Embodied Practice©
by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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Just have a little faith in me... Thank you, Mandy and Karen. I have set the pulpit aside, am purposely a little out of my comfort zone, and so I ask you to have a little faith in me. It is easy for me to hide my body behind the pulpit but this morning, I want to make our bodies the center of worship together.

We have been studying spiritual practices this month – we’ve used the categories scholar Andrew Harvey defines as:

1. heating practices,
2. cooling practices,
3. physical conditioning practices and
4. shadow work.

This morning we’re on physical conditioning practices; hence the reading about physical fitness.

Before I go on to praise the body in all its wonder and the physical conditioning practices that keep it flexible, I feel I need first acknowledge how messed up our culture is around this subject. And since all things are related, many of us are also personally imbalanced and injured around the subject: The subject of our bodies. Object is probably a better word than subject, because we have objectified our bodies. Rather than being in our bodies and being our bodies, the culture at large encourages us to objectify our bodies. Visual images flood the media of the perfect body, and most of us do not actually resemble those images.

As I was writing that sentence – I was working in a public place where a television was on – and I looked up to notice an ad for a thing called evapo slim or slimaway – it looked like a girdle. To be worn under your clothing to evaporate the fat – and it underscored my point. But I decided not to model one for you this morning.

So I begin by acknowledging the point Dale Dymkoski made in the reading: That our bodies and minds are one, there are ways we think which work against us and ways we can approach exercise which work against us spiritually.

For the physical conditioning practices to be helpful to the spirit, one needs to approach them with the right attitude. There is an important difference between physical practice in order to become worthy, and physical practice because we value our worth. Dymkoski talks about how when he was younger, he exercised because he was insecure and wanted to become attractive...
He claims it is not a bad thing, but admits that it is unsustainable — if you’re always exercising in order to feel better about yourself, at some point you may notice that you’ve not achieved that ever elusive happiness, and give up on exercise and healthy living altogether. If, however, you exercise because you respect your body, enjoy your body, love your body — this exercise can be a gift to your body and enjoyed throughout your lifetime.

Dymkoski defines fitness as the balance of mind, body, and spirit. I often define spirit as the connecting link between mind and body. Fitness as the balance of the three also works. As I get older, I recognize the significance of balance in our physical life.

You may know that Tai Chi can Help Parkinson's Patients Regain Balance.

Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art involving slow and rhythmic movement. It is sometimes called meditation in motion, because of its gentle, focused motions connecting mind to body. (I demonstrate some here)

The New England Journal of Medicine published a study by research scientist Fuzhong Li, a tai chi practioner himself. Parkinson’s disease is a disorder of the nervous system which affects movement and motor control.

“In the study, Li divided Parkinson’s patients into three groups. One group did resistance training with weights. Another, stretching classes. And the third took up tai chi. Each group participated in a 60-minute class twice a week for six months.

“When they finished, Li found that the tai chi patients were stronger and had much better balance than patients in the other two groups. In fact, Li says their balance was "four times better than those patients assigned to the stretching group and about two times better than those in the resistance-training group."

I share this example because I want to convey the breadth and width of the topic. The spiritual discipline of physical conditioning practice is not limited to weight lifting and jogging or running, though those forms of exercise can benefit the mind-body. Physical conditioning practice can be as gentle as Jessica’s daily walks, tai chi or yoga — anything, in fact, that helps us stay in tune with the rhythms of our own bodies so that we remain integrated as a whole being, and as flexible as possible.

My grandfather was very comfortable in his own body. He was an athlete. Played football in college, and was a baseball catcher on a minor league team. He golfed and bowled. He got a lot of exercise through physical labor — working on the ranch he owned — he fell out of a tree when he was in his 80’s — had been pruning an apple tree on the ranch. He mowed the lawn well into his 90’s. He used to jog around the house saying he needed to get in his “90 steps.” (I imitate Grandpa Norrie)
Because I asked, I learned that my aunts and father all remember a different number of steps he would do, anywhere from 10 to 100. I think it was 90. or 60. In any case, regardless, my grandfather was a well-rounded person, perfectly comfortable in his body and balanced. He worked each day, he played each day. He read and played cards and used his mind well, and he exercised and used his body.

I think physical fitness for him was a spiritual act, to use the words of Dale Dymkoski – through his body he accessed a deep and powerful love, the source of all creative energy. Exercise can be a form of creative expression, the chance to be one with God.

When does exercise become a chance for you to be one with God? When does moving your body make you feel powerful and loving and optimistic about the possibilities? Yes, I could be referring the runner’s high – the euphoria felt perhaps caused by endorphins – the morphine like substance produced in the body itself. But to tell the truth, I’ve not been blessed with that response for the most part to exercise.

