The best it can do is numb the pain for a short time, and then we crave another drink.

I use the word “craving” for those things which don’t feed us deeply, but only give us momentary relief and then leave us just as hungry and empty as we were before we had that first drink, or that first cookie.

I like to use the word desire for those deep hungers that come from our inner wisdom, that come from the spirit of life, and call us toward the journey into ourselves, that call us toward connection with others and with something larger than ourselves. If what we crave is a cookie, then what we desire might be sitting down to a home-cooked dinner—with real protein and fiber and vitamins and minerals. While we may crave a cup of coffee when we are tired, what we really desire is a good night’s rest.

Our cravings and desires are easily confused.

Our cravings and desires are easily confused. We have this restlessness in our hearts, and we try all kinds of things to pacify that restlessness. Even healthy things like work can lead our restless hearts in the wrong direction. People work 60 hour weeks so they don’t have time to listen to their empty hearts. Sometimes doing good and noble things can help us feed our souls, but the same actions can also leave us just as empty and restless as before. How can you tell the difference? Only paying attention and listening to our inner wisdom can help us discern. When you put down your work, how does your heart feel? Do you feel like a ship without an anchor, or grounded like an old oak tree? Do you feel closer to your deepest self or do you feel scared to peek into your heart because you are afraid of what you’ll find there?

Rumi writes about this very dilemma: how do we differentiate our desire for union with something larger than ourselves from our cravings and bad habits?

There are thousands of wines that can take over our minds. Don’t think all ecstasies are the same! Jesus was lost in his love for God.

*His donkey was drunk with barley...
Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,
the ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about “what’s needed.”
Drink the wine that moves you as a camel moves when it’s been untied,
and is just ambling about*

This discerning is one of the most important parts of the spiritual journey—discerning which desires are leading us towards health, towards something larger than ourselves, and which desires trap us. Rumi gives us some hints here, suggesting we “choose the [desires] unadulterated with fear or some urgency about ‘what’s needed.’” Truly, this advice is so hard for us responsible adults; there is so much that needs to be done to feed our family, to save the world. It can be challenging to hear our own desires over the urgent din of “what’s needed.” Rumi goes on: “Drink the wine that moves you as a camel moves when it’s been untied and is just ambling about.” That’s almost shocking to hear—a religious mystic comparing following our desire for the ineffable with an aimlessly wandering camel? In this culture we value our worth by how productive we are. How could “ambling” be a sacred act? When a camel is first set loose I imagine—not having known camels personally—that after being tethered so long by those they work for, at first they are not quite sure what to do. I imagine the camel kind of wandering this way and that, following a smell here, eating a tuft of grass there, exploring its freedom. And I believe freedom is a critical part of the spiritual journey.

Likewise, we know there are cravings which lead us away from freedom. We moderns call these addictions. By definition they tether us and limit us as we shape our lives around their fulfillment. So one way to approach spiritual practice is simply to untether ourselves for

a while—to amble in the woods, to let the mind wander and just notice where it goes, to pick up a pen and see what comes out.

That can be a lot harder than it sounds. Sometimes when we do take a moment to try some spiritual practice, our heart might wail like a baby crying out for milk. We are so hungry for real nourishment that the cries of our spirit can be as disturbing as the bawling of a hungry infant. We would do almost anything to make it stop, and maybe a new car or a pint of ice cream would mute it for a while. But if we care about the health of the soul, it's not enough to simply turn off the baby monitor so we don't have to hear the cry; we need to figure out how to feed that deep need.

To reacquaint ourselves with our own deepest desires, we have to first acknowledge that we are hungry. We have to feel some unpleasant emotions. Sometimes admitting what we really desire is hard because getting it seems impossible. I want inner peace. I want justice for all people. I want to create something beautiful. I want to be part of something larger than myself. And most brazen of all, I want to experience my oneness with everything. When the world assures us that getting drunk is a far more reasonable and realistic response to our hunger, one of the most important jobs of religious community is to help us get in touch with the most honest, deepest, desires of the heart. ■

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The Theology of Desire

BY MOLLY HOUSH
GORDON, MINISTER, UU
CHURCH OF COLUMBIA,
MISSOURI

*How fair and pleasant you are,
O loved one, delectable maiden! You
are stately as a palm tree,
and your breasts are like its clusters.
I say I will climb the palm tree and lay
hold of its branches.
O may your breasts be like clusters of
the vine, and the scent of your breath
like apples,
and your kisses the best wine that goes
down smoothly, gliding over lips and
teeth.*

Hoo!

