

Embodied Joy
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Oh, dear ones, siblings to me and to each other, what can I say, why am I speaking on this topic—embodied joy. The simple answer is, here at UUFM, we subscribe to a worship theme service, Soul Matters it's called, a service whose purpose is to help overburdened religious professionals with curated materials for children's faith development, small group ministry—our Sharing Circles—and worship. Sometimes the materials are useful. Sometimes they are irritating. The theme this month is "Opening to Joy." And so, here I am, following the theme. The complex answer is, well, more complex.

Honestly, that is a hard topic for me this year. It was hard preparing this week. I am in the season of my father's death and all the feelings and sensations that go along with that. Many of you know what I am talking about. Regardless, it is my role and my call to serve the holy in relationship with you, dear siblings. Perhaps you already realize, it takes 10 and more people to make multiplatform worship possible, as well as countless hours of practicing and tinkering, of organizing and writing, of calling and texting and emailing, of supporting and encouraging. And personally, I spend probably 20 hours a week writing pieces of various lengths and kinds for the Fellowship, including the sermon. Most of us know, if we write regularly and if we choose not to, that writing is a hard job of work. The total effort of ministry is challenging work at all times, and not only because sometimes I am not well-tuned to the themes of the month or the expectations and needs of this congregation. It is tough when I am well-tuned. Tough and good work. Sometimes joyful. Sometimes tedious. Always, always, always worth doing.

Why worth doing, especially when difficult? Why worth doing when I am not particularly keen on talking about joy, let alone joy that is embodied? Why, when I know that many of us struggle with our bodies as they are? Some of our bodies have been through recent surgery, and the pain that needs healing is not lessened. Some of our bodies are creaking and less flexible, older and completely unlikely to grow younger, no matter how much stretching or weight training or yoga or walking we do. Some of us have had limbs and other body parts removed. Some of us experience our five senses becoming less sensitive and receptive than they were fifteen or ten or even five years ago. Some of us are feeling memory slipping away, feeling cognitive acumen slipping, slipping, slipping into the future, away from our control. Cher sang "If I could turn back time." Yeah, that is just a wish. Neither Cher nor you nor I can turn back time. The effect on our bodies is always in one direction. I feel the return of the bursitis in my hip since I have not been lifting weights. My chest skin is crepe-y and my chin wattle is emerging. My hair is more white than not, sometimes changed to blue or blonde by the light in this sanctuary. But no amount of color, from light or from dye, will reverse the built-in, inevitable bodily transformation from brown to gray.

Given aging, given disease and physical infirmity, given pain in so many parts, how can we possibly have joy in our bodies? How can we embody joy, when some of us have never loved the bodies we have—we have felt that they have never worked well enough or been beautiful enough. Too many of us have simply not recognized the amazing reality of a watery bag of organs held together by a thin layer of skin

hoisted upon breakable bones. Bodies are amazing—regardless if we fit stereotypical, dominant measures of beauty—as infinitely diverse as the celestial bodies of space. That really is something else, miraculous even with the scientific explanations of how skin and bones and organs all work together. Despite the pain of our bodies, despite our unhappiness, our sadness with ourselves, despite all I have said this morning, all my borderline or full-blooded kvetching and whing-ing and lamenting, I maintain there is no other location for joy except in our bodies. Joy is always located in our bodies, even when we ignore that reality. Here is what I mean.

I hold this story close, of a time when my daughter was very young. The story is a gift that keeps on giving, over 25 years now. It was a hard time—two parents, two children, two full time jobs, one car. Child duty was my responsibility in the household division of labor. Children to day care and school by 9:00. At the college and in the classroom everyday by 10:00. Classes, meetings, prep all wedged into those few hours before it was back out to school and day care by 3:30. In order to have enough hours for the work that didn't fit in that thin sandwich of time, I rose at 4:00 am every day and worked until the kids got up at 7:00 and the whole thing started again, five days a week. I was exhausted in every way possible.

At the end of one such long day, I needed a rest and didn't know how to fit it in. I felt confident in leaving the six-year-old to play quietly with his toys, but the two-year-old was another story. I lay down on the couch and invited little Helen to crawl up on me. I put a thin blanket over us and told her that we were playing a new game called "Mommy and Helen Under the Blanket." She was agreeable, and I was going to get that bit of rest before the evening activities commenced.

