

## **Earth My Body**

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Unitarian Universalists affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part. On Earth Day, we remember that the concept of the interdependent web is not limited to caring for the planet. Our cosmology, our whole understanding about how the spiritual and physical universe works, is based on connections, and on cause and effect rippling out in all directions through those connections. We don't believe in a great chain of being that places some people as closer to God than others, but instead we appreciate our mutual interdependence with all matter.

In cosmologies that are based in hierarchy, some kinds of lives are valued over others, some genders over others, some races over others. In concepts of existence that can be mapped out in a great, linear chain of being, the earth is an object, there to be dominated and manipulated for the benefit of those at the top. And so are the human beings who are considered to be closer to the earth, those of us who are considered more base, meaning closer to the bottom of the chain. There is a direct connection between the dehumanization of people whose worth and dignity are denied, and disrespect for the ecosystem in which we live and move and have our being. As Unitarian Universalists, when we disrupt the false map of the universe that lifts the value of some genders or races over others, when we disrupt the concept that the purpose of the earth is exploitation, this is all part of the same project of affirming the interdependent web of existence.

I believe it is our duty to find joy in earthiness, and to lift up the beauty of humans and ecosystems that have been devalued by systems of oppression. The connections between our bodies and the earth are complex, real, and sacred. Nutrients in the soil--literal dirt--turned into garden plants turned into food, becomes part of our own bodies. When there is no human life left in my body, I pray that it will be returned to the earth. The earth is in us. We are in the earth. On Earth Day, I suggest we celebrate our oneness. I believe that we will not, as a culture, be able to embrace ecological care and concern until we also embrace the sacredness of our bodies and the sacredness of all of our human neighbors. That's why, today, I am going to focus on human embodiment.

We have much to celebrate about the living planet and our physical bodies. Putting our hands and feet in the dirt where we live, being fully present to the limits and possibilities of our bodies, the experience of the tangible world within us and around us can be good in many ways. The physical world can teach us to be at peace within. It can anchor our feelings of love in the here and now. The concrete reality we share can help us

understand our diversity and our commonalities. In other words, the physical world of soil and water and bodies teaches us peace, love and understanding.

## Peace

Experiencing the physical world as it is helps us to feel grounded. Being mindful of embodiment helps cut down on should-have's, might-have-been's, and ought-to's. The poet Wendell Berry speaks to this feeling:

*"When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.*

*"I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."*

"I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief," says Berry. Wild animals feel pain, certainly. All things in nature know birth, suffering, and death. But they "do not tax their lives with forethought of grief." The poet doesn't just contemplate the wood drake, he goes to lay down by the water. He gets close to the earth. He becomes part of the environment. His physical experience in the presence of still water brings him peace.

I believe that being present to any environment, right where we are, can help us to find relief from the taxation of the forethought of grief. Some environments may be more peaceful than others, but just paying attention to the here and now helps me slow down my mind from running away with imagined future calamities. "Don't borrow trouble," as my grandmother used to say.

The soil and water around us and our own corporeal bodies connect us to the present moment, but sometimes that link brings awareness of injury as well as wild beauty. There might be thorns next to the still water. On the other hand, even in the presence of suffering, there is also resilience. I find that trying to hide from pain also means hiding from beauty. The physical world is a complex package.

The same has been true for embodied awareness. The joy of walking, or resting, or playing connects us with the present moment, and brings some risks as well as pleasures. Regular practice helps us to remember the joys as well as the risks. As I am finding as I recover from a running injury, I have to practice mindfulness to notice what

my body can do, rather than let myself get distracted by what I think I should be able to do. Healthy activity is different for every person. When I think too much about comparing myself with others, I take less joy in experiencing the world for myself. When I am in practice with being active and mindful, I am at peace with my body. I feel grounded.

The physical world gives a gift of experience that cannot be matched by the realm of ideas. When I am able to be present to my own body and to my own physical environment, I feel at peace. I am not always able to anchor myself in soil or embodiment. I need more practice with noticing sensory reality instead of concentrating on my fears and worries. Sometimes, though, I find myself in the presence of still water. To experience body and earth on their own terms is to find freedom in the grace of the world.

## **Love**

Living things are part of living systems. The physical world calls us to be in relationship. That's what I mean when I say that the natural world and our own bodies teach us about love. I mean all kinds of love: the love of friends, the love of communities, the love of dogs and cats, the love of a baby who stares at you from over its father's shoulder as you walk down the street. Love, in a broad sense, is the force of compassion and interconnection at work in our relationships.

I believe that the earth is intrinsically good. I believe that our bodies are intrinsically good. We matter. I continue to believe that matter is good, even with the knowledge that pain and suffering are part of the deal. Let's relieve pain where we can. Where we can't relieve pain, let's care for one another, strengthening our connections.

This congregation already does a good job of caring for one another. I have heard about members visiting one another in hospitals and nursing homes. I've heard about phone calls and greeting cards and casseroles. I don't need to say a whole lot more about love here, except to point out that our physical bodies remind us of interdependence. Without awareness of our corporeal selves, we might be tempted to think we can get through this life alone and isolated. We need each other. As UU's, we respect the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. There is spiritual meaning in caring activities: compassion is faith in the interdependent web made manifest.

When we pay attention to our bodies and our lived relationships, the fact of interdependence is obvious. Connections open passageways for compassion. The physical world teaches us love, and it is good.

## **Understanding**

Earth Day and the upcoming Pagan holiday of Beltane remind us that every single body is amazing. Our bodies make the experience of awe and wonder possible. Listening to the voice of physicists, we all are made up of stuff that once burned in the hearts of stars. Our presence here together is amazing. Each one of us is a miracle.

Yet there seems to be social pressure to regard some bodies as perfect and the rest of us as broken. Some bodies are too large, too small, too brown, too disabled, too ambiguous, or too different to be acceptable. Our bodies determine whether we have equal access to public spaces, whether we can travel without harassment, and whether we can see ourselves reflected in the media as people of worth.

In this system of perfect versus broken, any deviation from the idealized form becomes a character flaw. Imperfection is assumed to be the result of a lack of control or a bad choice. This leads to a chilling of compassion for those who don't fit the mold. In other words: people who fall outside the norm are ignored or shunned or shamed as if this could make everyone conform. Many of us frantically try to control our lives to the point of eliminating the appearance of illness or difference, because we fear that perceived imperfection will threaten our relationships with others. As UU's, we know that humans are blessed and imperfect, and that we don't need to be idealized in order to be embraced by the Source of Life. You are worthy, just as you are. It matters when we speak up for inclusion. What affects one person's body affects us all. Let us seek the Divine in every person.

Being present with our corporeal bodies helps us to overcome our differences and disagreements. We find common ground in the mystery and miracle of being alive.

## **Conclusion**

A direct relationship with our bodies and with the earth that sustains us brings many gifts. Awareness of the physical world can anchor us in the present moment, bringing a sense of peace. When we care for each other in body and spirit, and when we care for our local ecosystem, we experience interdependence as a form of love. Fierce, unflinching amazement at the miracle of our bodies in this tangible world leads us to overcome our differences, letting justice arise from greater understanding.

May we share the peace of wild things. May we love honestly, aware of our interdependence. May we find understanding through our diverse experiences of the physical world.

Blessed be.