At what point did the mind wander off from the body and how do we get it back? The line we’ve drawn between the body and mind “are whimsy,” says Krista Tippett, “born of the limits of our understanding.”

To expand my understanding, I find comfort in identifying a point in history in which things shifted in the Western world and God got identified with the mind, and body with all things human. Sometimes mind was identified with man and body with woman, or Europeans with mind and Africans with body – you probably can see the pattern here – mind associated with all things great and good, and body with the people not in power, all things small and lesser. The mind is associated with thoughts and thinking and ideas, the body with heart, feelings, actions, and experience.

But when I read an essay in seminary that seemed to me to pin point the moment this split between mind and body began in our Western history, it was hopeful to me, because it meant that things weren’t always this way and that there was the possibility for something different – a wholeness of mind and body, a unity, a healing.

The essay was The Hermeneutics of the Self by Michel Foucault. In that essay he describes Classical Greek methodology, and Early Christian methodology – I’m struggling with the word to describe method of what – in current language, you might call it “spiritual direction.” I’m going to use the term spiritual direction and define for you what I mean by that – even though this is not the term that would have been used or understood in Classical Greek or Early Christian times. But spiritual direction, as I understand it, lies somewhere between therapy and education – what goes on between psychologist and patient and between teacher and student when the patient/student is trying to improve his way of being in the world.

The classical Greek method for this spiritual direction involved two people – let’s call them teacher and student for simplicity – and the teacher would ask guiding questions of the student so that the student has a way of comparing their actions in the world to their understanding of the world.

When they recognize inconsistencies between their thought and action, they work them through with the teacher, and see if they can’t resolve the differences. The teacher acts as a witness to the student’s life, and the student uses the teacher/witness to understand his actions and thought patterns and make changes to his life. Over time, the student learns to witness to his own life and the teacher is no longer necessary in such a formal way.

In early Christian history, this, then, becomes the confessional. Early church fathers, John Chrysostom and John Cassian describe the monastic discipline as concerned with thoughts more than action. An idea is not tested against real experience, but turned in upon itself to determine if it has been sent by God or Satan. We have a confessor and a confessee, and instead of teaching the confessee to compare his thoughts with his actions, his mind with his body or his thinking with his doing, the confessor instead teaches that he alone, or he and God alone, knows what is right, and teaches the confessee to compare his thoughts to the thoughts of God – compare them to what is right and true, in an abstract, disembodied form. Truth is revealed in dogma, scripture and authority, and no longer in experience. If one’s own thoughts are not grounded in experience, but rather the wisdom of one’s confessor, it is no small leap to renouncing one’s own feelings altogether.
This, I believe, is the point in Western history when the mind wandered away from the body and got associated with all things good, and the body was negated and devalued and denied. Now, I am strictly speaking out of the West. In the Far East, I understand, the same word is used in all languages for mind and heart, which indicates no such split.

Krista Tippett on her radio programs, Speaking of Faith, and On Being has interviewed Jon Kabat-Zinn, whose research is in the emerging field of mind/body medicine, with the focus on the clinical, social, and human performance effects of mindfulness meditation training in various populations.

He pointed out that we’ve named ourselves scientifically, homo sapiens sapiens, which roughly indicates beings that know and know that they know. That we are aware of ourselves is one thing that distinguishes us from other beings, but Kabat-Zinn points out that as a species we don’t take advantage of that ability, or cultivate it or practice it—which is changing—his current research and that of others contributing in large part to a changing culture. But for the most part, we don’t teach awareness in our culture, or how to tap into that knowing that we know. We admonish children in a classroom for quote “not paying attention” but we don’t teach them practical techniques for paying attention.

Tippett points out that the term we use, mindfulness, makes it seem as if it is about thinking, the activity we associate with the brain, which it isn’t—I would describe it as the link between mind and body. Kabat-Zinn claims that languages in the East have a single word for our two words mind and heart. And so when we try to explain the Eastern notion of mindfulness in a western language, it seems incomplete. He says you should think heartfulness at the same time you hear the word mindfulness to get a more complete understanding of the term.

Teaching mindfulness is about teaching awareness. It’s about witnessing our thoughts and feelings, and actions in the world, and more than that, and less than that.

There’s a TV show I discovered for myself a few years ago—it’s old hat now, so you’ve likely heard of it. It’s a reality show called Dog Whisperer, starring a dog behavior specialist, Cesar Millan. On each episode he enters the life of a family struggling with the behavior of their dog. and teaches them how to work with their dog to restore harmony in the family.

