Hey, hey, the first of May! Outdoor loving begins today!

So goes a slightly bowdlerized version of a saying I first heard in high school. Today, today is the first of May, the beginning of spring and a slightly scandalous occasion in the English-speaking world. May Day carries with it a certain threat of decadent licentiousness that both titillates and delights. Ignoring later labor commemorations of the Haymarket Massacre, nineteenth-century romantics saw Mayday festivities as vaguely pagan survivals of an earlier, pre-Christian "id," well before Sigmund Freud would coin that term, projecting onto it what Jung would later call "the shadow." A part of ourselves or culture which we publicly choose to hide, repress or deny, May Day became an emblem of sexuality. Mayday was carnal and indulgent for puritans, much as Christmas had been: something to be feared, discouraged and repressed.

But cannot hold forever (4). From light we move to darkness, and then again back to light.

I invite you to open your eyes now, and to soak in sense like a dry sponge.

There is a druidic story of King Cormac and the Well of Segais in Ireland: a mystic pool from which flow five streams, often likened to the five senses. Closing our eyes is a simple way that we can briefly close one of our senses, and sleep is another which most of us do. But how often do we consciously open our senses? Toward fun and a new pool of wisdom, then, I would invite you to do so now, here, quietly and in your seat. Look around, in a subtle way, to take in the play of light and shadow that washes over and through to fill this room. See the many colors and faces and shadows that fill it every Sunday but have never before filled it in exactly the same way they do this morning. Hear the odd rustling of your neighbors around you, the sounds that their breathing and our own clothing make as we sit (or settle or wriggle) in our chairs. Feel your weight as the earth draws it down, and the way that your clothes bind or drape around "the soft animal of your body." What does your mouth taste like this morning? Which mammals can you smell near you, or what other scents mask those mammals? We normally ignore these things because they are distracting, often painful or achingly beautiful to consider. Strong sensations can be awesome in the old-testament sense. They inspire awe, which is to say a mix of wonder, admiration and terror. Our Puritan forebears were right to distrust the body. It is a fierce and marvelous thing.

Hey, hey, the first of May! Why would we fear it, or push it away?

Our bodies are on fire, quite literally. Our very cells and mitochondria are physically combusting in a divinely balanced series of chemical actions and reactions, volitions and adjustments that are too complex to understand: "Not only queerer than we
suppose, but queerer than we can suppose," as professor Haldane had it. It is wildly improbable, and slightly terrifying. Our life on this earth, the seasons themselves: We live within a maelstrom of wonder, which falls after each summer, and then after winter springs. The days grow longer. Dead sticks explode with color. Our own souls awaken, to profound spiritual questions. How the hell did we get here? Where in heaven's name are we? What should it mean, if anything? Are there souls inside our bodies, or are our bodies inside our souls? And what are we to do, given all this wonder?

Materialism is the belief that matter is fundamental, and that phenomena such as consciousness or thought somehow emerge from that, like lotuses from mud. Idealism is its opposite, which presupposes some sort of divine plan or perfection, which somehow instantiates. Are we physical beings having a spiritual experience, as some assert, or spiritual creatures having a physical experience? And how can we tell? Embodiment is a deadly serious theological question. What are bodies and why on earth do we have them? What does it mean to be instantiated, born into a specific place and time? Can it mean anything? Do duties and opportunity grow from that, or are we merely bags of hormones, doomed to flail?

May Day, in all its historical nuance and complexity, can invite us to consider that: to solve metaphysical questions practically.

In preparing for these remarks I re-read too many books. One of them was Ronald Hutton's The Rise and Fall of Merry England about the ritual year in Britain from 1400–1700. Its successor, Stations of the Sun, provided more specific information on the history of customs related to Beltane and our modern maypole. A third was Vine Deloria's seminal 1972 book God is Red: A Native View of Religion, and a fourth was Matthew Fox' 1983 Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality. There are dozens of places to go with all of that material, but Fox' phrase is perhaps the simplest and most fertile.

Original blessing.

What would it mean to set aside condemnation and repressive obsession with original sin and hatred of our bodies to focus instead on a celebratory spirituality, what Fox calls "original blessing?"

Do we really believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as Unitarian Universalists supposedly do? Outward? To all of them? Does that "inherent worth and dignity" extend inward and downward to include all of ourselves? Including our sensuality and sexuality? What does that mean precisely today, Sunday May 1st, 2016? How do we witness and express that by physical action? How does my life change if I really love my body, all of it, top to toenails?

How would your life change if you absolutely loved yours, and encouraged others to love theirs, at every level in the world? All of it? What does it mean to take the flame inside you? Do we dare to say yes to life, as one hymn has it, to draw the circle of blessing wide to include all we are and each other?

I think it would be wonderful. And terrifying. The work of a full lifetime, if not several. I think it is wonderful, and terrifying, so invite us to think about it and conspire more later.

