



The Path

The Spiritual Theme Newsletter of the First UU Society of Burlington

October 2, 2015

What Does it Mean to Seek a Life of Embodiment?



Dear First UU,

Welcome to the inaugural edition of *The Path*, a new newsletter focused on the monthly spiritual theme! *The Path* will service a dual purpose in our shared congregational life. First, it will provide all of us with an introduction to the monthly spiritual theme and resources for engaging it more deeply. Second, *The Path* will serve as a session guide for monthly Theme Circles members. At each Theme Circle gathering, participants will get to share personal insights and reflections based on the spiritual exercises, questions and sources of inspiration included below.

Each edition of *The Path* will feature an introductory article on the theme as well as concrete pathways for exploring it in your own life, outside of Sunday morning worship. We invite you to engage in whatever ways feel right to you, and to consider the invitation to stretch beyond your regular spiritual routines and practices. The content of each edition will be based on materials we receive from Soul Matters, a collective of UU congregations engaging with common monthly spiritual themes. However, we will be supplementing the content with submissions we receive from you (more on that below!) and tailoring them for our First UU/Burlington context.

Soul Matters materials are primarily developed with an adult audience in mind, but as you'll see, many of the exercises and sources of inspiration will speak to older children and youth as well. In an effort to engage our children in the theme, Martha Dallas, our Director of Religious Education will be drawing on it in her (*continued on page 2*)

Upcoming Services

Sundays 9 & 11 a.m.

October 4 – “Charity is No Substitute for Justice Withheld,” Sushma Raman, UUSC

October 11 – “Life in a Body,” Rev. Mara Dowdall

October 18 – Tim DeChristopher and Rev. Mara Dowdall

October 25 – “Embodied Until The End,” Rev. Mara Dowdall

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First Sunday Family Chapels, and, each month, there will be a special display of theme-related books on hand in the children’s library. Theme related books for adults will be on display by the windows in The Parlors. We welcome your suggestions of other ways we can best bring to life the theme for First UU’ers of all ages.

This month, our spiritual theme is “**embodiment.**” What does it mean to live life in a body? How is our identity connected (or not) to our body? How do we relate to our bodies and the wide variety of experience they bring us: suffering and pleasure, frustration and exhilaration, pain and joy? What is the connection between our experience of embodiment and our sense of spirituality? And how can our lives “embody” the values we hold dear?

Humankind has been wrestling with these questions from ancient times. Likewise, religious leaders, theologians and philosophers have grappled with them as well, resulting in all manner of teachings about the body and embodiment. In his congregation’s newsletter on embodiment, my friend Rev. Shawn Newton historically notes that our own UU tradition has “tended to ignore the body – apart from our liberal approach to matters of sexuality.” Shawn observes, “our focus has frequently been limited to our brains; at our worst, we forget that our bodies are so much more than a complicated vehicle to transport our brain around town.” He challenges us all to return to the body, and to (re)consider the ways it allows us to experience a fullness of life beyond what our minds alone can offer.

This month, that invitation is likewise ours. In Sunday worship, we’ll explore the powerful ways we can embody our values in life and in justice work, with special guests Sushma Raman from the UU Service Committee and climate justice activist Tim DeChristopher. In my sermons, we’ll examine the connections between embodiment, UU theology and lived spiritual practice, including how we relate to bodies at the end of life.

See you on the path,
Rev. Mara



2015-2016 Themes



- November:** Story
- December:** Possibility
- January:** Time
- February:** Grace

- March:** Passion
- April:** Strength
- May:** Faith
- June:** Revelry



Looking Ahead Seeking Input on November & December Themes

Since arriving at First UU, some of my best sources of spiritual inspiration have come from you — your deep questions, favorite songs, podcast referrals, poignant quotes, and beloved poems have helped inspire a variety of sermons and worship services. In our first year together, we did this through the “Sermon Slow Cooker,” and last year, we invited you to submit materials on each month’s spiritual theme, a practice we’re going to continue this year with a slight twist.

