

“From the Neck Down: Relating to the Body”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
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The week before last, I took a few days of study leave to go on a retreat near the shores of Lake Superior. The retreat was led by a minister I know, and, by design, I was the only attendee.

For three days and nights, I stayed in a guest apartment that the minister and her husband have created above their garage. It's a great space for writing, and for the solo and guided reflections that were part of the retreat. The apartment is very “north woods” and Scandinavian, with nice, simple furniture, lots of knotty pine, and views of trees out every window. I found the apartment comfortable and very relaxing, except for one thing: it had a lot of places where I could bump my head.

When I'm wearing shoes, the top of my head is about six foot three inches above the floor. This is generally not a source of concern – my home and my workplace have generous ceilings and doors. But even with a high ceiling in the middle, this retreat apartment was a bit of an obstacle course.

The ceiling sloped down on one side, meaning I couldn't fully stand up in front of the fridge or the toilet. The bathroom doorway was on the short side, the kitchen lights came down to my forehead, and I had to weave around the dangling pullchains for the ceiling fans. Even the garden gate outside had a low-hanging piece of decorative ironwork.

And, unlike some tall people, I do not have a head of hair to serve as an early warning system or a protective cushion. So whenever I was moving around the apartment, I had to look up and pay attention, at least until my brain developed a map and patterns and habits to accommodate my body to this new environment.

The ceiling-fan chains did get me a couple of times, and there were one or two other minor brushes with some of the knotty pine, but overall, I adapted and had a very worthwhile retreat.

And one thing I noticed is that I never blamed my body. I never lamented that I was “too tall.”

There's nothing wrong with me or my height. It's just that not everything is built for someone like me. My approach has always been to be grateful for my height – I've never wished to be shorter, even when my femurs seem "too long" for certain airline seats, or when stores stopped carrying pants that I could wear. I'm not poorly designed (and neither are you); it's just that some things in the world around me weren't designed with me in mind.

Our theme this month at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is Cultivating Relationship, and today I want to talk about a relationship we all have: a relationship with our bodies. Unitarian Universalists and humanists have a reputation for wanting to deal mainly with matters of the mind and brain – diving into philosophy, analyzing history and current events, and strategizing about social justice. And we tend to do these preferred activities without much active participation of our bodies; it's hard to go for a walk and read a theology book at the same time.

The Unitarian side of our heritage in particular is sometimes thought of as a religion from the neck up – all brain, no body, no heart. That's why I've called this talk "From the Neck Down," to give some consideration to the rest of what makes us human. Whether we pay attention to them or not, our bodies are inevitable, often a blessing and sometimes a burden. And I want to explore that relationship today. Because it's a relationship that 100 percent of us have, and it's often changing.

I want to talk just a bit more about my experience of being a person of above-average height. My attitude toward being tall illustrates what I think of as externalized antipathy. Not that one wants a lot of antipathy in one's life, but on the occasions that my body has had a hard time fitting into the environment around it, I'm grateful that I've decided that the environment is the problem, not my body. My legs are as long as they are. The airlines that try to cram people of all lengths and widths into the same seats created the problem, not me.

And so while I might have moments of feeling uncomfortable, I don't feel badly about myself. It helps that height, for whatever reason, is considered a positive attribute, generally free of the stigma and free of the misplaced moralizing directed at other kinds of bodies.

And since tomorrow is National Coming Out Day, I'll say that this kind of externalizing that I do extends to my being gay. Even back when I was a teen struggling with the idea of coming out, even while I was living in fear of what it would mean for my life, I never, at core, felt that I was bad or had anything to be ashamed of. Like a poorly laid-out airplane, it was the world that needed improving.

The world has improved, but it still needs fixing, to make room for all of us beautiful LGBTQ+ people; we and our bodies and our desires and our identities are not the problem.

