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Mindfulness, Heartfulness, *Bodyfulness*

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On Tuesday I started teaching a 13-week class here at UUCF on **mindfulness**. There has been a massive increase over the past few decades in cultural awareness about mindfulness. Especially in the past few years, mindfulness seems like it is mentioned almost anywhere you turn.

Jon Kabat-Zinn has defined mindfulness as “**the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally**” (The Guardian). Mindfulness was one of the first major ways I learned to meditate, and both I and many other meditators can attest to the many benefits that can arise from practicing mindfulness. But as my meditation journey has deepened and widened, I have also come to realize that some forms of mindfulness can result in a “neck up” approach to meditation. So, as helpful as mindfulness meditation can be, there is also tremendous value in taking that eighteen inch journey from your head down to your heart for what are sometimes called heartfulness practices.

Some of the most well-known **heartfulness** meditations include loving-kindness, compassion, equanimity, and empathetic joy. And prior to this current class on mindfulness, I led a 24-week class here at UUCF last year that had a strong focus on heartfulness, particularly the Self-Compassion practices pioneered by Kristen Neff and Christopher Germer.

There is also starting to be more widespread awareness about the value of heartfulness practices, but heartfulness has a long way to go to catch up with the

popularity of mindfulness. And there is still another level down that is also incredibly important and transformative, but even less well known, and that is **bodyfulness**. One way of defining bodyfulness is awareness that arises from the somatic wisdom of the body.

I've learned the most about embodied meditation from a teacher named Reggie Ray, and there are a lot of free practices on his website (dharmaocean.org/meditation-resources) for anyone curious to experiment with bodyfulness for yourself.

I hasten to add that I don't think it's a matter of one meditation focus being superior to another. Some of us may have a proclivity toward one or another meditation approach based on our temperament and past history. All that is totally natural and fine. There also tend to be certain seasons of life when particular approach to meditation can be most helpful. Personally, I am coming to see the value of all three approaches—mindfulness, heartfulness, and bodyfulness— and of course the many other ways to meditate beyond these three.

For our purposes, I want to share a few highlights from Reggie Ray's latest book, *Somatic Descent*, and then connect us back with the related territory of "The Body Is Not An Apology."

First, let me give you a few examples of how many of us already have various experiences of bodyfulness. Have you ever found yourself saying something like:

- "What she said was very, very heavy"—that is, sensing a feeling of heaviness as bodyful awareness.
- Or: "I have a gut feeling about...." Bodyful awareness of information coming to you, not from your head or heart, but from your body.
- Or: "So-and-so's behavior makes me sick," is bodyful awareness of nausea in your body.
- Or: "When he was talking to me, I had a queasy sense that he was lying" (22).

These are some examples of awareness of bodyfulness, of opening your awareness to what your *body* has to tell you.

We can also intentionally cultivate various forms of bodyful awareness. A good place to start is to assume a comfortable relaxed posture—or even lie down (many of Reggie Ray's practices are done lying down)—then open your awareness to your body

and silently ask, **“What’s actually going on with me right now?”** Pause then and open your awareness further to what is happening *in* your body: Is there perhaps a tightness in your gut or in your neck and shoulders? If so, what’s that about? You could further drop into your bodyful meditation questions like, “What do I need to be aware of?” Or, “What needs my attention right now” (48)? Then pause and see what emerges into your awareness.

There is so much more to say about the transformative power of *bodyfulness*, but rather than spending the whole time talking about the value of embodiment practices, I also want to be sure to address the many strong currents in our culture that keep us cut off from our bodies. One of the biggest forces is what the African-American artist, activist, and educator Sonya Renee Taylor calls the **“Body Shame Profit Complex.”** To limit myself to just one representative statistic, “Earnings from the global beauty market reached an epic \$532 billion in 2019, and are projected to continue trending higher” (Taylor 2018/2021: 44). There’s a lot of money to be made in making us feel bad about our bodies.