This year, the creation of content for each edition of *The Path* will be a collaborative effort. Your submissions of readings, stories, videos, podcasts, visual images, questions, and spiritual exercises will help supplement the basic materials on our designated theme that we receive from Soul Matters. While we likely will not have room to publish every submission, all will be shared with First UU worship leaders as potential sources of inspiration for services.

Because we need to be working a few months ahead, this month, we welcome your contributions on December’s theme: “possibility.” Please send your related materials on “*possibility*” to **themecircles@uusociety.org** by the end of this month, **October 31**. (And if you happen to have any great stuff for November’s theme, “*story*”, if you send it in the next week or so, we can likely make use of it). Thank you, in advance, for being part of this shared ministry!

Self-Care on the Spiritual Journey

If we’re doing our job as a faith community well, then the spirituality territory we cover in our worship services, educational experiences, and social witness should be deeply relevant in our own individual lives. After all, one of the core purposes of congregational life is to inspire us to lives of meaning and purpose, but also to help us navigate “all that is our life,” including the joys and the struggles, by being a community of wisdom, challenge, care, and mutual spiritual support.



When we go deeper into spiritual exploration together and individually, as theme-based ministry and our related Theme Circles are designed to encourage, however, we might encounter some tender spots in our own souls and/or find ourselves revisiting challenging times in our life histories. Therefore, it is important, when doing deep spiritual work, to have trusted companions and adequate support on the journey, and to know you are welcome to care for yourself and your spirit along the way, engaging in the theme only to the level that’s comfortable for you.

Likewise, please know that Rev. Mara (**revmara@uusociety.org**) and our first UU staff are here to offer support if you find yourself struggling with something surfaced by the monthly theme. Please reach out to find out more about the pastoral and spiritual care available in our First UU community and get referrals to other related resources. You can email Rev. Mara directly or email **pastoralcareministries@uusociety.org**, which forwards to whichever minister is on-call for pastoral care: either Rev. Mara herself; Rev. Jennifer Pader, who provides supplemental pastoral care on a referral basis and also covers Rev. Mara’s study leave and vacations; or Rev. Phyllis O’Connell during Mara’s upcoming parental leave.

Each month, we will offer a spiritual exercise or few that will allow you to engage more deeply with the theme. Theme Circle group members are invited to partake of at least one, and bring any related insights or reflections from their experience for sharing at their monthly meeting.

OPTION A: "THE ARTIST IS PRESENT"

You are invited to view the brief video below about the performance artist Marina Abramović. In this excerpt from a documentary about her life and work, we see an art installation called, "The Artist Is Present." The premise of this performance is that she would sit across a small table from an individual and engage with each person for a minute or so in silence. These encounters make it possible to observe how much we can convey without words. The focus of this clip is the encounter she had when, upon opening her eyes, finding her former husband and artistic partner seated across from her. It's a powerful display of how connections endure, and of how our bodies carry a story that is as important as any that we hold in our heads.



After watching the clip, give thought to moments in your own life when you've experienced deep emotions that registered in your body. Moments when you thought your heart would burst with joy or pride. Moments when you felt a deep, gnawing anxiety in your gut. Moments when your body held an answer that surpassed the story that your brain wanted or was able to tell.

<http://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/03/love-in-silence-video/>

OPTION B: BODY MAPPING



Take a blank sheet of paper, and in the middle draw a figure to represent your own body. This may be a stick-figure or may look more like a gingerbread person. Artistic quality doesn't matter! Once the figure is drawn, meditate on different parts of your body. And if you don't draw, you can simply do this meditation in your mind's eye. Consider the story of your hand, your ear lobe, your shin. Give thought to the changes that have come with age, the tender places that carry wounds from the past, the places of joy and pleasure. Make notes, if you like, but mostly think through the "story of you" told as a narrative your brain might compose, but rather from the perspective of your body.

