

# **"Coming to Our Senses"**

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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## **Meditation Reading:**

### **How the Light Comes**

*by Jan Richardson*

I cannot tell you  
how the light comes.

What I know  
is that it is more ancient  
than imagining.

That it travels  
across an astounding expanse  
to reach us.

That it loves  
searching out  
what is hidden,  
what is lost,  
what is forgotten  
or in peril  
or in pain.

That it has a fondness  
for the body,  
for finding its way  
toward flesh,  
for tracing the edges  
of form,

for shining forth  
through the eye,  
the hand,  
the heart.

I cannot tell you  
how the light comes,  
but that it does.

That it will.

That it works its way  
into the deepest dark  
that enfolds you,  
though it may seem  
long ages in coming  
or arrive in a shape  
you did not foresee.

may we this day  
turn ourselves toward it.  
May we lift our faces  
to let it find us.  
May we bend our bodies  
to follow the arc it makes.  
May we open  
and open more  
and open still

to the blessed light  
that comes.

## **Sermon:**

I knew we were onto something when I started talking about our theme for January.

People were asking what the next theme would be for Journey Groups and the New Horizons newsletter, and I said it would be “The Body.”

Instead of being met with the usual smiles and nods, I noticed a few blank looks and even puzzled expressions.

The Body? How would that work, as a theme for spiritual exploration?

It sounded so much more *physical* than many of our other themes, such as “presence” or “character.”

What could the body have to do with spiritual growth?

Well, everything, it turns out.

As we make our way in the world, trying to live with meaning and purpose,

Trying our best to make ethical choices and to care for others and ourselves...

We do that through the physical self that is our body.

Our body is the only vehicle we have with which to “seek, connect and serve.”

How interesting, then, that we so often create psychological distance between ourselves and our bodies--

Distance that can prevent us from living fully  
and offering all we can, as human beings.

Some of us may carry difficult emotions having to do with our  
bodies, reflecting critical messages we've absorbed  
from our culture and the media...

Our bodies may hold memories of trauma or abuse.

And our bodies may be changing in ways we find challenging, as we  
age or as we live with illness.

There may be many reasons why we find ourselves "living in our  
heads" much of the time...split off from the immediate awareness of  
our physical body.

As mindfulness teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn writes:

"We evaluate, we judge, we digress, we categorize,  
we react emotionally, and so quickly that the moment of pure  
[sensory experience] is lost.

For that moment at least, you could say that we have  
lost our minds and taken leave of our senses."<sup>1</sup>

Together, we're now faced with the central human reality of the body  
because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The widespread illness caused by the virus,  
and the need for each of us to protect others from its spread, is  
forcing us to be aware of our bodies in new and urgent ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness* (Hyperion: New York, 2005), 41.

Also, as Black Lives Matter and other movements have made clear, the body carries political and social meaning, requiring collective response to ensure that all bodies are cared for.

With so much suffering made so clear to us this past year, it's a good time to return again to the body:

To “the who, what and where we are”...  
that is the gateway to meaning and insight.

And so, over the next three Sundays, we'll be inviting you to stretch into this theme of “The Body.”

You're invited to move with it, breathe with it,  
dance with it...

Trusting that it will bring you the messages  
you need right now, as we begin this new year,  
in this tumultuous time.

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Two thousand years ago, the poet Rumi, in the mystical Sufi tradition of Islam, expressed a dilemma that many of us experience today.

What should we do, when we feel anxiety about the state of the world or the difficulties in our lives?

What approach should we take, as we seek to resolve our problems and calm our anxious minds?

Rumi wrote:

“Today, like every other day,  
we wake up empty and frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.  
Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.  
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”<sup>2</sup>

This short poem is well-known and widely repeated.

Yet sometimes (speaking for myself) I think we can miss its main point.

It's often thought of as a kind of “recipe for prayer,”  
a way of reconnecting with what we might call “the divine,”  
or simply an affirmation of the importance of beauty in our lives.

