

“Your Body is Welcome”

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Meditation Reading

"Your Body Is Welcome Here"

- Rev. Sean Neil-Barron

Your body is welcome here, all of it.
Yes, even that part. And that part. And yes, even that part.
The parts you love, and the parts you don't.
For in this place we come with all that we are
All that we have been,
And all that we are going to be.
Our bodies are constantly changing, cells die and cells are reborn
We respond to infections and disease
Sometimes we can divorce them from our bodies,
and other times they become a permanently part of us.
Your body and all that is within it, both wanted and not wanted has a
place here.
Our bodies join in a web of co-creation, created and creating.
Constantly changing, constantly changing us
Scarred and tattooed, tense and relaxed
Diseased and cured, unfamiliar and intimate
Formed in infinite diversity of creation
Your body is welcome here, all of it.
So take a moment and welcome it
Take a moment to feel in it.
Take a moment, to be in it.

Sermon:

“Come, yet again, come.”¹

We wanderers, worshippers, lovers of leaving.

But what is it, exactly, that we are so often apt to leave?

Often, it is the present moment itself.
Our felt awareness of our body’s experience of life.

It is our senses of which we, so often, take our leave.

What if we welcomed ourselves back into our bodies,
into the shape and sense of life...

Not only with “self-acceptance”...

But with a radical, embracing love.
Love of our actual physical bodies at this actual time.

Love of exactly who we are—
with no need to improve, fix or correct ourselves.

What if that radical welcoming love
were to extend outward to all people, and all beings?

Come--as we continue to consider our bodies today,
welcoming and appreciating them anew—

And wondering why and how
we become disconnected from them.

¹ “Come, Come, Whoever You Are” in Singing the Living Tradition hymnbook.

Even when our bodies are tired,
aching, in need of healing...

May they be no caravan of despair.

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Right now, in this time of lockdown, we may feel disconnected from others, but we are here with ourselves.

As Jon Kabat-Zinn and others have famously said:
“Wherever you go, there you are.”

And wherever we stay put, here we are, too.

So this is an ideal time for us to reconnect within.

To seek healing from the disconnection between
our bodies and ourselves.

As I looked ahead to this sermon, a few weeks ago,
I was very grateful to be pointed toward a book and online
community called “The Body is Not An Apology: The Power of
Radical Self-Love” by Sonya Renee Taylor.²

She’s a widely respected author, speaker, poet and activist who
promotes radical self-love and body empowerment
as the foundational tool for social justice and global transformation.

I’d like to thank Josee Thibault and Tanya Cothran for letting me
know about her work.

² Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Berrett-Koehler, 2018), <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/>

I'll draw on it quite a bit this morning, while also recognizing that we can only scratch the surface in this short time.

The book begins with the premise that each person has within us a “natural intelligence” that guides us to become fully ourselves in our own divine uniqueness.

Quoting spiritual teacher Marianne Williamson, Sonya Renee Taylor writes, “an acorn does not have to say ‘I intend to become an oak tree.’ Natural intelligence intends that every living thing become the highest form of itself and designs us accordingly.”³

Taylor goes on:

“Each day we wake to a planet full of social, political, and economic obstructions that siphon our energy and diminish our sense of self.

Consequently, tapping into this natural intelligence often feels nearly impossible.”

“Humans,” she says, “Unfortunately make being human exceptionally hard for each other, [yet the work we do] is not about acquiring some way of being that we currently lack.

The work is to crumble the barriers of injustice and shame leveled against us so that we might access what we have always been,

Because we will, if unobstructed, inevitably grow into the purpose for which we were created:

our own unique version of that oak tree.”⁴

Many among you will realize that this deeply inclusive

³ Marianne Williamson, “The Spiritual Purpose of Relationships” (Lecture, Los Angeles, CA, January 3, 2016) quoted in Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not An Apology*.

⁴ Taylor, *The Body is Not An Apology*, 5.

understanding is in keeping with Unitarian Universalism's First Principle:

“The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

Every body, equally worthy of love.

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Of course, in our world, we often don't live this way.

Our culture compares and contrast bodies, valuing some over others, allowing violence to be perpetuated against Black and Indigenous bodies...

Allowing basic human needs to be denied to bodies that are differently abled...

Allowing the rejection and abandonment of bodies that suffer from mental illness...and the list goes on.

We often focus on these wider world concerns, as of course we should.

What Sonya Renee Taylor does—very helpfully and with tremendous compassion—is connect the dots between wider world injustice and the negative messages about our own bodies that each of us may carry, no matter who we are.

She writes:

“Body terrorism is a hideous tower whose primary support beam is the belief that there is a hierarchy of bodies.

We uphold the system by internalizing this hierarchy

and using it to situate our own value and worth in the world.

Knowing that we all are constantly manipulated by media messages that value some bodies over others, she urges us to do (quote) “the scary work of tearing down those pillars of hierarchy inside ourselves.”

“We must trust,” she writes, “that what will be left standing is our own divine enoughness, absent of any need for comparison.”⁵

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Thinking back to the poem Angela read earlier, by Reverend Sean Neil-Barron, I remember the line:

“Your body and all that is within it,
both wanted and not wanted has a place here.”

It causes me to wonder, why have some parts of our bodies—ourselves—been “unwanted?”

What are the ways that we’ve, likely unconsciously, internalized the “hierarchy of bodies” that Sonya Renee Taylor writes about?

And how might we tear down this hierarchy to create a more loving world?

You’ll notice of course that by using words such as “tear down” we’re making a connection with the call to “dismantle white supremacist culture.”

This dismantling, which is necessary to create anew a truly just and loving world, starts with each of us.

⁵ Taylor, 37.

