

Embodied Holiness



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February 28, 2016

As we come close to Spring I feel a profound need to reconnect to my body. All winter it seems like I am out of touch with body and soul, body and nature, body and earth. To be sure seeing the stars and the vast moon clad skies can be reinvigorating but it is in a way of seeing that reminds me how spectacularly immense the world is and how miniscule, I am in the scheme of things. Snow fall on my eyelids and ice underfoot are somewhat of a reminder that I am a bodied being although in an anxiety producing way. But spring time, mucking in the dirt, scooping dead brush away from slowing budding crocus, walking in

squishing mud, - -putting yard bric-a-brac in the proper place again ah that is when I feel an embodied holiness.

It seems no mistake that Easter is in the spring. Sometimes too, I have the sense that maybe the early church fathers were onto something when they began to teach about resurrection as renewal as body re-living. Of course those early church fathers weren't the only ones teaching and thinking about resurrection, rebirth and renewal of body and soul. The ancient heathen, goddess based religions did too. Even the Greek. Egyptian and Roman myths contained stories of their gods being born and reborn or being born to earth beings becoming gods on earth- Osiris, Isis, Hector, Leda the daughter of Zeus, or the classic resurrection story of Persephone and Demeter come to mind and are some of my favorites.

Many religions use a specific word to talk about the divine source becoming being earthly - that word is incarnation. Those of you brought up Roman Catholic might remember the word but in typical Unitarian Universalist and Rev Susan fashion we are going to reimagine, reclaim and reuse that word.

The incarnation for our Christian friends and family members is meant as the belief that the God became human as Jesus. Well for me this doesn't work because what I believe that people, (I repeat) all people are divine, each of us is born pure and wholly innocent and with divine god, within, God is a word I use loosely, not in the classic sense but as the pure, unencumbered energy and love which is at the very core of all life. And we each and every one of else embody the holy- the sacred- let us call it the word-or better yet the World Word which is without form and substance until it incarnates as flesh, as body, as you as me, as human being. I would even say every living thing that creeps, crawl, flies, hops, walks, strolls and struts animal or human.

Brian Wren, a mystic and song writer poet wrote the following poem, I read it in a *Christian Century* article by Barbara Brown Taylor called "Our bodies, Our faith" Though I might not agree with every word he wrote, I loved the imagery and the vision it calls up for me about *us* as World Word body. Let me share it with you.

Good is the flesh that the word has become

Good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,

Good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
Good is the body for knowing the world.
Good is the flesh that the word has become.
Good is the body for knowing the world.
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
Feeling, perceiving, within and around,
Good is the body, from cradle to grave.
Good is the flesh that the word has become
Good is the body, from cradle to grave.
Growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,
Happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh.ⁱ

How often does a religion tell you that you are welcome and loved, fleshed body and all? We tell you bring yourself- bring your experiences, bring your hopes and dreams, your wishes and challenges but I am fearful that we forget to tell you more clearly and precisely bring your body. Your lovely, aging, tattooed, scarred, hurting, svelte, fleshy, smooth, wrinkly, gnarled, stooped, upright body;

because you are your body, your body is you and you are divine.

This is what embodied holiness is. I suspect this might be one of the reasons that the foot washing ceremony holds a lot of appeal for Unitarian Universalist. During Easter week, many UU churches meet on Thursday night – also called Maundy Thursday for foot washing ceremonies. I also suspect this is why it was so powerful and controversial to have Pope Francis engage in a foot washing ceremony with criminals and with women his first year as Pope. He sure has proven a Pope willing to upset the status quo hasn't he? He has dared step into politics holding priests, pastors and politician to account for not recognizing all humans as worthy of compassion and care. He has dared to be in the presence of the oppressed, the ill, the criminal, the outcast. He appears not be afraid of women, nor afraid that he can't control his emotions when engaged with women or others. His activity of foot washing was a wake- up call to religious leaders that the human body and the foot is a blessed part of the human body. It deserves to be washed and wiped and noticed as a part of us that supports the human frame. We know, don't we, that the body is the vehicle that holds our spirit. We know too

that this body manifest in many forms and types. This can make us appreciate both the awe and wonder and confusion that recognizing the holiness within a body can bring out in us.