All of these are worthwhile understandings, of course.

But today, I'm struck by the contrast between the “opening the door to the study and reading”...that is, taking an intellectual approach to the emptiness and the fear...

And the taking hold of something physical and tangible:  
the “kneeling and kissing the ground” that takes place through the body and through physical sensation.

Now, the mind is of course part of the body,  
and I don't mean to suggest a disconnection there...

Nor do I mean any disrespect toward knowledge and reason.

But I think Rumi was onto something when he said that the emptiness we sometimes feel can be most readily be filled by sensory awareness...

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<sup>2</sup> *The Essential Rumi*, Translations by Coleman Barks (HarperCollins: New York, 2004), 36

Filled...by that which is very much at hand.

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I find evidence of this when I listen to people in the congregation...when you tell me about how you've been making it through this difficult time.

Here are a few of the “hundred ways” of “kneeling and kissing the ground” that I’ve heard about recently.

We might think of them as ways of “staying in love with life”—

Or, if mindfully approached, even as forms of prayer—

Of opening up a channel to the fullness of life itself.

When I share this list with you,  
try to remember or imagine how they feel.

Try to connect with the bodily sensation  
of these “many ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

Breathing deeply.

Gardening...or caring for a houseplant.

Practicing yoga, or stretching the body in any way.

Playing a musical instrument.

Listening to music.

Singing.

Clapping your hands, snapping your fingers or tapping your toes.

(Try it!)

Washing your hands.

Bathing or showering.

Preparing food.

Eating.

Working on a jigsaw puzzle.  
Pencilling in a crossword.  
Turning the pages of a book.  
Drawing or painting.  
Playing with a child.  
Tending to someone who is ill.  
Stroking the fur of an animal.  
Feeling the cold wind on your face.  
Wrapping a scarf around you.  
Listening to a voice.  
Gazing at a face.  
Noticing how light falls in your room.  
Laughing.  
Crying.  
Drifting off to sleep.

And breathing deeply, once again.

I hope that by taking this short time to focus on sensation, we may have been briefly released from the chatter of thoughts that can preoccupy us.

All of these simple, bodily experiences, when done mindfully, can reconnect us with the glory of being alive--

The “enoughness” of the present moment—

The healing quality of the here and now.

When we tune in to our senses,  
we attune ourselves to life, exactly as it is.

And that allows us to live more in harmony  
with the Whole.

In Coleman Barks' translation of Rumi,  
we hear an emphasis on “the beauty we love”...

But it seems to me that each of these of these simple acts of living  
becomes meaningful, and therefore beautiful,  
when we give them our full awareness.

## §

Around the world, Christians recently marked a holiday that  
celebrates incarnation—the story of God arriving on Earth in the  
form of a human body.

Going back further in the Hebrew Bible, the source text of Judaism,  
we find the central idea that human beings were created “in God’s  
image.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea that divine nature is limited only to humans  
is of course deeply problematic.

Unitarian theologians and many others today see the sacred in all  
interdependent forms of life...and for many, the word “God” is not  
helpful in describing the transcendent or the sacred.

Yet when we consider these central ideas from the Judeo-Christian  
tradition from which Unitarian Universalism emerged, we can see  
that religious thought has long been concerned with bodily  
experience.

The writer and teacher Richard Rohr, a very progressive liberal  
Christian, says that “to God, matter really matters.”

He goes on to say that,

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:27

“True spirituality is always *bringing us back* to the original bodily knowing that is unitive experience, which is why you cannot do it all in the head!”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, spiritual growth is not all about concepts or abstractions or even deep thoughts or smart sermons!

It’s about being fully connected to our bodies, to our five senses and to our sense of deep intuition, to the very ground of earthly being...to which we can open ourselves in love.

After all, to the Ground of All Being, “matter really matters”!  
In fact it’s the whole shebang.

