

“Embodiment”
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Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Several years ago at the congregation where I was an intern minister, or a student minister, I delivered a homily entitled “Life Lessons from a Life List.” I shared how certain observations made while watching birds had wider relevance in terms of living with integrity, meaning, and good humor. Today’s homily might be subtitled, “Life Lessons from Exercising: Embodiment and Exertion.”

Unitarian Universalist Minister Rev. Dr. Matthew Tittle writes, “For many years, running has been my daily spiritual practice. This is where and when I meditate, pray, replenish myself, and even sometimes write sermons, solve problems, etc. Running has changed my life; saved my life; literally keeps me mentally, physically, and spiritually healthy; and at least partially defines who I am.”¹

Not only does Rev. Matthew Tittle run daily; periodically, he runs triathlons. In a single day, he swam for 2.4 miles, bicycled 112 miles, and ran 26.2 miles. Allow me to be clear: I intend *never* to run a marathon, much less a triathlon. City blocks are the right size. City blocks are the perfect size for a walk around the block.

Yet I have my own credentials for speaking on exercise and spirituality. Over the past two years, I have lost about 45 lbs. in an intentional process of eating less and exercising more. I have learned to like lettuce and carrots, as well as every other food ever eaten by human beings except for sea urchins and lima beans. “Rabbit food” is no longer a pejorative term to me. For over three years, I have worked with a personal trainer twice a week at the gym.

Moderate eating and regular exercise have not always been part of my life. Eating began to assume disproportionate importance in my life during my college years. I had the misfortune to take physical education at the University of Wisconsin – Madison in fall 1974. I say “misfortune” because shortly thereafter the school eliminated the physical education

¹ See http://www.revmatt.org/sermons/mind_body_and_spirit.pdf.

requirement. In wanting to get a requirement out of the way as quickly as possible, I took a physical education course that I would not have had to take at all. More significantly and paradoxically, the class embarrassed me and discouraged me from exercise for many years.

For some reason, presumably to document progress toward physical fitness, students in the physical education class were photographed at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester wearing nothing but underclothes. Perhaps you have heard of the “Freshman 15.” That refers to the 15 lbs. of weight reportedly gained by freshman, who may be making food choices and exercise choices on their own for the first time. I must have excelled at putting on the Freshman 15 because there was enough difference in the “start of the semester” and “end of the semester” photographs to generate an inquiry by the instructor into whether the initial photograph was really a photograph of me at all.

This episode was very embarrassing, and it reinforced a conclusion that I had already come to: I am no good at exercise. Yet I am here as proof positive that we are never too old to exercise. We are never too out of shape to exercise. It is wise to check with your doctor before beginning an exercise program, and it is wise to examine your motivations.

Some motivations are more sustainable over the long run than others. The best motivation is appreciation for our bodies, whatever their state of ability or disability and wherever our bodies may fall on the body mass index chart. We cannot truly respect others and their bodies if we do not respect ourselves and our bodies.

As a middle-aged booster of exercise, I feel like a female Richard Simmons, even though I did not grow up in French Quarter of New Orleans as he did, where lard was a food group and dessert was mandatory. Fitness personality Richard Simmons has been around for 30 years and has helped people lose an estimated 3,000,000 pounds over that time.² My aims are modest: To encourage physical fitness as an expression of appreciation for our bodies.

² See <http://www.richardsimmons.com/j15/>.

Some religious traditions view the body as sinful or weak and focus on gaining life after death. Unitarian Universalists view the body as a source of good and an instrument of good and focus on life *before* death. Here are some life lessons that I have learned from exercise:

