

Body Justice

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

January 26, 2025

Reflection on the Theme by Kelly Kanyid

I grew up with a beautiful Southern mother. I largely understood the world by how others interacted with her; her rail-thin frame and heartbreaking, effortless beauty regarded as a virtue by other adults. All the ladies in our family were similarly beautiful, all blue-eyed, all somewhere on the spectrum of blonde from platinum to dishwater, not a single one over five foot or 100 lbs. For the first ten years of my own life it seemed that I would grow to be much the same, another carbon copy of the tiny, blond, blue-eyed Southern belles that came before me. In the photos of us all together, from 1982 to 1992, a distinct matrilineal line can be detected.

In 1993 I turned 11 and puberty was very, very unkind. The photos from this time still featured the delicate, demure, dainty blonde ladies they always had, but I look like Godzilla next to them, the tallest of the bunch, all curves and dark hair. The Southern Belles looked like they were in danger now, like I, with my monstrous frame, might just eat them. By the standards I had internalized so early on, I was not pretty, which really meant I was “unworthy.”

The virtue of my mother’s thinness contrasted starkly with the sin of my body, a body that took too much, was literally too big for its britches. I began taking over the counter diet pills for the first time at 13, the same year I began sneaking cigarettes thinking they would work as an appetite suppressant. The decades between now and then are filled with choices that harmed my body, yo-yoing from very small to very large and back again over the course of 30 years.

I stand before you today, hopefully off that roller coaster, having reached a median weight after years of therapy and medical intervention aimed at improving my mobility rather than changing my shape. A good relationship with my body remains tentative as I attempt to make peace with her after a lifetime of waging war. I’m trying to avoid buying into the cultural messaging I internalized as a youth. I’m also trying to reconcile my own anti-fatness with my desire for body liberation.

I want to console my younger-self, who felt truly hideous, monstrous, like Godzilla preparing to eat her tiny family in those old photographs. I want to tell her that she is not her body.

All of the demure, Southern ladies are long gone from this plane of existence. Now it’s just me in photographs with my daughter, setting that beauty standard for myself and for her, though I’m competing with messages she’s gathering from forms of media that didn’t even exist when I was her age. I hope that her version of all of this is more gentle, I hope that she is more gentle with herself. I hope that my continued struggles with body image aren’t just the beginning of hers.

Body Justice© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

The song Paul just performed is from the 1995 film *Pocahontas*, which was an animated musical “historical” – with parenthesis around the word *historical* – drama or better yet, fiction. But the lines – *you think the only people who are people are the people who look and think like you* – those lines are apt and to the point.

You think the only people who are people are the people who look and think like you.

So much of history can be told through that simple sentence. Not just the history of settlers and invaders on American soil. And not just history. We are going through a moment of history in which this has again become the norm, with the executive order issued on the current president’s first day of his return to office – “Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and preferencing” was how it is titled.

DEI stands for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Diversity – difference among humans

Equity – fair treatment of people across difference

Inclusion – ensuring that a diverse people have equitable access and involvement

DEI efforts were implemented to counter-balance the assumption of white supremacy that continues to undergird our society – beginning from that origin of Europeans arriving on American soil and killing and displacing the Indigenous population, to the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans and bringing them to America to make profit. What we’ve learned in recent years – those of us who didn’t know before – is that our country’s origin story remains with us and has not changed all that much. Slavery was abolished, but Jim Crow laws kept the system in place. Jim Crow laws were abolished, but mass incarceration kept the system in place, etc. etc. These stories were not limited to Black or Indigenous populations, but Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the incarceration of Japanese Americans in WWII, and German Americans, for that matter, among so many other laws and actions which maintained the hierarchy.

As Sonya Renee Taylor reminds us, these injustices are not abstract concepts, they are perpetuated on actual human bodies.

These injustices are increasing in this country again as its citizens elected a man who is only concerned about himself and his own clan. (I spelled that with a lowercase c but a K is not out of place here.) He has capitalized on our human tendency to fear difference. I mean that quite literally – he is making money off that fear. And he is scapegoating all those who don’t meet his definition of “people” - *You think the only people who are people are the people who look and think like you.*

“Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness by means of someone designated for the task. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.” Leviticus chapter 16 verses 21-22.

Wouldn’t it be great if we could confess over a goat all the iniquities and transgressions and sins of our society and be done with injustice once and for all? Unfortunately, it doesn’t actually work that way.

I agree with Sonya Renee Taylor that it is an inside-out job. “How we value and honor our own bodies impacts how we value and honor the bodies of others.”

As much as I would like to heap all the iniquities, transgressions and sins upon the person who was just inaugurated as president, and send him out into the wilderness.... He is a product of our culture and not the inventor of it.

We are all complicit, and since we have control over our own behavior and not much more, I believe Taylor when she says:

“It is through our own transformed relationship with our bodies that we become champions for other bodies on our planet. As we awaken to our indoctrinated body shame, we feel inspired to awaken others and to interrupt the systems that perpetuate body shame and oppression against all bodies.”

She goes on to say that:

“Body shame is often a result of our burgeoning consciousness about our own difference.” writes Sonya Renee Taylor. “Part of our evolutionary success can be attributed to our skill at quickly assessing danger. ‘Nope, that is not a person; that is a boa constrictor’ See, quick! In an evolutionary sense, humans’ ability to discern difference ensured that we stayed near the top of the food chain. Whereas noticing difference was historically necessary, modern humans have continued to use difference to sort ourselves, conflating difference with danger.” End quote.

I’m so glad that so many of you are studying the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (this is the class that many are taking and will be discussing this afternoon here at church). The DMIS it is a developmental model that helps us grow beyond this evolutionary tendency to sort ourselves by difference into a mature appreciation for difference and the ability to construct shared meaning. And it’s not too late to take it, as it’s an online course offered through the UU Institute and available to you whenever you’re ready.

