

Body and Spirit

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[Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester](#) – November 30, 2008

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How do you *feel* when you are in touch with something greater than yourself—when you are in a moment that I would call spiritual awareness? Not emotionally, that is, but physically?

I'm guessing this is not something most of us have spent a lot of time concentrating on. If I asked you how you felt physically getting up from the table at Thanksgiving, you might have a ready answer. How you felt emotionally might be complicated, but the physical feeling of fullness (or overfullness, as the case may have been) is easily brought back to mind.

Sometime, somewhere, a long time ago (and where and when exactly is a matter of much debate among religious academic types), theologians and philosophers decided that matters of the spiritual and matters of the physical were somehow separate from one another. And sometime, somewhere, that view became the dominant one in Christianity.

Some people blame Augustine for the split, though discussions of both mind and spirit being different from the physical reality of our bodies go back in Greek philosophy at least as far as Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BCE and to about that time in ancient Persia, with the founding of Zoroastrianism.

Augustine, who was born some seven hundred years after Plato's death, is a convenient target because of his prominence in developing what would become, for many centuries at least, orthodox Christian theology.

He also unabashedly separates the rational and willful from the emotional and carnal in his theology. In Augustine's writings, two Latin words are translated as "soul:" *animus* and *anima*, and he means different things by them. To Augustine, the *anima* is the part of us that leads us astray—our physical and emotional cravings and needs. This pull toward sin needs to be controlled by the *animus*, our rational capacity for self-control. This control, however can only truly happen (in his theological view) if we are in right relationship with God.

Of course, both of these things had spiritual dimensions to them. Both of these words are translated into the English "soul." While dualistic, Augustine's view of human existence did not separate out the physical from the spiritual as so many do today.

This kind of dualistic thinking is notably absent from Jewish history and theology. In Biblical Hebrew, the word most commonly translated as "soul" is *nepesh*, which is also a word that refers to the complete body that breathes, sometimes to the breath itself, and sometimes to the heart.

“Mind” and “soul” as well as “heart” are meant when the word is *lebab* (which is related to the modern Hebrew *leyb*, meaning the anatomical heart—the organ beating in the chest that is so essential for life). Much of the time, this is a metaphorical heart—the center of emotions, courage and strength—but it also refers to the physical part of the body.

The ancient Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, also means “breath.” It is the very force of life itself as much as it is the air that comes in and out of our lungs. It does not have to be either-or: breath or spirit, actual or metaphorical. It is both spirit and breath together. They are the same.

And yet, somehow the spiritual is so often seen as something apart from the flesh and blood, breath and being of life. Somehow, what is “spiritual” has been relegated by much of our society to the realm of the supernatural, leaving all of this natural mystery and wonder uninvolved.

And so today, I’d like us to take a moment to ponder our bodies and how our physical being and the ways in which it interacts with the world is vital to our spirituality.

Certainly, no two of our bodies are alike. I fully recognize that there are things that some of our bodies can do that others cannot. Movements and senses that I take for granted are not part of the everyday possibility for everyone. Some of us have bodies that present great challenges and limitations to us, and all of us are at best temporarily able-bodied. I get that.

But each of us has a body. A body that has physical sensations. A body that is capable of pleasurable feeling and of pain. A body that is capable of movement of some sort. And a body that is part of who we are, and part of the interdependent web of existence, and thus part of our connection to whatever it is that is greater than we are.

In addition to the overeating of Thanksgiving, four things in particular have happened recently that have made me think about the importance of this topic.

First, we have the wonderful fortune of having Donna Renfro with us as our Director of Religious Education this year. Donna, in addition to her impeccable credentials in education, is also involved in a ministry of dance. She shared with me the prayer I used today.

While I can cut a rug swing dancing, the areas of liturgical dance and movement are astonishingly foreign to me. For a year or two, I regularly attended Dances of Universal Peace, Sufi-inspired dances that bring together many different religious traditions. While I enjoyed the dancing as a spiritual practice, I never took the next step to learn how to lead such a thing.

And too many of the things I’ve seen in Unitarian Universalist worship are the kind of things that Garrison Keillor makes fun of us for. Exaggerated, clichéd movements to less-than-subtle poetry. Some of it has been excruciating.

And so it's been a great treat to have as a colleague someone who actually understands ritual movement, someone who teaches a form of it in fact, and who dances with a liturgical dance troupe in New Jersey. I'm taking the opportunity to learn myself, and I figure we can all do the same.

Second, I have begun once again to see a massage therapist on a regular basis. I've had two other times in my life when this was a regular part of my monthly routine, the latest of which being the four years before I moved to New York.

For me, the act of receiving massage is a deeply-spiritual act. It helps me pay closer attention to my own body, which, in turn, helps me pay better attention to the world outside of myself by being tuned into the physical ways in which I react to that world. The relationship between massage therapist and client is a spiritual one as well—my massage therapist in North Carolina could tell when things were not right with me spiritually and emotionally by the ways in which I held tension in my body.

Receiving massage on a regular basis has inspired me to think more about the role our bodies play in spirituality.

