



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Spirituality of Embodiment

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One way of classifying the various methods of self-improvement that one can pursue is to divide the different paths into four major categories: Body, Mind, Spirit, and Shadow. As I list some examples, drawn from a book titled Integral Life Practice, I invite you to consider where your proclivities lie, and how your attraction to practices in one or more of these categories may have shifted over time.

If left to my own devices, I'm most naturally drawn to practices around the mind: "reading and study, discussion and debate, writing and journaling, pursuing a degree." Additionally, my childhood experience of being raised in a conservative Christian tradition helped cultivate my appreciation for practices related to the Spirit: "meditation, prayer, spiritual community, worship, song, and chant." The more educated I became, the more exposure I had to what are sometimes called "shadow" practices, following psychologist Carl Jung's term for our unconscious: dream work, journaling, psychotherapy, art, music, and dance" (21).

There are other potential categories as well such as Ethics, Vocation, Relationships, and Creativity. But turning for now to our theme of embodied spirituality, the fourth major category of "body practices" include: "strength training, aerobic exercise, balanced diet, yoga, martial arts, sports and dance" (21). And as I've pressed to higher and higher levels of practices of the mind (earning a doctoral degree, writing a dissertation, working on publishing a book, writing sermons and blog posts), I've found that to keep myself balanced, I have had to become

increasingly intentional about carving out time for body, spirit, and shadow practices. And as you reflect on where you find yourself in this season of your life, I invite you to consider **what set practices might be most helpful to you: body, mind, spirit, shadow, or some combination.**

I should add as well that many spiritual teachers make an important distinction between the “gross body” and the “subtle body.” Not “gross body” as in ‘disgusting.’ It means gross as in ‘gross anatomy’ — that is, “the structure of organs and tissues that are visible to the naked eye.” So according to many spiritual traditions, we have both a gross body visible to the naked eye (“flesh and bones, organs and cells, saliva and blood”) and a subtle body “of various kinds of energy, sometimes called chi or prana,” which are related to the “chakras and acupuncture meridians” (128). And just as we can strengthen our gross body through practices like “weightlifting, running, aerobics, sports, and dance,” we can become more aware of our subtle body through practices such as “yoga, Tai Chi, Quigong, Breath Practice, Visualization, and Lucid Dreaming” (133-134).

You’ve already heard some powerful testimony from Irene about the transformative power of subtle body practices such as yoga. And I know there are other members of this congregation, who have had significant experiences through Tai Chi, Reiki, and other related practices. To share some of my experience, periodically over the last decade and more, I’ve benefited from doing quite a bit of yoga — as well as some Quigong. To focus in particular on yoga, part of what I appreciate, as Irene described well, is the way **yoga gets me out of my head and into my body.** It is also a great counterbalance to my running routine, and can help prevent injuries by increasing flexibility.

Given my bent toward mind-related practice, part of moving deeper into yoga for me was not only practicing yoga more, but also researching the yogic tradition. And one of the most interesting books I discovered is The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards published a few years ago by *The New York Times* journalist William Broad, who has been a yoga practitioner for more than four decades.

I discovered his book through three related articles he published in the *Times* in recent years:

- “How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body,”

- “Wounded Warrior Pose: The Perils of Yoga for Men,” and
- “Women’s Flexibility Is a Liability (in Yoga)”

Don’t get the wrong idea from the headlines. He and I are big fans of yoga. The central lesson is to proceed slowly and with caution.

Part of embodied spirituality is being aware of all our bodies can teach us and all that our bodies are capable of — as well as being aware of our bodies’ limitations. My biggest takeaway from the book is that I no longer have any aspirations of being able to fully contort my body into some of the extreme poses I have seen some yogis do. Instead, I’m content with the many benefits and much lower risks of intermediate practice. In particular, Broad’s Chapter Four on “Risk of Injury” is clear that yogis are well advised to be protective especially of their backs and necks.

Another major insight I had from reading The Science of Yoga that I hadn’t previously considered is that although yoga is wonderful in many way, most traditional forms of yoga are not a replacement for cardio:

...scientists concluded that the **yoga session failed to meet minimal aerobic recommendations** of the world’s health bodies. Its oxygen demands...“represent low levels of physical activity similar to walking on the treadmill at a slow pace or taking a leisurely stroll...” Decades of uncertainty ended as a consensus emerged that yoga did much for the body and mind but little or nothing for aerobic conditioning. (72)

However, yoga also

equaled or surpassed exercise in such things as improving balance, reducing fatigue, decreasing anxiety, cutting stress, lifting moods, improving sleep, reducing pain, lowering cholesterol, and more generally in raising the quality of life for yogis, both socially and on the job. (72-3)

Yoga may or may not be right for you, although there are an increasingly wide variety of yoga classes that can fit essentially any body type and level of fitness. Most importantly, I encourage you in the coming days and weeks to spend some time reflecting on what practices might be right for you in this season of your life, related to caring for your body, mind, spirit, shadow.

And as we move toward our conclusion, I should add that one of the most common themes related to embodied spirituality that I have seen from many different spiritual teachers is the invitation to **“befriend your body.”** And just as cultivating a good friendship requires time, attention, and care — so too befriending our bodies requires time, attention, and care. Indeed, the spiritual writer Barbara Brown Taylor goes so far as to say that it is, **“vitaly important for your spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say, ‘Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul’s address’”** (39).

At the same time, just as friends can betray us, so too as we journey through this life many of us have had experiences of feeling like our bodies have betrayed us. But even in such time, the practice of embodied spirituality challenge us to listen even more closely to our bodies for the wisdom that they have to share with us (Vennard 6).

In that spirit, I would like to invite you to experiment this morning with listening to your body through a practice known as a “Body Scan.” Body Scan practices can take as long or short a time as feels right to you. But for this morning, I will lead us through an adaptation of a brief body scan developed by Dr. Elisha Goldstein, a psychologist, who has extensively integrated mindfulness into his work.

If you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes. Take a deep breath. In... and out.

Use this breath as an anchor to ground yourself

in the now of this present moment.

Now bringing awareness to the feet:

noticing sensations in the soles of the feet...the toes...

the top of the feet...and up into the ankle joints.

Bringing a sense of curiosity to this practice,

as if you’ve never noticed these sensations before.

Shifting awareness up from the feet and ankles to the legs

...and shifting up from these to the hips.

And shifting up from there to the torso...

being aware of the back region, the chest, the abdomen.

And being aware of the arms, the hands...

choosing to shift attention to these areas.

Now in this space of awareness,

choosing to bring awareness from the torso

to the shoulders in particular

The shoulders are often a place of tension and stress

— so just being aware of what's here.

And up from there now to the neck

and from the neck to the face

Noticing sensations in the entirety of the face.

And continuing breathing and out,

release any awareness of the head and face,

the torso and arms,

the hips and the legs, and feet

And just coming back to the breath....

And as we come to the end of this practice,

acknowledge the experience

of taking this time out to connect with your body

How does it feel to experiment with the practice of embodied spirituality?