

Head, Heart, Body, Soul

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October 11, 2009

Who and what are you? Are you a body? Are you a mind? Are you an assembly of feelings, emotions? Are you a set of actions? Are you a soul? I would say the answer is: “Yes.” We are all of those things. And although we may pay more attention to one or another of them, and we may neglect others, all of those parts of us are integral to who we are. We must bring all the parts of ourselves to life if we are to live life fully and well. And we must find ways of nourishing all those parts of us if we are to be fully human, if we are to be whole and balanced people.

The head/heart dichotomy is one that often comes up when we look at our own religious heritage of Unitarian Universalism. Unitarianism is generally described as a religion primarily of the head. That is, Enlightenment values such as reason and rationality are embraced as central. But taken to extremes, that emphasis on thought and reason can lead to what have sometimes been described as “God’s frozen people.”

But nearly sixty years ago, the religion of the head – Unitarianism – was joined by a religion of the heart – Universalism, bringing much-needed balance to the liberal religious enterprise. Universalism brought with it the spiritual tradition of Pietism. Pietism sometimes carries a negative connotation of self-righteousness, smugness and spiritual escapism. But the great Universalist theologian of two hundred years ago, Hosea Ballou wrote that Pietism means living the life of reverence, of devotion, in the depths. He wrote:

We must not look for religion in creeds or formularies of human invention. We must look for it in the honest, the pious, the devotional heart; in the heart which truly loves God, loves its [sister and] brother also. The principle of love to God and goodwill to all is true religion.

And so the marriage of the intellectual integrity of Unitarianism, and the love and devotion of Universalism gives us a religion that pays more balanced homage to both head and heart, reason and compassion, justice and mercy, truth and love. And I think we are the better for it.

So much for head and heart. But what about body and soul? Are they also important aspects of our being as humans? Certainly our bodies are central to our lives, and I’ll say more about that in a moment. But what about soul? “Soul” is a tricky concept, and it’s not easy to put your finger on what exactly it is, if it is indeed anything real. And yet, early Unitarian William Ellery Channing said that the great end of religion was precisely “to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life.”

For me, it’s helpful to think of soul not as a discrete, spiritual entity that is somehow connected to our physical selves. Rather I think of it as a whole that emerges from the interactions of our many parts: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. In a way it’s the essence of who we are as a total person.

In his book, *Awakening the Soul*, the Rev. John Morgan maintains that, although “soul” is an elusive quality, not easily defined, “You know soul in a person or community when you feel it.” For him, “The soul . . . [is] the mystery encountered in the everyday experiences of living,

the depth seen when you are present at the birth of a baby, or when you hear music that touches you deeply, or when you look into the eyes of your beloved.”

So for me, your soul is the totality of who you are. And a healthy, well-fed soul is one made up of healthy, balanced, well-fed parts: body, mind, and spirit.

Indeed, the body is a crucial component of who we are. It is our physical home. It is our source of connection with the physical world in which we live. It is through our bodily senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell – that we apprehend the world and experience life. Yes, it is our mind that takes all that raw data and tries to make sense of it, but without a well-functioning body and sensory apparatus, there would be no source of information to process into knowledge. And it is our body that allows us to act on the world. With our hands we shape our environment and create beauty.

And so, if we want to be whole, well-balanced persons, we must pay attention to this body that allows us to experience the world and function in it. We need to feed it with healthy, nourishing food. We need to exercise it to keep it functioning effectively. But most of all we need to listen to it. In his recent book, *Making the Good Life Last*, Michael Schuler writes that “To thrive, we need to be alert . . . to what the whole human organism is trying to tell us.”

But according to a Canadian researcher [Will Johnson], “the average person is aware of only five to fifteen percent of his or her bodily sensations.” Schuler points out that “People spend so much time ruminating, daydreaming, problem solving, speculating, that they literally become alienated from their own body and thereby are rendered largely oblivious to its complaints, not to mention its pleasures.”

And so, if we wish to feed our souls by way of our bodies, we may want to pause occasionally, as we did during our meditation this morning, to intentionally listen to what our bodies have to say. There are also other ways of intentionally integrating body and soul. Walking meditation, as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh incorporates the physical act of walking with the spiritual discipline of mindfulness: attending to the breath, the blue sky, and the sights and fragrances along the path. Tai Chi and Qigong combine bodily movements with meditation, contributing to both physical and spiritual health.

