

Earth My Body, Water My Blood

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Introduction

Spring is in full swing, so I decided to venture out to the farmer's market. I awoke earlier than usual, excited about getting re-acquainted with local produce. When I arrived, the market looked much different than the idealized memory I had cooked up over the long winter. If I had thought about it, I would have realized that corn and peaches aren't in season in April. Cold wind whispered rumors of rain later in the day. Loose clusters of people wandered freely, unfettered by the celebration of humanity that presses through the market in late summer.

After walking up and down between the stalls once, I was able to let go of my idealized image, and to enjoy the market as I experienced it. There were heirloom varieties of apples that had been carefully kept since the harvest. There was a tasty mix of baby lettuces. There were herbs like dill and Italian parsley that would be perfect for a dinner I was planning. The early spring harvest has its own charms, and I was at peace.

Seeing friends and neighbors at the farmer's market is one of the things that keeps me going back over the summer. Not only do I treasure the relationships I have with people, knowing that I will see them makes me feel more accountable for showing up. In the summer, there is just time for a quick hello over the din of the crowd before the tide pulls us in opposite directions. In the spring market, I had time for a long conversation with a friend. Whether I meet crowds or individuals, showing up and toting my vegetables in canvas bags grounds me in the present moment where face-to-face

interactions happen. The embodied, food-centered experience anchors my feelings of love for neighbors and friends.

I hope I'm not giving the impression that I go to a farmer's market at a secret club. I'm glad to run into people I know, but there are lots of people at the market that I don't know. Everybody eats. The people who come together in that square have hundreds of different ways of making it through the week: musicians busking for tips, paychecks, assistance checks, trying to make savings last through a rough patch, getting by any way possible. In that space, all of our paths converge. The divisions that keep people moving through separate tunnels are temporarily weakened. Being fully present with our neighbors, in a physical place to meet a physical need, we are better able to come to an understanding about what it means to be a community.

I have been thinking a lot about the experience of embodiment. Today is the Sunday between Earth Day, when we celebrate and pledge to protect our ecosystem, and Beltane, a Pagan holiday that invites us to treasure our physical bodies. I like both of these holidays because they declare something I believe: our earth and our flesh are intrinsically good.

We have much to celebrate about the living planet and our physical bodies. Putting our hands and feet in the dirt where we live, being fully present to the limits and possibilities of our bodies, the experience of the tangible world within us and around us can be good in many ways. The physical world can teach us to be at peace within. It can anchor our feelings of love in the here and now. The concrete reality we share can help us understand our diversity and our commonalities. In other words, the physical world of soil and water and bodies teaches us peace, love, and understanding.

Peace

Experiencing the physical world as it is helps us to feel grounded. Being mindful of embodiment helps cut down on should-have's, might-have-been's, and ought-to's. The poet Wendell Berry speaks to this feeling:

"When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. "I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."

"I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief," says Berry. Wild animals feel pain, certainly. All things in nature know birth, suffering, and death. But they "do not tax their lives with forethought of grief." The poet doesn't just contemplate the wood drake, he goes to lay down by the water. He gets close to the earth. He becomes part of the environment. His physical experience in the presence of still water brings him peace.

I believe that being present to any environment, right where we are, can help us to find relief from the taxation of the forethought of grief. Some environments may be more peaceful than others, but just paying attention to the here and now helps me slow down my mind from running away with imagined future calamities. "Don't borrow trouble," as my grandmother used to say.

The soil and water around us and our own corporeal bodies connect us to the present moment, but sometimes that link brings awareness of injury as well as wild beauty. There might be thorns next to the still water. On the other hand, even in the

presence of suffering, there is also resilience. I find that trying to hide from pain also means hiding from beauty. The physical world is a complex package.