Third, we are about to begin teaching the *Our Whole Lives* curriculum to our 9th and 10th graders.

The *Our Whole Lives* series is a set of comprehensive sexuality education curricula designed to help people of all ages—from kindergarten to adults—understand sexuality as a healthy part of our beings, and to make responsible decisions about it. *Our Whole Lives* teaches that sexuality is more than just sex: it includes our need for emotional intimacy and friendly touch and our need to be able to express ourselves without fear of judgment.

It also teaches that sexuality is a topic worthy of discussion in a religious community. It teaches that our bodies are worth considering through the lens of moral decision-making, and through the filter of the principles our faith comes together to affirm and promote.

I know so much about this curriculum because I was one of the very first people hired as a teacher trainer for it, and because I later co-wrote the curriculum in the series for young adults. It is a wonderful gift we're giving to our youth—too wonderful a gift to give only to them, in fact.

And so I've been inspired to think about how we all can understand our bodies as part of our spiritual being, and worthy of spiritual consideration.

Finally, the midweek midday class has been discussing topics of religion in the news this fall. Among them are stories that have appeared of late about life after death, reincarnation, and the belief that the soul is not part of the body.

We have had fascinating conversations about all of these topics, and those conversations have inspired me to go deeper into this topic.

Despite the body-spirit duality present in much of Christianity, the modern-day practice of Unitarian Universalism is much *less* connected to our physical body and senses than is most of Christianity.

My own spirituality was nurtured in an environment that took physical and sensory clues from Catholicism much more than it did theological ones.

I vividly remember Sunday dinners at my father's parents' house in Brooklyn as a little boy. The family would gather in the early afternoon around their long dinner table—a miraculous table that folded up into a small cabinet and somehow seated all of us. After dinner, and while it was still light out, my grandfather would go for a walk. When we were there, my brother and I would usually join him.

He wouldn't go far—just a block or two, long enough to smoke a cigarette in his long, black cigarette holder. Usually, though, the end of the walk would be at the local Catholic church, where we would enter and light a candle.

Grandpa would drop a quarter in the collection box and we would get to light a candle. He instructed us that each candle represented a prayer for someone—and encouraged us to pray for someone else. Other than weddings and funerals, this was the only time I ever saw him inside of a church, and the most religious thing I ever remember him saying to us.

To this day, the act of prayer—complete with the notion that spiritual practice is the act of connecting with something outside of ourselves—is intimately connected with the sights and smells, sounds and feelings of that church.

The dark-red and amber candle holders with their flickering votive lights. The thick scent of incense lingering in the air from the morning mass. The cold stone walls going up to the vaulted ceiling. The soft shuffling of the feet of those who had come for a late-day moment of sacred quiet. The afternoon sunlight coming in through grimy stained glass windows. The physical act of kneeling.

The ritual of communion, too, takes full advantage of the body as a necessary part of spirituality. The act of ingesting bread and wine—whether actually or metaphorically the body and blood of Jesus—is the central religious ritual in Christianity. This ritual binds people together by making the very physical molecules of the bread and wine part of the body of each worshipper.

Most Unitarian Universalist worship has lost any connection to the body—singing and listening and standing every now and then notwithstanding. We have forced our entire religion into the head, and have therefore encouraged ourselves to divorce it from the physical reality of our being.

We light candles for huge milestones, and then in a public act that not everyone is comfortable with. Otherwise, even that act, meaningful in so many religious traditions, is relegated to Christmas Eve as something for the whole congregation.

Only rarely do we engage in rituals that ask us to move; it is a little ironic that our water ingathering that begins our Fellowship year in September and the flower festival that ends it in June are two of those rituals, and the two things we do that are most uniquely Unitarian Universalist.

I think we need to reclaim the place of the body in our worship. I hope you'll indulge me some more exercises like the one we did last week with the starfish on which you wrote ways in which you've made a difference to others—I've kept those starfish on the bulletin board because they were so inspiring to me. We could have shared those things orally, certainly. But the fact that they are physical reminders of the wonderful things you do makes them more special to me.

From time to time, we might even share a bite of food in worship, like we did in our Lammas celebration this past summer, when grain and jam signified the abundance of the harvest and the preservation of what is good in our lives.

It is unlikely that we will experience a Christian communion on Sunday morning, though I am open to the possibility of such a service for a special occasion (a Unitarian Universalist communion service for Maundy Thursday before Easter was one of the most powerful rituals I have partaken in as a member of our faith). But if you trust me, together we can find new rituals with broader and more inclusive meanings. I promise to forego the homemade hot sauce communion, really.

Perhaps, just maybe, we'll also get to dance, or at least to interpret our beliefs through movement (which is dance, even if it sounds less threatening). Donna has told me that her dance troupe would like to be part of one of our services, and I'm very much looking forward to taking them up on their offer. I hope we'll find ways for you to move as well—whatever your physical limitations or abilities.

I hope we can explore this together. May body and spirit be united once more, here and everywhere we go.

Blessed be.