I feel accomplished after working out, but I rarely feel euphoric. I feel physically better, for sure, and often more alert – but some of the repetitive forms of exercise don’t really excite me. Unless I’m outdoors – where it’s beautiful and I’m enjoying the weather or view, or if there’s music I enjoy or the movement is beautiful, then sometimes, on rare occasions, in those circumstances, I’ll feel at one with the world. Nia, as I wrote about in the bulletin this week, combines dance, martial arts, and mindfulness. It is a holistic fitness practice that addresses body, mind and soul. It’s done to music I enjoy and the music is beautiful. I’m so glad they are offering classes in Vancouver now as well as in Portland.

I was most at home in my own body as an adult while living in the Black Carib village of Travesía, Cortés, Honduras. I walked everywhere. I carried water and washed my own clothes by hand. But mostly I walked. And danced. Dancing was standard part of life in the village. In fact, one reason I love Nia, is that there is a dance move that resembles a dance called Punta that they do in the village where I lived. The women taught it to me at the end of every session of classes that we taught – we’d have a party, and kick off our shoes and we’d dance.

It was easy to get regular, daily exercise in rural Travesía, as daily life required it. Water didn’t come to our houses, we had to go to the well, pump it and carry it. Think about that every time you turn on the faucet and water comes out – every drop of water in Travesía had to be carried by people – women and children generally – to get to the house to use. That alone is more exercise than many of us have to engage in for daily living. Add to that, chopping and carrying wood for cooking, walking to town to buy the supplies and food you don’t catch or grow and it all adds up.

I often thought of my two years in the Peace Corps as my own time at Walden pond. I have easily read Henry David Thoreau’s Walden ten times through. He wrote at a point in our history in which everything was changing and trains were beginning to invade daily life – that’s how he would think of it. He thought it ironic that men would work all day to earn the money to take a
train to get somewhere when, in the same amount of time, they could have walked to the place
the train carried them.

My grandfather was born only 50 years after Walden was published. He was born in 1904 –
there will still horse and carriages, and I’m sure carrying water and chopping wood was as
common in his childhood as it is today in the developing world. I’ve always thought that is one
reason he was so comfortable in his body.. he grew up in a time and place where we more fully
used our bodies in our daily work. Today, so many of us work behind a computer screen... in
many ways our lives have become disembodied – we can skype our meetings, talk on our cell
phones, send and receive emails, and barely need to move our bodies in the process. I’m not
criticizing the technology – I think it’s amazing and important, and I think we have to be careful
not to let it run our lives. Our mindbodies need to be fully engaged on the physical level, as well
as mental, emotional, and spiritual levels. Our brains are a part of our bodies, and they work
best fully integrated and together.

We need our bodies to be able to handle the journey of life when things become stressful and
the stakes are high. Everything we do to take care of our bodies, to condition them to work best
as they are able, only contributes to our overall health and the health of the planet.

I call mine an embodied faith – embodied because we are beings in bodies, and I believe in the
integrated whole of our lives, lived through our bodies and in the world and on the single planet
we share. We embody our beliefs with our actions, as Jessica talked about this morning. and
what matters most is what it is we do with our very short lives.

Spiritual practices are those disciplines we learn to help us be at our best. I distinguish between
prayer and meditation in terms of production or reception. Prayer as talking, and meditation as
primarily listening. Physical conditioning, I’ve decided, is like making your body talk. Helping it
move and making it fit. Listening to your body is important – it’s critical – but the spiritual
practice of physical conditioning is like a body prayer. We are talking with our bodies and
asking them to hold out a while longer and breathe a bit deeper to deliver oxygen and nutrients
to our tissues and help the cardiovascular system work more efficiently. We are talking with our
bodies by being active which boosts “good” cholesterol and decreases unhealthy triglycerides –
it helps the blood flow. This body prayer stimulates various brain chemicals and makes us
happier and more relaxed. This body prayer helps us fall asleep faster and deepen our sleep,
and finally it can have a positive effect on your sex life – and what can be more spiritual than
that? Love embodied. Spiritual practices help us unite feelings and thought, our intentions
with actions, ourselves with Godself, or our purpose with a greater purpose. They help us stay
alive and awake and powerful – so we can handle whatever life throws at us.

Our bodies and beings are wonderful. They’re wide and narrow, they’re tall and short. They
move quickly and slowly with and without help. They heal and they suffer – we suffer and we
heal and we live in our bodies.
May ours be an embodying faith – one we use to heal the world and do no harm. May we embody our faith in ourselves, our lives, in our greatest purpose or God. Wrote Don Miguel Ruiz “Your body is the manifestation of God, and if you honor your body, everything will change for you.”