It starts with some of the habits and patterns that may be so familiar we don't even realize we have them.

They may be part of the shell that's preventing us little acorns from truly flourishing, and doing our part for the healing of the planet.

We can start to notice these, not with a shaming and critical eye, but instead with sense of peaceful curiosity...
a non-judgmental interest in how we came to see ourselves and others.

Sonya Renee Taylor talks about making peace in three ways:

Making peace with not understanding,

Making peace with difference,

and making peace with YOUR body.⁶

So, as we're curious about that last one, we might ask ourselves, how are we carrying the body shame that is woven so deeply into our culture?

How do we reject our bodies,
in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways,
and in doing so, how do we buy in—
both literally and figuratively—
to the hierarchies that need to come down?

Here are few, drawn from Taylor's work and my own experience, and I hope you'll think of some of your own in the coming days...

⁶ Taylor, 15.

But again, the idea here is not to layer on any more shame, but to simply notice with kindness.

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First and foremost: we may compare ourselves to others, placing ourselves up or down on various ladders.

Here Taylor repeats the famous quote, “Comparison is the thief of joy.”⁷

But comparison and competition is so much a part of our culture, we may not notice we’re doing it, or on some level we may think we should!

Some others:

Ignoring or minimizing physical needs in the name of achievement, social acceptance or success.

Feeling embarrassed for any aspect of our appearance, or any illness or ailment.

Feeling guilty when we make a mistake, forget something, or don’t understand a certain subject.

Feeling shame over mood or emotions.

Insisting on perfection in ourselves or others...and demanding consistency in everything we do...that is, not accepting difference even within ourselves.

Over-valuing constant productivity.

Valuing youthful bodies over others.
Feeling apologetic when we are sick or tired.

Buying things to feel more worthy or enough—often called “retail therapy.”

Seeing your social or living situation as less worthy than someone else’s.

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It’s worth pausing here to notice that during the pandemic, many of us have been looking at ourselves more usual.

It makes me wonder what it was like in the early 18th Century when mirrors became widely available.

Right now, we’re create a sense of distance from our bodies as we literally look at ourselves at a digital remove.

We may notice ourselves having self-critical thoughts about our appearance or our homes as we watch ourselves on Zoom.

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Now, of course, this isn’t to say that we shouldn’t experience joy and pleasure in the clothes we wear,

Or in wearing make-up or styling our hair
or decorating our homes.

But it’s just to notice that in subtle ways,
and because we’ve been taught to do so through our culture, we often judge and evaluate our bodies and those of others.

Using the tools of mindful self-awareness, we can simply notice when a judgmental or self-critical thought arises, and we can intentionally replace it with a kind and loving thought instead.

Sonya Renee Taylor encourages us to “make peace with our bodies by distinguishing and diminishing the [outside voice of shame and judgment]...

and cultivating a practice of listening more deeply to our authentic selves, our radical self-love voice, our “inside voice.”⁸

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Again, because we’ve been steeped in messages that actually counter the notion of Universal Love and inherent worth and dignity,

we may not realize how often we judge and evaluate ourselves and other people.

Here’s another small example.

Recently the director Michael Apted died at age 79.

He made many films, but is best known for the “Up” documentary series that followed a group of British schoolchildren, beginning at age 7, and then continuing until the last documentary when they were all 63 years old.

When I think about the series—which I loved—I realize that much of its entertainment value

⁸ Taylor, 41.

came from taking stock of how everyone was turning out...how they were physically aging, and what they had achieved.

The “hierarchy of bodies” was built into the series from the beginning as it began as an exploration of the British class system—and as the director, unconsciously but in an accurate reflection of the times, included very few women in the program.

I found the “Up” series to be a deeply moving portrait of ordinary people growing up and growing older.

Yet when I think about watching the films, I realize I couldn’t do so without comparing the various people, one to the other, and each to their own younger selves, and then to me, especially because I’m roughly in the same age group.

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When I started writing this sermon, I wondered, at first, if enough people here might be able to relate to the subject of body shame.

So I asked my husband, “Was there ever a time in your life when you felt embarrassed about something about your body or felt that your body was different or unworthy in some way?”

Without missing a beat, he answered, “My childhood.” And then he laughed and added “My teenagehood!” And he said I could share that with you.

When we think about our bodies and all they’ve been through, we might recall many painful experiences of shame or rejection...having to do with our appearance, our sexuality, or our abilities.

These experiences may be more widespread than we realize.

And in addition, many people received early messages that their whole selves were unlovable or unacceptable, if they showed weakness or failed to live up to some standard.

According to the recent biography by his niece,⁹ the 45th President of the United States was one such person.

We can only imagine how deeply he must have internalized these messages, to project them with such hostility on so many others.

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Also let me add that, if anything troubling is surfacing for you today as you reflect on your body's experience during your lifetime, please don't hesitate to reach out for support.

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In "The Body is Not An Apology," Sonya Renee Taylor writes:

"Radical self-love is not a destination you are trying to get to; it is who you already are, and it is already working tirelessly to guide your life.

The question is how can you listen to it more distinctly, more often?"¹⁰

She suggests that over time, as we become more mindfully aware of self-limiting thoughts, we will gradually let them go...replacing them

⁹ Mary Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (Simon & Shuster, 2020)

¹⁰ Taylor, 5.

instead with loving and kind messages toward ourself...which strengthen and empower us to do the work of love and justice we're uniquely called to do.

In this steady transformation, we might find ourselves practicing self-care in new and enjoyable ways...

Honouring our unique talents and gifts and sharing them more freely and confidently...

Saying "no" with clarity and confidence, when a particular choice is not right for our body...

And opening our hearts in generosity and compassion when we recognize that other bodies are in need.