

**The Spirit Likes to Dress Up Like This:
The Incarnational Nature of Our Faith
August 8, 2010**

Well, speaking of “Come Sunday,” after being away for what felt like a very long time this summer, I finally returned to Wildflower a couple of Sundays ago, and here I spoke to you, in part, about how the very spirit of life moves through us every time we breathe in and out. I also talked about the need for us to breathe through our struggles, to be attentive to the wounds within, calling to be healed.

It felt good to be back that Sunday, and though I wouldn't be in the pulpit the following Sunday, I looked forward to coming to church then and witnessing the service led by the Pagan group. Then, on Tuesday, when I went into the office, I noticed I felt a bit achy. By Tuesday night, I could tell something was up, and by Wednesday I was calling in sick. For nearly a week, I lay on my couch flattened by the flu, unable to do much more than drink tea, read books, and sleep.

Now, according to me, that wouldn't be such a bad life, if it weren't for the sweats and chills and skull-cracking coughs. On the worst days, books felt almost too heavy to hold, and my eyelids weren't too light, either. But I read as I could, and the book that ended up consuming most of my time and attention was one by Robert Kull, entitled, *Solitude: Seeking Wisdom in*

Extremes. The book is essentially a journal of Kull's one experimental year spent in solitude, living on a tiny island in the Patagonias of southern Chile. Not a fast paced book, *Solitude* records in detail Kull building and living in his cabin, setting up solar panels for his laptop, fishing, gathering firewood, engaging in power struggles with his cat, observing the orange-billed Butter Bellied ducks, repairing his outboard motors, and confronting his anxiety about the wind and rain.

All along the way, Kull writes about the aches and pains of his body, as well: the frequent falls he takes on the slippery stones due to his prosthetic lower right leg; the torn rotator cuffs from hauling, falling, and chopping wood; the phantom pains of his missing foot; and the tooth he must pull himself with just some string and Tylenol 3. As I read Kull's journal entries about his day-in and day-out struggles, I found myself also journaling a good bit. From my couch, I wrote about how my body ached so much one night lying in bed, I had to keep it moving like a pig roasting on a stick. One morning, I wrote in ten-minute increments about the need to put a blanket on, take a blanket off, turn the air conditioning up or down, keep feet covered or free. I wrote about how absolutely nothing tasted as good to my tongue and belly as instant noodle soup, how my lungs felt weighed down, and how I was tiring of waking up with my clothes soaked from the fever working its way through. It was as if, in my little apartment in South Austin, I was both a witness and a partner to Robert Kull, learning to

survive with the one thing we each had--our imperfect yet perfectly worthy, loyal, always striving bodies.

Looking back on that week, on one hand, it seems a shame it took me getting that sick to get that in touch with my own body. On the other, I'm grateful I could pay that much attention, that I could get to know my bronchial tubes like I never had before, that I could learn the fine art of holding my head just so when coughing, so it wouldn't hurt so much, that I could be so aware of the rising and falling of my body's temperature.

Now to give myself some credit, it's also true I've recently taken up yoga for the first time in almost twenty years and that that too has brought me back to my body in such a way that I am reminded once more, here it is: here is this body--this temple--in which I live; here, in the words of Ralph Helverson, is this "impassioned clay." I think I'll pay attention.

Do you pay attention? Do you pay attention to how your body is working, to what it's calling for, and especially, do you pay attention to how your body is home to your very spirit, your very soul?

Maybe, at least sometimes, you look at it as if it were almost something else, over there. This summer, amidst my travels, I spoke with a young teenage girl, who was going through some struggles about *her* body--how she uses it, how she treats it, how she perceives it. I told her about when I was in my twenties living in New York, I used to walk down the street and every store window was an opportunity for me to judge my

body by what I saw in the reflection. How's the butt? How are the hips? Am I pretty? God, the butt's too big, the hips too there, the pretty... And then one day, I thought to myself, don't look; just feel. How does your body *feel*? And suddenly, things were just a bit better, because my body, my temple, without the eyes of judgment upon it, felt perfectly all right. It was a moment somehow reflective of and entering into the opening lines of Mary Oliver's poem that we heard Roger read: "The spirit likes to dress up like this: ten fingers, ten toes, shoulders and all the rest..." How extraordinarily liberating.

Of course, yes, I was young then, and more active. And in my life, I've had the good fortune of only once having had any kind of fairly major health issue, that being my thyroid last spring. Still, though I've faced no major or sudden changes to my body in the time since my store window revelation, I know my body is aging, changing, settling in, settling down. And I know the same thing is happening all *around* me, all the time, here, among you. In the few years I've been here, I've witnessed people acquire walking aids and hearing aids, go from bifocals to trifocals. I've seen people's bodies shift shape, growing taller, growing smaller. I've seen people grow bodies in their bodies. And, I have seen people go through the journey of watching their own bodies deteriorate even while their spirit stays mighty alive.