So far, I have been talking about finding peace in awareness of the natural environment. The same has been true for awareness of my own body. I was on the neighborhood swim team when I was a kid. I wasn't very competitive, but I had a great coach. She challenged us to improve based on our own record rather than comparing us with others. She taught us how to stretch and to cool down in order to reduce the risk of injuries. She encouraged us with sincere praise. My coach taught us to notice the difference between being sore after challenging ourselves and being injured. All of her encouragement helped me to concentrate on my stroke rather than the other swimmers or my worries. I felt my arms guide water out of my path, noticed the air entering and leaving my lungs, stretched my toes for a long kick. Being fully present with my physical experience, my soul could rest for a time, and I was free.

This is something I have to practice in order to remember. It takes concentration to notice what my own body can do, rather than let myself get distracted by what I think I should be able to do. Healthy activity is different for every person. When I think too much about comparing myself with others, I take less joy in experiencing the world for myself. When I am in practice with being active and mindful, I am at peace with my body. I feel grounded.

The physical world gives a gift of experience that cannot be matched by the realm of ideas. When I am able to be present to my own body and to my own physical environment, I feel at peace. I am not always able to anchor myself in soil or embodiment. I need more practice with noticing sensory reality instead of concentrating

on my fears and worries. Sometimes, though, I find myself in the presence of still water. To experience body and earth on their own terms is to find freedom in the grace of the world.

Love

Living things are part of living systems. The physical world calls us to be in relationship. That's what I mean when I say that the natural world and our own bodies teach us about love. I mean all kinds of love: the love of friends, the love of communities, the love of dogs and cats, the love of a baby who stares at you from over its father's shoulder as you walk down the street. Love, in a broad sense, is the force of compassion and interconnection at work in our relationships.

As I said before, I believe that the earth is intrinsically good. I believe that our bodies are intrinsically good. We matter. I continue to believe that matter is good, even with the knowledge that pain and suffering are part of the deal. Let's relieve pain where we can. Where we can't relieve pain, let's care for one another, strengthening our connections. In the reading earlier by Erika Hewitt, we heard:

"May we bring to our intricately woven bodies a sense of sacred caretaking. In doing so, let us also be grateful for the embrace of the Holy: the Presence that creates and sustains life, the Mystery that knit together each of our bodies, and the force of Love that celebrates our desires."

The "sense of sacred caretaking" is an important point. This congregation already does a good job of caring for one another. I have heard about nursing home visits. I've heard about long phone calls between members about coping with illness. I heard great things about Parents Night Out on Valentine's Day. I don't need to say a whole lot more about love here, except to point out that our physical bodies remind us of

interdependence. Without awareness of our corporeal selves, we might be tempted to think we can get through this life alone and isolated. We need each other. As Unitarian Universalists, we respect the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. There is spiritual meaning in caring activities: compassion is faith in the interdependent web made manifest.

Just as the gifts and limits of our own bodies can teach us something about love, our relationship with the environment where we live is a form of love. I grew up in Maryland. The Chesapeake Bay is part of me; "water my blood" feels more real than metaphorical. Picking up trash on the sidewalk, forgoing pesticides on my lawn, writing to my legislators about conservation all arise from the love and connection I feel with the actual soil, water, and air where I live. I would be willing to bet that many of you feel the same way, which is why you were out here last week for the Spring Clean Up. I look forward to hearing more about that.

In the opening reading today, we heard the voice of Richard Gilbert, who wrote:

"Blessed are they who protect the earth and all her creatures,
from the plants of the field to the trees of the forest,
for their reward shall be harmony with the web of existence.
Rejoice, and be glad,
for the earth and her people are one."

Blessed are you, indeed. The secret, I think, is to start with feeling at one with the part of the earth where we are. The whole earth is hard to imagine. Soil and water in our hands come much closer to our hearts. I love my planet in an abstract way. I am concerned about the polar ice caps and the rainforest. But what really gets me moving is my hands-on love for the environment where I live. I love the dogwood trees and the pink magnolia trees and the pin oak trees. I love the Jones Falls and the Susquehanna

River and the Patapsco River. Paying attention to the physical world helps me to feel at home in the watershed I share with other living things.

