Radical self-love summons us to be our most expansive selves, knowing that the more unflinchingly powerful we allow ourselves to be, the more unflinchingly powerful others feel capable of being. Our unapologetic embrace of our bodies gives others permission to unapologetically embrace theirs.


By Phoebe Godfrey

This semester I have been teaching a class called Sustainable Societies, in which I invite the students to explore ways to be more sustainable, just, and thriving society, and therefore what makes people collectively and individually happy. For this class, as with all my classes, students keep reflective journals, but in this instance those journals are focused on the concept of embodiment.

Embodiment is one of those concepts that defines the entirety of life, as life necessitates a material manifestation. A body, even as a tiny microbes or giant sequoias, is that which is raised in Western culture, the intellectual and experiential meaning of embodiment often escapes us. In fact, our culture is overly disembodied culture, meaning that we have been infected with the dualist philosophy of the Greeks, which bled into Christianity—saying that matter (nature, body) is evil and spirit (God, soul, mind, civilization, nurture) is good—and that later gained secular popularity with the work of the philosopher René Descartes.

Out of these divisions has emerged a hierarchi-cal ideology, which ranks all aspects of society in terms of how close they are to Nature, with Nature seen as the unmindful and uncivilized. Civilization, associated with all that is good and that constitutes progress and superiority, manifests disembodiment through the othering of nature and colonization of nature, as well as the body, particularly those bodies deemed to be “uncivilized.” This is evident in the structures and practices of sexism, racism, and classism, as well as the fear and othering of LGBTQ individuals. Certain groups are conceptualized as being closer to Nature, defined by their bodies, their hair, their emotions, and their inability to be “tamed,” or civilized. Of course, there are exceptions to this narrative, as in the term “unnatural,” which is used strategically, particularly in the case of LGBTQ identities, to demonize and pit certain bodies against an imaginary, hyper-purified notion of what is “natural.” However, the dominant narrative of maiming Nature is endemic in our culture and can be understood as being linked directly to what is now a climate and ecological crisis.

The cultural background that shapes our reality and experiences is why we find it challenging to inhabit our bodies, to be present to our own physical experiences, and to do so without fear of ideological judgment or critique. And yet it is my understanding that until we can do this, not only will we be unable to create environmental and social justice, but we will also be unable to achieve what author and activist Sonya Renee Taylor calls “radical self-love.” In fact, one could argue that these processes must be co-created, since radical self-love and environmental social justice are inseparable.

In her groundbreaking book The Body Is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love (2018), Taylor writes, “Living in a female body, a Black body, an aging body, a fat body, a body with mental illness is to awaken daily to a plane of existence that expects a certain set of apologies to already live on our tongues. There is a level of ‘not enough’ or ‘too much’ woven into these strands of difference.” These communities whose bodies inhabit, interact with, have been marked by, and have felt upon this toxic hierarchical ideology are branded as being “not enough” or “too much” and are called to ask for extraneous “forgiveness” from those whose bodies are branded but in the opposite way, as being superior, civilized, clean, male, white, pure, normal, appropriately proportioned, etc.

Taylor identifies her own body as fat, Black, female, queer, non-normative. And yet, against the social odds, she celebrates her body and herself, having put in the work of practicing what she preaches. She endorses radical self-love inviting us to see the embodiment through which social and physical liberation can be achieved. As she states, “Radical self-love demands that we become the others in the Fullness of embodiment and intersections and that we work to create space for those intersections.” In so doing, we give ourselves the right to be as we are, which gives others the right to be as they are in all their manifestations.

Taylor argues that the more we make conscious practice to “unapologetically embrace our bodies” (which can be painful and difficult), the more the social signifiers that have been placed upon us are transformed into tattoos of love. As a result, we give others permission to unapologetically embrace theirs and collectively become the embodiment of spirit and love, no longer separated by the unfounded and damaging concept of “difference.” As I tell my students, only a disembodied culture would actively, knowingly, and willingly destroy its external body, the Earth, which holds and creates our individual bodies, all living matter. So, if you want to help create social-environmental justice, begin with your body, with radical self-love, for such a beginning is never an ending, it is always another beginning. Don’t believe me? Read and listen to Sonya Renee Taylor, or ask any of my students, or, better yet, try it for yourself, for all of us are embodied beings. And while you are doing so, heed Taylor’s timely and prophetic words about “going back to normal” (see image).

