

“Embodied Wisdom”

March 8th, 2020 - Rev. Laurel Gray

In my looking for readings for our service today, the majority of what I found focused on the appearance of our bodies. On accepting our lumps and scars, stretch marks and wrinkles. So much of the attention directed at our bodies is either a commentary on how they're not perfect, or a pep talk about how we should love them anyways. And while it is a relief to accept our bodies as they are, it's a different and deeper thing to say that our bodies have inherent wisdom.

I find it more powerful and more interesting to sit with this idea that our bodies contain inherent wisdom, that our capacity to know and remember is not limited to our cognitive brain processes. That we are made of more than just brain matter and mind chatter.

And if our bodies are the guest house of our being, the home for our life, the place that holds our stories, then suddenly all those aesthetic imperfections seem awfully insignificant - if anything, they're part of the beauty of it all, markers of the lives we've lived.

This month our theme is wisdom and we'll be focusing on different kinds of wisdom over the next few weeks, so perhaps it's wise to start with some definition.

If you google the word wisdom, the definition that comes up is quote “the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment.” Perhaps we could even go as far as to say that our experiences and our knowledge help us to develop good judgement. This is the nature of wisdom.

As Unitarian Universalists, our collective center is our covenant - the promise we make to ourselves and each other about how we will try to live. Our covenant is made of seven principles - they're printed on the back of your order of service if you'd like to take them with you.

The fourth principle is that we covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Even saying this, it feels heady, as if truth and meaning are treasures that exist only in our minds. But I wonder if today we can move the locus of that search from our brains into the rest of our bodies.

What if your search for truth and meaning is a process of listening, attuning to the wisdom held in your body.

I want to focus on two different kinds of embodied knowing today. First the more immediate ways our bodies offer their wisdom in the form of our emotions, and then secondly the ways that our bodies hold memory. I am going to talk about the effects of trauma, but I will not talk about specific traumatic events.

In graduate school, I was assigned a book called "Facing Feelings in Faith Communities" by William Kondrath. It focuses on the six primary feelings and how they can show up in our own lives and collectively in the life of a faith community. In the beginning, Kondrath explains that there are three interrelated dimensions to learning and change. Those are cognitive, which is our thoughts and beliefs, behavioral, which is our actions, and affective with an a, which is our feelings. He writes that in affective learning, "we notice bodily sensations that carry messages about what we may need."

The six primary emotions that Kondrath names are fear, anger, sadness, peace, power, and joy. Like with colors, within each of these categories, there are shades of nuance, a whole spectrum of colors of fear and anger,

sadness and peace, power and joy. And all of those feelings live in our bodies. Emotions affect our physiology - we can feel the difference between peace and fear in our heart rates, in our breathing, the alertness of our nerves and attentiveness of our vision. The same goes for joy and anger, sadness and power. We know them in our bodies.

The thing that I found so helpful in reading this book, is the way it lays out how emotions are telling us about our needs. Emotions come as messengers helping us attend to ourselves.

So our search for truth and meaning must wind its way through our bodies, as we tap into the various shades of our feeling and try to understand what our bodies are saying.

Sadness is a feeling that tells us we're experiencing loss and we need comfort or space, support for our grieving and letting go.

Fear tells us that we're perceiving some kind of danger, that we need to find safety, protection, or reassurance.

Anger tells us that we're experiencing a violation, that our boundaries have been crossed or our expectations dashed. We need to set limits, reestablish boundaries, and negotiate our expectations.

Peace tells us that we're experiencing a deep awareness of connectedness.

Power or agency is about feeling competent and able.

And joy comes from a sense of inner gratitude, awe, and wonder.

All three - peace, power, and joy - are messages that we need to continue whatever it is we're doing.

As we go through our lives, our bodies are the houses of all this feeling, all this wisdom.

As Rumi wrote in our opening words, we must welcome all these visitors. “Even if they are a crowd of sorrows, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whatever comes because each has been sent as a guide”

Our bodies know what we need, if only we might listen. So too, do they remember what we’ve been through.

