

Bodies

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stony Brook, NY, February 2012

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Opening Words and Chalice Lighting Cynthia Rylant (*God Went To Beauty School*)

God Took a Bath

With His clothes on.
His robe, to be specific.
Why did He do this?
He was shy,
that's why.
A little self-conscious
about His body.
God wasn't always
this way.
He used to be free as a bird,
running stark naked
everywhere.
He never thought
about bodies at all.
Then these things
started coming back to Him:

The whole misunderstanding
with Adam and Eve.
Then circumcision.
Then talk talk talk
of everybody being made
in His image.
Until He got afraid
to look in the mirror.
Everybody had such
high expectations
and now He was
a little insecure.
Could be He was flabby.
Love handles on God
would have to be *huge*.
So He kept His robe on.

[Review individual and group covenants or parts thereof]

Check-in [the topic suggested is, as usual, optional]

Winter's short hours of daylight invite introspection and reflection. In February, the lengthening days arouse a sense of anticipation. What are you moving away from and what toward?

Words to Carry into Silence

Like the Rosetta stone, for those who know how to read it, the body is a living record of life given, life taken, life hoped for, life healed. It is valued for its articulate ability to register immediate reaction, to feel profoundly, to sense ahead. The body remembers, the bones remember, the joints remember, even the little finger remembers. Memory is lodged in pictures and feelings in the cells themselves. Like a sponge filled with water, anywhere the flesh is pressed, wrung, even touched lightly, a memory may flow out in a stream. ~Clarissa Pinkola Estes (*Women Who Run With the Wolves*)

Silence

Meditation

[Facilitators: If you choose to use this portion of the curriculum, you will find the guidance you need as leader embedded, for the most part, in the words you read. Remember to read this meditation quite slowly, pausing for a few seconds or longer as indicated by * to allow people to take the words in and respond internally. The duration of the silence at the end is up to you. Afterwards, you may want to offer the group an opportunity to share briefly their response to the experience.]

I invite you now to make yourselves comfortable in preparation for a short guided meditation that will be followed by a period of silence. Some of you will easily allow my voice and words to guide you, others of you may have more difficulty. Feel free to allow your mind to go where it will if this is more interesting or comfortable for you.

The body in which you live is constantly changing. Over a space of seven years your body replaces practically every single molecule with a new one. * Every morning, the first time you open your eyes, the top layer of your vision-sensor receptors is simply scorched away, and you literally see the world with new eyes. * Every single second, two million of your red blood cells die and two million new ones take their place.

Close your eyes and say silently the word “now” to yourself a few times slowly, aware that every time you form the word in your mind this million-fold renewal is happening in your body. “Now.....now.....now” *

Think now about the borders of your self. Your very skin is an organ of encounter and exchange. Every breeze that touches your cheek connects you with the farthest reaches of the earth’s atmosphere. * A whole ocean of air has gone through your lungs, wave by wave. Portions of some storm raging now in the arctic may once have been inside you. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke mused on this and called our very breathing an “invisible poem.” * At every meal, what has been alive and died becomes alive again in you by nourishing your own aliveness. *

The mysterious force of life has kept the small red muscle of your heart beating uninterruptedly since before you were born. How many years, days, minutes, seconds has that been? How many more will there be before it is still? * You are the project of a vast and intricate community of organs dedicated to your survival against significant odds. *

Rarely do we stop to express gratitude for the everyday marvel of our bodies. I invite you to use the silence that follows to acknowledge in your own way the elegance and expertise of your body, the vehicle through which you experience life, the instrument with which you make your indelible mark on the world we are given to love, to enjoy and to sustain. *

*****SILENCE*****

[If you choose, invite people to share brief responses focused on the effect of the meditation on how they are feeling about their body in this moment.]

Questions to Guide our Sharing

Many people think of the body as the temporary home of the spiritual self as if the two were separate and independent entities. Are they? This session offers you an opportunity to think about the relationship between “you” and your body. That relationship certainly changes over time. Our bodies inform and are transformed through our spiritual and psychological growth. Our experiences are inscribed in muscle and memory by the shifting of tiny electrical charges in the organs that collaborate to organize us as individual living beings. Our maturing “Self” interprets and reinterprets those notations as we mature, arranging them as the changing story of who we are in the world.

Each chapter of that story reveals how our genetic connection to others, our emotional and physical exchanges, our interaction with cultural values, and our belief systems continually

redefine the boundaries of our identity and journey as beings of both spirit and bone. At the end of every chapter in the book of our lives we are new beings in changed bodies in a different context.

1. What messages or images over your lifetime so far have affected your relationship to your body the most? Think about your family of origin, TV, magazines, peers, fads like piercing and diets, education, religious values, etc.
2. Your body has changed in appearance and ability over time. What do you miss most of what is gone or diminished? What physical changes have you welcomed?
3. We all inherit physical attributes. Some we appreciate or learn to appreciate, others cause us shame or trouble. Discuss.
4. What do you remember about how you experienced your body as it was going through the changes of adolescence?
5. Was there a point in your life at which you recognized that you were at the pinnacle of your function and form as a physical body? What did you enjoy most about that time in your life?
6. Can you remember a time when your body spoke to you about some problem and you refused to listen? Was there a time when your body vividly revealed a piece of wisdom to you?
7. How does your physical life contribute to your personal growth? Do you have a physical practice that contributes to your spiritual life?

Closing Words and Chalice Extinguishing

Edward Galeano in *Walking Words* records this small poem.

The Church says: *The body is a sin.*

Science says: *The body is a machine.*

Advertising says: *The body is a business.*

The body says: *I am a fiesta.*

1. The first step on a spiritual path today is a return to a sense of one's own body. ~Martha Heyneman
2. Our body is precious. It is a vehicle for awakening. Treat it with care. ~Buddha
3. If we bless our bodies, they will bless us. ~Gloria Steinem
4. In 1993, a "March of Dimes poll found that 43 percent of Americans would engage in genetic engineering 'simply to enhance their children's looks or intelligence.' ~Bill McKibben ("Designer Genes," *Orion*, 2003)
5. "The body never lies." —Martha Graham
6. Our own physical body possesses a wisdom which we who inhabit the body lack. We give it orders which make no sense. ~Henry Miller
7. Scars are tattoos with better stories. ~Toyota ad in *Sports Illustrated*
8. Why should a man's mind have been thrown into such close, sad, sensational, inexplicable relations with such a precarious object as his body? ~Thomas Hardy
9. Our bodies are our gardens - our wills are our gardeners. ~Shakespeare
10. Varicose veins are the result of an improper selection of grandparents. ~William Osler
11. The body is but a pair of pincers set over a bellows and a stew pan and the whole fixed upon stilts. ~Samuel Butler (*Notebooks*)
12. It is in moments of illness that we are compelled to recognize that we live not alone but chained to a creature of a different kingdom, whole worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body. ~Marcel Proust
13. Body and mind, like man and wife, do not always agree to die together. ~Charles C. Colton
14. The human body is a magazine of inventions, the patent office, where are the models from which every hint is taken. All the tools and engines on earth are only extensions of its limbs and senses. ~Ralph Waldo Emerson
15. Giving birth is like taking your lower lip and forcing it over your head. ~Ellen Degeneres
16. You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body. ~C.S. Lewis
17. We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey. ~Pierre Teilhard de Chardin