

**The Web: Body, Mind, and Spirit**  
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The last step in the process of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister is an interview with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Let me just say that it is a big deal, and though my interview was over a decade ago, one moment stays with me yet. After a number of questions, one of the members asked me about the Unitarian Universalist principles and which one I liked best. That was easy. I liked the seventh principle, the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part, not the whole but a part. (If you want to follow this discussion of the principles, you can turn in your hymnal to Hymn #1, and then turn back one page. ) I had always thought of the seven principles as making two groups. The first – the inherent worth and dignity of every person – is manifested by numbers 2 through 6, as we look inward to the different ways in which humanity is called to act out that dignity and worth in themselves and recognize it in others. Then with the seventh principle we look outward to the rest of the universe, where the first six principles are writ large. I had a sense that if humanity is worthy of respect, then the whole interdependent web must be worth of awe. I started to warm up to a theological question about my panentheist view of the divine.

Then another member of the committee looked sharply at me and said, “I never much liked the seventh principle. That web makes me think of spiders. Ick!” This caused me quite a shock. I couldn’t imagine anyone rejecting that glorious view of the whole universe connected by gossamer strands. And spiders aren’t supposed to be icky any more, since we have all learned that they are beneficial creatures, eliminating many pest insects. I stood by my love of the web. It took me several years to realize that she was only testing me to see if she could rattle me, and more time before I realized that I should have drawn *her* out on the subject.

All this came back to me several years ago when a parishioner won a Service Auction “sermon topic of your choice.” Cheryl assigned me to preach on the connection of body, mind and spirit. Somewhere in the first and seventh principles lies the answer to Cheryl’s topic. Now I

know the mind/body problem is a very old topic in philosophy – but I am no philosopher. Psychologists have also grappled with the problem, but I am no psychologist either. Moreover, neither science nor philosophy has come up with a definitive answer to Cheryl’s question. And in any case I didn’t feel that she was looking for arcane arguments or elaborate experiments to define the relationship of mind and body. She was calling for a theological approach. So, a little history.

Historically, Judaism took a very concrete view of the world. What you see is what you get. The ancient Hebrews were concerned about the here and now, about how to live in the world to live in harmony with their God. Creation is real and concrete, and it is good – God said so in Genesis. Body, mind and spirit are one. Since the earliest Christians were all Jews, Christianity began with the same outlook. It wasn’t until Christianity moved throughout the Mediterranean basin and met up with Greek philosophy that it took up Platonic dualism. Plato split the world into two parts, seeing matter, including the body, as low and coarse and corruptible. The soul, on the other hand he saw as immortal, fine, and altogether glorious. The spirit is where reality lies. When this idea got mixed into Christianity, it was the source of a long tradition of hating the body, renouncing sex and generally striving to be “in the world but not of it.”

In the Middle Ages some took this dualism to an extreme. The Cathars, also known as the Albigensians, developed a heresy that imagined that the world of spirit had indeed been created by God, but the world of matter was created by Satan to trap the souls of human beings into an endless cycle of reincarnation, far from the spirit world. It was an attractive idea for people so poor and downtrodden that they didn’t have much to look forward to in this life. If they could just live by the strictures of this austere faith, they could look forward to an eternity in heaven. The Catholic church felt threatened because these heretics saw the church as utterly worldly and corrupt, and also because they denied a central tenet of the Trinitarian Christianity: the idea that Christ was both fully human and fully divine. The Cathars – whose name means “pure” in Greek – believed that Christ was a purely spiritual being, not born of a woman at all, not human. Cathars generally hoped to be baptized only on their death beds, since once they

were baptized, they were expected to renounce all worldly pleasures – they refrained from sex, from owning property, and eating meat or milk or cheese. Although the church hunted down these heretics and indeed wiped them out along with all their writings, you can still find dualistic, other-worldly thinking among some Christians and in the culture at large to this day.

How many science fiction stories have I read over the years that begin with the idea that body and spirit or body and mind are separable? I remember one such story in which all the progressive people had long since left their bodies behind and lived a free and delightful life floating among some kind of psychic energies, unbound by coarse matter or the necessity of earning a living. Once a year they hold a festival in which they re-embody themselves for a day of feasting and dancing, using the most beautiful bodies carefully preserved for this purpose. Meanwhile, back on normal Earth, the conservatives don't like this at all. They see the disembodied folks as totally irresponsible, leaving all the work to those left behind. So they lay a trap, with lovely bodies, booby trapped to prevent a return to the psychic world. The folk who use those bodies are captured, tried, and eventually put to death, a real and permanent death I might add. Well, all that was amusing reading, and at the time I sympathized with the progressives, but ultimately it was not very enlightening to me.

At heart I must reject dualism, whether the harsh Albigensian heresy or the romantic science fiction sort. I cannot imagine any form of being which is not embodied in matter or at least encoded in energy, the real stuff of the real world. As I see it, we do not *have* bodies, we *are* bodies and minds and spirits, all inseparable. I hold a down-to-earth, real, non-supernatural view of the world. I take a skeptical view of ghosts and telepathy and all claims of the paranormal.

And yet . . . there is plenty in the real scientific world which we do not understand. When I was younger, I used to keep a sort of mental bin. When I heard about odd phenomena, things that seemed convincing that had no “normal” explanation, I would just toss them into the bin. As I've gotten older, that bin has gotten larger. Sometimes I think of the normal real world as a sort of safe little playpen, with us inside it, and the old bin is everything all around us. We

know from the most everyday observations, that body and mind and spirit are closely connected, that our bodily well being affects our minds and our frame of mind affects our bodies. Stress can kill us, and a hopeful outlook influences the course of an illness. Psychologist Larry Dossy has claimed that experiments show that people, or plants, or even bacteria that are prayed for do better than those that do not receive prayer. All this is meant to be double blind, to avoid any placebo effect. I've never read the original papers myself, and am not qualified to assess them in any case, but I remain skeptical.

