

What does the hokey-pokey have to do with life?

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Call to Worship “Come to be Danced” - Jewel Mathieson

We have come to be danced.
Not the pretty dance
Not the pretty pretty, pick me, pick me dance
But the claw our way back into the belly of the sacred,
sensual animal dance.
The unhinged, unplugged, cat is out of its box dance.
The holding the precious moment in the palms of our
hands and feet dance.
We have come to be danced

Not the jiffy...shake your booty for him dance
But the wring the sadness from our skin dance
The blow the chip off our shoulder dance.
The slap the apology from our posture dance
We have come to be danced

Not the monkey see, monkey do dance, one, two, dance like you.
One two three, dance like me dance –
But the grave robber, tomb stalker,
tearing scabs and scars open dance.
The rub the rhythm raw against our soul dance.
We have come to be danced

Not the nice, invisible, self-conscious shuffle
But the matted hair flying, voodoo mama
Shaman shakin’ ancient bones dance
The strip us from our casings, return our wings
Sharpen our claws and tongues dance
The shed dead cells and slip into
The luminous skin of love dance

We have come to be danced

Not the hold our breath and wallow

in the shallow end of the floor dance

But the meeting of the trinity, the body, breath and beat dance

The shout hallelujah from the top of our thighs dance.

The mother may I? Yes you may – take 10 giant leaps dance.

The olly olly oxen free, free, free dance.

The everyone can come to our heaven dance.

We have come to be danced

Where the kingdoms collide in the cathedral of flesh

To burn back into the light

To unravel, to play, to fly, to pray

To root in skin sanctuary

We have come to be danced

We have come.

Reading

-John Corrado

We're one big, not-always-happy family,
given life and breath by an eternal parent
we dearly long to know.

Now we have our one shot at it,
our one time to be a conscious part
of this ongoing cavalcade.

It's not a free and easy trip.

We have to live with pain as well as pleasure,
temptation as well as promise,
loneliness as well as love,
fear as well as hope.

We have to live inside a coat of skin,
wrapped up in drives difficult to control
and dreams difficult to achieve.

And though we are the guests of honour,
we don't get to set the time of the party or its place,
nor are we consulted about the guest list.

This is our time, and there really is just one question:

What are we going to do with it?

Sermon: “What does the Hokey-Pokey have to do with faith?”

It was meant to be a simple exercise
about how to answer children’s questions.

It happened in a course I took in UU Religious Education at Harvard.

Our professor passed around an envelope
that contained small strips of paper,
each with a question that a child might ask.

Our task was to open the envelope, pull out the paper, read the question,
take a deep breath, and then, without delay, respond—
as though we were speaking to a six year old,
and not as though we were defending our master’s thesis.

My friend Brent went first.

He pulled out the question: “Will my dog go to heaven?”

Brent did as good a job as any of us might have.
He started talking about how special dogs are,
how hard it is to lose them, and how we hope to see them again.

But the more he talked, the deeper was the ditch that he was digging.

Was he really suggesting there was a chance of seeing a beloved pet again?
Was he asserting a belief in heaven?
And some sort of physical resurrection—for pets, let alone humans?

These, after all, were pretty bold claims to be making in a UU class.

Did he mean what he had said?

And, if he was fudging, even just a little,
is it ever a good idea for a minister to lie to a child?

Needless to say, we didn't make it to any of the other questions that day.

The entire class turned into an extended discussion about heaven and hell, the body and the soul, and about the need to be very, very careful when answering the questions of curious children.

I thought back to that moment in seminary this week when I heard that Pope Francis recently fell into a similar ditch.

It was first reported that his question came, just as he was leaving St. Peter's this week, from a distraught little boy, who asked the pontiff if he would see his beloved dog again in heaven.

In trying to comfort the boy, Pope Francis was reported to have said, "paradise is open to all of God's creatures."

While it's now clear from updated news reports (news that came in once my sermon was already written) that he didn't actually say that, his misquoted words launched a global flurry of activity, as animals-rights groups celebrated this newly minted doctrine as proof that animals have souls and should be protected, and church leaders tried to pull back a bit from the theological pronouncement it seemed the pope had inadvertently made.

The danger, for the pope, of so many people not really knowing what papal infallibility actually means, is that everyone takes everything you say (and, in this case, don't say), perhaps, a little too seriously.

It's just a hunch, but I suspect this particular pope would be happier, at least some days, being a Unitarian Universalist minister..., where we never have mix-ups over infallibility!

At the very least, if the story were true, it would have been helpful if the pope could have taken my UU religious education class.

Because the single-most important thing I remember from that day was the lesson that it's always best to first ask children what they think.

Not only does it buy you an extra minute or so
to ponder your own response, but,
if you're actually listening to the child,
you may hear the real substance of her concern.

Still, based on the initial report,
I think the pope gave an okay response to the little boy.

It was one of those moments when compassion and comfort
were far more important than theological purity or precision.

And, besides, as it turns out,
at least a few popes over the past two centuries
have gone back and forth on this question about animals.

John Paul II pretty much stated as pope that all dogs do go to heaven.

In our tradition, as you might have guessed,
we make no such official pronouncements.

And if we ever decided to do so, the question of whether
dogs go to heaven would be a pretty difficult place to start.

As my classmates and I discovered many years ago, some questions
are much more complicated than they may seem on the surface.

For starters, within our tradition, concern about heaven and hell
—and debate about an afterlife—has given way over the past century or so
to seeing that heaven and hell can be conditions in the here and now.

As a result, UUs have tended to see that we have a responsibility
to work for less hell and more heaven in the life that we have
and share with others.

And, of course, any discussion about dogs in heaven would be challenging for
us, because we haven't really had much to say about immortal souls.

