

“There Is a Body”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, May 9, 2021

Today’s first reading is adapted from the Complete Jewish Bible, the book of Genesis chapter 1, verses 26-27:

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, in the likeness of ourselves; and let them rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created humankind in their own image;

in the image of God, God created...us/them.

Our second reading comes from astrophysicist and author Neil deGrasse Tyson:

What we *do* know, and what we can assert without further hesitation, is that the universe had a beginning.

The universe continues to evolve.

And yes, every one of our body’s atoms is traceable to the big bang and to the thermonuclear furnaces within high-mass stars that exploded more than five billion years ago.

We are stardust brought to life, then empowered by the universe to figure itself out – and we have only just begun.

Sermon: “There Is a Body”

Both of our readings today are creation stories. The first is from the Jewish Bible which some of us know as the Old Testament, from the first chapter of the first book, Genesis, which tells of the creation of all things, or at least, most things. The creation of God remains a mystery.

This story says that God created humans in God’s image. That humans were created to rule over the Earth and all creatures is a problematic topic for another day. That humans

were created in the image of God, the holy, aligns with our Unitarian Universalist belief that we each carry the spark of divinity within us.

The second reading is from the world of science through the words of astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson, who studies the stars and the Earth and the universe and, well, everything. This story says that we are made of stardust, the stuff that makes up all things. In this ever-changing world, humans evolved out of the same matter that makes up everything in the universe. We share common ancestry, and we are all connected; another of our Unitarian Universalist beliefs.

One of the things I love about UU theology is that both stories are offered, and both can be held as true at the same time. And, not only these two stories, but many other creation stories as well. Creation stories are all responses to one of the big questions of life: where do we come from? The big questions are what we bring to our religious communities and many faith traditions have stories to offer in response.

Our spiritual theme for the month of May is “story.” There are many stories to consider this month, stories of who we are and how we got here, stories of who our ancestors were, stories of the Earth and its inhabitants, stories about events past and future, stories of creatures real and imagined. After all, we did have a visit from Bigfoot just a few weeks ago. The thing about stories is that we tell them, and they also tell us. The stories that we create and tell about who we are and where we come from set the stage and context for how we live. If the story is that humans were created in the image of God placed here to rule over the Earth and all creatures, that may lead to our being in the world in a particular way. If the story we tell is that humans were created from the same stardust that all creatures are made from, then our being may well be quite different.

Earlier, Sara told a story about birth. Imagine if that was the story each of us was told about our arrival! On this Mother's Day, I am aware that some of us were told a story like that and others of us had different stories. Each of us was told a story that has affected our lives, and each of us is creating the story of our lives now.

Were you told a story about your birth, about how you came to be in this world? What were you told about how babies came to be?

Over my years as a social worker and minister, I've heard many birth stories and family lore about how babies are made. In my family, being brought by the stork was a popular story. My grandmother told the story that we were found under a cabbage leaf in the garden. In our culture, we tell stories that reflect our beliefs about where we come from and who we are, often stories that cover-up or distract from the fact that we inhabit physical bodies and are born through physical bodies; the bodies that we name and honor on this day; the bodies that are called mothers.

We are told stories about bodies as things to be controlled, perhaps our individual bodies, perhaps the bodies of others. Those bodies with a uterus are under scrutiny as reproductive rights continue to be undermined and attacked. Black and brown bodies are quite literally under attack. All of this is within a culture that tells us that bodies are to look a certain way, behave a certain way, be a certain way, and that anything outside that way is less than. And there is a large industry ready to sell us products to help us conform to that one way.

Out of this culture comes the -isms: racism which says that white is the only way, sexism which says that male is the only way, homophobia which says that being heterosexual is the only way, transphobia which says that cisgender and gender binary

are the only way, ageism which says that young is the only way. Each of these -isms asserts that there is one best way to be. It reflects a culture of supremacy.