It's in the Bible y'all. Climbing the palm tree. Kisses like wine.

Specifically, it is a passage in the Hebrew Bible, from the Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon (7:6-9). It's a glorious love song, beautiful and sensual and earthy, which the ancient Jews read as a love story between humans and God, and which contemporary scholars read as an erotic encounter between two people. I like to read it as both, because how can we separate our experience of the holy from our experience of one another and this world: this world that caresses our skin through wind and water and earth and others' skin?

Do you remember your first big crush? That first time of *wanting*, even though you were not sure what, exactly, it was that you wanted?

I remember in 9th grade sitting in front of a Very Cute Boy in my history class, and I had memorized every plane of his face, and the way that he slouched at his desk, so that I could just *feel* him sitting behind me.

The back of my neck was hyper-aware of his presence. The room felt bright,

the world exciting, and my blood felt close to my skin. It was pure giddy longing, before longing got complicated.

I was crushin' hard.

Incidentally, he did not feel the same way. But it almost didn't matter (almost), because wanting him made me feel so very alive and in love with the world.

I was newly awakened by desire and so totally alive. It's a powerful feeling, though sometimes scary—and often made scarier by our culture's conflicting messages and hang-ups. But no matter who you are and who or what you've wanted, I hope you have felt that moment of unadulterated longing lighting up your soul and your skin.

I believe that what the world needs is simply us, come alive. And as I've read Sufi poems and remembered that first unrequited love, I've realized something more about what "coming alive" means—that the world needs us crushin' hard. The world needs us wanting, longing, living with our blood close to our skin.

And, furthermore, the world doesn't need us only crushing on holy, worthy, sacred things, because the whole world is worthy of our desire. God is worthy of our desire, and so is the Very Cute Boy in history class, by virtue of the spark of God that lives in him. The sacrament of really good dark chocolate is worthy of desire, and so are you. Yes, you, who are young or old; gay, straight, bi or otherwise; clear or confused; happy or hurting.

The holy is hungry for us and through us. And when we embody love in the world it is our minds and souls *and our bodies* that hunger. And when we live love, it is not just by feeding the poor or healing the sick—it is also by *wanting* and *longing*, it is by finding pleasure and taking delight in the world.

Our religious lives call us into awareness of our desire. It has always been so for some—particularly for the

mystics, those ecstatic lovers of God of every faith. But, of course, it has often been otherwise, as well. The denial of desire in mainstream Christian theology has also been passed down along the ages and has caused much heartache, injustice, and despair.

The early Christians were heavily influenced by Greek philosophic traditions which separated the material body from the ideal spirit, labeling matters of the spirit holy, and matters of the body debased. Further, the Greek Stoic traditions advocated *apatheia*, the careful and rational separation from one's passions. The Greeks distinguished between three kinds of love: *agape*—unconditional, selfless love; *philia*—devoted familial love; and *eros*—passionate, earthy love. These loves were ranked in exactly that order. Indeed, communities of faith often point us, as I have many times done myself, to agape love as the highest ideal—that love we give freely, asking nothing in return.

But, in truth, if we are to embody love fully, its forms will be intertwined. Our giving freely of ourselves will ring hollow if it is not fueled by our desire, even as our desire unchecked by true concern for others will be a force of harm. Postmodern philosopher Paul Ricouer points out that eros love without agape can be a brutal chaotic force, but that agape love without eros can be overly cerebral and moralistic. And feminist and queer theologians have been working for years now to reclaim eros as a core part of our beings and our religious lives.