Similarly, there are many forms of “body prayer,” which recognize the connection of body and spirit. I invite you to join me in one brief exercise that was used as a warm-up for a Tai Chi class I used to take. Please stand where you are if you are able. Even if you remain seated, you should be able to participate. Watch and listen first, and then join me when I repeat. Breathing in, open your hands and your arms, raising them above your head. Gather the energy of the universe and, breathing out, bring it down into your heart, and then allow your hands and arms to return to your sides. And now, repeat that with me a few times: Open . . . Lift . . . Gather . . . to the Heart . . . Return . . .

If it seems like I’m emphasizing body and heart this morning more than head, that is at least somewhat intentional, for a couple of reasons. First, the mental processes of your head are implicitly called into action by my use of language to convey my thoughts, products of my head. So we’re already operating at that level. And second, it seems to me that, if there’s any one part of our being that we over-emphasize, for many of us that would be the head/mind.

Certainly the mind is a crucial part of our ability to understand and live in the world. But any part of our being, if exercised to the extreme, at the expense of other parts, can throw us out of balance and lead us to fragmentation rather than wholeness. Coldly logical rationality, if unchecked, can kill dreams and narrow the range of possibilities and connections of the heart.

Similarly, obsession with the body can lead to muscle-bound freaks or sickly anorexics. And overemphasis on matters of the heart may lead to mushy-headed sentimentalism.

Let us rather seek balance in our being. Let us seek health and wholeness, finding ways of feeding all parts of our selves, and bringing every part of ourselves to our living.

We're going to take a little break now, and listen to some more music from Lois and Sue. I invite you to take in the music with every part of yourself. Use your body to notice the physical sensations caused by musical vibration, and how it makes you feel like moving. Use your mind to take note of the structure and harmony of the piece. And also allow the music to speak directly to your heart. Let it feed your soul.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE: *Largo and Vivace from Sonata in D Major* Vivaldi/Respighi

I haven't said very much about heart so far. Actually, rather than talk *about* heart, I'd rather try to speak *to* your heart. One of the most effective ways to do that is through stories. Stories can touch the heart in ways that logic and abstraction usually fail to do. And so I'd like to share with you a couple of stories for the heart. I ask only that you open your heart as you hear them so that you can receive them into the deepest part of yourself.

The first story: The nurse escorted a tired, anxious young man to the bedside of an elderly man. "Your son is here," she whispered to the patient. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened. He was heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack and he dimly saw the young man standing outside the oxygen tent.

He reached out his hand and the young man tightly wrapped his fingers around it, squeezing a message of encouragement. The nurse brought a chair next to the bedside. All through the night the young man sat holding the old man's hand and offering gentle words of hope. The dying man said nothing as he held tightly to his son.

As dawn approached, the patient died. The young man placed on the bed the lifeless hand he had been holding, then he went to notify the nurse. While the nurse did what was necessary, the young man waited. When she had finished her task, the nurse began to offer words of sympathy to the young man. But he interrupted her.

"Who was that man?" he asked.

The startled nurse replied, "I thought he was your father."

"No, he wasn't my father. I never saw him before in my life."

"Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?" she asked.

He replied, "I . . . knew he needed his son, and his son wasn't here. When I realized he was too sick to tell who I was, I knew how much he needed me." [from *More Stories for the Heart*, compiled by Alice Gray]

And the second story: It had belonged to Great-grandmother and he knew he must be very careful. The vase was one of mother's dearest treasures. She had told him so.

The vase, placed high on the mantle, was out of the reach of little hands, but somehow he managed. He just wanted to see if the tiny little rosebud border went all around the back. He didn't realize that a boy's five-year-old hands are sometimes clumsy and not meant to hold delicate porcelain treasures. It shattered when it hit the floor, and he began to cry. That cry soon became a sobbing wail, growing louder and louder. From the kitchen his mother heard her son

crying and she came running. Her footsteps hurried down the hall and came around the corner. She stopped then, looked at him, and saw what he had done.

Between his sobs, he could hardly speak the words, "I broke . . . the vase."

And then his mother gave him a gift. With a look of relief, she said "Oh, thank heavens, I thought you were hurt!" And then she held him tenderly until his sobbing stopped.

She made it very clear – he was the treasure. Though now a grown man, it is a gift he still carries in his heart. [Ann Weems, in *More Stories for the Heart*]

My charge to you this morning? Cherish your body. Cherish your mind. Cherish your compassionate heart. Listen to each of them. Feed each of them. Keep them healthy and in good balance. In so doing you will be feeding and growing a vital, healthy soul.

So may it be.