The question arises, how does our faith call us to live with our ever changing bodies, and how might we understand our bodies--however

mortal, however imperfect they may be--to be essential elements of and contributors to our faith?

Now, if all I did was ask you to *think* about it, well, your *minds* wouldn't mind, but your bodies might feel a bit excluded. So here is what I would like you to do. Settle into your own body and remember that line from Mary Oliver's poem: "The spirit likes to dress up like this." Oliver writes:

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 darkness of time,
Sweetness
And tangibility,

To be understood,
To be more than pure light
That burns

Where no one is--

So it enters us...

So it enters us. I invite you to close your eyes, sit quietly, be conscious of your breath, and see what part of your body, what part of that tangibility calls to you. Maybe it is a part of you that has aged or worn down a little more quickly than the rest of you. Maybe it is a part of you that you especially love, that is strong, that is gloriously healthy. Maybe it is a part of you waiting to be understood, waiting to tell a story, whether of pain or of joy. Be with that part now, and, as you connect with that part of your body, I invite you to say, quietly, as many times as you like, "The spirit likes to dress up like this. The spirit likes to dress up like this." Listen. Feel. Be with. Yourself. [SILENCE]

As you are ready, please come back into the room, with the rest of us, eyes open. Now, understanding that there is a balance between hiding ourselves and needlessly overexposing ourselves, I would like to invite a few volunteers to rise in body or spirit and share just a bit about your experience of that meditation. What insights or appreciations might you have had? How is *your* body a home for your spirit, and how might it be guiding you in your faith? [SHARING]

Thank you. Thank you for your honesty. Thank you for your vulnerability. Now, having invited you to consciously spend time with a part of yourselves other than just your fast-thinking, quick questioning minds, I want you each to consider with your whole body the incarnational nature of our faith. Incarnational. Incarnate. Jesus, according to Christian teachings was and is God incarnate, embodied, in the flesh, come down to walk and teach and suffer among the people. His ultimate suffering, known as the passion of Christ, was the sacrifice of his body on the cross. When we see his body on the cross, we are called to remember the suffering he endured, his teachings, his presence, and most of all, of his revolutionary love.

Many of us, I know, have turned away from Christianity, put off by a message of such suffering and ultimately of martyrdom. That's not how we want to spend our lives, or raise our children. I understand. And yet, at the same time, I wonder, how do we put our whole bodies into this Unitarian Universalist faith? How is ours an incarnational faith?

I'm reminded now of one other way I passed my time while I was sick. On July 29th, via Facebook and the internet, I followed intently as hundreds of people rallied in Phoenix, Arizona, to protest Senate Bill 1070, which essentially legalizes racial profiling and deportation of anyone who cannot provide proper identification. At those rallies, 83 people were arrested, 29 of them being Unitarian Universalists, including the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Peter Morales, several clergy people,

and about twenty lay leaders. These people made their faith incarnate by nonviolently placing their bodies before injustice and refusing to comply with the racist laws Arizona's governing body wishes to enforce. Watching raw video clips, I was moved to tears as I saw friends and colleagues linking arms, singing, praying, and being pulled away by police for a night in jail. I give thanks to them for the sacrifices they made. I give thanks to them for living not just in thought but in body the second Unitarian Universalist principle, justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.

Of course, theirs is a somewhat drastic example of how one might live an embodied Unitarian Universalism--similar in spirit to the scores of Unitarian Universalists who went down to Selma, Alabama, at the call of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in 1965. And both of these moments in our history show a particularly justice-oriented embodiment of our faith. I see similar examples when members of our congregation travel to the Gulf Coast to do hurricane recovery work, when they help restore people's homes through Hands on Housing right here in Austin, and, though I didn't go to Ecuador, I'm guessing the same goes for the five of you who did go this past July.

But our bodies are not only instruments of justice. They are our very dwelling places, called to house and communicate our very spirits. So we are called not only to hammer and paint, not only to march and protest, but to sing and dance, cry and feel. We are called to be present, not only in our

minds, but in our hearts, in our limbs, in our lungs, in the palms of our hands and the small of our backs. We are called to remember that yes, the spirit does like to dress up like this, fingers, toes, shoulders, and all the rest.

Such bodies as ours will not last forever. From the moment we are born, we all begin to age, we all live with death somewhere out there, before us. As the late Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church says, "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." So while we live, and while we live in these particular dwellings, these garments in which the spirit likes to dress up, let us give thanks to our bodies, old and young, in solitude and together, healthy and struggling, imperfect and perfectly worthy. Let us give thanks with heart and mind, hands and feet, tears and laughter, and when the spirit says do, remember, oh Lord, you've got to do, and when the spirit says sing, you've got to sing.

Amen.

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