I've experienced a lot of learning about the body in recent years, and one of the areas of growth for me has been around ableism and disabilities. A number of people living with disabilities hold a perspective that bears some resemblance to what I've been talking about – that the bigger problem is the world. [In an online article last year](#), the writer Andrew Pulrang, who has lifelong disabilities, had this to say about the challenges:

Many disabled people find that most of these hardships come from other people and the environment they live in, not their disabilities themselves. It can help to think of a pie chart. For each person at different times, there is a different ratio between direct suffering from a disability, and indirect hardships imposed by other people's ableism, systemic failures, and lack of accessibility. Some days, chronic back pain, sudden muscle spasms, or loss of mobility is much worse than physical barriers or interpersonal ableism. Other times, we can cope well with our impairments, but struggle [to] gain access to the places we need to go, and process emotionally the onslaughts of insensitive, ableist comments that can come seemingly out of nowhere.

There is absolutely a lot disabled people endure and have to work through, but much of it is entirely unnecessary pressure from the outside. Disability hardships are real, but they don't have to be.

Pulrang also makes clear that layers of privilege can lead to vastly different outcomes and life situations for any two people with seemingly comparable disabilities. "More disabled people," he says, "could be independent and happy if their material and social conditions were improved."

Pulrang is one of several writers who have helped me examine my own views of disabilities. He talks about what he calls the "mistaken and corrosive notion that disability is fundamentally a natural tragedy to be overcome. It's not." I have to acknowledge to having my mind expanded by this perspective – the idea of framing a disability as a neutral or even positive difference, like having long legs, rather than a problem in need of fixing.

I've also learned a few things from the phrase "temporarily able-bodied," which is used

to describe people who are not considered to be living with disabilities. Saying “temporarily able-bodied” is a good reminder of the tentative nature of everything, and of the reality that all of our bodies have limits. [As disability advocate and business owner Sean Crump puts it](#), “It’s not a matter of *if*, but the question is *when* will the barriers in our community impact your life?” Such a question might be helpful for closing any perceived distance between those with disabilities and those without.

Another way that the temporarily able-bodied can help close that distance is to think twice before describing a person with disabilities as an “inspiration.” I’ve heard this from a number of friends and writers with disabilities. And there’s a [Netflix series called “Special,”](#) which was written by and stars Ryan O’Connell, a young gay man with cerebral palsy. It’s a very funny and sex-positive show, and it also takes on serious issues. There’s [a gut-punch scene](#) in which a very fit, temporarily able-bodied man tells Ryan how *inspiring* Ryan is, just for going to the gym. Just as Pulrang described, it’s an insensitive, ableist remark seeming to come out of nowhere. Ryan is reduced to his disability.

This kind of thing is often called “inspiration porn.” It’s an opportunity for the able-bodied to feel like they’ve done a good deed by effectively patting a disabled person on the head. They simultaneously distance themselves from any bodily differences by “othering” the disabled person. There is a human tendency to back away from anything perceived as illness or infirmity of the body, and a tendency to create hierarchies of humanity to feel better about one’s own fate.

“Being disabled is one of the billion possible ways of being human,” my friend [the Rev. Theresa Soto says](#). She describes her own disabilities as [“factory-installed”](#) – she’s always had them, and they’re a part of who she is. She’s fully human, and, in the words of [the story we heard earlier](#), she rocks what she’s got. And, Rev. Theresa says, she imagines “supportive, inclusive futures” for everyone: “It is possible for us, together, to keep shifting frameworks that devalue other people’s human experiences, so that if someone should become disabled..., the future that awaits them doesn’t require them to struggle or do everything the hardest way possible.”

Now, I realize, that, by titling this talk “From the Neck Down,” I may be seen as reinforcing the famous Cartesian perspective of [mind-body dualism](#), the idea that the mind and body are separate and very different in nature. But please know that I do not consider there to be a bright line between the body and the mind. It’s actually a little surprising to me that this duality has persisted so strongly to the present day, given the progress of scientific knowledge.

