

“Body of Knowledge”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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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.

I love the hymn “Find a Stillness.”

I find that it calms me, slows me down,
and comes to me sometimes when I really need it.

Today, given our focus on embodiment
(our monthly theme for May),
I wondered how that song would feel,
if instead of the word “spirit”
we substituted the word “body.”

(Sing)

“In the body,
By the body,
With the body giving power
I would find true harmony.”

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that put in the context of a hymn,
we recognize and affirm the wisdom of the body...
the kind of wisdom we sometimes
associate with “spirit” or “soul.”

Make that lyric change with other hymns
and you’ll see it just as clearly.

“Body of life, come unto me...
sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion...”

Or how about “I’ve got peace like a river,
in my **body**...just as much as “in my soul”.

It’s no secret that I find words like “spirit” and “soul” useful,
both in congregational singing and elsewhere.

For me, the unseen dimension of life,
no matter how it’s named, is a source of energy, power and
knowledge...and we’re wise to cultivate as human beings,
for our own well-being and the benefit of the Whole.

But the body, the physical, the tangible is just as wise...
And these aspects of our lives are interdependent.

They are intertwined in beautiful ways that we can,
and indeed we must, affirm and celebrate.

When we recognize the deep knowledge held within our bodies...and
the wisdom they offer through the universe of processes alive within
them,

...we may find a route toward insight and understanding
both in our personal lives and for the well-being of our planet.

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Now, we Unitarian Universalists can be pretty “heady” people.

Who else would give their church a name with so many syllables?

Historically, we’ve been known for rigorously intellectual sermons,
and many people in our pews, though by no means all, are highly
educated.

As well, many UUs have “come from away”...
come from religious traditions that emphasize
the senses much more than we do.

High Anglican and Catholic services are known for their
“smells and bells”— sensory aspects that put worshippers
literally into a different frame of mind,
one more receptive to contemplative awareness.

The physical postures of Muslim prayer,
the patterned movements of yoga and Tai Chi...

The sweet and savoury tastes of the Jewish seder...
the soft bread in the mouth during Christian communion...

These are sensory experiences, and that’s no accident.

Whether we focus on our breath in meditation,
move our bodies in sacred dance,
or be carried away by the sound of a hymn...
all of these “spiritual practices” are in fact “bodily practices.”

We need the vehicle of our body to open up
our awareness to the entire Body of Life.

Our bodies are the portals through which we gain awareness and
insight...and not only through our waking physical lives...but also
through dreams, that come to our bodies during sleep.

As Nietzsche said, “There is more knowledge in our bodies
than in our deepest philosophy.”

And could be a wake-up call for those of us
who tend to live in our heads.

Before we get much further,
let's take a moment to connect to these bodies of ours.

What is your body calling for, right at this moment?

Perhaps you'd like to stretch your legs, or wiggle your toes.

Extend your arms, roll your shoulders,
close your eyes or move your head from side to side.

Maybe you'd like to let out a big yawn!
(Go ahead, I won't be offended!)

(People do what they do.)

At many of our meetings here at First, in committees and Journey
Groups, we take a few minutes to "check in."

Just now, we did a "mini check-in" with our bodies.

We invited our bodies to say "Hi! Here's how I'm doing."

The check-in didn't need words,
and even though we're in a public place,
it was primarily for our own personal knowledge
and awareness.

So, what was your body telling you in that moment?

Perhaps, "I'm tired."
Or, "I'm restless."

Perhaps, "I'm needing to stretch myself right now."
Or "Something is really a pain in the neck."

“I’m shouldering a lot” or
“I feel the need for better support.”

If you didn’t feel like moving,
was the message, “I’m stuck”...
or “I’m comfortable right where I am”?

If you took a deep breath,
are you desiring to take life in more deeply?

Or, perhaps, wanting to make space for your inner life?

When we’re open to a conversation with our bodies,
we encourage a playful and creative dialogue
that can guide us toward well-being.

If your body told you something interesting or useful just now, you
might consider writing it down on the “Connection Card” in your
Order of Service...

Perhaps on the side meant for a message from a member or a friend.

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In his book “The Soul’s Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual
Way of Life,” Thomas Moore writes:

“Through a life of sensation we take in what the world has to offer
and what the artist has beheld in trance.

This is the most appropriate way to inquire into the mysteries and
search for the presence of God [or the sacred], because analysis only
takes us further into our own reasoning, while the senses carry us
into an undiscovered, unfiltered world.

The senses not only reveal the cold facts of the physical universe, but they also grasp the secrets of the spirit.”¹

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Engaging in “poetic conversation” with our body can be a powerful and illuminating spiritual practice.

Another simple practice we can do anytime is to meditate on the obvious connections between our bodies and the body of our common ancestor, Mother Earth.

While breathing deeply, you can envision the network of branching airways within your lungs as a mirror of the branching trees overhead...