As Hebrew Bible scholar David Carr writes in his book *The Erotic Word*, with the help of these movements in theology, we can now speak of “an eros that encompasses the myriad of ways people live out their deepest selves.” He points out:

One part of the past repression of sex has been restriction of it to a small part of life—closeted, heterosexual,

exclusive. In contrast, some thinkers are urging a wider concept of eros that would embrace not only sexual passion, but work, play, deep friendship, art, and many other sorts of profound pleasure. Such an eros would include the passion of lovers' desire, and also the sensual joy of a shared meal or an abiding thirst for justice.

A healthy sexuality exists in our core as a driving life force of passion.

Reclaiming eros in this way is a powerful countercultural message, and a declaration of our faith in human good. It stands in contrast to both the message in popular culture that your desire is a casual commodity to be bought and sold and to the message from many religious communities that your desire is shameful or wrong.

As we teach in our Our Whole Lives sexuality education class:

Your body is a very good gift, and made to delight in the world.

Your sexuality, that kernel of desire in your soul, is a very good gift, a gift of connection, creativity, and pleasure.

Anyone, including yourself, who irresponsibly violates that truth, whether physically or spiritually, has wandered far, far away from the divine source of love that hungers in and through us. Anyone who harms that kernel of desire does violence too, against the heart of God, who desires us as we are.

I want you to hear that sexuality is a great good gift and a part of our spiritual being, *and* that it is not only about attraction or some particular physical act. A healthy sexuality exists in our core as a driving life force of passion.

Womanist thinker Audre Lorde defines “the erotic” as “those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest

within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.” She writes:

We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward what will accomplish real positive change.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology of desire proclaims that we are created good, and we are created wanting and longing for Good. Our theology of desire calls us to live out that which is deepest, and strongest, and richest within us. It calls us to fall in lust with the world, in love with the holy.

To quote again from the Song of Songs (8:6-7)

... love is strong as death,

Its passion fierce as the grave.

Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.

If one offered for love all the wealth of one's house, it would be utterly scorned.

May your life be one of love stronger than death, and passion fierce as the grave. And may you rejoice and be glad in it. ■



The Cage of Desire



(excerpt)

BY JASON SEYMOUR,
MINISTER, UU SOCIETY
OF GREATER SPRING-
FIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

The flood of marketed desire that we experience daily began in the US at the turn of the 20th century. The new machinery of the industrial revolution had dramatically increased productive capacity, and for the first time producers of goods were consistently able to out-produce demand. One *New York Times* article at the time called it “need saturation”; industry could now produce in a few months what would satisfy demand for a full year.

This worried the captains of industry, who saw idle capacity as wasted money and feared a radicalized working class. They sought new ways to entice people’s needs and spending. Political leaders feared the mob of a dissatisfied public, and sought new ways to pacify and defang the masses, and entrench their own appeal.

Concurrently, the field of psychoanalysis was experiencing its formation in the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud’s main thrust was his suggestion that there are hidden, unconscious desires that drive individuals. His work would be used to explain the discontent of the masses of the Russian Revolution and the frenzied stock crash of 1929. The implied warning: satisfy the public’s desires or face instability, violence and chaos.

Freud’s American nephew, Edward Bernays, is today often referred to as the progenitor of the public relations industry. Using his uncle’s discovery of the unconscious, Bernays began crafting new marketing messages based not upon functionality or product attributes, but upon how whatever he was selling could indulge a person’s ego, or make them feel good about

themselves. For example, he would sell a screwdriver not by talking about its effectiveness at driving screws, but rather by showing how a person might feel using it: helpful, productive, handy, or “more of a man.”

By the late 1920s, thanks largely to the work of Bernays and company, the demand problem was nearly solved. Industry was kept busy and the masses were pacified by the consistent manufacture and delivery of consumer desires. In 1927 one journalist wrote: “A change has come over our democracy. It is called Consumptionism. The American citizen’s first importance to his country is no longer that of citizen but that of consumer.” One year later, President Hoover addressed leaders of industry: “You have taken over the job of creating desire and have transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines, machines which have become the key to economic progress.... By advertising and other promotional devices...we have a boundless field before us; that there are new wants which will make way endlessly for newer wants, as fast as they are satisfied.”

