

**“Embracing the Body”**

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims  
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona  
February 20, 2011

**Story for All Ages:**

**Reading:** “Some Kiss We Want” by Rumi, from Soul of Rumi by Coleman Barks

There is some kiss we want with our whole lives,  
The touch of spirit on the body.  
Seawater begs the pearl to break its shell.  
And the lily, how passionately it needs some wild darling!  
At night, I open the window and ask the moon to come and press its face against mine.  
Breathe into me. Close the language-door and open the love window.  
The moon won't use the door, only the window.

**Responsive Reading:** # 517, by Starhawk

I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the  
mysteries of the waters,

*I call upon your soul to arise and come unto Me.*

For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe.

*From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return.*

Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold – all acts of love and pleasure  
are My rituals.

*Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility,  
mirth and reverence within you.*

And you who seek to know Me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not,  
unless you know the Mystery:

*For if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it  
without.*

For behold, I have been with you from the beginning,

*And I am that which is attained at the end of desire.*

**Sermon:** There is a view of reality that divides things into polar opposites, like good and evil, spiritual and physical, healthy and unhealthy. That view is known as dualism. It is opposed to monism, which sees the universe and its creator as a unified whole. The dualistic view that divides the physical from the spiritual has a long lineage in human history, especially the history of religion. The dualistic view values things of the spirit and devalues physical things, especially the human body.

The Gnostics were probably around before the birth of Jesus. But they continued as a branch of early Christianity. The Gnostics were radical dualists. They believed that the material world was created by an evil lesser god who was cast out of the divine world, stole divine power, and created an evil physical world for its own purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Another early Christian sect, Manichaeism, also saw matter as inherently and completely evil, “the creation of the devil[.]” “[T]he work of [the true] God was the universe of souls, and the path to salvation was their release from sinful flesh. . . . Sexual intercourse was [viewed as] inherently evil, [because it] continue[d] the natural order.”<sup>2</sup>

Gnostics and Manichaeans maintained that the physical human body and all the rest of material creation was intrinsically evil, something from which to escape or be released by death. The material world could not be saved, nor could humans be saved through or in their physical bodies. Indeed, the radically dualist view of Gnostics and

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Clark Kee, *Christianity, A Social and Cultural History*, 2d ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 90; *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, “Gnosticism.”

<sup>2</sup> John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 212.

Manichaeans, and their confidence in their own salvation, caused them to be indifferent to moral virtue in what they deemed to be an unchangeably evil physical world.<sup>3</sup>

Origen of Alexandria was an early Christian church father, who lived from 185 to 254 of the Common Era. According to the website Religion Facts, “[b]y all accounts Origen lived an extremely ascetic life[,denying himself pleasure and] more than willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. Famously, his great zeal [for the spiritual side of life, which he saw as opposed to the physical] even caused him to castrate himself. It seems his primary motive was to avoid any possible scandal due to his private instruction of women. He also seems to have interpreted Matthew 19:12 [literally], ‘There are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.’ Origen appears to have thought better of this act later in life. In his Commentary on Matthew he writes disparagingly of those who take 19:12 literally, and calls such an action an ‘outrage.’”<sup>4</sup>

Dena, who works with me at my law firm, took a tour of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome some years ago. There were many large statues of unclothed men throughout the Basilica. Except there are sculpted leaves in the place where anatomically correct parts used to be. The tour guide explained that many of the statues in Rome had been brought into the Basilica, initially in honor of the classical art of sculpture.

But there came a time when one of the popes became concerned about the sinfulness of the body. He thought it was time to cover up the statues’ realistically sculpted “private parts.” So the leaves were added. The problem was that covering the parts with a leaf simply increased a certain projection beyond the plane, as it were. The

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/people/origen.htm>.

leaves were actually calling attention to the areas of the sculptures that the pope and his advisors wanted to hide. Since the Catholic censors were unable to disguise the male anatomy sufficiently, they decided to emasculate the classical sculptures. The leaves stayed, and the underlying parts they were designed to cover were discreetly removed. But they were kept and stored. As the tour guide said, “there’s a lot of male genitalia in the basement of the Vatican.” I couldn’t help but think that that was true both literally **and** metaphorically.