OPTION C: NOTICING THE BODY

As you go about your month, each day set a brief time to "check in with your body." It could be when you first wake up, take your lunch break, or before you drift off to sleep, and it will only take a couple of minutes. Set a timer or alarm reminder if it's helpful. When your moment comes, take three deep breaths, and bring your attention back to your body. Allow yourself to feel your breathing, the ground below you and/or whatever else your body is touching. Notice what you feel: any places of pain or tension, sensations, temperature, etc. As the month goes on, pay attention to whether this practice changes anything for you, for example, do you find yourself noticing your body more at other times, too? Or not?



Living With the Questions



Here are some questions for reflection and discussion this month. Don't feel you need to answer them all or have answers to them right away. Rather, we invite you to "live with them" throughout the month, and see how they break into—and break open—your ordinary thoughts. If you are in a Theme Circle, please come prepared to your gathering to address whichever one(s) speak to you most strongly:

- * How do you experience your body on a daily basis? Are you frequently mindful of yourself as a body, or do you tend to forget that your thoughts, memories, and feelings are embodied in a physical way?
- * Growing up, what messages did you receive about your body/the body in general from your religious community, family, friends, school, culture, etc.? How do you relate to those messages now?
- * When have you been most aware of your body? What has brought that awareness to mind?
- * How does the way you think about your body affect the way you care for it? Are you attentive to its needs? Its changes? Its challenges?
- * In your self-understanding, is there a difference between your physical body and what you relate to as your mind, or spirit, or soul? How does that understanding impact how you relate to your body?

Words for Wisdom and Inspiration

The following texts are not "required reading," but are simply meant to spark your reflections and questions—and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to "seek a life of embodiment." If you are in a Theme Circle, you will be invited to share with your group whether any of these words, or the further resources, particularly spoke to you and why.

When the sweet ache of being alive,
lodged between who you are and who you will be, is
awakened,
befriend this moment.
It will guide you.
Its sweetness is what holds you.
Its ache is what moves you on.

- **Mark Nepo**



The Church says: The body is a sin.
Science says: The body is a machine.
Advertising says: The body is a business.
[But the] body says: I am a fiesta.

- **Eduardo Galeano**

These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

- **Rainer Maria Rilke, Book of Hours, I 59**



“Inside”

How something is made flesh
 no one can say. The buffalo soup
 becomes a woman
 who sings every day to her horses
 or summons another to her private body saying,
 come, touch, this is how
 it begins, the path of a newly born
 who, salvaged from other lives and worlds, will
 grow to become a woman, a man,
 with a heart that never rests,
 and the gathered berries,
 the wild grapes
 enter the body,
 human wine
 which can love,
 where nothing created is wasted;
 the swallowed grain takes you through the dreams
 of another night,
 the deer meat becomes hands
 strong enough to work.
 But I love most
 the white-haired creature eating green leaves;
 the sun shines there swallowed, showing in her face
 taking in all the light,
 and in the end
 when the shadow from the ground enters the body
 and remains, in the end, you might say, This is my-
 self still unknown, still a mystery.

- **Linda Hogan**, from *Rounding the Human Corners*



There is a vitality, a life force, an energy,
 a quickening, that is translated through you into
 action, and because there is only one of you in all time,
 this expression is unique.

- **Martha Graham**



The body says what words cannot.

- **Martha Graham**

Art creates a bridge between being and embodiment.

- **M.C. Richards**, *Centering: In Pottery, Poetry and the Person*



There is no place so awake and alive as the edge of becoming.
 But more than that, birthing the kind of woman who can
 authentically say, ‘My soul is my own,’ and then embody it in
 her life, her spirituality, and her community is worth the risk
 and hardship.

- **Sue Monk Kidd**, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*



You do not have to be good.
 You do not have to walk on your knees
 for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body
 love what it loves.

- **Mary Oliver**



To be here now, alive in the twenty-first century and smart enough to know it, you had to be...extremely — make that miraculously — fortunate in your personal ancestry. Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, a period of time older than the Earth’s mountains and rivers and oceans, every one of your forbears on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life’s quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result — eventually, astoundingly, and all to briefly — in you.

- **Bill Bryson**



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.