I feel a certain magic, awesome and mysterious, connection to life to living when I step in mud, when I dig through dirt to plant a seed, when I smell a flower, bury a bulb to watch it bloom, when I hang clothes out to air, when I walk the labyrinth or do any action that makes a connection between body and earth, body and the sense of holy that is found in nature.

For too many of us we are disconnected from our body, we are taught that it is weak, burdensome, unclean. Yet I have seen and heard about the most loving care, compassion and integrity given as an EMT or firefighter, police officer picks up a wounded broken person, an ill child, an aged person, or a person who has died. I have seen and witnessed how funeral directors and morticians treat our beloved deceased knowing that that body once housed our loved ones. I have watched nurses, doctors and care givers treat their patients with kindness and compassion when they are at their most vulnerable time. I suggest that if we don't appreciate and embrace our embodied holiness,

that when we get ill we will neglect the many resources that can assist us to heal. We forget at our peril that when others are sick or ill or our loved ones with severe or minor illness that tender touch and tender care is the divine connection that can make the difference between wellness and increasing disease.

We get confused and hear confusing messages about our body all during our life. Young women are bombarded with messages about how they should look and act, young men are sent confusing messages about their bodies, they are to be tough, disconnected from physical pain and told that men don't cry or hurt or are not allowed to show emotion. Well, I have a news flash for us. Emotions are buried and they are buried alive and if they are not dealt with in ways that are healing and holy they will erupt and wreak havoc. The body mind connection is well known. The connection between physical illness and unresolved emotional spiritual ills has been well documented.

Now let's stop for a moment before you go blaming yourself for your ills. I know I did that too. When I had cervical cancer I went on a long guilt trip of how my body was punishing me for wrongs I had done. This was totally not true. I developed cervical cancer because I had children

when I was very young and used a certain type of birth control that since has been known to contribute to cervical cancer when other factors come into play. However, what I did learn was to heal and to stay healthy I needed to find ways to develop good care habits and a relationship with my body that brought me to be more friendly, comfortable and accepting of my body.

I spoke about young men and women and how they are taught about their bodies but just look at the many negative messages that are given about aging, about body type, about bodies that don't work as well as they once did, because they are numb or weakened. I would like us to reclaim the embodied holiness that we are no matter what our body has been through. Any practice that we can engage in that puts us in touch with our body is good.

And now back to Brian Wren,

Good is the body for knowing the world.

sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,

Feeling, perceiving, within and around,

Good is the body, from cradle to grave.

Growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,

Happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,

And I am going to change his last line to ‘good is the pleasure of life in our flesh.’ⁱⁱ

Good is our body, good is the embodied spirit of holiness and divinity that is within it. Good is the opportunity to be reminded that our bodies are part and parcel of our whole and entire being. Good is the chance to look ahead to Spring time, when renewal, rebirth is most present when we connect body to nature.

I encourage you to take some time in the next few weeks to pick up a stone on your way into the house, to touch a tree, to stoop down and see a pile of dirt, to pick up a packet of seeds as you leave here and plant one and watch it grow and fill with life, as you too will fill with joy as the season begins to shift and change.

May it be so.

ⁱ Song lyrics by Brian Wren from Christian Century article Jan 27, 2009 Our Bodies, our faith, by Barbara Brown Taylor. P 26

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Body Prayer

I invite you to partake with me in a body prayer

Please stand as able and willing

Hands outstretched, palms open to the sky

And say: We Wait and we receive

Cross hands over chest

And say: We hold close

First one hand outstretched - then the other

And say: We let go

Repeat the actions and the words.

End with slight bow.