Right now, I'm reading a book called ["The Body Keeps the Score,"](#) which was recommended to me by our young adult group here at FUS. The book's author, Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, tells of how 140 years ago, Charles Darwin wrote [a book about human and animal emotions](#), and their similarities. Darwin described the actions and reactions between the mind and the viscera, which he called the two most important organs in the body, and he talked about the nerves that wire them all together.

Dr. Van der Kolk praises Darwin's forward-thinking, all-encompassing approach. And he points out that emotions have the power to cause physical pain in the body – stomach-aches, headaches, muscle tension – and he reminds us that physical pain in turn affects our emotions. "Until recently," Van der Kolk writes, "this bidirectional communication between body and mind was largely ignored by Western science, even as it had long been central to traditional healing practices in many other parts of the world, notably in India and China."

One might note that the white and Christian world, with its views of the body as sinful and the soul as a separate entity, helped perpetuate this dualism. But there is now a broadening understanding that so much of how we react to life and how we feel our humanity happens outside of our minds. That it has taken so long is a reminder of our denial of the body's importance and negative views of it; the problem of ableism is rooted in our own fears about our own bodies.

The attention we pay to ourselves from the neck down also has taken on another meaning in the pandemic era. With so much of life, school, and white-collar work now taking place online, many of our bodies are getting ignored, in two ways. One, a typical Zoom meeting is truly a bunch of people as seen from the neck up. It's a gallery of heads and faces in boxes, with the rest of the body deemed extraneous. The body is unnecessary, except as a support structure, and maybe as a way to press the "unmute" button if our brain remembers. Many of us have spent much of our days appearing disembodied.

And that has led to a second kind of ignoring of the body – in the online world, there is almost no requirement to move it. Office workers used to go from desk to meeting room to cafeteria and back. Social justice advocates used to run all over town to get to different meetings for different causes in different communities. Now, except for taking care of a few bodily necessities, a person can spend eight hours or more in the same chair, at the same screen, with tired eyes and muscles fallen asleep for lack of purpose. Anyone predisposed to ignore one's body may forget about it entirely until numbness sets in.

And, as Van der Kolk reminds us in “The Body Keeps the Score,” human bodies are designed not only to move, frequently, but also to be in the physical presence of other human bodies. We’re wired that way from birth; it’s one of the factory presets. So, for many people, the virtual experience has been only partly fulfilling. Information and words and feelings may be shared, for some people more easily than in person.

And there’s a lot of value in that, as I’ve learned from leading grief groups, writing sessions, and coffee hours online, and much of my seminary education took place remotely. But my seminary still made everyone come to Chicago several times a year, and there is still power in a physical room full of people

At the same time, gathering electronically and being disembodied can offer the benefit of removing a number of barriers to participation. I chose my seminary in part because I didn’t have to move. Folks who want to see what we’re up to here at FUS on a Sunday morning don’t have to overcome mobility challenges or snowy sidewalks; they don’t even have to be available on Sunday morning or live nearby. They can still enjoy some levels of participation. Thanks to our tech team, this was actually an option before the pandemic, and it’s become an even more important and permanent part of how we do things.

And for those who want embodied, in-person experiences with their fellow members of the congregation, we’re offering new kinds of outdoor social activities, like a chili cookoff and nature outings, as well as opportunities to take part in justice events like last weekend’s Bans Off Our Bodies March. That march was a protest of the way certain politicians are hijacking individuals’ relationships with their own bodies.

Politically, medically, interpersonally, intra-personally – bodies can be so complicated. Maybe that’s part of what’s behind the dualism and the minimization. Bodies are a lot to deal with.

But we don’t really have much choice – having a body is, at least for now, the only way to go through this experience we call life. Fortunately, as Rev. Theresa said, there are a billion possible ways of being human. May each of us find the way that fits best, and may all of us work toward a world of greater inclusion for the bodies of all, so that all may fit in anywhere they choose. May it be so.