Hey, hey, the first of May! Outdoor something begins today.

The Puritanical fear of Mayday is fundamentally a fear of sex and sexuality, both our own and that of our neighbors, but mostly of our own. As defense, we project that fear onto licentious others through cultural shadow. We fear our own desires, if we even admit them, to envy the young and shame the slatternly. Heads and hearts lie about things below the waist, to deny the engorged testament of our own bodies: Sometimes for years, or decades, even lifetimes. We fear the violence of a dominant, sex-negative culture, and so trade intimate truth for public respectability. Sexuality becomes a sort of consumer good, rationed grudgingly, if at all, restricted to the young and the beautiful. But ugly people deserve to have sex. Lonely people deserve to have sex. Broken people deserve to have sex. All people deserve healthy sexuality, but there is never much of it, or not for long, and we rarely speak of it. Not even to ourselves. Isn't that odd? Curious? Sinful?

In her 2000 book Full Exposure, feminist author Susie Bright asserts that the process of "coming out" is not something that should happen once to gay people, and then be complete. It is a lifelong process. It is not like a divine and authoritative revelation of a single thing at one time for all
eternity, but rather an eternal unfolding of the self: An unfolding each of us can choose to see and seek as part of being human. Have you come out? Sexuality is our mammalian birthright, inherent to full and rich humanity, as important as any other sort of wisdom, love or health.

The experience of embodiment is a complex one, spiritually deep and fundamentally erotic. Old or young, pre-pubescent or post-menopausal, gay or straight, partnered or solitary, every human has a body and is entitled to fully partake in the inherently erotic ecstasy of embodiment, across realms of imagination beyond shame and fear. What are you most afraid of about your body? Go there. What don't you want to admit? Approach that. What thoughts about your body most disgust or frighten you? Touch those. You will not die because you did so, but because it was your good luck to be born.

"You do not have to be good," begins a poem by Mary Oliver:

"You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves."

Embodiment is fundamental to human existence, with sensual pleasure an erotic birthright. The pleasure of our senses. The dance of light. Caressing scents and sidelong glances. Puritans who would tame the May or hate a ribboned pole do so for good reasons. They say no because they fear themselves. And now isn't that silly?

Hey, hey, the first of May! Embodied insight can begin today.

There were a lot of places I wanted to go today with these remarks, but mostly I haven't. I glance rather than point, on the theory that each of you will take away whatever you are ready for. In his 2015 book on authentic sexuality in a sexually dysfunctional culture, "Sex Outside the Lines," therapist Chris Donaghue asserts (a) that good sex therapy helps a person to grow and become more whole through exploration of their sexuality and (b) that everyone is morally entitled to that. Imagination and celebration and pleasure are not special prizes for some people just some of the time, or for you when you are good, but a fundamental human right: as basic as air, food or water. Breathe into that, to take that flame inside you.

Everyone I see in this room has a body. Everyone in this room deserves pleasure and love, as everyone in this room deserves water and air. Everyone in this room has an erotic soul: many things delightful and, yes, sexy about them. Everyone in this room deserves all of that, including me. Including you.

Look closely or with open-ness and you probably see or feel it. Look closely within yourself, to take pleasure and feed that yearning. You are deeply embodied and always shall be, from beginning to end. May this day allow us to see that. May yet more loving begin today.

A scientific understanding of axial tilt has almost nothing to do with our experience of spring, and the history of pagan Beltane and the origins of the maypole have nothing to do with the joy and pleasures we may take in it. "Whoever you are," Mary Oliver continued in that poem, "the world offers itself to your imagination."

One of my favorite gospel stories is from Matthew 26, where at Bethany Jesus is anointed and rebuked for taking pleasure in scent and in flesh. Take pleasure in our bodies, I hear that story saying, for they shall not always be with us.

Embodiment is a mystery, and also a sacrament. May you touch and love yours, through touch and trembling, across electric fibers, to your bones and marrow.

--- FIRST SERVICE ENDING ---

May all of us cry out "oh gods" in ecstasy, and mean it, across many days of our lives.

--- SECOND SERVICE ENDING ---

After second service today there shall be a maypole, for whomever wishes to step out and enjoy it, whether in sun or "the bright pebbles of rain." Some may see the maypole itself as phallic. Others may see the double helix of DNA within its weaving ribbons. Some may see quaint custom or culture: the world tree or sun dance. Others may just see the
pleasures of youth, the beauty of nature, or just a blur of pretty colors.

Whatever you see, may it bring pleasure and insight.

--- BENEDICTION ---

Our life begins by breathing in.
Our life shall end by breathing out.
May every breath between be a blessing,
and every step in your dance stoke a sacred fire.

Blessed be, and namaste.

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Chris Donaghue. 2015. Sex Outside the Lines: Authentic Sexuality in a Sexually Dysfunctional Culture. (BenBella Books: Dallas).