Thus, the cage of desire, in its crude initial form, was constructed—with the willing, often eager, participation of the American consuming public.

By the 1960s the game was changing. People had become critical of the establishment, of any establishment. They no longer saw conformity as therapeutic; conformity repressed exactly what needed to be set free. Unhappiness did not arise out of an inability to repress one’s inner urges; unhappiness was, in fact, caused, and made worse, by the repression that was being pushed as the cure.

Thus, the marketing atmosphere that emerged from the 60s had become one of feeding and indulging desires; the era of merely repressing or controlling desires was at an end. New production efficiencies, brought on by computer-

ized machinery, embraced the challenge posed by indulging spontaneous desires.

This gave the illusion of greater liberation, of greater personal expression, through a multitude of products. But, I ask you, is it truly freedom? Or is it the same passive reactivity, with simply more choices to choose from?

This emphasis on shallow personal satisfaction is foolish at best, criminal and manipulative at worst, in that it rarely makes even an effort to plumb the depths of our true longing, giving us instead a multitude of false gods to follow home. Sometimes we are hoodwinked by false pretenses. Other times, however, we know false gods for what they are, and yet we are simply too scared or too comfortable to disrupt this system, this expansive history that informs our identity. We stand frozen in view of our investments, despite our ongoing pain. We unwittingly rationalize the consistent denial of compassion in the name of personal satisfaction. We grant permission for selfishness because someone somewhere told us that this is the way it has always been done; it is inherent in the original design, in *our* original design.

Religious community is a place where we are called to explore our natural desires as individuals, to organize for their common pursuit, and to find mutual support in our daily struggles for authenticity. The prevalence of marketed desire simply makes more valuable, and more necessary, a kind of relationship that is free of coercion, that elevates compassion beyond personal identity and common good above individualism. A kind of bond that discerns natural desires from marketed desires, a kind of company that will stand with you, maladjusted still to the cages that remain. We can be a crucible for one another’s endless formation, if only we are brave enough to remain awake ourselves. ■



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

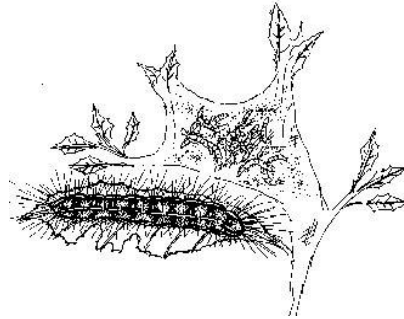
I was on a Vipassana meditation retreat in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley one spring, looking out over rolling hills. Cherry trees were in bloom, along with other fruit trees, flowers and bushes which provided beauty as far as the eye could see. In all of this beauty, my mind—which was supposed to be centered on my breath—was obsessed with one thing and one thing only. Tent caterpillars. One of the cherry trees had tent caterpillars.

Back home in Washington DC, where I lived at the time, we also had an outbreak of tent caterpillars. I had learned to paint Tanglefoot, a sticky substance, around the base of my tree's trunks so that the caterpillars could not scooch up and make their disgusting nests. There was no Tanglefoot on that cherry tree I could see from my meditation perch, and it upset me every time I opened my eyes (which were supposed to focus only on dharma teachings, announcements, or yoga instructions).

Finally, I went up to the groundskeeper, who I saw out working while I was supposed to be doing walking meditation, and hissed, "Tanglefoot." Did I mention we were supposed to be silent for the whole ten days of the retreat? The groundskeeper, clearly under instructions, did not respond verbally, or seem to even register what I had said. No Tanglefoot appeared on the tree.

The next day I had a one-on-one session with my primary teacher at the time, Tara Brach. Tara knew me well from other retreats and events. She had grown up UU and knew that I ran the UUA's Washington Office at the time, and we frequently talked about our common social justice concerns. In the session, I told her how troubled I was by the tent caterpillars.

