

The Slowest Part of Ourselves



REV. LINDASUSAN
V. ULRICH
*Minister, Unitarian
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The body is the slowest part of ourselves. Our thoughts, emotions, spirits — these can move at lightning speed, switching from one state to another in an instant. The body, though, takes time to learn. The metaphor shifts from lightning to ocean liner, changing direction in the vast sea: slow, laborious, needing time before it can complete the turn.

The other side of that, though, is that once the body gets it, it knows how to keep moving steadily in the direction of healing. It demonstrates what a loyal and powerful ally it can be.

Everything we do in our lives is mediated by the body. Ultimately, our deepest thoughts are transmitted by electrical pulses along neurons. A parent's profound love for a child involves a massive dump of hormones into the endocrine system. Peak spiritual experiences may expand the chest or cause tears to stream down cheeks.

We are in this world, embedded in this physical reality for however long we're alive. What's more, we need not delay finding paradise until after death — it's available to us in the here and now. This is known as a radically realized eschatology. (Eschatology

is the theological term for how we understand final things.)

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker notes that radically realized eschatology "begins with affirming that we are already standing on holy ground. ... Instead of striving to get somewhere else, our goal can be to fully arrive here and greet each day of life with gratitude." This applies as much to arriving fully in our bodies as in the world.

For years, due to my own trauma history, I spent most of my time away from my body. With time and practice, I started recognizing the signs that I was dissociating: the edges of my vision would grow a little hazy. I'd lose track of what I was saying. My sense of presence turned into a notable absence.

I also learned techniques to come back to myself. I'd wiggle my toes within my shoes, or I'd go around the room noticing objects and their colors: brown table, blue shirt, yellow book. By grounding myself in the here and now, my body became an anchor in my current reality rather than my traumatic past. I came alive rather than merely existing.

I know that this can get tricky when the trauma is still ongoing. But I also know — after decades of hating my body and believing that it had be-

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*"When we heal
our own trauma,
individually and
collectively, we don't
just heal our bodies.
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on the trauma we
inherited, we help
heal the world."*

RESMAA MENAKEM

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Loss as a Gateway to Compassion

RACHEL

CLF member, incarcerated in MO

This might sound strange, but I have felt the most present, the most interconnected mentally, spiritually, and physically when I have experienced loss. It's easy to see life and acquiring good things as blessings, but loss is a pretty powerful catalyst for change that a lot of people don't recognize because, let's face it, who wants to focus on things that make us suffer, give us pain, and can sometimes be traumatizing?

Everyone wants to reach for the light (*carpe diem!*), but few want to give themselves over to the dark night of the soul, to look at your own shadows, face them, and be thankful for the opportunity to embrace that pain and hardship and grow from your past (*carpe noctem?*).

Life and creation are just as sacred as death and destruction — both are needed for existence to even be possible in the first place. Some trees can't grow without the occasional

forest fire. Mothers sacrifice their life force just to bring in new life. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

Loss has been a gateway to compassion. It shifted my perspective, forcefully and not too gently, but sometimes we need to be shoved out of our comfort zones to get to where exactly you need to be, whether it's to learn something yourself or to be there to help someone else. ■

On Grief and Embodiment



ROSE GALLOGLY
*CLF Publications
Coordinator*

Thank you to Rachel for your above piece, "Loss as a Gateway to Compassion" — this reflection is prompted by and written in response to your words.

As I write this, I'm about two months into the most significant and all-encompassing grief journey of my life. My beloved mother passed away at the beginning of April — a fact that still feels completely impossible, no matter how many times I share it.

I'm new to the experience of this level of grief, so I won't pretend to have particular wisdom on it. But I

can say that so far, this has been the most embodied experience of my life. I've never felt more completely in my body than in the moment I learned my mother would soon be leaving hers, and every day since is teaching me more and more about how to care for and love my full, embodied self.

My family had a precious almost-week between my mom's stroke and her death, during which we knew that she was dying and that the most we could do for her was to sit by her bedside and surround her with our presence and love. Every inch of my body hurt that week, and I found myself uninterested in numbing the pain — feeling it made this unfathomable thing that was happening more real, somehow. The pain was

as appropriate and warranted as my sobs and panic attack I had by her bedside, each one a physical expression of my complete love for her, and how very much I wanted things to be different.

