

Embodied Living**A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on June 6, 2021**

I detest tofu. I do. Does anyone here like tofu? It looks weird, it smells weird, it has a bad reputation, it's like eating a sponge, the texture is strange, it doesn't taste like chicken no matter what people say, and it has no flavor. Even disguised in recipes, I can still taste that strange sweet/chalky taste. For some people, tofu is the kool-aid that inducts them into a cult they want no part of. Who eats tofu – hippies, health nuts, and tree-hugging veg-heads? To be clear, hippies, health nuts, and veg-heads are always welcome at All Faiths.

Despite my disgust, and to make a point about embodied living, I am willing to befriend tofu for the next 20 minutes. Besides, if I go on I might be challenged by the producers of tofu not unlike Oprah Winfrey when the beef industry went after her. Tofu has been eaten around the world for over two thousand years. Why? I have no idea. Here is the amazing thing about tofu, I hear that the flavorless brick can be made to taste like anything. If you cook it right it can be dense and firm and it can take on any flavor you want. I'll take their word for it. I'm not interested in that test kitchen. So, you might be saying to yourself, "get to the point: Alright, alright. Like tofu, we humans can pick up or absorb any flavor we like. That is we can be an expression to an idea or feeling or that which we value-a lot like tofu. Embodiment is not a fixed state but a process requiring deep listening, honesty, humility, and a willingness to leave the known for the unknown-to leave the realm of familiar ideas and ways of thinking for the wide open territory of truth. Can our lives be larger than we were led to believe possible? Think about it, you are tofu. You are a sponge for embodied living.

I often compare embodiment to the words of Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian James Luther Adams claiming our theology. He says there is no need for us to go from person to person to tell and explain our personal theology. They only need to look at our voluntary associations to discern what we believe. That is, they only need to look at the life we are living, engaging, and practicing to tell what we believe. A dear member and friend of the last congregation I served, Judy Bonner, always rolled in our parking lot, car covered with bumper stickers encouraging peace, equality, justice, and compassion. We only needed to look at Judy's car to understand what she believes, the life she embodies. If you knew Judy well you would know that she embodied the qualities that her bumper stickers champion. She dedicates her living to peace and justice. Our lives are a journey toward embodiment; a quest that continues. Poet Mary Oliver writes of this journey saying, "Things take the time they take. Don't worry. How many roads did St. Augustine follow before he became St Augustine?" We will embody our personal truth only if we risk the journey, are honest and leave behind our ways that keep us bound and unable to move toward the truth.

Let us unpack the notion of embodiment as a journey a bit more. Embodiment, in our religious lives is not a list of qualities we like best about ourselves. It is a practice to acquire these attributes through our living. The road of embodiment is one with unexpected or unintended results. I recently read a story by Tracy Cochran titled *A Shared World*. Cochran describes her

decision to travel to India as a place unknown to her other than what she was told or had read. She writes. “I came to India braced for darkness. But in all my planning, I hadn’t anticipated the light.” She describes living in the unknown when her tendency was to seek the known. She said yes to this trip because she wanted to live life in a bigger way. What she found were the joys of being in community and the generosity of a people. She expected darkness but received light. Cochran writes. “She realized that we are meant to give ourselves to life and that we can turn away from life or be open to receive it.”

Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism, and a definite tofu eater, tells us in the Tao Te Ching, the fundamental religious and philosophical text for Taoism, “If you want to awaken all of humanity, then awaken all of yourself. If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world, then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself. Truly, the greatest gift you have to give is that of your own self-transformation.” In the blog *Blueprints for Butterflies* we learn that the purpose of embodiment is to exist in the emotional and spiritual space of freedom, separate from the burdens of other’s expectations. Embracing our own journey through life transcends us into creating our own voyage, in our own vehicle, with no hitchhiking needed. “While driving ourselves we learn to take the scenic route through life while growing in emotional and spiritual intelligence. Life presents the opportunity to learn about ourselves in order to grow spiritually, not the other way around.” This is the listening of embodiment. Listening to ourselves. Listening to the still and small voice within whether it be your voice or the voice of something or someone you believe to be greater than yourself. Honesty is staying true, honest, to ones beliefs. Honesty and integrity go hand in hand. Unitarian Universalists may find this easier than most because we are encouraged to be seekers and find our own truth versus managing the dishonesty of dogma.

In his 2013 Commencement address at the University of California, DJ Patil says, "Actively take chances on others, even when it is at a risk to you and seek out others who will take a risk on you. Life always requires some level of risk taking." Risks are necessary to make changes happen and there will always be both personal risk, as well as to others involved. Comfort zones are really the perfect opposite for risks. They are the decisions and ways of doing things that have the least risks, the least unknowns and are easy for us to do. We should never let these comfort zones dominate us. Having a willingness to take on risks means also to have a willingness to step outside our comfort zones. Comfort zones are everything from our daily routine, to our lifestyle, to our work and habits or roles in our lives. All of these things that are repetitive and lasting become comfortable but, the new things in life really make things change over time. Anyone who is too afraid to step outside their comfort zone is also too afraid to take the risks that are often needed on the journey toward embodiment. If we give up comforts and ease to move towards and tackle the next challenge, we surely show great signs of personal and spiritual growth.

My Colleague the Rev. Carol Altman-Morton writes, “The challenge for Unitarian Universalists is not really in convincing us that there is a connection between mind, body, and spirit. The challenge is in getting us to move from thinking about it intellectually—knowing that there is a connection—to really experiencing it, being attentive and attuned. When and where do we experience it? It can be most easy to access when our senses are engaged: in relationships, nature, music, art, poetry. Through our experience we can move from knowing there is a connection, to learning about what that connection really means. We can know ourselves and each other more fully. “ We are called to be the walking embodiment of our liberal faith.

As messengers of Unitarian Universalism we must be the embodiment of our message. We must avoid living in a fixed state in our congregation or our lives. We must listen, deeply to ourselves and to the calling of our principles and tradition. We must be honest with ourselves and acknowledge the realities of our living, we must be willing to leave the known for the unknown and become familiar with the wide open territory of truth. We are seekers not of a single truth but our personal truth. We will only be rewarded by the promise that it is possible to live our lives and our faith beyond anything we could have imagined. There is no need to pack our bags. This journey is not a trip. It's not a vacation. It is a process. A discovery.

The Rev. Jim Eller-Isaacs tells a story of what the journey might be for us as seekers. He recalls going to a Buddhist monastery for a retreat. He had forgotten to take his meditation cushion and so he looked around for one there. He was accustomed to the traditional type that is firm and inflexible. Nothing was available. He looked for one of those buckwheat-filled ones to use instead. No luck with that, either. Finally, he decided to do something radical and try out an inflatable meditation cushion that had been made for general use. Despite his distrust of anything new, he discovered the inflatable meditation cushion to be bliss. Even though a part of him whispered that "no real Zen student would use such a thing," another part of him reminded himself that his Zen teacher—one of the most highly regarded Zen teachers in the U.S.—had been using one for years with no ill effect. Later it occurred to him that the traditional cushion is a metaphor for orthodoxy, rigid tradition, and the presumption that pain is good for us. "Sit and cope with it," it suggests. The buckwheat cushion is better, but after a while, every nugget of buckwheat becomes engrained on your posterior and numbness is the result.

Dealing with religion can be like that, too. The inflatable cushion he observed was a good metaphor for our tradition and journey toward embodiment. It says, "pain is not required—you need not assume a painful position of body, mind, or spirit." Your mind need not become paralyzed or numb. Just sit, be open, and see where your spiritual journey can take you. Let us prepare for the journey, the quest, that never ends.

May it be so.