She looked at me with compassion. "When you leave here," she said, "You might want to start a nonprofit with the goal of dealing with tent caterpillars. But now, that's not what you're doing. If you can't stop noticing the tent caterpillars, concentrate on bringing them into your consciousness and into your heart."



I was appalled. Clearly they were already in my consciousness—way too much—but the idea of bringing these horrible little worms into my heart, on purpose, sounded like a terrible idea. But, I tried. From then on, when my attention turned to the tent caterpillars, I set my intention to welcoming them into my heart. When I finally managed to do this, it's hard to explain quite what happened, but it was powerful. The closest image I have is that it was like what can happen when you look at an image that might be a young woman or an old witch, depending on how you look at it, and which switches back and forth, changing as you adjust how you fix your eyes, how you hold the picture, how you tilt your head, how you squint.

What happened was that my desire to rid the world of tent caterpillars was still there, but depending on which way I looked at it, it alternated with a different image—the clear knowledge that this desire to eradicate worms was somehow connected to my own sense of shame and inadequacy, which permeated from inside me. As I continued to sit with the shifting between shame (internal) and desire to eradicate the caterpillars (external), another change took place: something in my internal

sense of being moved to acceptance. I could see and know, from the inside, that even with worms crawling around in my heart, I was OK. Nothing about me needed to be fixed. Desire to eradicate the worms shifted at that point, too, and I trusted that the groundskeeper could do his job without me.

This experience came back to me when I returned to Washington DC to do my job. We had been trying, with considerable lack of success, to stop a war that was brewing in the Middle East, to keep religious conservatives from imposing their religion on the rest of us, to make elections fair and equitable. None of it was working. After the experience with the worms, the work shifted for me. I allowed all of those horrors, and many more, to take up residence in my heart. Somehow in that shift the desire to change what was going on shifted from desperate hopelessness to radical acceptance. Not acceptance as in *might as well stop trying to change this*, but rather acceptance as in *here is what we have the power to do*, and *there is where somebody else needs to do something or it will not happen*.

Desire of any kind, including desires to be healthy, desires to be loved, and desires to make the world more equitable and beautiful, can be negative forces when they come out of a place of shame and inadequacy. Nothing is ever enough, and grasping becomes a dominant force. I now try to hold in my heart the knowledge that I am fundamentally OK even when things around me are unfair and destructive, even when others are not behaving as I wished they did, even in this broken-hearted, aching world.

My desire for justice will never fade; that desire tells me I am alive and alert. But the desperation in my desire for a better world which was propelled by shame and inadequacy has shifted, and for that I will forever be grateful to tent caterpillars! ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Desire seems to fall into two categories. There is good desire, the kind of desire that makes you come alive and orient toward what your body and/or soul most deeply wants. And there is bad desire—craving or attachment or addiction that puts you in a stuck place where you are continually reaching for something that is supposed to fill a hole that it will never be able to fill.

But I think there are other kinds of desire as well. I remember learning in college literature classes about the medieval ideal of romantic love, which could be summed up as a knight pining for a lady in a tower. It was a kind of desire that was beautiful precisely because it *wouldn't* be fulfilled. The beauty was in the longing itself, rather than in the relationship that two people (often married to others) might achieve. I imagine it as the kind of desire I felt as a young teen to have an encounter with a unicorn.



I was certainly old enough to realize that unicorns weren't real, and there was exactly zero possibility that this would ever happen.

But the desire, the imagination of an encounter with mystery and wildness and purity and recognition, soul to soul—that was real.

Perhaps that kind of unrealized love is ridiculous, overly romantic, but I have



a soft spot in my heart for a pure desire for the impossible.

But then there's another kind of desire which

we haven't really talked about—the entirely achievable desire for things that serve you, but cause harm to others. This could look like a whole lot of things: Dashing across lanes on the highway in a way that is exciting and gets you to your destination faster, but is hazardous—or at least scary—to others on the road. Building your dream cabin in the woods—to the detriment of the woods themselves and the creatures who already live there. Eating up the ice cream that others in your family were expecting to share.