- **Sean Neil-Barron**

“Mind-Body Problem”

When I think of my youth I feel sorry not for myself but for my body. It was so direct and simple, so rational in its desires, wanting to be touched the way an otter loves water, the way a giraffe wants to amble the edge of the forest, nuzzling the tender leaves at the tops of the trees. It seems unfair, somehow, that my body had to suffer because I, by which I mean my mind, was saddled with certain unfortunate high-minded romantic notions that made me tyrannize and patronize it like a cruel medieval baron, or an ambitious English-professor husband ashamed of his wife — Her love of sad movies, her budget casseroles and regional vowels. Perhaps my body would have liked to make some of our dates, to come home at four in the morning and answer my scowl with "None of your business!" Perhaps it would have liked more presents: silks, mascaras. If we had had a more democratic arrangement we might even have come, despite our different backgrounds, to a grudging respect for each other, like Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier fleeing handcuffed together, instead of the current curious shift of power in which I find I am being reluctantly dragged along by my body as though by some swift and powerful dog. How eagerly it plunges ahead, not stopping for anything, as though it knows exactly where we are going.

- **Katha Pollit**



If your ego starts out, 'I am important, I am big, I am special,' you're in for some disappointments when you look around at what we've discovered about the universe. No, you're not big. No, you're not. You're small in time and in space. And you have this frail vessel called the human body that's limited on Earth.

- **Neil deGrasse Tyson**



Going Deeper: Further Resources Related to Bodies and Embodiment

Books

Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment, Lenore Friedman, Susan Moon

Being Mortal: Medicine and What Happens in the End, Atul Gawande

Between the World and Me, Ta-Nehisi Coates

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Jean-Dominique Bauby

Embracing the Body; Finding God in Our Flesh and Bone, Tara Owens

Far from the Tree: Children, Parents and the Search for Identity, Andrew Solomon

Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice, Stephanie Paulsell

I Am My Body, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel

It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health, Robie Harris

Landscapes of Aging and Spirituality, Kathleen Montgomery

NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity, Steve Silberman

Our Bodies, Ourselves: A New Edition for a New Era, Boston Women's Health Collective

Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers, Mary Roach

Trans Bodies, Trans Selves, Laura Erickson-Schroth



Videos and Podcasts

The Body's Grace

Yoga instructor and writer Matthew Sanford talks with Krista Tippet about his understanding of the mind-body connection, shaped by his life, his yoga practice and an early experience of trauma in a car accident that left him paralyzed.

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/bodys-grace-matthew-sanfords-story/185>

Listening Generously

The physician and writer Rachel Naomi Remen shares wisdom and insight gained from her work with physicians and cancer patients fostering new understandings of healing, and how own life experience with chronic illness.

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/listening-generously/124>

Changing Our Bodies

If you could change one thing about your body, what would it be? In this video, it's fascinating to hear the differences between the answers that adults and children provide. How can we be more like the kids? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0tEcxLDDd4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0tEcxLDDd4>

Real Beauty Sketches

Even though it's a commercial for Dove soaps, the video raises interesting questions about how we see ourselves.

There's been quite a bit of response to this video, both positive and negative, but it's worth starting with the original and going from there, if you're interested. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyJGk>





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Further Resources Cont'd

What Are We Made Of?

Neil deGrasse Tyson explains the origins of the atomic elements found within our bodies — proving that we are, indeed, stardust.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/23/neil-degrasse-tyson-origins-atomic-elements-bodies_n_3117063.html

Befriending Our Bodies

Medical doctor and Buddhist teacher Jon-Kabat Zinn discusses mindfulness meditation as a means to connecting with our bodies. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFAsnamhIEE>

And just for fun... and amazement at what the human body can do:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rj-Yk7MUdGc>

Credits: Though we have made several additions and some changes, the December 2014 edition of *New Horizons*, the theme newsletter of First Unitarian in Toronto, Canada, provided significant content for this edition of *The Path*, particularly the questions, practices, words and additional resources. Many thanks to Toronto First and Rev. Shawn Newton for this inspiration; you can view their original edition at <http://www.firstunitariantoronto.org/sermons/theme-based-ministry>.

