

Delight in Movement

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

September 29, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Emily Layfield

When I first saw the synopsis of today's sermon after volunteering for the date, I admit I had a bit of a sinking feeling. "Delighting in movement" does not come naturally to me. I've always been kind of clumsy and self-conscious, and when I was a child a lot of the types of movement I was exposed to didn't come particularly easily or gracefully, and since there were other skills that did, I tended to stick to the non-physical things, and figured I just wasn't an athletic person, that movement wasn't really for me. Not to mention, movement has gotten really tangled up with ideas like body image, and physical fitness in our society is often equated with moral or social value, with patriarchy layering on extra obligation for those of us presenting as female. And for some of us who are in a fat body in a society that is often associating fat bodies with disgust or pity it can be especially tough to associate that body with delight.

All that being said, in recent years I've been trying to intentionally decouple all of that baggage from movement itself, because it's become increasingly clear to me how inextricably linked movement is to so many of the areas where I have been putting my focus, things like attention and mood and clarity and energy. And it's been helping - I no longer believe that I have to be good at a physical activity in order to be worthy of participating in it, and I've been trying a wider variety of activities than I used to allow myself to. It's also been important to me that when signing my daughter up to try physical activities that we stay focused on finding the fun in moving her body and in learning a new skill rather than on evaluating her progress against other people's, or gauging whether she seems 'naturally talented,' whatever that might mean. But although I hope that approach can help her avoid developing some of the harmful ideas I absorbed in the first place, I still haven't quite resolved for myself that there's a big gap between believing that moving my body is good for me and finding situations where moving my body feels good.

For me, a big part of that gap is that delight is hard to wring out of obligation. Whenever there's a 'should' associated with something, the motivation for doing it gets all tied up with the reasons why I really ought to be doing it, and detaches from the thing itself. And if there are any negative feelings like shame or embarrassment or disgust layered on top of that, the good feelings get even harder to access. Delight seems to be instead all about reveling in the thing itself, for its own sake, and about being present in the moment rather than evaluating it critically. Nevertheless, there are a few ways I can already reliably find delight in being in a body, things like singing, or hugging my spouse or my daughter, or the smell of a forest, or riding a roller coaster, and I've been working off the theory that maybe those kernels of delight are something I can build on. Someday I hope to be able to say that there are ways of moving my body that feel that way too, and I'm committed to continuing to seek them out.

Delight in Movement© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Give me the beat boys and free my soul! Thank you, Paul. *You know a melody can move me.* I love dancing and moving to music. I take tap on Mondays and dance Zumba on Tuesdays and Thursdays when I can, and it's really the beat and the music that makes it fun for me. I go to Orangetheory fitness where the music is so loud I've had to buy concert earplugs that I wear sometimes....

Our theme this month is Delight as an aspect of Love. I want to talk this morning about loving ourselves, loving our bodies and loving movement. I think my entire life I've been in search of the experience I had a young child in a dance class on the WSU campus in Pullman. They had a live drummer playing and we'd move across the floor to the beat, sometimes on our toes and tall and other times low to the ground, sometimes swiftly and other times as slow as molasses, but there was something about that experience of me in my body and the music in the room that I really, really loved.

Then, when I read Emily's reflection for this morning, I remembered all the struggles that came afterward. As a kid, dance was pure and simple, inhabiting my body was easy and fun. I'm pretty sure there were no mirrors in that dance studio. We weren't looking at ourselves, we were being ourselves. There's a difference. And that experience did not continue. As I grew older, I grew a complicated relationship with my body, to put it mildly.

And I realized the flaw in my blurb for this morning's service. I made the bold statement that everyone finds delight in movement, when of course, that's not true. Not everyone delights in moving their bodies, and even I who do delight in it, haven't always and don't always... In fact, I've been struggling a bit since my return from Romania where I got COVID. The cough hasn't completely left and I'm unable to jog – I climb hills on the treadmill instead, and I've left Orangetheory early a couple times this last week because the coughing had started. So, I remember that it's not fun to move when your body is in pain, or you're sick, or embarrassed, ashamed, or angry at yourself.

