

Body of Evidence

I recently went on a 3 day meditation/movement retreat at a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center. I did not know until I got there that it was a silent retreat.

I arrived at the gorgeous retreat house with a trunk full of stuff I had bought on my way through Hyannis. I had stopped at the Christmas Tree Shop, Bed and Bath, Kmart and Macys. What is it with this shopping mania that attacks me when I get off island? Does this happen to you? I have lists Gary and I have developed over the months between off island trips and I race into stores like a starving person just arrived at my first meal in months. It totally freaks me out.

So, I arrived with my car trunk full of stuff that luckily shut without exposing its contents. Here I am at a Buddhist retreat center where surely part of the lesson is about detachment, not craving, not grasping and in my trunk is evidence of an attached, craving, grasping consumer.

Each day for 3 days, we would wake up to an hour long movement exercise from 6:30-7:30 and then there was breakfast in silence of course and then 3 hours of teaching with Lama Willa Miller and yoga with a Yin Yoga teacher, then lunch and then 3 hours more teaching and yoga and then dinner, and then 2 hours of movement after dinner.

In the silence and the movement, my mind traveled many places, some instructive, others just ways of escaping the moment.

One of the many things that popped into my mind was watching T.D. Jakes on TV with my mom.

Have any of you ever heard of J.D. Jakes? Thomas Dexter "T. D." Jakes, Sr. is the bishop and chief pastor of The Potter's House, a non-denominational American megachurch, with 30,000 members. T. D. Jakes' church services and evangelistic sermons are broadcast.

My mom told me that she woke up each morning and watched T.D. Jakes. Now my mom is a pretty radical woman who has taken care of herself and her children for a long time, so I was intrigued. She told me that the only rule if I cared to join her in the morning was that I could not critique T.D. Jakes out loud because it would spoil the experience for her.

So I woke up and with tea in hand, eyes barely open, my mom and I sat down to T.D. Jakes who wakes you up real quick with his booming voice and presence.

Jakes said that life is always wooing us, pulling us in ways we cannot explain. He told us that we should submit to this whisper.

He went on to say that we always want to teach from our strengths, our knowing, but the real testimony of our lives is not in what we do right, it's in what we have done wrong, it's in how we follow the whisper, it's in how we surrender to our weaknesses. He said, "You don't have to be perfect, you just have to be present."

Being present. How difficult that is! How many ways we keep from being in this moment, and in this one too. How do you distract yourself? Do you make lists, plan meals, think of what you have done wrong or right or what you need to do as soon as you leave this Meeting House?

I do all of those things. And during this retreat, I did them all at once. Lama Miller was asking us to be our bodies, to inhabit our bodies, to be at one with body. She asked for presence through her teachings and the Yin Yoga asked for presence through the cells...the whisper was, come, come here and feel what is yours to feel. Come right here and be at one with all of self.

There is something so frightening about being present, about calming the stories of the past and the future that we live in and on so often. Feeling all of this fear, I made all or replayed all kinds of stories to distract me. The one that was the most entertaining was the designing of a shirt for the holidays to match my favorite necklace.

I was listening to a Jim Antal you tube video recently. The Reverend Dr. Jim Antal serves the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ as the Conference Minister and President. What a fascinating man, capable of giving a hard message of truth without making it seem impossible to get there, without telling us we are bad, or failed beings but rather by telling us we have all we need to make change happen and that we are particularly well poised to make a difference as religious communities. He said, "The challenge for our generation religiously, regardless of what religious perspective you have, is whether or not we will embrace this time as an opportunity to engage in spiritual practices of changed behavior that can alter our expression of what we consider to be progress, what we consider to be success, what we consider to be the fundamental values of life."

And I thought listening to this, what a fascinating invitation this spiritual practice of changed behavior. It struck me that a good starting point would be the spiritual practice of embodiment. When we can know that our bodies and minds are one, that we are our bodies, our bodies become sacred, even holy and from there the bodies or lives of all others become sacred and the earth becomes a sacred body too. Dr. Abram's book *The Spell of the Sensuous* that I spoke of in last week's sermon, is about how we are changed by being in the world, how we are part of the fabric of the world around us, how we are an organ of this world, flesh of this world.

An organ of this earth. Feel that for just a moment. We are an organ of this earth. I think embodying this is a spiritual practice has the power to changes our behavior, our values, our definitions of need and community.

As Sally McFague writes in *The Body of God*, “We do not have bodies, as we like to suppose, distancing ourselves from them as one does from an inferior, a servant, who works for us (the “us being the mind that inhabits the body but does not really belong there). *We are* our bodies...”