- 1) Motivation works best when it is internal, not external. Exercising to prove ourselves to others or to look good to others is not as sustainable as exercising to satisfy ourselves.
- 2) Life is a marathon, not a sprint. Looking buff for a class reunion is not as important as having more stamina for daily living.
- 3) There are always others more naturally gifted and/or harder working than you are when it comes to physical fitness. This is not a tragedy. There are always others *less* naturally gifted or harder working than you are. This is not a comedy.
- 4) It is a mark of maturity to view our image in a mirror without emotional angst. Averting our eyes from our image in mirrors is avoidance behavior which does not serve us. Excessively seeking our image in the mirror can be narcissistic. Gyms and dance studios typically have lots of mirrors, and mirrors can bring a helpful form of desensitization. Gaining a realistic view of our bodies can help us face reality in other areas of our life with more equanimity.
- 5) Goals can be approached indirectly. As far as I am concerned, there is no reason to tone abdominal muscles other than to prevent backaches. In dealing with other people at work and at home, sometimes an indirect approach is more helpful than directness which may feel like a frontal assault.
- 6) “Flow” can be ours. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has spent a career studying “flow” – the zone in between anxiety and boredom where challenges and skills are well matched. Experiencing flow in exercise can make us more alert to opportunities for flow in other areas of our life.
- 7) Diligence has rewards. Discipline and focus open up new horizons rather than restricting us.
- 8) We can manage disappointments and setbacks. We cannot avoid them, but we can manage them. Disappointments and setbacks do not squash us; we can manage them.
- 9) Accepting our limits regarding physical activity helps us understand how to live gracefully and age gracefully. We may not be able to do as much as fast as younger

people (or as much as fast as we could do when younger), but we can appreciate and care for our bodies no matter our age.

- 10) We can get used to being “differently abled.” Accommodation for disabilities and bodily quirks is easier now than ever. The bunions on my feet give me the footprint of Big Foot or the Abominable Snowman. No matter. A few band-aids and orthotic aids enable this Big Foot to participate in exercise.
- 11) Strength and flexibility are fine, but balance is most important. This is true inside and outside of the gym.

You may be wondering, how exactly is this exercise pep talk religious? Unitarian Universalism encourages the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. “Free” meaning nowhere is off limits in our search. “Responsible” meaning our understandings are best explored in community. We are encouraged to kick the tires of what we believe so that we do not drive away in a lemon. Others are often more than glad to kick the tires of what we believe, and they are doing us a favor.

My search for truth and meaning has led me to the works of philosopher Ken Wilber. He is a synthesizer of systems of knowledge, pulling together the most comprehensive map I have ever come across of all of life. He pays attention to individual and group. He pays attention to surface and depth (that is, behavior and interiority).

I leave you with two points related to physical fitness which I take away from my immersion in his work. First, there are at least two dozen different lines of development within us. Spiritual development may be considered one line. Physical fitness may be considered another line. There are over 20 other lines – including cognitive development, moral development, psychosexual development, and so on.

Each line of development proceeds fairly independently of the others. That is how someone can have a high level of spiritual development and still abuse power. There are spiritually adept people, including ministers, who take advantage of their followers. To be fairly well developed spiritually does not mean that we are fairly well developed in other areas. We cannot infer anything about development in another of the two dozen or so lines of development by knowing

something about development in one particular line. This is true regarding spiritual development and physical fitness.

The final point related to spirituality and physical fitness that I take away from Ken Wilber's work is the distinction between state and stage – between state of consciousness and stage of consciousness development. Some states of consciousness are waking, dreaming, and deep dreamless sleep. Examples of states within the waking state are monkey mind (a racing agitated state), the spacious emptiness of some meditative states, and the endorphin-filled rush of a runner's high.

States of consciousness are not the same as stages of consciousness development. Stages of consciousness development are fairly stable. States fluctuate. This point is key: We interpret our states of consciousness by our stage of development. States are interpreted by stage. The endorphin-filled state is interpreted differently by people at different stages of development.

The endorphin-filled state of a five-year old is interpreted differently than the similar state of a 50-year old. Attaining an endorphin rush state of consciousness is not the point, whether the rush occurs because of exercise or because of participation in religious community. The point is developing an adequate, comprehensive interpretive framework for experience.

I have referred to the endorphin rush of exercise. This distinction between states and stages also comes into play regarding mystics and others through the centuries who have occasionally felt "one with everything." The "one with everything" state of a five-year old is interpreted differently than the similar state of a 50-year old. Gaining ever more inclusive interpretive power regarding experience is the promise of spiritual development.

May appreciation of bodies – our own and those of others – increase in surprising ways. May we gain the ability to look objectively and compassionately into the mirror on the wall and the mirror of relationships. May our interpretive powers develop in the crucible of community. May it be so!