I could barely eat for that entire week, as if my love for her was taking up too much of my being for there to be room for anything else. I've regained my appetite in the time since, but it often feels like my body chemistry has been changed by this loss. My mom loved cooking nourishing, vegetarian meals, and these days, any food that's even slightly less healthy than what she would

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trayed me — that our bodies are *always* on our side. They alone remain with us from birth until death. They consistently lean towards healing as best they can, even if they can't make it to wellness.

Whether or not the spirit is willing, the flesh is not weak. It is the magical machine that makes the human experience possible. We find paradise, Dr. Parker reminds us, through “a profound embrace of this world” — including our own embodiment.

If we can feel at home in this world — truly at home, without any asterisk about our size or disability or any-



PHOTO BY DINGZEYU LI ON UNSPLASH

thing else — we won't just benefit from the steadfast gifts of the body. We'll also have better access to the gratitude, compassion, and peace that

keep us connected to all the beauty of this sacred world. May we always remember that we, too, are holy ground. ■

Updates from the CLF's 2021 Annual Meeting

JODY MALLOY

CLF Executive Director

The CLF held its Annual Congregational Meeting on Sunday June 6, 2021. Anyone who could not attend the meeting was invited to vote by mail ahead of the meeting. To date we have received 440 votes via mail, with over 400 coming from our incarcerated members. 33 members voted in person at the meeting. We are still receiving ballots that were postmarked prior to the meeting and will have final tallies in next month's *Quest*.

CLF members voted for the slate of nominations presented by the nominating committee (preliminary vote 445 yes, 1 no, 21 abstain). Annalee Durland-Jones, Aisha Ansano, and Julica Hermann de la Fuente were all voted onto the board. Danielle Di Bona was voted as clerk. John Hooper was voted as treasurer. And Debra Gray Boyd was voted onto the nominating committee.

CLF members voted to affirm the 8th principle, which states that “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant

to affirm and promote: Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” (preliminary vote 420 yes, 34 no, 19 abstain)

CLF members also voted for the new revised bylaws developed by the board (preliminary vote 427 yes, 8 no, 24 abstain). For those with internet access, the new bylaws can be found on the CLF website by choosing About on the main menu and then About again. ■

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make doesn't sit well anymore (and food that does remind me of her feels even better than it did before).

As I've waded into grief, I've found that it's impossible to describe without some level of contradiction. I never experience it as just one feeling: for me, pain and sadness have been woven so tightly together with love and gratitude, there is no separating them out. Noticing and naming where I'm experiencing each of these feelings physically, in my body, has become a necessary and almost constant practice for me just to move through the overwhelm.

The pain and heaviness usually shows up in my back and my limbs, building up as tension in moments when I feel the wrongness of a world without my mother's physical presence. But that pain is always coupled with a feeling of warmth and protection wrapping around my heart: what I understand as her presence and love as it's with me now.

I do feel that warmth around my heart as my mother's spirit, with me now as she is with all that she loved in life — and I try to simply rest in that feeling as much as I can, and to ignore the nagging pull of my mind when it doubts the 'realness' of what I'm feeling. It is easy to doubt, because our minds can't ever fully make sense of even our deepest spiritual truths; they can simply be experienced, known at the level of



PHOTO BY AUBREE HERRICK ON UNSPLASH

the body, and disembodied Western culture has taught so many of us to mistrust what is felt.

Through the heartbreak and exhaustion of feeling so much all of the time, in grief, I've also found myself more able to appreciate the everyday pleasures of simply being in a body. When I feel the sun on my skin and smell the spring flowers coming alive in my mother's garden, each of those sensations feels like a huge gift, anchoring me to my love of this life. There's no more room for me to take for granted the miracle of physical presence on earth while I'm this close to the otherworld of death.

Loving my physical body, caring for it through its overwhelm and pain, also feels like the most important, everyday way to honor my mother. She cared for me, for my body, so completely in life — caring for myself

with that level of love is perhaps the most simple and most significant way for me to carry on her legacy.