In the blurb to this morning’s service, I confessed that this was a sermon I hadn’t dared to give before. I have talked about the body before, but I’ve never come close to discussing my own feelings of shame associated with my body and body size. I mean, shame by its very nature, is something secret, something hidden. I know in theory that shame diminishes by talking about it, but I’d never felt sufficiently healed to address it in public. I mean I always try to avoid using the congregation as my therapist. I pay somebody else for that.

But I’ve been on a journey with you, most recently when I talked about loving to move my body and hearing the reflection of the worship associate that Sunday about how she hadn’t learned to love moving her body because it didn’t come easily to her at first and then because it got tangled up with body image and, I’m quoting now, “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.” End quote.

It was immediately after that service when I made an inappropriate comment about the thin body of a Coming of Age student and related it to his eating habits. Fortunately, another parent called me on that

microaggression and it caused me to think about those comments some of us try to justify as *innocent* but actually do great damage to ourselves and one another. The intent is *harmless*, the impact is full of harm and is accumulative.

Taylor, in her research, asked people to identify their earliest memories of body shame:

Kathleen said “I was around seven years old and a little boy in school, named James, called me fat. I think that was when I started dieting.”

Emma said “At about age seven, the older brother of a friend told me girls couldn’t go topless because it was dirty.”

It is not only girls who receive these early shame-inducing messages. Boys, trans children, and gender non-conforming children receive shaming messages early on.

Said Alex, “From the age of six I knew I felt like a boy. I hated the dresses and dolls my mother forced on me. Whenever I complained, she’d tell me as long as she bought the clothes, I would wear what she told me to. I learned quickly that who I was was not okay.”

I don’t believe that parents wish to give the message to their children that who they are is not okay, but we parents are human too, and our own unresolved body issues get passed down from generation to generation, whether we intend it, whether we think it innocent, or not. Until we’ve dealt with our own stuff, we pass along the supremacist cultural norms we learned from our families and society.

Trans children and trans people are particularly at risk right in this country right now. Partly because they are a small identity group, and being small in numbers, they are “different” from the majority: .6 of 1 % of the U.S. population. Much smaller than you would think given the air time transphobia was given in this last election.

As a small population, they are vulnerable, because 99.4% of the population are “different” from them and potentially view this small minority as a danger, to harken back to our evolutionary tendencies to view difference as dangerous.

Sonya Renee’s Taylor’s recipe for healing our body shame includes

1. Make peace with not understanding
2. Make peace with difference
3. Make peace with your body.

I think the first item is critical for the 99.4% of the population who are cisgender – that is our gender identity matches the sex assigned to us at birth.... We, the majority, need to make peace with not understanding those whose gender identity doesn’t match the sex assigned to them at birth. We don’t have to understand *why* a person knows their gender identity doesn’t match the sex assigned to them. We probably *can’t* understand why a person knows their gender identity doesn’t match the sex assigned to them. I bet plenty of trans people don’t understand the *why* of it either. They just know they are who they are and want to be accepted by society for who it is they know themselves to be. Isn’t that just what we all want?

672 bills were introduced in 43 states in the last year to block trans people from receiving basic healthcare, education, legal recognition, and the right to publicly exist. It doesn't matter that 613 failed, that only 50 passed and that 9 are still active, because the idea behind introducing the legislation is to intimidate, harm, and scapegoat. If trans people are responsible for all the iniquities, transgressions and sins of the world, we don't have to be.

A lot of people are being targeted right now – immigrants, birth-right citizens, people with disabilities, people of color, those who run DEI programs, the list is endless. There is no hierarchy of oppressions only intersectionality. What's not on the list are those whose social location put them at the top of an American hierarchy or caste system. Because that's what we have and what we must dismantle. As the Pink Haven Coalition says on their website: "We know that liberation is a group project and that no one is free until everyone is free."

I visited the Holocaust museum while I was in Kolosvar or Cluj this last September. You can walk through the exhibits listening to the stories of one of three Jewish citizens of Cluj during the second World War. I was there, however, on a tour of Unitarian villages and churches, so as I was walking through the museum and learning the history of the Jewish people, I was also aware that the small minority population of Hungarian Unitarians were also victims of Hitler's persecution and systemic mass murder. Liberation is a group project. No one is free until everyone is free.

The strategy of the authoritarians on the right, then and now, is to separate and divide us. If we fight amongst ourselves, we can't be fighting the unjust laws, the discrimination, the harmful impact of this administration's executive orders. Liberation is a group project. So we need to stick together. We need to have each others' backs. Isn't that interesting how that metaphor refers to the body? We literally have backs on our bodies and we need to protect our backs and fronts and the backs of other bodies.

So, as I was finishing up writing this sermon, I got an email from De Stewart, President of PFLAG Vancouver about their inaugural meeting on Tuesday, February 11th at the YWCA. PFLAG works to ensure LGBTQ+ people everywhere are safe, celebrated, empowered & loved. Eddy Funkhouser, Chapter Engagement Coordinator/PFLAG National will be the guest speaker at that meeting. He'll be talking about the history of PFLAG, the chapter structure of PFLAG, issues the LGBTQ community are facing during these challenging times, what PFLAG is doing on the national level and how we can support these efforts locally. He is sure to be an inspiring speaker. PFLAG is one way to help with this group project of liberation.

"When we speak of the ills of the world – violence, poverty, injustice – we are not speaking conceptually; we are talking about things that happen to bodies." writes Sonya Renee Taylor. These are frightening times we are in. Our bodies are at risk. "It is through our own transformed relationship with our bodies that we become champions for other bodies on our planet." Will we be there for one another?