

Human Condition

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar

American society has acculturated us to ideas about how our bodies should look and function. There are norms for everything from weight to brain functioning. Many of us spend a good deal of time trying to meet these norms in defiance of our beautiful diversity, the many ways human bodies grow, change, adapt, and function. Please join me for a sermon that uplifts and celebrates our bodies and humanity as we find it.

Bio:

Reverend Dittmar graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1997. She served one year as Interim Minister at the Gathering at Northern Hills (Cincinnati, OH 1997-1998), and eighteen years as Minister at First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati (1998-2016). In 2016 she began work as Congregational Life Field Staff with the MidAmerica Region.



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Opening Reading #442 “We Bid You Welcome”

Opening Hymn #1008 “When Our Heart is in a Holy Place”

Or

#323 “Break Not the Circle”

Reading “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver

Closing Hymn #203 “All Creatures of the Earth and Sky”

Or

1007 “There’s a River Flowin’ in My Soul”

Sermon Text

Opening Reading #442 “We Bid You Welcome”

Opening Hymn #1008 “When Our Heart is In a Holy Place”

Reading

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

– Mary Oliver

Human Condition

I have one foot larger than the other one. Most of us do. You really aren't imagining it. You go to the shoe store, your left shoe fits but the right one feels small. You wonder if the small one will stretch. You wonder what is wrong with the shoe. It's not the shoes. It's the feet, our feet. They are not the same size. Human bodies are not symmetrical. Human minds are not perfect. We are all in process, being conditioned in our conditions to our condition. We are wholly human in a dazzling continuum of being and mortality.

As a guest minister I once preached a sermon entitled "Dare to Be Average." After the service, one man came up to me and wanted, needed - I would even go as far to say - to argue with me that "average" was not commendable. Where was my spirit of achievement he asked, where was my value for success? Where were my standards? Obviously, my sermon on the impossibility of perfection had fallen short. I went home content.

Our bodies are full of differences, and they continue to grow and change with age, time, and life. If we live long enough there will be many adaptations, medication, and therapy needed for accident, injury, and wear and tear. Our bodies are extraordinary in their divergence and adaptation. The myth is that there is one standard of health, beauty, and "normalcy."

It is the idea of "normal" that I find particularly frustrating. I have a friend who was born with spina bifida, her spinal cord developed so that it was open to the air, instead of closed inside of skin. I am sure her medical diagnosis at the time was full of words such as "did not develop properly or normally," but neither of those words "proper" or "normal" are factually true. Bodies develop in a myriad of ways, there is no "proper." And as for normal, if spina bifida is a condition that happens, and it is, then it is normal.

Due to spina bifida, my friend uses a wheel chair, which is also normal. The problem is with society and the medical profession when it chooses to see this condition as abnormal. What if we lived in a society where we celebrated and designed for all variations?

The human condition includes a vast continuum of everything. It is only limited by our imagination and narration, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. There are a lot of different sized feet out there, unavailable organs, missing hair, extra hair, different shaped bodies, different functioning brains. This is not matter of perfection or failure, because failure and perfection are relative, limited notions, and just small parts of the "all" of the human condition. We are so much broader and diverse than we know, and as the MidAmerica Regional Assembly keynote speaker, C B Beal, who describes themselves as a "white, fat, queer, non-binary religious and social justice educator" likes to say, "Everybody is already in the room."

Beal remind us, we are only limited by our notions of what is normative and our deceptions about our beautiful variety. I hope you will register for our Assembly at <https://www.uua.org/midamerica/ra/2022> to join the conversation and learn more.

Beal's comments remind me of the movie "Sound of Metal," about a heavy metal drummer, played by the actor Riz Ahmed, who goes deaf. The character he plays, Ruben, struggles against his growing deafness with all his might. He fights himself. And in the process, he makes himself sick and miserable. In the movie we journey with Ruben, as his body changes, and he learns new ways of communicating and living in silence, finally celebrating the peace it brings, which is the peace he discovers by

embracing his body as it is, instead of forcing it into the shape of the body it was that moved more easily in society.

What if there is not a normal body, not a perfect body, not a “proper” body. What if there are bodies in extraordinary and miraculous variation and our work in society is to find ways to embrace, assist, and include them all?