One of the most powerful books I’ve read recently about learning how to love our bodies is Taylor’s book *The Body Is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (2018/2021). She has also recently released a supplemental practice guide titled *Your Body Is Not an Apology Workbook: Tools for Living Radical Self-Love* (2021).

Let me begin by telling you some of the origin story for Taylor’s approach. A little more than a decade ago, in 2010, she had no intention of starting “a radical self-love movement with hundreds of thousands of followers....” Instead, she was simply listening to a friend who was worried that she had unintentionally become pregnant. Her friend confessed, “My disability makes sex hard already.... I just didn’t feel like it was okay to make a big deal about [using protection]” (xiv). Unexpectedly, Taylor found herself saying six words that would be transformative not only for her friend, but also in her own life and in the lives of a growing number of people: **“Your body is not an apology”** (xv). Taylor now finds herself in the unusual position of regularly receiving photos of people who have had “The body is not an apology” tattooed *on their bodies* as a permanent reminder of this wisdom (xiii). That’s one way of making a commitment to bodyfulness!

As one member of Taylor's team has written: *The Body Is Not An Apology* is not about something as simple as body positivity or acceptance. It is about the ways in which we see others and ourselves and judge one another on far deeper level than we may know...[based on] the seemingly most superficial of assessments—those of others' bodies and our own. (101-102)

Taylor calls us to loosen the grip of body shame and reorient ourselves toward love and celebration of all the ways that bodies are different (10).

To explore further, I recommend her book and workbook, both of which are short and accessible. But to begin to give you a sense of her perspective, I'll share a brief overview of three of her key tenets-:

1. Make peace with not understanding
2. Make peace with difference
3. Make peace with your body. (21)

First, **make peace with *not understanding***. Many of us like best to perceive things up in our heads. And there can, of course, be tremendous value in cognitive intelligence. But if we experiment with moving down into our heart, and still further down into our body, we can find a peace beyond mere cognitive understanding. The truth is that there is so much we don't know about ourselves—much less other people. Instead of jumping straight to judgments of other people based on superficial perceptions of their bodies, what if we experiment with **“accepting humans and their bodies without understanding why they love, think, move, or look the way they do”** (22). Can you feel some peace descending with that notion?

The Buddhist tradition calls being free of judgment “beginner's mind”—that is, setting aside preconceptions in order to experience reality with openness and freshness. Notice how these different approaches show up differently in your body. Shame and judgment can feel tight, constricted, cut off from others. (Can you feel that change in your body as you imagine a real situation involving shame and judgment?)

In contrast, loving acceptance tends in your body to feel open, connected, free flowing, peaceful and at ease. Can you feel the bodyful difference as you imagine extending love toward yourself or others? Make peace with not understanding.

Second, **make peace with *difference***. Here, Taylor quotes the late poet and activist Audre Lorde: “It is not differences that divide us. It is our inability to celebrate those differences” (23). The Body Shame Profit Complex sometimes tries to convince us that there is one singular standard of beauty, and that the more we deviate from that alleged norm, the less worthy we are.. It can be a tremendous source of peace to put that oppressive standard down, and accept that there is a wild, beautiful diversity out there of what bodies can look like, very much including our own body (25). Make peace with difference.

Third, **make peace with *your body*** (26-27). Taylor’s book and workbook contain a large number of tools to help, so I’ll primarily share the middle stanza of a brief, but powerful poem titled “Three” by Nayyirah Waheed:

and i said to my body. softly.
'i want to be your friend.'
it took a long breath.
and replied
'i have been waiting my
whole life for this.' (75-76)

As you experience those words, look for a sense of peace in *your body*.

Right now, in this moment, try putting one hand on your heart center and another on your gut. Offer yourself a gentle, compassionate, soothing touch. Take a deep breath in and out. Open your field of awareness into deeper bodyfulness. Make peace with not understanding. Make peace with difference. Make peace with your body.