You can trace the river of a vein in your arm while sitting beside a river and watching it flow...

Or imagine how your fingerprints are like sand-dunes, in a tiny landscape that is continually breaking down and reforming, as our skin is regenerated about every 27 days.²

Now, I threw that interesting fact in,
in the way some humans do,
because we like to understand things and sound smart.

But we don’t always have to try to understand everything.
That’s what intellectual activity is all about.

¹ Thomas Moore, *The Soul’s Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual Way of Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 232.

² <https://www.webmd.com/beauty/cosmetic-procedures-overview-skin#1>

For spiritual activity,
we need only to behold the body of life
that is literally right here in our hands.

To humbly sit with the mystery that is life.

The mystery that is us.

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In a new book called “A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough,”
Wayne Muller writes:

“Human beings have an innate capacity to discern
what is necessary or true;

We have our own authentic, most reliable inner compass,
a visceral knowing, an unmistakable sense in our hearts and bodies
that indicates what is the next right thing to do,
to make, to become.

This inner wholeness has been given many names—
our spirit, our true nature, our spark of divinity,
our subconscious, our intuition, our inner light.

What lives and breathes in us is a knowing of what
cannot be easily seen or named by language.

This compass, this still, small voice,
this absolutely trustworthy capacity
to listen for what is right and true—

It is from this place that we come to know,
without doubt or hesitation,

an undeniable certainty that who we are,
and what we do, in this moment,
embedded in a gentle peace beyond understanding,
is wholly sufficient.

[Is] simply and completely enough.”³

Wayne Muller acknowledges what will be clear to many of us.

We lose touch with this inner knowing
when we tune out or ignore the wisdom of the body.

And he points out that it often comes to us
in the most subtle and simple of ways:

“A cramped feeling in our belly when we’re invited to an event we’d
rather not attend,

Or a gentle leaning toward, or away from,
a certain person, task or responsibility.”⁴

As we learn to become more mindful of the signals our bodies are
offering, it can be helpful to sit with a trusted friend, who can listen
non-judgmentally...

Not advising or critiquing,
but entering with us into a spirit of gentle inquiry.

These spiritual friends and teachers are all around us,
both in this room and elsewhere, and they’re in the culture as well,
often providing the wisdom that we need for our own healing and
the healing of the world.

³ Wayne Muller, *A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough* (New York: Harmony, 2011), 21.

⁴ *ibid.*

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The artist Yoko Ono has an exhibit on at the Gardiner Museum now until the end of this month.

Called “Riverbed,” it’s an experiential exhibit that invites the public to be literally “in touch” with our own suffering, as well as our longing to mend the world, and our ability to do that in our very personal ways.

Her Twitter feed yesterday, when I was writing this sermon, read: “You are a cloud. Didn’t you know that?”

So, she’s right in tune with us today, as we reflect on the connection between our bodies and our spirits.

When I visited the exhibit, a middle-aged woman came through the doors and almost immediately started to cry.

Reading the booklet given to her, she approached a large grouping of stones arranged like a river on the gallery floor, and carefully picked one up.

They were all fairly large stones, quite heavy, each one with a distinctive colour and subtle texture.

You could pick up whichever one spoke to you, and sit down on either a meditation cushion or chair, to follow Yoko Ono’s instructions for the “Stone Piece” installation.

They were simple instructions:

“Choose a stone and hold it until all your anger and sadness have been let go.”

Sitting on her cushion, the woman continued to weep while holding the stone, tears running down her cheeks.

I wondered if they might fall on the stone and cause some kind of problem.

About fifteen or twenty minutes passed.
I lost track.

And then, when my tears subsided,
I breathed the deepest breath I had breathed in days...

...and placed the (slightly damp) stone back in the riverbed.

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Later, I found myself reflecting on the body of knowledge Yoko Ono brought to this remarkable work of art—and to the two other installations that make up the “Riverbed” exhibit as well.

Now 85 years old, Yoko Ono lived through the traumatic loss of someone she loved deeply, as the result of a violent crime.

While surely not the only challenge she’s encountered in her long life, it was one that brought her face-to-face with grief and sorrow, with the tragically unpredictable events of life, and with what some people might call “evil.”

Nevertheless, she has responded to a world of hurt with work that heals...

Art that brings us into contact with the broken within ourselves...

...and the disconnected shards of life that can only be reconnected with care and with love.

Her Riverbed so moved me, I believe,
because after a long period of busyness
and brainy-ness...

It welcomed me back into my body...
Inviting me to find a stillness...
and hold a stillness...

To let the stillness of a thousand-year old stone
carry me.

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And so, I wish for you now, and always,
a healing encounter of sensation and spirit.

May the knowledge your body holds
replenish you today...

and carry you forward
in the never-ending conversation that is Life.

Amen.

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