We have a standard poodle in our house. Her name is Nutmeg. She is the second dog we’ve owned as a pet. Our first poodle was named Scotty. When he was a puppy, he was hard to handle. I understand most dogs are hard to handle in the puppy stage. But I had never owned a dog before Scotty, and so I was particularly challenged. Though I went to puppy training classes with him, we still had an issue in our backyard of his jumping and nipping—and so we called in a dog behavior specialist. The first thing you learn with just such a dog whisperer, is that it is the human behavior that is the problem and once you change that, the dog’s behavior is no longer troubling. These dog whisperers might more accurately be called human behavior specialists. The smarter the dog, the quicker they train their humans—I say that from personal experience. Poodles are smart and I was pretty naïve.

On one episode of the Dog Whisperer, Cesar Millan was helping a couple with their pit bull/lab mix (I’m not sure about the lab part, but the dog was part pit bull) Anyway, this dog liked to eat small animals. He actually ate a squirrel when they first got him and whenever they took him on a walk, he would lunge after all small animals, including small dogs and all cats.
So Cesar taught the humans to be more aware of the dog’s behavior. They paid attention to where the dog put his attention – and brought his attention back to them whenever it wandered toward a small animal. They had to watch the dog closely and evaluate his behavior. They noticed when the dog got distracted by a small animal and when it got ready to lunge. Cesar put some small animals, a rabbit and a guinea pig, in a cage, and taught the dog to lie next to the cage and relax. Whenever the dog got up, got alert, or paid attention to the small animals, Cesar forced him down again and drew his attention elsewhere. Finally, he tamed the dog enough that he could bring the guinea pig to his lips for a kiss and the dog passively licked him. Then, the test, Cesar had the owners take the dog on a walk in their neighborhood that was full of small animals, small dogs, cats and squirrels and the humans had to keep the dog’s attention focused on them and not on the small creatures. It was amazing to watch, and transformative for the family.

We can likewise be transformed by such attention to ourselves. Human beings are saddled with a stone age mind in a digital world, said Jon Kabat-Zinn in one of those radio interviews. He claims we are still in our infancy as a species and that we need to reclaim full functionality of our humanity – learning mindfulness is a part of reclaiming our full functionality. We need to learn to watch ourselves, analyze our own behavior, our own thoughts and feelings, our own breath pattern, in order to tame that stone age mind and allow it to work for us in a digital world.

As relational beings, we need others to learn how to do this. The couple with the pit bull/lab mix dog needed Cesar Millan to help them. I needed a dog behavior specialist to help me with my behavior so I could deal with my dog, Scotty. Just as the Ancient Greeks would provide witnesses and teachers for one another to understand themselves, we can be witnesses to one another. We are, in fact, witnesses for one another – whether we call it that, do it intentionally or not. But Kabat-Zinn would argue that the benefits lie in being aware of our awareness – fully becoming those homo sapiens sapiens, the beings that know and know that they know.

We are witnesses for one another and can understand ourselves better – this is something we can do for each other at church.

Our chalice circles might also be called “mindfulness groups”, or better yet, “heartfulness” groups. Chalice Circles in some other congregations are called “covenant groups” because of the covenant which is shared in these small groups. Because of that split I mentioned, the one in our Western tradition where Early church fathers created the confessional where ones ideas were measure against the ideas of a disembodied God. Because we inherited that unhelpful mind/body split deep within our culture, I think some folks are wary of the concept of covenants as abstract rules grounded in a disembodied authority figure, rather than what are meant to be – the articulation of our lived practice together.

And clearly Chalice Circles are not the only place in church life where we can witness one another and help us grow into our identity as homo sapiens sapiens. The Careers & Kids group for young adults and slightly older, the coffee and politics, humanist group, committee meetings, justice gatherings - Whenever we find ourselves together, it is important that we speak from the heart with intentionality, we speak the truth in love to one another, that we not back down from hard observations, and pay attention our own responses as closely as Cesar Millan watches dogs and their owners.

We can learn mindfulness, heartfulness, we can become more aware of who we are and live into each moment more fully – breaking time open and being here now.
I like to think I know at what point in history the mind wandered away from the body, and I know how to get it back. I believe we can learn to tame the stoneage mind. We can learn to still the wandering mind. We still it, calm it, bring it back to this time and this place and be here with one another. When it wanders off again, bring it back to your breath and feel the air circulate in your system, breathe in peace, and breath out love.

We do this not just for our own well-being, not just because it makes us happier, but for the well-being of the planet. This awareness leads to all kinds of intentional decision making that can curb violence, alleviate injustice, and heal the world. But that sounds like the topic for another day. This day, this moment, let’s just be here together, mind with body, heart with soul. Let us be here now. And breathe.

*Benediction*

May this be a week of deep listening and witnessing, as we practice heartfulness and feel the strength of that river flowin’ inside telling us, each of us, that we are somebody important with important work to do to heal the world. Breathe in and as you breathe out, let the congregation say, Namaste.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.