Helen lay on her back on top of my chest, her full weight pressing down on me. I can feel it still. She put her right leg up, tenting the blanket, running her foot along our covering. I can't be sure, but it seems she was simply feeling the material against her skin, enjoying the sensation and the repetition. As she raised her foot, the late afternoon light brightly shining through the window and through the blanket, her little toes became translucent, glowing a fleshy red. Perhaps this is something she noticed as well, as transfixed as I was by the lovely vision.

With those rosy glowing toes, Helen seemed both completely substantial and wholly ethereal at the same time. With her weight on my chest and her toes aglow, I knew I was in the presence of the full embodiment of unified self, visible and tangible for a heart-breaking instant. Helen did not have a body—she was a body. She was a mind-body, inseparable and discreet. I can still conjure this experience through memory, where she and I were both completely ourselves and more than ourselves at the same time. Out of all the frustration, the dull round of everyday life grinding me a little each day, out of psychic pain and difficulty arose joy, deep joy resonant in me. In me—as an inseparable mind-body fully realized and tuned to the joy available from before and beyond, from another fully realized mind-body, Helen herself.

This was the joy—discovered through body consciousness—of being inexplicably alive for reasons unknown, for reasons it is my task to learn and locate and co-create. As it is for all of us. And here, as

not simply in the Fellowship but as a fellowship, we can learn and discover and co-create our whole selves in a caring community of curiosity and open-heartedness.

Perhaps you, too, have experienced such extraordinary moments within ordinary life? Perhaps you were a child, swinging as high as you could on your swing set. Perhaps you are climbing hills and rocks, surmounting a high peak you thought beyond your endurance. And then the view! Perhaps you are holding in your arms a child, and rocking, the repetition soothing in the moment and reminiscent of other such times, even times when you were the child in arms. Perhaps you are digging in your garden, really noticing the way an earthworm moves or the shape of the roots of the weeds you can't ever quite eradicate. Perhaps you are touching your own hand, feeling your skin and the bones and veins and tendons which are as much you as your so-called thoughts and feelings. Perhaps you are touching the hand of someone else in this lovely way. The moment need not be large, need not be triumphant, need not happen when you want it to. We are often surprised by joy, if we allow ourselves to be. It sneaks up on us. Such joy, such connection, aching connection, often comes upon us sideways, when we least expect it but often when we most need it. When I most needed it, I took a turn back toward joy in the body, and that turn began with recognizing the moment just as little Helen seemed to be living it, unconsciously, without needing to think about it. Just being.

Sadly, our language thwarts a wholistic sense of self. We say, "our bodies," "our minds," maybe even "our spirits." Who is it that does the possessing? The spirit in the material, the ghost in the machine. That seems to me faulty thinking, a false reality. De Chardin, as a Catholic, worries for people that they will reject the actual body for the ghostly spirit of some presumed eternal afterlife: "You hoped that the more thoroughly you rejected the tangible, the closer you would be to spirit." We Unitarian Universalists, we are more apt to imagine that we can do without the body "because the power of thought has been kindled" in us. "Sons and daughters, [siblings] of the earth," the Jesuit calls to us, "steep yourself in the sea of matter, bathe in its fiery waters, for it is the source of your life." "Do you not see that the very law of your own nature makes these a necessity for you?" We are bodies, not apart from them, always unfinished, always in process from birth to death and beyond. Our being is inseparable from physicality, from the material, from body.

Why is all the hard work of worship worth it? Why is all the hard work of being present in this hour, here, worth it, pulling ourselves through time and space, through snow and inertia and pain, to be together? Because here, we celebrate life together, and there is no life without bodies. And "your body is welcome here, all of it. Your body and all that is within it, both wanted and not wanted, has a place here." All histories and experiences, all abilities and beingness, all identities and genders. "Our bodies join in a web of co-creation, created and creating. Formed in the infinite diversity of creation." Our Unitarian Universalist theology calls us to honor all bodies as the natural outgrowth of life—full of pain and wonder, decay and liveliness, complex and perplexing. Life is so good that most of us long to persist in our bodies. Most of us do not willingly end our own lives as bodies, even when we are in pain. Yet no wonder we need community, to grow in understanding and acceptance? How would we ever have the wherewithal to do this work alone?

So, let us celebrate our life as embodied, a state that calls us to communion and connection with each other, sharing our lives as physical beings. Let us answer the call of life, which we can call "Spirit" if we want to. You got to do when the spirit says do! So, do, and do in joy! There is something powerful, even magical, about you. About all of you. Let us be grateful that the world is still to be created. Let us give thanks that we can be more than we are. When the spirit says do, you got to do! So, let's celebrate our being bodies, with joy.