

Spiritual Pathways of the Body by Rev. Doug McCusker

Back in the mid-90's there was a science fiction television series that lasted only 1 year called Earth 2. Some of you may remember it. Probably not many, that's why it was cancelled. The premise of the series was that in the year 2192, Earth has become uninhabitable so most people live on orbiting space stations. The show followed the journey of a small expeditionary group who travelled to a distant planet in an attempt to find a cure for a mysterious disease called the "syndrome."

At first the planet seems to be like Earth, but it was gradually revealed that it has a very different ecology, including 2 different native sentient and humanoid species. One is called "Terrians", who would create tunnels in the ground through a pseudo-psychic process. They would pop up through the ground as if they were the planet itself in human form. Their well-being was somehow linked to that of the planet. The show was cancelled before we

could learn more about this link between the humanoids and their planet, but that always stuck with me.

The first time I saw one of the Terrians pop up from the ground; shooting through the surface like a prairie dog without a hole, I instantly thought of how connected we are with our planet and the physical forces of the universe. Our bodies are made up of recycled bits and pieces of stardust moving through the cosmos from the cataclysmic big bang of creation. Our bodies and its constituent components are connected at the material level to something greater than ourselves. We don't pop out of the ground, but when we are born, we emerge from another human body in the mysterious chain of existence we call life.

Last week in the first sermon of this series called Spiritual Pathways, I defined spirituality as “the need to express what we experience in our connection with life.” Life both contains us and is infinitely greater than us. Some of what we experience can be articulated with language that is imprecise and bound by our

culture and accumulated knowledge. Concepts like “God” and “life force” are metaphors that point to a deeper reality.

In an old Buddhist story, the nun Wu Jincang asked the Patriarch Huineng, “I have studied the Mahapari-nirvana sutra for many years, yet there are many areas I do not quite understand. Please enlighten me.”

The patriarch responded, “I am illiterate. Please read out the characters to me and perhaps I will be able to explain the meaning.”

The nun said, “You cannot even recognize the characters. How are you able then to understand the meaning?”

“Truth has nothing to do with words” said the Patriarch. Truth can be likened to the bright moon in the sky. Words, in this case, can be likened to a finger. The finger can point to the moon’s location. However, the finger is not the moon. To look at the moon, it is necessary to gaze beyond the finger.”

Spirituality is about experiencing truth for ourselves in our search for meaning. Religion and philosophy are exercises in finger pointing. This sermon is of course a finger pointing. My words are only pointing. Pointing and discussing other pointers is fine, but it is not the same as experiencing. It is important to know the difference and to not stop at the finger. The experience of something is the connection with something, the feeling of being one with something, without labeling.

My first career was cartography, which means I made maps. I love maps, they describe where things are in relation to other things. They show us direction and patterns. They use symbols and names. But they are always wrong. Maps have built-in error because they are a projection of our potato shaped earth, onto a flat surface. The only true, totally error-free map would be an elliptical globe the size of the earth that accounts for magnetic and gravitational anomalies. The mathematics behind map-making is all about minimizing the error for the purpose for which

you are using the map. A hydrographic chart for ships uses a different projection than the GPS map in your car.

But I digress, maps do that to me. The point is that the map is a representation to help guide us, but it is not the territory that it is depicting. Our minds create maps through our concepts and thought patterns to help guide us, but they are only representations. Maps are wonderful, but they are no substitute for putting your feet on the ground and experiencing the totality of the place through your own senses.

Our bodies are our one true home in this life. It is our physical manifestation that changes with us as we journey together. We are companions with our bodies even though sometimes we feel like enemies. Our relationship with our bodies is very complicated because we are so closely linked. It is our eyes that see distance, our ears that hear music, our tongue that savors spices, our nose that breaths in air and our flesh that touches the world.

This close connection with our environment has been maligned as a punishment in some religious traditions. The flesh is seen as a symbol of sin, a curse from the original fall of man. In this theology, the body is what separates us from being with God. We are destined to feel pain, suffering and death because we are imprisoned in mortal bodies.

Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle postulated an absolute dichotomy between the physical/material realm and the spiritual/intellectual realm. The physical was seen as of lesser value because of its temporal and common earthiness. This dualistic thinking continues to permeate Western thought, devaluing things we deem merely physical including our bodies and the earth itself. So many of us continue to treat our bodies as if they are disconnected from the higher realities of the mind and spirit.

Scott Alexander writes that “human wholeness and health are impossible if we separate the spiritual from the physical in our

lives. All of life is woven together in an interdependent web of connection and relationship. If we do not nurture, tend, and care for our bodies, we will not succeed in maintaining a proper and lively spiritual relationship with ourselves, our neighbors, our earth and the holistic mystery that is life itself.”

In our story this morning, Siddhartha was taught that in order to learn the truth about why humans suffer he needed to deny his body and endure physical hardship. This led him nowhere except near death. Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice, but it is not meant to be taken to the extreme where one’s body breaks down. Fasting, when done in a controlled manner, actually enables us to psychologically free ourselves from desire and to appreciate food and sustenance rather than take them for granted.

Physiologically, when we fast we cleanse our bodies of toxins. Done correctly, fasts lead to a state of clarity and even euphoria.

