

THE SPIRIT LIKES TO DRESS UP LIKE THIS

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Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS *I Sing the Body Electric (#4) ~ Walt Whitman*

I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her
neck for a moment, what is this then?
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.
There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the
contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

Yes, being here, together, pleases the soul well.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *Who Is Ben? ~ Charlotte Zolotow*

(In this story, Ben experiences how, in total darkness, he feels that he is part of everything.)

READING *I Sing the Body Electric (#9) ~ Walt Whitman*

This best known and most enthralling of Whitman's poems is a praise-song to physicality that raises questions about the soul.

O my body! I dare not desert the likes of you in other men and women, nor the likes of
the parts of you,
I believe the likes of you are to stand or fall with the likes of the soul, (and that they are
the soul,)
I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems,
Man's, woman's, child's, youth's, wife's, husband's, mother's, father's, young man's,
young woman's poems,
Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears,
Eyes, eye-fringes, iris of the eye, eyebrows, and the waking or sleeping of the lids,
Mouth, tongue, lips, teeth, roof of the mouth, jaws, and the jaw-hinges,
Nose, nostrils of the nose, and the partition,
Cheeks, temples, forehead, chin, throat, back of the neck, neck-slue,
Strong shoulders, manly beard, scapula, hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of
the chest,
Upper-arm, armpit, elbow-socket, lower-arm, arm-sinews, arm-bones,
Wrist and wrist-joints, hand, palm, knuckles, thumb, forefinger, finger-joints, finger-
nails,

Broad breast-front, curling hair of the breast, breast-bone, breast-side,
 Ribs, belly, backbone, joints of the backbone,
 Hips, hip-sockets, hip-strength, inward and outward round, man-balls, man-root,
 Strong set of thighs, well carrying the trunk above,
 Leg fibres, knee, knee-pan, upper-leg, under-leg,
 Ankles, instep, foot-ball, toes, toe-joints, the heel;
 All attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my or your body or of any one's
 body, male or female,
 The lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean,
 The brain in its folds inside the skull-frame,
 Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,
 Womanhood, and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from woman,
 The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-looks, love-
 perturbations and risings,
 The voice, articulation, language, whispering, shouting aloud,
 Food, drink, pulse, digestion, sweat, sleep, walking, swimming,
 Poise on the hips, leaping, reclining, embracing, arm-curving and tightening,
 The continual changes of the flex of the mouth, and around the eyes,
 The skin, the sunburnt shade, freckles, hair,
 The curious sympathy one feels when feeling with the hand the naked meat of the
 body,
 The circling rivers the breath, and breathing it in and out,
 The beauty of the waist, and thence of the hips, and thence downward toward the
 knees,
 The thin red jellies within you or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones,
 The exquisite realization of health;
 O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul,
 O I say now these are the soul!

MESSAGE

The Spirit Likes to Dress Up ~ Rev. Stoneberg

I went to visit Gord and Claire McLellan just a few days before Gord died. His breathing was shallow and thin; he was barely present. He would take in as big a breath as possible, brighten and begin a thought only to fade off, without, it seemed to me, the energy to even notice. His body was still alive and functioning, however weakly, but his 'Gord-ness' was mostly absent. He was existing on that liminal plain between life and death, and it occurred to me that this would probably be the last time I would be in his gracious presence.

Among the powerful moments of my life is the experience of sitting with, and touching, a body after death...my parents, my dogs, a few friends, and many I have served as minister. Powerful because that experience makes it clear that a being, a personality, is so much more

than a body; powerful because once a body dies, whatever gave life to that form, seems to evaporate. The shell is still present but whatever life it once embodied has gone.

Today's service title is inspired by Mary Oliver, and her writing, titled appropriately, *Poem*:

The spirit
likes to dress up like this:
ten fingers,
ten toes,
shoulders, and all the rest
at night
in the black branches
in the morning
in the blue branches
of the world.
It could float, of course,
but would rather
plumb rough matter.
Airy and shapeless thing,
it needs
the metaphor of the body,
lime and appetite,
the oceanic fluids;
it needs the body's world,
instinct
and imagination
and the dark hug of time
sweetness
and tangibility
to be understood,
to be more than pure light
that burns
where no one is --
so it enters us --
in the morning
shines from brute comfort
like a stitch of lightning;
and at night
lights up the deep and wondrous
drownings of the body

like a star.

To be alive is to be in possession of both a body and spirit, coexisting, dancing together. The spirit needs the body in order to “plumb rough matter” and the body needs the spirit in order to animate and connect. (And I trust you’ll indulge me today by allowing the word ‘spirit’ to encompass the many understandings we might have about that force or energy that breathes life into being. I might even dare to use ‘soul’ interchangeably with ‘spirit’...but these are just words, and spending time trying to dissect them would be antithetical to the theme of today’s service.)

