

The Spirit and the Flesh
Rev. David Takahashi Morris
Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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Our religious ancestors had some odd ideas. Joseph Priestley, back in the latter half of the 1700's, was a scientist, political theorist, and a Unitarian clergyman. He also happened to believe that the soul could not have an existence separate from the body. He believed that our souls did not leave us in death, but slept. That's the belief that led English columnist David Davis to pen this mocking epitaph:

Here lies at rest, in oaken chest,
Together packed most neatly,
The bones and brains, flesh, blood, and veins,
And soul of Dr. Priestley.

That isn't on Priestley's real headstone in Pennsylvania—but it's not too far from what he believed about the unity of body, mind, and spirit.

The connection between body and mind, as science and philosophy tends to frame it, or body and spirit, as religion describes it, has always puzzled and tantalized us. How is it that our bodies, made of physical materials, have life? Where does our sense of identity come from? What is our true nature?

Both religious and secular accounts of human nature in Western culture have traditionally accepted a dualistic understanding of mind and body, of spirit and flesh.

Much of Western religious thought on this subject, of course, springs from the Hebrew Torah. In the older of the two stories in the book of Genesis, God molds Adam from the red clay of Eden's ground, and blows the breath of life into his nostrils—the Hebrew word, *ruach*, which depending on the context means breath, wind, or spirit. From the first, then, we are made of two aspects: body and spirit, the one from the earth, the other from God.

Religious accounts over the centuries in the Western tradition have tended to give primary value to the spirit side of this equation. The body has been viewed with suspicion as the source of tendencies which would pollute the divine breath which gives us life.

Outside the religious tradition, Western thought has still found a dichotomy between the part of us which has material, physical reality and the part which is non-material. In the scientific account, humankind evolved gradually over millennia from earlier animal and hominid ancestors, and the capacity for thought evolved along with us. But science has had less success with the origin of that thinking part. Biology can study the state of the brain when thinking and emotional response occurs; psychology can study the contents and patterns of our thoughts and feelings, but neuropsychology has yet to convincingly integrate the two in a single theory explaining how our thoughts originate.

Our tradition, though, has long rejected the dualist position. Our religious ancestors long ago decided they did not believe in a spirit world and a material world, separated from one another.

But if dualism is wrong, then what is true? How is it that we can be conscious of things our senses aren't perceiving? What is our identity, our self made of?

Some scientists and philosophers find a ready answer for these questions in materialism. This school of thought says matter is the only reality, and everything can be explained in terms of matter. At its most extreme, this view is characterized by the work of scientific writers like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, who say that our sense of identity, our emotions, our aspirations and values can be broken down to complex electrochemical interactions.

Another position with deep roots in Western intellectual history, going back at least to Plato, is that only the spiritual is real; the material world of our perceptions is an illusion. In this view, we humans are spiritual beings, with an enduring identity that is independent of our bodies, unaffected by any details of our physical or social life. In contemporary times, this is the worldview that predominates in the "New Age" movements.

It doesn't seem to me that either the materialist or the spiritualist position actually resolves the problem of achieving unity of mind, body, and spirit. If my goal is to move away from dualistic thinking, I need to integrate the different parts, not choose one over the other. If ingenuity and daring, heroism and sacrifice, are nothing more than the chance combinations of chromosomes, then we can bid "farewell to the quaint notion that you have a hand in your own destiny, or a purpose for being here that it's your job to discover and fulfill." On the other hand, if we deny or devalue the experiences of our own bodies and the evidence of our own senses because only the spiritual is real, then why should we relate to this world at all?

As Gary Kowalski points out in his book *Science and the Search for God*, the most recent work in the sciences—and in theology—is suggesting that "matter" is far from the unthinking, worthless muck which too much of our religious and intellectual history has valued so little.

"If you picture a single atom magnified to the size of Yankee Stadium," Kowalski says, "the electrons would then hover like a cloud of gnats above and around the ballpark, higher and further away than any home run Hank Aaron ever hit, while the nucleus, smaller than a baseball, sits all by its lonesome in the center field; everything in between is vacant, empty space.

"Empty space" is not what it used to be, however. Physicists now tell us that what we formerly called a vacuum is actually sizzling with all kinds of energy fields, and that those fields are continually giving birth to a variety of "virtual particles" that pop into existence and then disappear again in something less than a trillionth of a nanosecond. Inside the proton, we are informed, swarms of these virtual particles—quarks, gluons, pairs of electrons and anti-electrons—and other ultra-miniature entities—come and go each moment, a little like an electoral storm inside an unimaginably small bottle. "

In other words, what we call inanimate matter, the "flesh" of which our bodies are made, is alive with activity. And out of the vast universe of living matter in which we live and move and have our being, we arise, coherent and self-directed; perceiving, experiencing, describing and feeling;

made up of these uncountable tiny particles but also functioning all together as a single unified whole. Our consciousness, our mind, our spirit—our soul, if you will—is part of an incredibly complex living system.