When we pay attention to our bodies and our environment, the fact of interdependence is obvious. Connections open passageways for compassion. As the reading said, our bodies are "channels of the world coming alive through us." Another word for coming alive in compassion and connection is love. The physical world teaches us love, and it is good.

Understanding

So far, I have said that being present with our bodies and our environment teaches us peace and love. Matter also teaches us understanding. We find common ground with others and we resolve divisions within ourselves when we can see all living beings as expressions of blessing.

When I was in my teens and twenties, like a lot of young people, I struggled with body image. I wore clothes that didn't fit me very well so that I could hide in their bulk. I read way too many teen magazines. I was sensitive to the ways we young women let our ideas about perfection come between us, as if beauty were a scarce commodity and we were starving for scraps. I doubted constantly that my body was acceptable or valuable.

It took a long time before I asked the question, "acceptable or valuable to whom?" I was judging my own body as an outsider, as someone who evaluates with a scale or a tape measure, instead of experiencing the physical world as it is, through my own senses. I would rather experience the physical world as myself, at home in my body. Erika Hewitt writes:

"Let us remember and celebrate, this morning,
that each of our bodies was woven together in the depths of mystery:
cells multiplying, tissue taking form, organs taking up their function,
all under the silky cover of skin."

When I was here in March, we talked about our shared origins. All of us are made up of stuff that once burned in the hearts of stars. Our presence here together is amazing. Each one of us is a miracle.

Yet there seems to be social pressure to regard some bodies as perfect and the rest of us as broken. Some bodies are too large, too small, or too different to be acceptable. Our bodies determine whether we have equal access to public spaces, whether we can fly on an airplane without harassment, and whether we can see ourselves reflected in the media as people of worth. This pains me. What affects one person's body affects us all. Can we see the Divine in every person?

My reflections on this subject are influenced by Nancy Eiesland and her book, "The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability." Eiesland points out that some bodies are made of plastic and metal as well as bone and tissue. These materials, too, were once held in the hearts of stars. She writes, "Our bodies participate in the imago Dei, not in spite of our impairments and contingencies, but through them." As a Christian, Eiesland notes that the resurrected Jesus invited the disciples to touch his wounds, inviting "connection and equality at the point of Christ's physical impairment." Wholeness, in Eiesland's view, is about solidarity.

I suspect that some of the barriers we face in relating to each other come from divisions within our own minds. If we think we can control our lives to the point of eliminating the possibility of illness, the reality of imperfection becomes a threat in our relationships with others.

I hear echoes of this in reference to catching a cold. When a loved one admits to being sick, helpful friends quiz them about being in contact with children, washing their hands, getting enough vitamin C, and so on. Unsolicited advice in this case is like saying, "illness only comes to those who don't take precautions to prevent it." But illness does come, sometimes in random ways. Too often, it comes in forms more serious than a cold. No person deserves to be sick. If we can come to terms with our own mortal bodies, we don't need to distance ourselves emotionally from loved ones whose illness remind us of mortality. We come to a greater understanding of ourselves and each other when we embrace the fullness of embodied experience.

Being present with our corporeal bodies helps us to overcome our differences and disagreements. We find common ground in the mystery and miracle of being alive.

Poetry may be the best way to express this:

"Let us gather in reverence for the gift of these bodies,
whatever their ages, their shapes, their abilities,
and may we know them to be channels of the world coming alive through us:
These bodies, these blessings, bring the world to life
through seeing, taste, hearing, scent, and touch."

Conclusion

A direct relationship with our bodies and with the earth that sustains us brings many gifts. Awareness of the physical world can anchor us in the present moment, bringing a sense of peace. When we care for each other in body and spirit, and when we care for our local ecosystem, we experience interdependence as a form of love. Fierce, unflinching amazement at the miracle of our bodies in this tangible world leads us to overcome our differences, letting justice arise from greater understanding.

May we share the peace of wild things. May we love honestly, aware of our interdependence. May we find understanding through our diverse experiences of the physical world.

Blessed be.