Butch Hancock, of the band “The Flatlanders,” once said, “Life in Lubbock taught me two things: One is that God loves you . . . and you’re going to burn in hell; the other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on Earth . . . and you should save it for someone you love.”<sup>5</sup>

Modern society has its own dualism. Sex sells, as we know. I saw a commercial recently showing a man and a woman in the throes of passion. And then the camera panned to a cat eating out of a bowl, apparently in the same house. It took me several seconds to realize that it was a cat food commercial. We are told over and over that if we just buy this car or that toothpaste, other people will find us irresistible. And many people pursue a religious or spiritual life. But how often do we hear that body and spirit are connected? It seems to me that much that we see or hear seeks to divide the world into the sacred and the profane, the worthy and unworthy, good and evil. Where do we hear the truth that separating the world into polar opposites denies reality and the chance for wholeness?

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<sup>5</sup> Documentary film “The Education of Shelby Knox”

Traditional religion seems to be uncomfortable with the human body, especially physical pleasure. I remember that when I was growing up as a Methodist, anything that was too pleasurable was suspect. That was mostly about sex, but not all of it.

Last week I was fortunate to attend an “Excellence in Ministry” conference put on by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. It was held on California’s Monterey Peninsula. My friend Jan and I had driven up together. On the way home, we took the Pacific Coast Highway, one of National Geographic’s 500 Drives of a Lifetime. We pulled off at a state park and took a short hike up a narrow path from the highway. There we could look down to the ocean from between tall pines high on a cliff. There was a cool breeze and the sun was warm. The white spray of the surf was brilliant against the huge, sharp, black rocks there and for the miles north we could see. Maybe 500 feet down and inside the crashing surf was a secluded cove. The beach was inaccessible and the sand was pristine. I can see the water in that cove clearly again as I remember it. It was a startlingly bright, emerald green. I stood there and thought what a privilege it was to be alive.

In mid-January, I attended an all-Bach organ recital at All Souls Episcopal Church in Phoenix. That wonderful organ filled the spacious sanctuary with the sound of some of the best music anyone has ever written. I felt transported to another place. It was an extraordinarily sensual and spiritual experience. The path the music took was through my hearing. But its resting place was somewhere at the center of me, what I think of as my soul.

The Gnostics, Manichaeans, Puritans, and sometimes we moderns seem to believe that taking too much pleasure in any kind of physical way is wrong. We are

sometimes told that pleasure distracts us from cultivating our spirits. That our bodies themselves are somehow sinful and need to be purified before we can become holy. I just can't buy that. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: "The spiritualization of sensuality is called love: it is a great triumph over Christianity."

Three weeks ago I heard UU singer/songwriter Peter Mayer sing his song "Holy Now" at the Valley UU Congregation in Chandler. He sang:

*"When I was a boy, each week  
On Sunday, we would go to church  
And pay attention to the priest  
And he would read the Holy Word.  
And consecrate the holy bread  
And everyone would kneel and bow  
Today the only difference is  
Everything is holy now.*

*Everything, everything,  
Everything is holy now . . .*

*When I was in Sunday school  
We would learn about the time  
Moses split the sea in two  
Jesus made the water wine  
And I remember feeling sad  
that miracles don't happen still  
But now I can't keep track  
'Cause everything's a miracle*

*Everything, everything  
Everything's a miracle . . .*

*Wine from water is not so small  
An even better magic trick  
is that anything is here at all.  
So the challenging thing becomes  
not to look for miracles  
but finding where there isn't one.*

*Holy water was rare at best  
barely wet my finger tips  
Now I have to hold my breath*

*I'm swimming in a sea of it  
Used to be a world half there  
Heaven's second rate hand-me-downs  
now I walk it with a reverent air,  
"cause everything's holy now.*

*This morning outside I stood  
And saw a little red-winged bird  
Shining like a burning bush  
Singing like a scripture verse  
It made me want to bow my head.  
and I remember when church let out -  
how things have changed since then,  
everything is holy now.*

*Everything, everything  
Everything is holy now  
Everything, everything,  
Everything is holy now . . ."<sup>6</sup>*

But what about loving the material things of this world when they are not at their best nor lovely? As the Buddha reminded us, "All compound things are subject to decay." Our own bodies age. They begin to betray us as we degenerate or become sick. I think we still must celebrate the senses, our physical selves. In so many ways, it is through our senses that we are most truly alive. Indeed, when our physical bodies no longer function at all, that is the end of life as we know it. But the fact that our physical selves end does not mean they are unimportant or unworthy. It does not mean we should not rejoice in them while we can. Maybe the very fact that they do not last forever makes it imperative that we love them while we have them. And the fact that the rest of the physical world decays is reason enough to love it while we can, too.

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<sup>6</sup> Lyrics by Peter Mayer, copyright 1999 (ASCAP).

