

Loving Ourselves and the World Whole
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First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Readings: from Sonya Renee Taylor, “The Body is not an Apology”¹ and from the poet Nayyirah Waheed²

Sermon

You, my dear, have a body. It is both similar to and different from other bodies with whom you share this spinning rock. And we humans struggle with those differences.

Whatever beliefs we strive to hold about inherent worth and dignity, none of us receive consistent messages that all bodies are beautiful, amazing and worthy.

My earliest memories about body differences are from second grade. Like the time I overheard teachers talking approvingly about my friend Beverly’s body. I no longer remember exactly what they said, but I remember very clearly that the body of that second grader was judged to be good. And I remember realizing that my differently-proportioned body was not worthy of admiration. I wanted my body to be like Beverly’s.

Second grade was also when I noticed that my friend Annie’s body was different from mine. One day some boys at school started calling her fat lips. It made her cry. I looked to the adults to do something, but they just looked on. Her lips were larger than most of our peers. Her skin was also darker. My 7 year old white self didn’t grasp the wider context. But I was beginning to understand that it was OK to be mean about someone’s body, and that tears mattered more in some bodies than in others.

While my memory of learning about body difference starts in second grade, many studies have shown that children are aware of those differences much earlier. Especially racial differences – infants recognize them, and – in a particularly heartbreaking finding - preschoolers of all races have a sense that it’s better to be white.³ I’m quite sure that if my body were Black or Brown, my learning would have begun much earlier.

But, even I learned pretty early to look critically at my own body (as well other people’s) – not to rejoice in the wondrous variety, but to check for anomalies, things that make one body less worthy than another. No one taught me that there was a hierarchy of bodies, but I nonetheless knew that there was some kind of “ideal normal,” and I was supposed to compare my body and others to it, feel shame when I came up short, and look down on others who didn’t measure up. As a child, I didn’t judge this system as good or bad. It was just ... the way it is.

¹ Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body is Not An Apology*, 4-5.

² <https://wordsoftheyear.com/2015/06/04/three-by-nayyirah-waheed/>

³ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2020/08/children-notice-race>

I hope you had time as a child when – for you - body difference was not linked to varying levels of worth. There’s a lot in Unitarian Universalist children’s religious education that seeks to offer such an experience to kids, and push back on the messages they receive just about everywhere else about bodies. But even if you had access to that programming, there’s an excellent chance that body difference was – at least unconsciously - linked to worth. At least if you grew up in this culture, where it's everywhere.

Media. The adult conversations you’re not supposed to hear as a child, but of course you do. The pervasive commentary about people’s bodies. The tears people care about, and the ones they don’t. The words and actions of other children. The very absence of certain bodies from your world.

What I learned growing up was that a male body moves you up in the hierarchy (how far depends on how closely it conforms to the current ideal, and other attributes like wealth); female bodies are positioned according to how appealing - and unthreatening - they are to the heterosexual males around them. Being taller, free of acne and athletic moved you up the hierarchy. Having darker skin or being fat moved you lower. Disabled, neurologically different and trans and queer bodies were both lower and somehow invisible. With a few adjustments along the way, what I learned growing up was pretty good preparation for adult life.

And while things have changed in the last 50 years, and I know plenty of us have worked hard to view ourselves and others apart from that hierarchy the hierarchy remains.

There may be some evolutionary basis for our tendency to assign worth based on bodies. Differences can be dangerous, and to stay alive, humans naturally categorize, and define people as “in” or “out.” That may be part of what’s going on. But in this culture, the body is very deliberately connected with human worth for reasons that have nothing to do with our well-being.

The creation of hierarchies of bodies is a tool for wielding power and legitimizing oppression that’s been with this country since the beginning.

Slavery of course, and the displacement and genocide of indigenous people. The declaration of independence declares the equality of all men, but everyone knew that meant only white men. And anyone who wasn’t a man didn’t count either. The end of slavery, and constitutional amendments expanding voting rights, made the hierarchy less overt, but it’s still going strong.

And for much of my adult life, it never occurred to me that it didn’t have to be this way. I was trying to move up in the hierarchy, not tear the whole thing down.