Lama Miller said that enlightenment can only happen in this body and enlightenment is a daily practice of compassion. When I heard this it was the first time in my life I longed for enlightenment. And then she said, you cannot think yourself to enlightenment, you can only be your way to enlightenment.

You can only be your way to enlightenment.

The body is not a warehouse, it is a temple in which, through which, the holy expression of life is given form. We take care of the body not to simply care for our health but to care for the place in which all that we know and will ever know is sustained, the place through which we learn compassion, the place in which enlightenment, the practice of compassion, is possible.

Lama Miller went on to tell us that the truth of impermanence is a liberating truth. We usually think of aging as an inconvenient imposition, but it is a master teacher.

Our body teaches us how to let go. Our body, master of impermanence, is always letting go of something: flexibility, mobility, mental clarity, clear hearing, clear sight,

muscle tone, strength, endurance, memory, painless movement, long slumber...we are always losing something bodily. And we rail against this. Curse the body. Poke and prod the body to go back to what it was. But of course, there is no going back for the body.

Without the body's constant loss, we might believe we were invincible. Indeed, so many of today's problems are here because we do believe this, believe we do not need each other, the earth, the bees, the seas, the air in order to attain our goals, indeed, so often it is felt these are in the way of our progressing to our goals.

If we knew our bodies, if we knew our bodies as part of the whole, as part of all that is, attuned to teach us the lessons of life that must be learned: we are fragile, we are impermanent, we are small and susceptible to every shift in environment that occurs, if we knew and could embrace the truth of our bodies, might we learn how to live on this earth together too?

Sally McFague, the author I mentioned who wrote, *The Body of God*, goes on to write that the earth is God's body. She also writes that it does not matter whether this is true or not, what matters is if the metaphors we are using to represent life and love inspire us to be better people. The earth as God's body is a metaphor she feels creates reverence and action.

Heartfelt and mindful are metaphors too.

If you ask the Tibetan people, Lama Miller told us, where is their mind, they point to their hearts.

The body is the key to awakening. Freedom is within the body, not outside of it in some spiritual or transcendent state. The body is the place of bliss where bliss is not about some unreal, permanent, joyful state but rather about a capacity to experience life in each moment, with the pain and aches and all the losses of life, to fully arrive in each moment so that pain is not all there is, ache is not only what is true. Also true is breath, our togetherness, this openhearted possibility of love that sits on our laps waiting to be recognized.

Lama Miller turned us to our breaths often, to the constant coming in and flowing out of air. We turned so often to our breaths that the miracle of life could not be ignored. We breathed in unison so often that we could hear the whisper of our lives, the longing, the invitation to the moment. We breathed so often with awareness that the breath become a sea that the body was floating upon.

Once Lama Miller said, breathe until the mind has become a handful of salt in the warm water of the body, a handful of salt in the warm water of the body.

And then she said that all suffering is resistance to being in the present moment. I think the master of the present moment is our bodies. As bodies, as cells, as organs and flesh, we always know where we are, what we are feeling, needing, sensing, responding to. There is no other place for the body but now.

[Hand movement exercise.]

Eve Ensler, writer of the vagina monologues, was recently interviewed by Krista Tippet, creator of the On Being radio show. Ensler said:

“I love the idea of the second wind. I've always loved it, like you're running and running and running and suddenly you get that next wind and you can keep going. And I've always been very curious what lives in that space of second wind. What's in there? What part of us spiritually, physically? What is it, you know, what are the ingredients of it?

She goes on, “A second wind is a total body experience, and I feel to some degree that we're kind of in our second wind as humanity. This could be our second wind, but it requires a radical re-conjuring and re-conceiving of the story. We have to ask, What are we doing here? We have to become willing to move with this wind that is trying to come in, trying to pass through us right now.

Everything's — the paradise is here. Paradise is right in front of us.”

I too love the idea of a second wind. A second wind feels like what comes into us, through us and as what is always present as breath. I think that an important spiritual practice that can change our behavior is all wrapped up in wind and breath and recognition that we are embodied; that we are bodies, that nothing happens that does not affect our body selves. And from there, from that reverence of this

fragile flesh, how can we do anything but realize all fragility, our connection to each other and the very body of this earth? How can we do anything but bow to our dependence on each other, this moment, this air, this skin?

We are organs of the earth. What does that metaphor ask of us? How does it call us home and call us out into each other's lives? What healing does it bring? What healing does it ask us to bring to others?

May this moment fill you with a second wind and may this wind lead us into the stunning awareness of our own fragility and beauty and our solid connection to this fragile earth and each other.

Amen.