To be alive is to be an inseparable combination of body and spirit, but many in the west, in the Christianized world, have a complicated relationship with, if not disdainful regard for, the body. For example, my upbringing taught that the body is the temple of the holy spirit, while at the same time, that anything ‘of this world’ was to be rejected as sinful. This left me confused: not knowing if my body was really my own, if it could be trusted, and I concluded it would be better to make no any meaningful connection with it.

And then there’s modern-day marketing, using the body as the primary target for a multi-billion dollar industry for all kinds of products and techniques...everything from what has become ‘diet-tainment,’ to gym plans, to beauty regimes...all in the name of creating a body that is acceptable out in public. The underlying message: “Your body, in its natural state, is ugly and unacceptable” and “If your body isn’t beautiful, you are not loveable.”

Add to that the hierarchies of worthiness our society has created based on skin tone and the objectification of bodies as worthy only to the extent that they are deemed sexy...well, it is no wonder that we are uncomfortable being in our bodies, uncomfortable wearing our own skin.

Those negative messages are nothing new. Think of the Adam and Eve story, or at least how it’s been interpreted...telling us that when our earliest ancestors gained true knowledge, they were ashamed of their nakedness and hid. And so, we have separated our bodies from our spirits in the name of religion...feeling shame for our physicality, and our sexuality (which we’ll talk about next week.)

Yet, the Hebrew Scriptures repeat, again and again, that the material world is good. They praise bodies, they praise the earth. They name birds, trees, rocks, air, fish -- all as good. And Jesus, as a Jew, continued this tradition, treating all bodies – regardless of gender or race - as worthy of compassion and connection. So where did this idea that body and spirit, or body and soul, are separate come from?

My colleague and friend, Rev. Suzelle Lynch, tells it this way: “Plato taught that the ideal -- the essence -- of a thing was more perfect than anything in the physical world. Thus the realm of spirit was actually more real and worthy than its imperfect, physical shadow. As Christianity spread to more gentiles, particularly Greeks, it adopted that dualistic perspective -

- the idea that mind, body, and soul are separate, with mind and soul being higher and more pure than body.”¹

The tradition lost further confidence in the body when Descartes placed nature and reason in opposition, and later was further deeply influenced by the Puritan suspicion of pleasure of any kind.² And so, we have inherited a radical discomfort with the body...a discomfort that has led to self-loathing...a discomfort which has made the body an evil that must be controlled by laws.

And again, that’s something I want to talk about next week. On this morning, my goal is that we would begin to erase some of that dualistic conditioning and better embrace the wholeness, the oneness, of who we are...to be like the boy Ben in today’s story...able to experience his body, his being, as part of the immensity of all that is, while at the same time claiming his worthiness, his place, his home in the midst of that mystery....to feel loved, and tucked in, enfolded, in belonging and worth....in spirit AND in body.

I love how the focus on a theme, working on a sermon, allows me to see things that I might not otherwise see. It made me sit up and take notice of a commercial last night that celebrated women’s bodies and spoke of reclaiming esteem for them...I thought, “Yes, preach it Special K!” This heightened awareness happens over and over, and I hope that our monthly themes bring similar serendipitous moments to you. On this past Thursday, sitting in the sun on a window bench at Kettle Drums and waiting for the throngs to arrive for our pub nite, I picked up a local magazine (*The Link*), and within it, happened on a wonderful article appropriate for this morning.

The article was an excerpt from an instruction book...“The Gift of Memoir” by Diane Taylor. Taylor suggests that memoirs are most meaningful if they contain good anecdotes, and that the secret to good anecdotes is that they contain specific detail about the body. The body, she says, creates a bond between characters and events, and also between writer and reader. The body makes us real.

Did you feel that connection when listening to Whitman’s words this morning? (And speaking of serendipitous events, I was listening to “This is My Music” on the CBC while writing this yesterday...actually re-reading Whitman’s words...when the host mentioned “I Sing the Body Electric” and told of how listening to certain pieces of music make her feel as Whitman felt...sizzling, toe-tingling, alive in each cell of her body...) I understood the host because I could understand the feeling I her body.

Whitman expresses so much detail about the body that it was palpable, and creates by listing details of the body, a sense of how sacred it is. Likewise, Taylor relates another woman’s story of her close relationship with her grandmother...as told in the details of sharing a bath.

¹ Rev. Suzelle Lynch, “The Soul Loves the Body”, May 3, 2015

² Rev. Dr. Daniel Kanter, “The Practice of Wearing Skin” <https://vimeo.com/25401484>

“Through mention of a least 20 body parts, a very touching scene emerges that transports the reader to the tub of hot water and the warm family connection between the grandma and granddaughter. We see and feel the washcloth as it travels over thumbs, arms, chest, belly, soles of the feet, between the toes...Some of my students felt this amount of detail was invasive. I’d use another word,” says Taylor. “Sacred.”