But because I have that core experience from childhood, that important memory of being fully in my body and fully present to it and the beat in the room, I have an anchor and a way back to movement. There have been years, I can tell you, when I moved precious little – and I did judge myself harshly and was cruel to myself and that cruelty, rather than motivating me, paralyzed me instead. This dorsal vagal response is the oldest pathway and evolutionarily the first to develop. I shut down.

But I have a memory of loving myself and loving my body and loving to move *to the beat, boys, and free my soul.* That memory allows me to try again in search of the experience.

Sitting is the new *smoking*, they say. And I don't say that to shame us. It's just a fact that our bodies are meant for movement and our society has developed more and more ways and reasons for us to be still and sit – using what we think of as our brain, but is only the verbal-thinking cerebrum. Which is why I find it so helpful to understand polyvagal theory and all the ways in which our entire bodies inform the way we experience and understand the world. I love that term “genius-level reptiles” that comes from Joseph Chilton-Pearce in a book called *The Heart-Mind Matrix*.

If you've ever experienced high level conflict in a UU church setting, you'll understand what he means by “genius-level reptiles.” Probably the same can be said for an academic setting or many places, come to think of it. I once had two professors on a church board (not this church) - we were experiencing conflict over whether to move to a different location – and when these professors fought, they used high falutin language, sophisticated terminology, and well, words that echo some of the terms in our reading this morning – esoteric and specialized, but it was clear to anyone that wasn't them, that they

were emotionally charged and activated and weren't, in fact, being rational, despite the language of rationality they used to further their emotional argument. "Genius-level reptiles." Great term.

What we've lost with all that sitting is access to the gut and heart brains. And by not moving, we reinforce the immobilization response, the dorsal vagal pathway. The next pathway to develop was the sympathetic branch and mobilization – running from the tiger. So we're on the move. Only, our tigers are less likely to be physical beings these days, but those terrifying predators of the mind – so we don't physically run away and get our muscles moving and our heart rate up, but our hearts beat faster and the anxiety surges without a physical release for the adrenaline. Without that release, the anxiety builds and we are activated even sooner the next time, and then more activated, and more distressed and so on.

But here's the good news. Last to develop evolutionarily are those patterns of social engagement that are unique to mammals. We influence one another. We co-regulate. A parent's soft embrace with a child can calm that child and change their physiology in the moment. Or someone addressing you with a calm demeanor can actually calm you down. Now, it can also have the reverse effect. Ever notice yourself get anxious when talking to a person who is highly anxious and upset? The social nature of our beings means that we affect and are affected by others in our physical space. This worship experience – this gathering in a group and singing together and sometimes reading together, moving together can change the emotional state of the individual. There's a power in the gathering of all these bodies in a single space, and that power can be healing but can also have the opposite effect. I think of the political rallies of fascist dictators as an example – riling up the energy and getting people to act violently toward those "others" whoever they've determined to be "other." Unscrupulous churches do the same – which is why there are so many who swear off organized religion or politics, because of an experience of being swept up into a group emotional response that afterwards seemed ill-advised. I go back to that term "genius level reptiles." But just because this energetic power can be used for evil, doesn't mean it can't and shouldn't be used for healing and helping and making this world a better place.

We are more powerful together, when we harness the energy of healing. Social engagement is our unique mammalian talent and we can use it for good. We can learn to love ourselves, love our bodies, and love movement together, when we gather and sing and come together in this thing called worship – this communal act of calling out those values most worthy of our attention. Worship means to shape worth – to consider our highest values and how to embody them in our lives. I value loving ourselves and loving our bodies. Moving my body helps me express that love.

We are our best selves when we are in the ventral vagal state – an emotional state of openness and social engagement, where we have a wide view and can consider choices. But when we instead turn into 'genius level reptiles,' it's because we're in that fight, flight, freeze, state with limited options and choices. We've got blinders on because we're in survival mode, whether its our physical survival that's at stake, or the imagined survival of our ego created by that verbal-thinking cerebrum. Engaging the heart and gut brains give us more information and more options and requires use of more parts of our bodies.