Warning: Mud!

By Angela Hawkins Fichter

Everyone knows what mud is. When you are a child, you love to play in it. You make mud pies with it. You get it all over yourself. And then when you grow into children of your own, you are reintroduced to it by their playing with it and in it. But neither your childhood nor your kids’ childhood prepares you for what I am about to disclose.

We in New England know what corduroy roads are. In spring, up in the wilds of Maine, there are corduroy roads. These are dirt roads that turn so muddy that vehicles don’t drive over them unless they are converted to corduroy roads. That means logs are placed in the mud in a pattern that is perpendicular to the direction of the road. You can drive over a corduroy road, but you can get stuck in a muddy road or driveway in spring.

Well, a couple weeks ago I discovered a kind of mud. A kind that makes you fall, not get stuck—fall right down on the ground the second you step on it.

First week of March, I took a walk in the backyard around my flower garden. The lawn was frozen solid. I was just looking to see how things were, whether any bulbs had come up. In the second week of March, I went out to walk around my garden again. I was looking to see where I could plant the perennial flowers I had ordered from catalogs. Ever heard of flower lust? If you get catalogs in February with color photos of plants in full bloom and you think, “Oh, I want that; it is so pretty,” that is flower lust. You get it when you look at those gorgeous photos and then out the window at your own garden, which is brown, dead, and has snow patches.

When I set out on my second inspection, I stepped carefully around the perimeter of the garden. It felt as frozen as it was before. But only I walked a few steps before I slipped, and thud! I was smack on the ground.

I immediately thought of my orthopedic surgeon. He gave me a reverse shoulder replacement three years ago. Five years before that, he operated on that same shoulder and my elbow after I fell down a flight of stairs in a new apartment in Connecticut. After he finished the shoulder replacement three years ago, he looked me in the eye and said, “For the rest of your life, never, ever fall again.” This was like a commandment.

I thought of him and his commandment as I lay on the cold ground. The top quarter-inch was mud, but the ice on the ground was frozen. The yard had not seemed muddy to me when I walked on it the week before. But this in a new valley, only five years old. As I lay on the ground, inspecting it, I saw wet mud in between blades of grass.

Before my husband and I moved to Hampton a new, smaller house with safety features for the disabled, we had lived for thirty-two years in Scotland in a house built in 1872. During those years, my husband dug garden beds for flowers and vegetables. He dug holes, putting the soil on a sheet next to the bed, loosening the subsoil with a spade fork,0

I was thinking about the soil on the compost pile. That grass had roots that were several inches deep. Not so with a new house, where the grass, though it looks nice, is brand new, with little root structure yet. After my initial shock at falling in the yard, I gave thanks to God that I had fallen on my side, not my right, where the shoulder and elbow surgery had been done. First I hit the ground was my left knee, then my backside, which has cushioning. No cushioning on the knee, so I had scraped knee under my jeans. I came inside, washed up, laundered the muddy jeans and jacket, and prayed I had not injured my knee beyond the scrape. So far, so good, I’m glad to report.

My advice to you is to get on your back and move on. You have the most important thing, your family, and your community, and your work, and everything else, to be done.

4/12/2021
https://neighbors.pageflip.site/editions/NP85704/pages/10/print

Social-Environmental Justice Begins with ‘Radical Self-Love’

Ragged Hill Woods Offering Outdoor Activity Sessions at W-T 4-H Camp this Spring

Get your overly zoomed children out of the house into the spring breeze to participate in some fun and educational environmental science programs outdoors at the camp, 326 Tall Pond Rd in Pondfield.

April 6 (PK & K) & April 7 (Gr. 1 – 6) & April 8 (Gr. 7 – 8) Water Cycles (learn about how the water cycle works)

April 13 (PK & K) & April 14 (Gr. 1 – 6) & April 15 (Gr. 7 – 8) Salamanders (hunt for and learn about salamanders)

Sessions last one hour, (max 10 per time slot) $12 per child (all 4 sessions $40), held outside, masking and distancing required. Must pre-pay, (all payments are non-refundable). Pre-K and K sessions offered of 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM. Grades 1 – 6 sessions are offered at 10 AM, 1:00 PM and 4:30 PM. Grades 7 – 8 will be offered at 4:30 PM.

To register and get further information about time slots available, please call 860-974-1122 or e-mail raggedhillwoods@gmail.com.