More and more, we are learning that feelings and memories are held in our bodies. This can be beautiful - as in a smell that reminds you viscerally and instantly of some happy memory. But it can also be a horror, as in the case of those with PTSD. In cases of severe trauma, memories too terrifying to be put into words, or even clearly remembered, can live in the body, creating an imprint in an individual's physiology.

In a book entitled “The Body Keeps the Score” Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, who is a psychiatrist and researcher writes about this phenomenon. He has studied trauma’s effect on the body for decades. Weaving together stories from his patients’ treatment and images of brain scans, Dr. Van der Kolk speaks to the complexity of how experiences become imprinted in our bodies. In the case of trauma, this can often result in disconnection, numbing, and various health problems because it becomes too terrifying and painful for people who have survived trauma to process their memories and regulate their emotions. And in fact, the disconnection is one of the body’s survival mechanisms in the face of trauma, a way of protecting us from the unbearable. But it comes at a cost.

Van Der Kolk writes that quote, “One of the clearest lessons from contemporary neuroscience is that our sense of ourselves is anchored in a vital connection with our bodies. We do not truly know ourselves unless we can feel and interpret our physical sensations”

After spending much of the book describing the ways that traumatic experiences change our bodies, Van Der Kolk turns to different modalities that he has studied and have made a positive difference in his patients’ lives. These forms of treatment help people reconnect to their bodies and help heal the physical and emotional responses that have gone haywire.

One of these modalities is yoga and he quotes the author Stephen Cope, who says this: “as we begin to re-experience a visceral reconnection with the needs of our bodies, there is a brand new capacity to warmly love the self. We experience a new quality of authenticity in our caring [for ourselves]”

Van Der Kolk also points out that “neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change the way we feel is by becoming aware of our inner experience and learning to befriend what is going on inside ourselves”

In this, healing is a process of attunement, a process of learning to welcome the feelings that come as messengers, learning to trust that they won’t destroy us, learning to love the wisdom of our bodies. It is a process of returning to ourselves, changed though we may be in the process.

One of my favorite biblical stories is that of Jacob wrestling with an angel through the night. He’s journeying home to Canaan with his family and sends them ahead with the supplies they need, and spends the night alone on the riverbank. In the night, an angel appears - sometimes

translated as a man, or god, or a force - and the two spend the night caught in a struggle, fighting towards morning.

Come daybreak, Jacob's hip has been wrenched out of its socket, surely he's exhausted, but he refuses to give up until he receives a blessing from this mysterious force. And Jacob does receive this blessing, but he is also given a new name, Israel, and is left with a limp.

Our experiences, our struggles, our nights of reckoning, they leave an imprint not only in our bodies, but more fundamentally in our very beings. And Jacob fights for the blessing - it is not some act of charity or paternalistic fixing, the blessing is born of Jacob's presence in the struggle, his agency, and his insistence on meeting daybreak on his own terms. And so it is with us. The struggle doesn't make us stronger, it's we who find our own strength and seek the blessing in the midst of struggle.

It is we who can choose to welcome the unexpected joy, the crowd of sorrows as guides on the path of our lives.

Our bodies can tell us not only about what we need, but also about the stories we hold and the experiences that have fractured and formed our sense of ourselves.

Our bodies are made of flesh and marrow, they ache and they age, but they are also the home that holds the story of our lives, a place to create that story, to find wisdom, to seek our blessing.

In my yoga class last week, the instructor said, "instead of listening to the thoughts of your mind, try to listen to the thoughts of your body."

And so I invite you to do the same, to tap in to the wisdom held in your body, the knowing, the good judgement, the feelings telling us what we need.

Perhaps courage and living from one's center is in part a process of learning to listen to the wisdom of our bodies, to search for the truths held within, to pay attention to what we need and what we know. That is not always an easy process or a fast one, but perhaps it is the road home to ourselves.

May it be so.

Amen