Movement can help. Sometimes just taking a walk around the block, or rolling your wheelchair to a different space, can open you up to new possibilities that you couldn't imagine because your body, focused, on survival, limited your choices and thinking. Physically getting out of an unsafe environment makes sense. Say you're in an argument with someone and you know you're not thinking clearly – excuse yourself, move into a different space, take a deep breath or two, shake out your limbs or put your body in a posture of power, and it can change your perspective on the conflict. You can re-enter the conversation with more choices.

I am happier when I'm fully present in my body, loving myself, my body and all the ways it moves. I think that Emily is right that the pathway to loving ourselves and our bodies and movement is not by 'shoulding' ourselves or judging ourselves, not by threatening ill health or gloom and doom should we not engage in a particular physical activity, but rather by exploring what it is we do delight in and building on that. If it's singing, well singing is a whole-body activity. It engages the heart and gut and brain and puts it all together and you can't tell me it doesn't take stamina and strength to sing the soprano solo of the Verdi Requiem which Worship Associate, Alexis Balkowistch, is doing in October, for example.

My husband, Stuart, is very active. He gardens and fixes things around the house, plays tennis with his friend, Matt. But he wouldn't be caught dead in an Orangetheory fitness class or Zumba. He can't imagine anything worse than loud music he can't control and sweating with a bunch of strangers. Which I find odd. Because he's the extrovert in our family – he interacts with strangers all the time, while as the introvert, I steadfastly ignore them. But it is I who enjoy these group classes with strangers and he who goes for vigorous walks alone or with the dog. So, there's no telling what kind of movement will ring your bell or toot your horn, but I'm pretty sure something does.

One of my favorite reads which I've read several times is a book called *Born to Run* by Christopher McDougall. It was published in 2011. The subtitle is *A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World has Never Seen*. It's a stunning critique of the running shoe industry as well as a fascinating exploration of the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico who run hundreds of miles without rest or injury, for fun. McDougall is an often-injured runner himself and set out to answer the question 'why does his foot hurt?' Apparently he wrote a sequel to this book, a training guide for runners, so hopefully he no longer injures himself as frequently. I'm unlikely to ever become a superathlete and run hundreds of miles, but I do enjoy reading about them, and have my seasons of enjoying running – well, jogging, outdoors.

Pantomime, as you saw this morning, is something I enjoy playing with. In middle school and high school in Fargo, North Dakota, I attended this wonderful arts camp – Trollwood Performing Arts School, in Moorhead, Minnesota, actually. Fargo-Moorhead is like Portland-Vancouver. But we explored dance and mime and commedia del arte. I was in musicals like the Wizard of Oz and Shakespeare like a Midsummer Night's Dream. And the instrument of the actor and artist is the body.

Currently, I'm taking tap dance lessons -and what I love about tap is that you are making the music with your feet. It is not only dancing to the music, but actually creating the beat and rhythm of the music with your body. It's like drumming, but you're striking the beat with the taps on your shoes and the floor beneath your feet. I honestly can't think of anything more fun than that. It may not be your thing, and that's okay. But I love it and delight in it.

My Grandpa Norrie seemed to love himself, love his body and love movement. He had a variety of interests that kept him active throughout his life. He was a catcher on minor league baseball team, and golfed and bowled and one of my strongest memory of him is the 99 steps he would take around the house just lifting his legs up and down, looking quite ridiculous, but he swore by the value of it.

Our bodies were meant to move. Born to run, according to McDougall, who explores the research in evolutionary biology at the University of Utah. Evolutionary biology is what gets us this polyvagal theory as well. Understanding how we evolved and what we evolved to do fascinates me – especially given the rapid-fire change we experience in our society and the inevitable delay in our ability to cope with that change. Sitting, for example. It's a strange modern phenomenon that our bodies are ill-suited for undertaking hours on end and it's hurting us, unless we can find ways to counteract the effects and

utilize the fullness of our bodies and not just the verbal-thinking cerebrum. Our heart and gut and legs and arms and chest and hips – *these hips, they don't fit into little petty places. These hips are free hips. They don't like to be held back.** They like to dance. So *let it be a dance we do.* Let us dance and sing our way into loving ourselves, loving our bodies, and loving that movement which is our birthright, our inheritance and our freedom. Let us delight in the movement.

*[Homage to my Hips by Lucille Clifton](#)