And that is the great thing about a hierarchy (if you’re near the top) - disenfranchised people don’t come together to demand what they deserve. Instead, those part way up are so intent on holding their position and maybe inching a little higher that they do the work of perpetuating the system of oppression. It’s brilliant – all you have to do is define an ideal “normal,” which is not aging, Black, trans, disabled, fat, queer, suffering from mental illness or addiction, neurologically different, and so on. And then distribute those who don’t match that definition at varying levels in the hierarchy, with consequences for those who are further down. Then, teach people to derive self-worth from looking down on those below (while also seeing them as a threat). And finally, hold out the promise of climbing higher, along with shame for failing to do

so. At that point, the system pretty much maintains itself, fueled by the insecurities, fears and dreams of all who are trapped within it.

We've seen this all along in economically disadvantaged white men whose self-interest has little in common with that of wealthy white men, but many still support policies that oppress them. These policies secure their place in the hierarchy. We've seen this in the women who use the proximity of powerful men to move themselves up. We've seen it in the white women whose feminism long assumed whiteness, ignoring the intersectional oppressions of women of color.

As long as so many remain committed to struggling for placement within a hierarchy of bodies, it stands strong. Doling out its varying degrees of oppression to us all.

For when body differences are inherently shameful, we're all stressed ... because we all have bodies. And, we're vulnerable to exploitation by those who remind us that there is an "ideal" and - not only are we not it - but it's our fault that we're not. And so we spend time and energy and money trying to fix or hide the problem that is our body, or to numb ourselves so we don't feel its shame.

It makes people miserable. And our focus on our "problem bodies" distracts us from the very real oppression of bodies. It dims our calls for justice, as the body hierarchy also sets us up to treat the voices that come from bodies as having varying degrees of worth – in this system, critiquing someone's body is an effective way to devalue what they have to say.

How do we break free? According to Sonya Renee Taylor, it's not effective to just keep flailing against the system. What works better is to start with our relationship with our own bodies. Not body positivity, not tolerating or accepting our bodies, not even working on our self-esteem or self-confidence - Taylor encourages us all to love our own body.

Here's her insight - when we judge anyone's body, including our own, we are perpetuating a system of oppression. It doesn't really matter whether we're praising that body or belittling it – either one places that body within an oppressive system. Refusing to relate to our body as that system demands is an act of resistance that changes how we relate to difference in others, and inspires us to come together across differences to dismantle the structures that inflict violence on different bodies.

When we judge our bodies - good or bad - we participate in oppression; when we love our bodies, we begin to resist.

I find this perspective both real, and encouraging – systemic oppression is very big – and overwhelming. But self-love – we can, perhaps, do that. Especially in community with people who practice honoring everyone's inherent worth. All of our bodies.

But it does take work. Our commitment to the inherent worth of all beings, doesn't – by itself - prevent us from doing our part to maintain a hierarchy of bodies. And even though many of us have worked to form healthier relationships with our bodies, that's not enough either. Because functioning within body hierarchies is engrained and automatic. We've been doing this our whole lives. Most of us have probably found fault with our own body already today, although it's so habitual we may not have noticed. In Taylor's paradigm, every time we judge our own body, we are upholding the system.

We may work hard for justice in so many ways, but there are even more ways to oppress people based on body differences. Until we, as a society, actively reject the fundamental linkage of worth to physical appearance, we're playing wack-a mole.

And it starts with our own body. Loving our bodies changes us, and those around us, and ultimately the oppressive system itself. We love ourselves and the world ... whole.

Yes, the world is a mess. There is pain and sorrow and hopelessness may not be far away. But there is something we can all do, right now.

Love your body. We don't have to feel love. Just do it.

You might begin by paying attention to how you talk about your body - to yourself or to others. Is your language or tone loving? Or harsh and judgmental? Sometimes our thoughts are so fleeting that it's hard to tell, but try to notice what's going on. And then, as best you can, speak to or about your body with the kindness you would offer to someone you love. That's language from author and researcher Kristin Neff,⁴ who also encourages explicitly giving our bodies compassion for all of the struggles that go with being a body in this world. And finally, do something kind for that incredibly valuable and amazing body that you have.

Something shifts when we love our bodies.

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.”⁵

Your body is worthy of love. As it is. This is a powerful religious truth. Loving your body can change you, and it just might usher in a better world for us all.

May it be so.

Amen.

⁴ Kristen Neff, *Self-Compassion* (2011) 53-4.

⁵ <https://wordsfortheyear.com/2015/06/04/three-by-nayyirah-waheed/>