Give bodies to the people in your stories, she says. If you don’t, your readers cannot connect with them. And isn’t this what Mary Oliver speaks to in *Poem*? Airy and shapeless thing, the soul needs the physicality of the body...lime and appetite...oceanic fluids...instinct and imagination...the dark hug of time. To be understood, to connect with others, we need to be more than just spirit...more than simply “pure light that burns where no one is.”

I mean, where would we be without our bodies. I know, that’s the million dollar question... where are we if not in our bodies...before we are born and after we die...but now, here, in life, we NEED our bodies...these wondrous and mysterious things!

Another Taylor, renowned theologian Barbara Brown Taylor, in her touching book, *An Altar in the World*, writes this:

“My body is what connects me to all these other people. Wearing my skin is not a solitary practice but one that brings me into communion with all these other embodied souls.”³ We all wear skin whether we like it or not, but how will we wear it? Will we wear it with gratitude instead of loathing? Will we offer it to go on being useful to the world? Will we ignore the body’s reality and forget that it speaks of our spirit, or ignore its complex role in our lives? Will we wear them with love and pride?

How will we wear our bodies? Did any of you happen to see the great video posted on Facebook recently of the woman who stood in a busy marketplace in a bikini?⁴ (One day I hope that we’ll have technological capacity to easily share media during a service. If we did, I would have shown it to you now.) A chalkboard at her feet reads, “I am standing for all people who have struggled with a self-esteem issue like me. Because all bodies are valuable. To support self-acceptance, draw a heart on my body.”

“I was scared,” the woman said, “that people would yell terrible things at me or that no one would draw a heart on my body and I’d stand there alone and crying for minutes that felt like hours. Well, none of that came true, except for the crying part.” If you get a chance, google it. It’s powerful.

Could you do that? A really important, and rightful, teaching, is that we should love others as we love ourselves...but that’s really difficult when we can’t love ourselves, and so often the source of our self-loathing lies with our bodies.

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *An Altar in the World*, p 42

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/BuzzFeedNews/videos/1013138262040525/>

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that, like the woman in the marketplace, we allow our bodies to be seen...and first by ourselves, by standing naked in front of a mirror for as long as ten minutes and just looking at our bodies...seeing ourselves and being grateful for the body we have been given. Strip away all the judgment. Name that judgment as the lie that it is. See how beautiful you are.

Our bodies...no matter their size or shape, their colour or ability, their age or gender, their health or supposed intellect...ALL of our bodies are a part of the beauty of creation and cannot be separated from the wonder of life. ALL of our bodies. Each and every one.

In this place, in this community, in this church, we believe that more knowledge, more self-love, and more pride in one's body and its sexuality is good. Good. It is a good and blessed thing to be in a body. It is only through our physicality, being in these bodies, that we can bring love into the world. Let us not be afraid to embrace the truth...that our body is a sacred vessel, the home of our spirits.

Let me conclude with the 'mirror prayer' offered by Barbara Brown Taylor. Imagine yourself, naked, standing in front of a full length mirror. See your body in all of its glory and imperfection, in all of its myriad parts and miraculous workings. Imagine saying:

"Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul's address. You may decide that there's a lot to be thankful for."⁵ Thank you (spirit) for breathing life into these lungs. For the electrical impulses that have powered millions of unnoticed heartbeats. For the chemistry happening in my taste buds that has brought me pleasure at countless meals. For the thousands of miles these feet have carried me. For these things, I give thanks."

It is good. So be it. Amen.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Waiting for Our Souls to Catch Up

If you'll remain standing, we'll share some closing thoughts. You're invited to join hands as you're comfortable doing so. Use your hand, your fingers, your palms, your elbows, your arms, to touch one another.

In October's theme packet you'll find this story:

An archaeologist once hired some Inca tribesmen to lead him to a site deep in the mountains. After they had been moving for some time the tribesmen stopped and insisted they would go no further. The archaeologist grew impatient and angry. But no matter how much he cajoled, the tribesmen would not go any further. Then, all of a sudden the tribesmen picked up the gear and set off once more. When the bewildered archaeologist asked why they had stopped and refused to move for so long, the

⁵ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *An Altar in the World*, p 38

tribesmen answered, "We had been moving too fast and had to wait for our souls to catch up."

May this morning have been a time for you to rest from your journey, take a break from your labours, and to simply wait for your soul to catch up, that your spirit can be fully present in your beautiful body.

And now it's time to set off once again. Go now, embodied, in peace and love.