If you are on your own grief journey — whether from a recent loss or one still carried close from many years ago — I hope that some of these words have landed gently in your body, either as a mirror or comparison point for your embodied experience. There is no one right way to feel or live with grief; each of our experiences plays out within our unique, messy, infinitely complex bodies, and I think the most important thing may be to simply be with what our bodies are feeling. I hope that's true, anyway — being with all my body is feeling has been my way of making it through so far, so I'm holding on to it and trying hard to understand it as sacred. Our bodies are sacred, without a doubt, so all their experiences of love and grief must also surely be so. ■

Our Hands



REV. ELIZABETH
CARRIER-LADD

Minister, First Parish
Dorchester, MA

"I loved my grandmother every moment of my life. I still do. I know she did not invent the racialized trauma that both white and Black people blew threw her. None of these people, or their parents, or their grandparents, or many generations of their ancestors, invented this trauma. It was passed down and passed down and passed down and passed down. It is now up to us — to you and to me and to everyone else who cares about human beings — to put a stop to this cycle of trauma. This means metabolizing trauma in our bodies."
—Resmaa Menakem

When I first came to somatics practice, I had been in talk therapy for most of my life. I could tell you, at great length, all of the things that I was working on. I knew myself very well. Changing my behaviors was still a big struggle. My trauma responses to triggers were so hard to shift. My body had absorbed so much and given me coping mechanisms for survival.

Healing is a physical act. It happens in our soma, our body. Our bodies are incredible at carrying so much pain and trauma and memory for us — until we are ready to release them by moving through them. Research shows that our bodies carry more

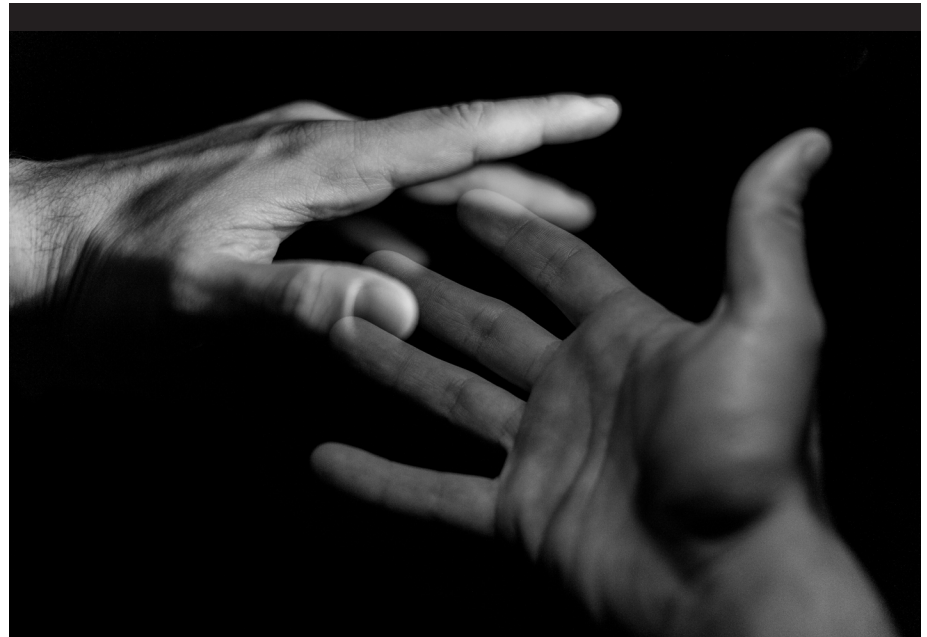


PHOTO BY MARCO CHILESE ON UNSPLASH

than even what is ours, though. They carry the pains and joys of our ancestors.

In his book, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathways to Mending our Hearts and Bodies*, therapist, teacher and somatics practitioner Resmaa Menakem lays out a theory of how generational trauma must be healed in order to overcome racism in the United States. He ties the brutalism of early colonizers of what would become the United States to the terror and torture of the Middle Ages, explaining how a whole people could inflict such trauma on another. Deeply hurt people hurt people. He describes the different ways in which white body supremacy impacts BIPOC bodies and white bodies today that must be healed.

Healing the trauma in our bodies is particularly fraught for those of us

who have our own trauma history. If you have a history of trauma in your life, take it slow. Give yourself a lot of grace. Do not go it alone, ask a trusted friend or therapist to support you. Take breaks whenever you need to. Embodiment can be risky and scary for those of us who have stored painful memories within ourselves. It is an amazing gift that our bodies have taken this in for us. The process of feeling and releasing it needs to go at the pace that feels right for you.