Some of you might have heard of the concept of “universal design,” designing products, buildings, and experiences so that they are accessible to everyone. Universal design relies on the theory that everybody is already in the room, or on the street, or in a home, so how do we design for everyone? There are curb cuts on streets to make it easier for strollers, walkers, and wheelchairs. There is live transcription in zoom rooms so that text can appear on the screen as a person speaks. In many ways we are in the infancy of universal design and still learning. I know I am. It has taken me years to remember to “enable live transcription” when I host a zoom room. It is new for me to ask questions and be curious about universal design. Questions like “How can I design a class to include the most people” or “What about this experience excludes somebody and what could be done to change this?” These questions are more like conversations with continual learning. I am not perfect in this work because I am human. I just try to learn because I care about all my neighbors and I will be learning about and trying to practice universal design until the day I die. It is a journey, not a destination, and I am grateful to be on this journey.

I recently spoke to a disability activist who wistfully wondered when people would just accept their human bodies as they are. This got me wondering about how much I accept and celebrate my body just as it is. Truth be told, I am only doing a moderate job at this, which is very human of me. I am still wrestling with my newly grey hair, wrinkles and changing body, just as Ruben wrestled in “Sound of Metal,” though, since these changes do not involve my livelihood, I am having an easier time than him.

I do though see myself struggling to celebrate the changes and where I find myself now. Sometimes I think of myself as old, and not in a celebratory way (which I could choose to do). It is almost like in thinking about “old” as negative, I am creating and participating in a limited narrative and falling into that old habit of conceiving problems about something very normal and natural. Instead of complaining about my wrinkles, or trying to hide them, what if I celebrated my journey of life. I am who I am. I am 55 years old. There are many sunrises and sunsets, many adventures, and stories in these lines.

For me as a white woman with privilege I risk invisibility in a youth focused society (but let’s be honest, the youth don’t even want all the attention they get). And for other people, with a variety of abilities and identities (say, a black, elderly woman in a wheel chair) the gauntlet of perception includes invisibility, ignorance, multiple micro-aggressions and discriminations. What if we could break away from “right body, wrong body,” perfect anything, and just be? Just be in love, appreciation, and blessed adaptation.

The poet Mary Oliver writes

You do not have to be good

You do not have to walk on your knees

For a hundred miles through the desert repenting

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

I wish so much in this world that we could appreciate one another beyond just form and diagnoses, which can never fully describe the complexity, the moving beauty of every human story, and life. No one here is just the sum of their diagnoses or form. We are that and so much more.

I recently read a true story by Clinical Psychologist, Annie Rogers, entitled *A Shining Affliction: A Story of Harm and Healing in Psychotherapy*. Annie begins her story with a description of her doctoral clinical internship at a site for emotionally disturbed children. She works with several children but is immediately drawn to five-year-old Ben. As she describes several play therapy sessions with Ben, we discover that he was a severely abused child, left alone in a windowless room for the first 18 months of his life. He now lives with a loving adoptive family but bears the scars of his early years.

Ben is never a diagnosis to Annie, so he is never a diagnosis for the reader. Annie is driven to uncover what is inside this bright, creative, hurt boy, what his story means to him, and to find a way to help him bridge into a good and loving world and family that still waits for him. For the first time in his young life, Ben finally connects to someone, Annie Rogers. Their play therapy is moving and magical. As the reader, we think the story is going to be just about Ben, until Annie has a severe breakdown and is hospitalized. Her fall is intense, as are the repressed memories she recovers that have rendered her unable to speak. At one point as Annie begins to move forward with a good therapist, she asks the therapist, "Do you think I will ever be cured?" After laughing quite some time he replies, "Annie, only ham gets cured."

There is no cure. There is no cure, only living, loving, getting help with people who support us, and celebrating the human condition.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, you have a place in the family of things, just as you are, normal, varied, and beautiful in your own way. Celebrate yourself and your loved ones in your infinite mystery and beauty. May it always be so.

Closing Hymn #203 “All Creatures of the Earth and Sky”

Closing words

Go out into the world in peace

Have courage

Hold on to what is good

Return to no person evil for evil

Strengthen the fainthearted

Support the weak

Honor all persons