But I do know that the “placebo” effect of prayer is real enough. When my friend and seminary classmate Cary Kauffman, ill with breast cancer, was in her last months, she remained an agnostic, but was always grateful for the care and support of friends and strangers, whether it took the form of prayer, or kind thoughts, or little gifts, or the channeling of energy. It all made her feel better, though she saw none of it as supernatural. I believe that prayer surely affects the one who prays, and thereby has its effects upon the world. Whether there is some form of energy transfer we do not yet understand, some entanglement of quarks or channels of love, I do not know. If there are such things, they are part of the real natural world, a holistic world, that web of which we are a part.

There are two intertwined consequences of rejecting dualism. First, it makes sense to concentrate on making this world a better place. It's all we have and are likely to have. It behooves us to care for the environment, to act for justice, and to live in harmony with nature. Second, I have been forced to abandon any notion of a continuing personal existence beyond death. If we are whole beings, body mind and spirit, I can't see any way for spirit to detach itself from a dead body. I can't imagine any mechanism that would allow that thing in me that says “I am” to mean anything if I am not part of this body in this world. If we continue, it is not as self conscious entities but as the memory and influence we leave behind. I know people have many different ideas, and some are convinced otherwise, and they may be right. I just can't imagine it. I recently read a most intriguing claim from the Institute of Noetic Sciences that in this real physical universe, “consciousness is primary” and everything flows from it. That has all sorts of

implications, and maybe it's true, but I don't know how to evaluate that either. So I am left to concentrate on this world, and let the next, if any, take care of itself.

It seems to me that Unitarian Universalists have always acted as if we held a holistic view of human beings. We have always taken a this-worldly view of things. Even four hundred years ago in Poland, the unitarian Christian followers of Faustus Socinus created a utopian society in which everyone worked at some trade, including the nobles who had donated the land. This socialistic society broke down fairly rapidly, as socialism is wont to do, but they began with a very earthy way of doing things. No one was above manual labor. When they celebrated communion, it was with pure spring water and honey cakes – for the sweetness of life. Their most important industry was a printing press, with which they preserved their ideas in a most concrete form.

We have never been given to missionary activity to save souls. The Unitarian Service Committee was formed during World War II to help with refugee work, feeding people and helping them to escape from the Nazis. Today the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee provides training and grants to help people raise themselves out of poverty, to help them liberate themselves from oppressive situations, to help them cope with disasters. We do not assume that we have the right religious answers for them. If people have adequate resources and care for their bodies, and can live in dignity and autonomy, we believe that they can find their own religious answers. We do not use food as a lure to coerce them into accepting a particular view of the divine or of human nature. If we can help make this world a better place, people have the freedom to develop their own ideas. That is enough.

And yet, for all my rejection of the supernatural, I still find myself longing for the experience of the divine, about which I am not able to be very articulate. I am drawn to what Unitarian Universalist President Bill Sinkford calls “the language of reverence.” Something in the interdependent web, some sense of goodness and beauty and creativity and justice speaks to something deep within me. When I say “God,” this is what I am responding to. Sometimes this seems like an entity to me, sometimes only a vision or hope, sometimes nothing more than a

container word for the sources of goodness. For an exam in seminary, I once had to memorize half a dozen different understandings of the concept of the Trinity, with such wonderful words as *perichoresis* – dancing around, which always made me think of electrons dancing around the nucleus of an atom. I actually had to memorize the exact words, because none of it made enough sense to me to put it in my own words. Nevertheless, I do believe that people ought to look at the divine through whatever lens is right for them, so I wouldn't want to shatter those Trinitarian lenses, but *I* cannot see clearly through them. And thankfully, once the exam was done, I quickly forgot them all. My understanding of the divine is more like what Creation Spirituality theologian Matthew Fox, calls panentheism, wherein God – the “diaphanous and transparent God” is something within and around and through the universe, not apart from it. He writes of panentheism, as meaning

“God is in everything and everything is in God.” This experience of the presence of God in our depth and . . . in all the blessings and the sufferings of life is a mystical understanding of God. It is not theistic because it does not relate to God as subject or object. (p. 91)

In writing of panentheism, Fox cites Meister Eckhart:

God created all things in such a way that they are not outside Godself, as ignorant people falsely imagine. Rather, all creatures flow outward, but nonetheless remain with God.

and Mecthild of Magdeburg:

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw – and knew I saw – all things in God and God in all things.

If the first Unitarian Universalist principle, the inherent worth and dignity, leads me to a holistic view of human beings, the seventh brings me to a holistic view of the entire universe.

One of my colleagues (Margee Allen) spoke eloquently once at a ministers' retreat about her view of the interdependent web. She sees the universe as filled with the shining strands of the web, tiny vessels filled with the love that connects us all.

Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh expresses this idea of connection as "interbeing." Here is what he says in his book *Peace Is Every Step*:

**Interbeing:**

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not there, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb to be. We have a new verb, inter-be

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in the paper. The paper and the sunshine *inter-are*. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger's father and mother are in it, too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here

– time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. We cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up of only “non-paper” elements. And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe it.

P. 95f Thich Nhat Hanh *Peace is Every Step*

So Cheryl, body mind and spirit. It’s all connected. There is nothing else. May we so live as to honor the body and mind and spirit that is every person. May we so live as to nurture the web of connection that nourishes all the universe. May we so live as to be in harmony with the divine. Amen, shalom, and blessed be.