It happens all the time, in ways large and small. But I have been thinking about it particularly in terms of the society-wide conversation taking place about sexual abuse and sexual consent. Sexual desire, in and of itself, is a good thing, a natural and healthy pleasure that most beings (human and otherwise) experience. But it is all too common for people's desires to not match up. What one person wants to do with another person is not the same as what that other person desires.

And for far too long, men have been taught to follow their sexual desires as a goal to be achieved. Society teaches men that what is normal is to try to "score" or to "get some." In the meantime, while society has shifted some from the long tradition of telling women that their sexual desires are dirty or wrong, women still are taught that fulfilling men's sexual desires is anything from an expected kindness to an obligation to a means of escaping even more devastating harm. In the context of those social teachings we often get lost in a morass of desires that are not just unmatched, but also involve more and less subtle kinds of coercion.

When the fulfillment of sexual desire is a personal goal to be achieved, rather

than a subtle and potentially shifting conversation, then it makes sense to push the boundaries of "no," to see if you can't bargain or plead or demand your way to getting what you want. If the fulfillment of someone else's sexual desire is an obligation, it's all too easy to fail to hold on to—or even recognize—what your own desires actually are.

Imagine what would happen if we were to teach our children and our partners

It's a lot more complicated than just trying to get what you want.

and ourselves that our desires are legitimate and good, and that we are fully entitled to the pleasures of our own bodies. But that encounters with the bodies and desires of other people are never a game to be won, let alone a resource to be exploited. Instead, perhaps we could understand sexual encounters as a conversation in which we find pleasure in trying to recognize and acknowledge and respond to the places where our desires connect.

A conversation that you are trying to win is an argument. A sexual encounter you are trying to win is assault. But we have the choice to understand our desires as part of a complex dance in which invitations are offered and responded to in some variety of ways, all which need to recognize the agency and wishes of the other person.

It's a lot more complicated than just trying to get what you want. We will never do it perfectly, and there will always be those who just don't care about the cost to others so long as their desires are fulfilled. But it isn't a unicorn fantasy. If our deepest desire is for connection and respect and recognition and passion, we can find a way to live into that reality. ■



Church of the Larger Fellowship
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Web Site www.clfuu.org — **Email** clf@clfu.org — **Toll-Free Line** 800-231-3027 or 617-948-6150

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CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA



Ananda's Eyes

One day, while the Buddha was staying in Sravasti, his disciple Ananda was walking back from alms lunch under the hot sun and felt thirsty. He saw a maiden named Prakriti drawing water from the well, so asked her for some water, which she gave to him.

Now, Ananda was recognized by all to be exceptionally handsome, and Prakriti became smitten as she watched him drink. She desired him, but despite her own beauty could not entice him to stay.

In desperation, she sought help from her mother, Matangi. "He's a disciple of the Buddha," her mother said. "He has taken monastic vows. You cannot have him."

"I don't care," replied Prakriti. "If I can't have Ananda I won't go on living." And with that, she would neither eat nor drink, so powerful was her consuming desire for Ananda.

Fearing for her daughter's well-being, Matangi compelled Ananda to visit their home again. Ananda became confused, for Prakriti was very beautiful, but ultimately he still returned to the Buddha. This time Prakriti followed, declaring her undying love for him.

The Buddha asked Prakriti, "What is it that you love about Ananda?" She answered, "His nose is fine, his ears are well-proportioned, and lastly his eyes are so beautiful—they are dreamy!"

"Alright," said the Buddha, "if you desire his nose, I'll cut it off and give it to you. If you desire his ears, I'll slice them off, and you can have them. And if you desire his eyes so much, then I'll gouge them out and they're yours to take back with you."

Prakriti protested, "If you cut them off his face they won't be attractive anymore. They will rot and decompose!"

Then, the Buddha said, "If they are not desirable when removed from his face, then why do you find them so desirable now? Eventually, they still will rot and decompose, as all things are impermanent."

Reflecting on this, Prakriti immediately gained awakening. She no longer desired Ananda and became a disciple of the Buddha. ■