In a 19th century Unitarian catechism, to the question,
“where do we go when we die?”
the very matter-of-fact answer was, “not very far.”

The truth is that I know in our congregations today, there is actually a wider range than we often recognize of people who do believe that there is some sort of experience that awaits us after this life.

They don't usually mean St. Peter and the Pearly Gates, but they do have a sense that we have a soul that continues on past our deaths.

While I'm certainly open to the possibility, and would, I hope, be happily surprised if things turned out differently than I expect, for myself, I come closer to the view of that 19th century theologian, who thought we don't do much travelling once we die.

I haven't personally found much purchase for the idea that we are comprised of both a body and a soul—at least not in the literal sense.

Instead, I believe we are born into this world in bodies and animated by the power of life itself, as we breathe in our first breath through to the moment we breathe out our last.

Where some religions see the body as a temporary home to be discarded when the soul moves on, some mortal coil to be shuffled off at the end, our tradition holds that our bodies are a precious gift to honoured and celebrated and used in service for the work of the world.

With a deep doubt that there might be anything more to come, our bodies contain all of the life that we are in any way guaranteed.

And, even that guarantee is very time-limited.

Linda Chrisman gets at this in such a poignant way in her essay, "Birth," from the book *Being Bodies*:

During the days before my son's birth I listened to requiems, over and over, for hours and hours. I listened and wept to Brahms and Berlioz and Fauré.

I really don't know why, but I craved those requiems
the way I had craved corn in the early months of my pregnancy.

I was aware of death from the moment I knew that I was pregnant.

As my baby grew in life inside of me,
death grew as a presence beside me.

Sometimes I was afraid my baby would die or I would die.

Sometimes I was not fearful.
The certainty of death, however, grew as my belly grew.

I had understood the cycle of life into death and death into life,
but now I felt this cycle.

I could feel that in birthing this baby into life,
I was also birthing him into death.¹

That is the bittersweet bargain that's on offer
to those of us who believe that life is a one-shot deal.

We get one body, and with it one brief life,
to make of it the most that we can.

While we can replace some of our parts
and go in for an occasional tune-up,
the body we are born into is the only one we'll ever have to work with.

And, yet, too often we fail to remember what a precious gift it is
to inhabit the world, alive in flesh and blood.

We focus instead on the imperfections and the parts that are worn out,
we see only the drooping and the sagging and the wrinkling,
we feel only the aches and the pains—
which I do realize can be terribly difficult to endure.

But we sometimes forget that the body is our prized ticket to life,

¹ Linda Chrisman, "Birth," from *Being Bodies*, p. 60.

even with all of its hardships and disappointments and complications.

In this month's *New Horizons*, I included a brief video of people being asked what they would change about their bodies, if given the chance.

It was so striking that the adults mentioned things like having smaller ears, bigger eyes, longer legs, or no stretch marks.

And the kids, when asked, said things like having wings or a mermaid's tail. One boy wanted to be able to teleport himself, and another wanted fast legs to run like a cheetah.

Somehow, these kids have held on to a knowledge that seems to fade with age—that our bodies are splendid centres of possibility.

These kids haven't yet forgotten that we have come to be danced—to live into the fullness of our bodies, to feel, stretch, and grow, to know life's pleasures and its pain, its joys and sorrows, its bliss and its heartbreak.

In short, to know in our bones what it means to be gloriously human.

There are so many voices that compete for our attention to take us away from that sacred truth, that precious understanding.

As the writer Eduardo Galeano puts it:

The Church says: *The body is a sin.*
Science says: *The body is a machine.*
Advertising says: *The body is a business.*
[But the] body says: *I am a fiesta.*

In this month, as we consider what it means to seek a life of embodiment, let us explore the relationship each of us has with our own body, and not as an intellectual exercise, as we're so prone to do as Unitarians.

Instead, let us feel and know and honour our body, through and through. Aware of it, awake to it, appreciative for the good gift that it is.

Let us listen to what it tells us,
about who we've been, who we are, and who we are becoming.

Let us take in what it has taught us about being human,
and what it has to teach us still, as we contend with all of its changes.

For, one day, it will be otherwise.
Our body will give out, and we'll take our last breath.

And the telling question will be less whether we've gone to our heavenly
reward, but whether we knew and built
something of heaven, right here on earth, in and with the body that was ours.

A couple of weeks ago, there was a moving segment on *The National*.
It was about Matthew Heisler, a student at the University of North Dakota
who died last spring in a tragic house fire, at the age of 21.

Matthew had signed up to be an organ donor when he was 16.

In total, sixty people were helped by the ongoing gift of his body.

The powerful clip on the CBC showed the day that his parents and sister met
Tom Meeks, the man who had received Matthew's heart.

They burst into tears as they put a stethoscope to Tom's chest
and heard the heart of their own son and brother beating once more.

What an awesome, beautiful, and gut-wrenching dance this is.
And what an astonishing thing to help keep the dance going,
even after we've gone.

Now, I realize you may still be wondering where the
Hokey-Pokey figures into this sermon. . .

Hearing my sermon title, Bill Dunk-Green wrote to assure me this week
that though he was once addicted to the Hokey-Pokey,
he had turned himself around. . .

When I asked if I could share the news with the congregation,
he said, "that's what it's all about!"

It is, of course, a song with words we all know,
whether we really want to or not.

But it offers some meaningful advice for living
an engaged and embodied life—
guidance to put our whole self in,
to take our whole self out,
to jump back in, with all that we are, and shake it all about.

So, does the Hokey-Pokey hold the key to the meaning of life?

Maybe so.

If we dance these bodies we've been given for everything they're worth—
which will, of course, in the end, be everything.

Amen.