Maybe old Priestley was right after all.

There's a story about a wave running across the surface of the ocean. As the shore approaches, the wave grows frightened, thinking that soon it will break up and die. It tries to hold back, disrupting the progress and direction of the other waves. Finally one great swell says: You don't understand who you are. You're not a wave, you're the ocean. This calms the little wave, which falls on the shore, allowing itself to crash and re-form into something new.

A wave is not a single volume of water travelling across the surface of the sea to hit the shore and dissolve; it is reconstituted in every moment by the water in front of it, within it, below it, and behind it. Yet this constantly-changing reality of the single wave is not an illusion. Can you imagine, if a real wave had feelings and perceptions, what an extraordinary life that would be? To undulate swiftly across the surface of the sea, shaped by winds and tides, inhabited moment to moment by uncountable living beings which rise up in greeting, glide along for a moment, and settle back behind. . . Then the push of the floor rising up underneath the wave rising up with a cap of foam and flinging itself with utter abandon at sand, coral, or rock. . . What a marvelous journey.

Of course, a real wave can't feel those things, or perceive its existence and surroundings, or consciously remember its identity moment to moment. That's what *we* do.

Perhaps each of us is a wave, a shape gathered for a brief time out of all the teeming sea of energy and matter and force that existence is made of, travelling through the stories of our lives, constantly reshaped by our encounters and surroundings, until we end against shoal or shore, separate into our constituent parts and re-form again into new shapes, new identities, new forms. Unlike the wave in the ocean, though—so far as we know right now—one of our constituent parts is consciousness. We are aware of ourselves and of our surroundings; we narrate the story of our ongoing journey, and we respond to them with emotions that connect our physical being with our awareness and perceptions.

The Nobel Prize-winning physiologist George Wald wrote: "It would be a poor thing to be an atom in a universe without physicists. And physicists are made of atoms. A physicist is the atom's way of knowing about atoms."

What if we, we human beings, are the Universe's way of knowing, experiencing, and remembering itself? What if every perception, every feeling, every experience of ours is a gift to the Universe, a unique, unrepeatable opportunity for matter and energy to knowingly experience itself?

If spirituality is the quest for a unity of our physical, mental, emotional selves, experienced in connection with something larger than our particular body and life, then every moment of our existence is a spiritual experience—if we're paying attention to it.

So is this all just another way of getting caught up in speculation about something that doesn't have any impact on our real life in the world, like the legendary medieval debates about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?

Well, let's see. Suppose I am confronted with injustice, a discriminatory law, a system of oppression. How should I engage? Should I follow the impulse of rage? Should I assure myself that I am not participating in the wrongdoing, and be grateful for the purity of my soul? Should I align myself in solidarity with the suffering, letting their experience become real in my life, and dedicating myself changing something that is part of the world I share?

Suppose I am with a family member who is being unbelievably stubborn about something enormously important like whether to take out the recycling right now. This never happens. . . How should I respond? Should I surrender to the urge to prove I'm bigger, stronger, and more important, so my desires matter more? Should I deny I'm frustrated, focus on the good in the other person, honor their need for autonomy and take it out myself, sure of my reward in the next world? Should I take the time to acknowledge both our feelings and needs, and take the risk of finding a solution that might not be them doing what I want right now after all?

Suppose I'm recovering from a devastating blow, like the loss of a job, or the discovery of an illness, or the death of a beloved one. A friend takes me for a walk over here in the Shell Ridge open space. Do I use the time and space to rehearse again and again the terrible thing that's happened to me, oblivious to everything else? Do I do battle against my feelings of hurt, loss, or bitterness, forcing myself to "rise above it" and focusing on the higher reality that pain only matters if we give it our attention? Do I allow my pain to be real to myself and to my friend, do I hold it alongside the beauty of the grasses and trees, the sudden appearance of the goofy-looking turkey flock, the gift of my friend's time and caring, knowing that it is all real, the loss and hurt *and* the beauty and compassion, all part of my living in this world?

No, I don't think I'm just trying to tease out whether the cherubim are wearing tap shoes or toe slippers. I think it matters very much how we understand our relatedness to the rest of this material and spiritual sentient, living, breathing universe of experience we find ourselves living in.

I don't think it matters so much precisely how we understand or describe the mechanism by which body, mind, and spirit are intertwined, but I do think it's important that we learn to value all the different aspects of ourselves. I do think it important that we experience ourselves and the Universe in a direct, physical, emotional, intellectual, imaginative way, that we reach out in our relatedness to all that is, and that we work to shape the course of events to bring healing and wholeness, to create greater compassion, more creative connections.

We belong in this world. We are connected to it; we share its life, and our living in it is a gift. We are, in David Whyte's words,

"The visible/and the invisible/working together/in common cause,/to produce/the miraculous."

Let us learn to know our world and ourselves as one. Let us celebrate our life in all its richness, its sorrow, its beauty, its need for healing, and its joy. To be fully alive and awake is the holiest work we can do.