Another way that we place value on some bodies and not others is the relationship between human bodies and the bodies of other animals. We may privilege human bodies in the ways that we choose to use land. Do we allow wolves to roam free over their large territory or do we make raising cattle for human consumption more important? We may privilege human bodies in what we chose to eat. Do we eat the bodies of other animals for our sustenance? What is our relationship with animals we are responsible for as pets or as livestock? I am certain that my two cats would have an opinion about that.

Our challenged and confused relationship with our bodies has a long history. The ancient Greeks first separated the body and the spirit, and ever since philosophers have wrestled with the nature of the mind, the body, and the connection between them.

Theologians have also wrestled with the nature of body and spirit. Some suggest that the body is for enjoying sensual pleasures and beauty, claiming that this is also a way to connect to the Divine. The mystics embody this view—the poetry of Rumi, the writings of Teresa of Avila, the Kama Sutra. The Buddha teaches that the body is a source of joy, a pathway to mindfulness, a simple and direct way for awareness. A foundational Buddhist teaching begins with “there is a body.” Each of these traditions assert that our senses, our bodies are a path to beauty, to ecstasy, to awareness, to the holy.

Other theologians suggest that only the spirit is pure and of God, that bodies are of the material world and so can be a distraction that lures us away from the sacred. This view says that bodies are dangerous and to be controlled, that they are a threat to our purity

and connection to God. This view asserts that bodies are dirty, sinful, to be ignored at best and abused at worst.

We inhabit a world with both views, actually many views about bodies. What does our Unitarian Universalists theology teach us? First, that love is the foundation. Love in all its forms; love of ourselves, body, mind and spirit. Love of each other physically and emotionally as we choose to. Love of each other with agape, as Martin Luther King, Jr. called it, respecting the inherent worth and dignity of others. Love for the natural world of which we are part. Love for the divine in whatever way we experience it.

We also inherit a tradition of belief in science, knowing the benefits and limitations. We seek to know and understand how our bodies and minds work, and we teach what we learn to our children. For example, in 1999 the UU Association and the United Church of Christ jointly developed a curriculum for sexuality education called Our Whole Lives or OWL for short. It was originally intended for children and has been updated and expanded to include the most current information for all ages, kindergarten through elder adults. The teaching is about all bodies, all ways to love and who we love, as well as important issues like consent, peer pressure and illness. This reflects our belief that bodies are sacred and worthy of our care and attention, our bodies, and the bodies of others. It teaches a scientific view of bodies grounded in our faith.

We also inherit a strong tradition of being rooted in the material world, this world. We do not have a doctrine that says we will be rewarded in heaven or in the next life. The only life we know we have / is this one. The only world we know we have / is this one, so we are called to make it the best that we can. That is a foundation for our work for justice in this world, now.

And, so as UUs we tell a different story of body and spirit, a radical story of connection and of wholeness. We say that mind, body and spirit are all connected. We say that all bodies are sacred, bodies of all abilities, of all ages, of all sizes. Your body is sacred, no matter how you were born, who you love, how you look. We choose a story of love.

I invite you now to embody that story of love with a blessing for our bodies. This body prayer was created by Annie Scott, a UU religious educator who is our congregation's regional contact. You'll meet Annie in the Fall if you haven't already.

I invite you to move through the motions with me once, then we will bless our bodies going through the movements quietly 3 times. You can do this standing or sitting as you are most comfortable. Settle into your body. Take a deep breath in and out.

We begin with our hands in front of us in the prayer pose to find our inner quiet.

We raise our arms up high to open ourselves to the Spirit of Life, God of Love.

We bring our hands to our hearts to affirm the strength of our inner voice.

We extend our hands out in front of us to offer our kindness and respect to others.

We lift our hands high over our heads reaching out to the world in openness to all it might offer.

We bring our hands down gathering in the gifts and bringing them to our heart.

And returning to our stillness, we bring our hands together in the prayer pose.

(Repeat three times.)

You are a body. You are holy. You are loved.

Let's hold a moment of silence together.