We need to see goodness in the material world, including our own bodies. Enjoyment of the physical, the world of sensation, is also a path of the spirit toward wholeness, toward salvation of the whole person. According to Matthew 25:36, Jesus says, "I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me." Jesus was talking about physical as well as spiritual needs.

Remember what I said about the Gnostics and Manichaeans? They were indifferent to moral virtue, because the physical world was unalterably evil anyway. What does it matter if we work for any good in a world that is inherently evil, where there is no chance for redemption?

Why does it matter whether we care about the physical world? Because it is by our sense experience that we know what it is to be human. It is through our own longing for human touch, our own hunger, our own experience of illness or physical limitations that we find compassion for our human brothers and sisters. Knowing what we need lets us connect to ourselves and others, care about our own and their physical well-being. Until basic physical needs are met, there can be no spiritual development. Abraham Maslow taught us that with his hierarchy of human needs. This is the truth of the Social Gospel. What good is religion in this world if we do not take care of people who are poor, or sick, or hungry, or lonely?

I close with a parable about a young minister, Dan. (The "young" part tells you this story is not autobiographical.) More than anything else, Dan wanted to feel close to God, which he thought of as all that was good in the universe. He had chosen ministry and was devoted to it because he thought it would let him feel that connection to God all

the time. The things other people enjoyed, the ordinary things of this world, seemed frivolous to him by comparison.

So he had never dated much and had no interest in spending time that way now. Food was a necessity, not a joy for him. He didn't go to movies or read fiction or enjoy listening to music very much. Dan thought that the time he spent doing those things could be better used by reading and thinking seriously about living as God wanted him to live.

Of course, visiting people who were sick or dying was a ministerial duty. So was doing things to improve the lives of others. He took Jesus' lesson about clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and visiting those in prison seriously. Dan was a serious and dedicated minister. As he visited the poor, the disabled, the sick, he thought to himself, "I should not be enjoying the things of this world. They can't."

And then from some of the things he had been reading, he started thinking that maybe suffering was a path to God, to salvation. His own suffering was insignificant, except that it might lead him to a more fully spiritual life. What did his suffering matter if it helped him get closer to God? What did this life matter when being with God lay at the end of it?

Suffering wasn't good in itself, of course. But if it made people realize that they couldn't depend on this life to be good to them, maybe it served a purpose. Maybe suffering helped people know that God and a better life were waiting for them. So Dan started preaching that to the poor and hungry and sick. But he noticed that people weren't very comforted by the idea that there was a purpose for their suffering. The

other thing he started to feel was that it was easier for him to believe that suffering had a purpose. It made it less difficult to visit people who were hurting.

One day he visited with a homeless family. They were staying in the shelter that his church ran one night each month out of the church basement. One of the little boys, who was probably about seven, caught Dan's attention right away. "How are you doing?" Dan asked. The boy said, "I'm hungry." So Dan took him over to the food line. As they stood in line, Dan asked, "How long have you been coming to places like this?" The little boy said, "Ever since Daddy got sick and lost his job." Dan noticed that the boy's clothes were torn and needed washing, and that he had some sores on his hands and arms.

When Dan went home that night, he pulled out his devotional book. But he kept losing his place. He couldn't stop thinking about that boy and his family. And the more he thought about them, the sadder he got. Tears came to his eyes, and then ran down his face. He thought, "God can't want these people to suffer, or me either. A good, loving God can't just use our pain to make us realize that we need God."

From that night, his ministry changed. For one thing, it hurt more, every time he saw someone who was sad, or in pain, or in trouble. But he also began to believe that there was no virtue in denying himself what he could enjoy. He didn't have to deny himself because others did not have the chance to enjoy what he did. It was by loving his life that he really cared about their lives and wanted more joy for them.

Dan started enjoying what he ate. He started paying attention to music he heard and found that he really loved some of it. He started feeling at least as close to God in watching some movies and reading some novels as he had studying the Bible. He

decided to start dating. And then he found someone and fell in love. When they were together, he finally understood the old wedding vow almost never used now: "With my body I thee worship." Dan knew he had never felt more alive or closer to God and to the whole Creation than when he and the person he loved most in the world were together.

The point of being human is not to mortify the flesh to get closer to the center of our being. It is not to deny the physical to reach the spiritual. The point of having a body is to love its connection to what we feel most deeply. It is to connect the physical to the spiritual, to experience all of being human. We are not two things, body and spirit, but one. May our lives and our compassion show that we understand the connection of our bodies and our souls, which connects us to everyone and everything else. Amen.

**Benediction:** As we fall continuously in love with this life, may we be filled with a compassion and commitment to bring its joys to everyone. Everything is holy now. Amen.