Rabbi Irwin Kula writes, “When we see our bodies as a blessing, our sensual desires as sacred, there’s no end to the pleasure that awaits us.

The challenge is to raise our consciousness to the delights everywhere around us; to anticipate and celebrate every momentary pleasure with intention.”

Sadly, at many times in human history, and certainly in much religious doctrine of many faiths, the human body has been cast in an unfavourable light.

Many, if not all of us, have been affected by those rejecting messages.

The poet Eduardo Galeano once wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Rohr, Center for Action and Contemplation. Daily Meditations: Human Bodies Week 1 Summary. <https://cac.org/human-bodies-week-1-summary-2018-04-07/>

“The Church says: the body is a sin.  
Science says: the body is a machine.  
Advertising says: The body is a business.

The Body says: I am a fiesta.”

Perhaps one of the most important things we can do,  
for the healing of the world  
not to mention the sustaining of our spirits,  
is to reclaim and celebrate our bodies  
for the miraculous fiestas they are!

As the poet Jan Richardson wrote:  
“Light has a fondness for the body.”

We can lift our faces toward it, affirming that  
that our bodies are beautifully and perfectly made  
in harmony with the entire body of nature.

By affirming this deep interconnectedness through our body’s  
experience...we literally “come to our senses” to realize the wisdom  
that lives within us in every moment, and the agency we have to  
move and shape the world.

## §

We live in a time of information overload,  
of constant data, analysis and entertainment.

These, too, can distract us from the simple sensory awareness of  
living in our bodies...and can cause us to feel overwhelmed and  
powerless to make the changes we must.

In her 2017 book “The Age of Overwhelm”,  
Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky writes:

“It’s important to pay attention to what’s in our control, what’s not in our control, and how to tend to this reality—practically—in such a way as to mitigate harm, cultivate our ability to be decent and equitable and act with integrity.”

She writes, “Everything is connected. [...] In ways big and small, we are all responsible for contributing to systemic change where change is due.

There is plenty of heavy lifting to be done.

But to contribute effectively—  
to have a foundation to manage that at all  
and to sustain ourselves for the long haul—  
we must tend to our own selves in parallel.

We simply can’t contribute skillfully  
and do our best work toward effecting external changes  
if we aren’t also taking care of the place  
where overwhelm takes root: within ourselves.

It is also within ourselves that we have the most agency, authority and power to change.”<sup>5</sup>

That is to say, we must return again and again  
to our bodies, as the home of our souls  
and the source of all action that is possible.

Even in the simple act of focusing on the breath,  
we bring about healing changes in our bodies  
and affirm the sacredness of the present moment  
and our ability to bring peace to it.

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<sup>5</sup> Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul* (Bervett-Koehler Publishers: Oakland, 2018), 4.

Our attentiveness to our bodies will also, naturally,  
cause us to notice when we are disrupting life.

We can become more aware of our voices, when they become raised  
in tension.

We can be attentive to fatigue in our bodies,  
when we need to slow down and rest.

Rather than becoming lost in evaluation or self-criticism  
or desire for something different, we might simply open ourselves to  
the reality of our sense experience,  
and listen to what it has to say.

## §

At times, I've heard spiritual growth described as a "conversation  
with life." It's a phrase I've often found helpful.

At one point, awhile back in my own journey,  
I suddenly realized that the amount of commentary going on in my  
head was not allowing Life to get a word in edgewise!

From that point on, I've tried to notice when my thoughts  
are interfering with that larger conversation...

I've tried more often to quiet my mind and let Life speak.

At those times I often notice new sounds, sights, even smells.

Colour and light become more clear.

My muscles relax,  
and there seems to be more space around me.

It may only be a momentary change...and yet, it allows me  
to reconnect with what is larger than myself.

Something that can hold me...  
and that I can never be disconnected from.

I am always grateful when  
I can come to my senses in this way.

And I hope that you, also,  
through your senses and your body,  
be guided toward the peace  
and the meaning  
that you seek.

Blessed be.

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