Once Siddhartha found the right balance of concentration and health, he was able to unlock the secrets of life at a deeper

level. No longer beholden to desire he defeated his inner demons that wrestled for his attention in the busyness of his life. And the earth was his witness. Not some celestial deity, but the earth. Siddhartha was liberated from a dependency on his body by the earth, the physical realm itself. But even when he became the Buddha, he remained with his body in a conscious relationship between spirit and flesh.

This story, of course, is another example of a finger pointing to the moon so that we may gaze at the truth in our own lives. Christianity has another metaphor that describes the interplay of the body and spirit. In First Corinthians, Paul of Tarsus refers to the body as the “Temple of the Holy Spirit.” Paul, as a Jew, knew quite well that in the inner most sanctum of the Temple was a room where the divine presence was believed to dwell. Only certain priests who had been cleansed and consecrated could enter that part of the temple.

Our bodies as temples implies that deep inside our innermost being we are connected to the divine, however you describe it for yourself. Our bodies, serve as a portal to the interdependent web of life. Our inner world interfaces with our bodies through our senses, neural pathways, cellular networks, energy fields and genetic codes. We have a myriad of infinities running through us.

There is the infinity of space that reaches out to the depths of the cosmos through the minerals that course our blood. There is the infinity of time reaching back over billions of years. There is the infinity of the microcosm inside our molecules. It is as vast and dazzling as the cosmos. But as John O'Donohue writes, the infinity that haunts everyone and which no one can finally quell is the infinity of one's own interior. A world lies hidden behind every human face.

Last week, we turned parts of our Fellowship building into a photo studio in which we stood in front of a camera to have our portraits taken. As I stood there posing for the photographer, I had this uncanny feeling of being inside my face, trying to present who

I am through a natural smile. It's a strange thing that we do, freezing our image to serve as a proxy for all eternity.

But to really know someone, you must gaze into the vastness of their face. Not just the eyes, but the lines of the mouth, the wrinkles on the brow, the curve of the chin, the coloration of the cheeks and the textures of the skin. In that landscape our inner stories are etched. We cover up the rest of our bodies, but we usually leave our faces naked and exposed.

Several years ago, when I was in seminary, I shared with my class that I felt ashamed that I couldn't break free of the prejudices that overtook me whenever I walked down the street and saw a black man walking toward me. I knew that I had been socially conditioned to feel fear, but it still bothered me that I didn't treat everyone equally upon first glance. The instructor said that we are all conditioned with biases, but the key was to be conscious and aware of them. So, I started a practice of trying to gaze into the face of everyone I encountered, whether they were strangers or friends.

This was much harder to do than it sounds. I hadn't realized how superficially I looked at people. I wasn't one to notice eye colors before. As I walked on the downtown streets of Chicago I kept my head forward and captured people's faces. I didn't stare, I just gazed and acknowledged them. Their faces revealed their humanity as long as I was willing to appreciate it.

In the process many people gazed back and connected with my humanity. For just a split second there was a conversation between two faces, linking our lives, and penetrating the fears that separate us. In just the 6 or 7 blocks from the hostel to the seminary during rush hour pedestrian traffic, I must have encountered at least a hundred faces that belonged to real people, each with a library full of stories to tell. This became my morning meditation. I would start the day noticing the aliveness around me simply by peering into the faces of the crowd.

We are sensual beings. Our bodies are like a gauze and our senses are the holes where the external world enters and mixes

with our inner world. As our sacred home, we have the choice to be hospitable or private to the stimulus that graces our doors.

How you sense and what you sense determine how and what you will be. To the fearful eye, all is threatening. The world will seem like a minefield that grips you with terror. You will miss the beauty of a smile and the sweet fragrance of the rose. To the persnickety taste buds all is suspect. Sameness and the familiar will be all that you know. To the busy ears, silence is lost. There is a voice inside you that no one, not even you, has ever heard. Give yourself the opportunity of silence and you may begin to hear deep within you the music of your spirit.

As the beautiful poem that Elizabeth shared with us says,

Know yourself as something more

Than the body's material shell.

Seek deep within yourself

For the light that knows you well.

We are the ghosts inside the machine, the occupier of this perfect creation. Our true self is not a prisoner within our bodies, but a reflection of the divine, where the infinities meet. Through our bodies we can come to know this true self as part of the larger body of the universe. When we are born, we inhabit a vast cosmos that is our bodies. We only use a small percentage of our brains and have access to a small archive of our memories and yet it is enough.

Our bodies are perfect just as they are. Each one is as it was meant to be. No two bodies are the same and there is no ideal greater than the other. So be at peace with your body and treasure every organ, sinew and bone. Be in harmony with the vital fluids that run through you like a river. Have an attitude of awe and wonder as your body moves, thinks, dreams, cries, loves and constantly changes.

Your body is your sacred home. As far as I know it is the only one you'll have. It is part of the earth as much as the

mountains and the oceans. Let it take you on a journey through this life, always aware that you both must take care of each other. Someday the journey will end for you, but take joy in knowing that you are part of a greater, ongoing, transcendent life that has been forever changed by your presence.