Central to the practice of somatics in the practice of centering. It is how every somatics class or gathering begins. We can do this practice standing, sitting or lying down.

First, we find our core, just above the belly button. We can place a hand

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there if it helps us connect. We center from this place.

Next, we center in length or in our dignity. We can lift one arm up and one arm down. We allow our lower body to settle into gravity and our upper body to lift in our full height.

Then, we center in our width or in our connection. Perhaps we reach our arms wide to feel our wideness and our interdependence.

And finally, we center in our depth

or in our place in history. We feel the space between our back body and our front body. We feel our ancestry behind us and our future before us.

If you take up this process of healing, it will be uncomfortable. Remember, refusing to heal is always more painful over time than the pain of healing. And remember these words from Resmaa Menakem: "When we heal our own trauma, individually and collectively, we don't just heal our bodies. By refusing to pass on the trauma we inherited, we help heal the world."

It is our job to do what we can while we are here. To pass on just a little

less to the next generation. To heal as much as we can. We are not either traumatized or healed — it is an ongoing process of healing that we all must engage in to stop the cycle of racial violence from continuing to pass from generation to generation.

Healing is hard work. Embodiment can feel dangerous. And it can awaken within us more joy, more compassion, more resilience. It can build a stronger connection between our mind and our body. It can help us more easily access the power and wonder that lives inside of us. It can bring our actions into alignment with our values. And it heals the world. ■

A Farewell Note from Rev. Jennifer



REV. JENNIFER JOHNSON
CLF Learning Fellow

This is my last column for CLF in my capacity as Learning Fellow for the Worthy Now Prison Ministry. My fellowship ends on June 30, after which I will be moving on to my first parish ministry in Bridgewater, Massachusetts. My columns in *Quest* and the *Worthy Now* newsletter have been the primary way I have communicated with you, our incarcerated members. So this is my good-bye to you, dear friends in faith. I want you to know how deeply I value the

countless ways you have moved me over these past ten months.

You have taught me, inspired me, challenged me, mobilized me to action, enlightened me, moved me to tears, and made me laugh out loud. Without ever exchanging a passing glance, much less a smile or a handshake, I have experienced the power of sacred connection through your words.

The CLF worship theme for this month is Embodiment. Sometimes, the relationships we build across prison walls can feel dis-embodied. Our bodies are never in the same

place at the same time. For the most part, we come to know one another by no other means than words on paper. I grieve this reality. I am outraged that you, beloved siblings in the human family, are denied the gifts of physical presence with the members of your chosen faith community. Yet, the idea that our relationships are not embodied is, I believe, simply untrue. We may not be together in body at the same time and place, but our relationships are powerfully embodied.

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I'm thinking of all the physical effort and energy that goes into connecting through prison mail systems and the United States Postal Service. Your efforts to procure paper, envelopes and stamps. Your labor of writing by hand the insights of your mind and feelings of your heart and spirit. The unceasing efforts of our indomitable prison ministry administrator, Beth Murray, to process the endless piles of mail and redistribute it to CLF staff and pen pals in the far-flung places

where we live and work. I'm thinking of the way I settle into my office chair with each one of your letters, pen pal applications, and course responses. How I say your names out loud before reading through your reflections. How your words, your stories, your insights, your kindnesses elicit embodied responses—not only laughter and tears, but also a heart at times softened by compassion, or lightened by humor, and at other times fired up for justice. I cannot express all the ways you have moved me.

As I take my leave, I want to emphasize how deeply grateful I am to

each one of you for overcoming the barriers imposed on you in order to build healing relationships with those of us on the outside. I promise to carry your friendship with me—in body, mind, heart, and spirit—as I grow in my ministry. More than any other teachers, you have taught me the truth of Universal Love and Universal Belonging. I will keep your lessons close at heart. May they ever guide me, and all of us, towards a ministry of love and liberation.

In faith and gratitude,



FOR YOUR REFLECTION

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This issue includes many reflections on embodiment — its difficulties, its importance, its complexities. It has made us wonder: as you read each piece, where have you felt the messages in your body?

Does tuning into your body feel easy or difficult for you? Do you have any practices or tools to help you access your embodied self? If not, are you interested in learning more about embodiment and/or embodied healing?

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.



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