



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Not Her Problem

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I appreciate that Afton was willing to take on *All I Want* by Joni Mitchell. It's one of my favorite romantic songs, and it brings back memories of love from my young adult years. It came on my iTunes randomly, as I was driving home from seeing Neil Young play an all-acoustic set at the Adobe Theater this past Tuesday night. Neil Young is the Canadian Bob Dylan who I much prefer over the American one. I adore Neil Young thanks to two different boyfriends I had when I lived in Eugene, OR in the late 90's. I had a lot of boyfriends before I fell in love with my Canadian husband. As my father said in his toast at my wedding, "Hannah sure did sow her wild oats." It really upset my mother-in-law. But I was happy he said that because he was honoring me – I'm glad I can say I sowed my wild oats before I got married. I'm proud of that.

Because – sex is important. Sex with a real person is important, and is one of the great gifts of having a body. Sex is a sacred expression of our reverence and gratitude for our lives, for our partners, for our bodies. Sexuality used to be honored as such, in human religious expression and ritual, especially women's sexuality – women's bodies were honored much like the phallic symbolism that came to pervade our culture once patriarchal religion took over several thousand years ago.

There's a fun book I'm reading, that serves as inspiration for the writing project I started on my Sabbatical a while back. It's called *Maps to Ecstasy: The Healing Power of Movement* by Gabrielle Roth, who calls herself an urban shaman. Her book is about how the path to wholeness must begin in the body.

"Only when you truly inhabit your body," she says, "can you begin the healing journey. So many of us are not in our bodies, really at home and vibrantly present there. Nor are we in touch with the basic rhythms that constitute our bodily life. We live outside ourselves – in our heads, our memories, our longings – absentee landlords of our own estate."

Roth recounts a story of running into a Rabbi at a mall. She writes, "We got to talking and I asked, 'do Jews hate their bodies as much as Catholics?' He started to laugh in mock shock, but then gave me a more quizzical look. I'd hit on something close to him. He told me he'd just buried his father, who was also a Rabbi. He'd asked his father on his deathbed, 'What was the most important thing in your life, the Torah?' And the old man had answered, 'My body.' 'I was stunned,' his son now told me. He stared past me in awkward silence and finally said, 'I always thought my body was just a vehicle for my mind; feed it, clothe it, send it to Harvard.'"

Does this strike a chord with you? In what ways are you not present in your body, or maybe even at war with it?

I don't mean to pick on Jews or Catholics. The separation of the sacred and the body is far from absolute in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Growing up, I attended a much beloved YMCA overnight camp in Michigan called Camp Echo. It was the beginning of my spiritual

consciousness when I learned about the sacred triangle of the YMCA – one side each represents mind, body, and spirit. The balance of these three I still recognize as key to maintaining health and happiness. For “spirit”, a vague term to some, one could substitute our emotional life.

In the film *Her* we see what happens when it becomes socially acceptable to outsource two sides of that sacred triangle to computers – our emotional life and our bodily life.

I included the Susan Schneider reading earlier in the service to provide some nuance today. This young philosopher points out some possible benefits of high-functioning artificial intelligence (AI), and she describes the advancements that may become a reality, maybe even in many of our lifetimes.

*Her* is one of those seminal films that portend the future, and can serve as a warning about the direction we're headed – as long as we examine that warning. First, full disclosure: I don't want to sound like a cranky Luddite up here, but in a lot of ways, *Her* scared the bejeezus out of me.

I'm a mom, and my kids are only 2 and 4. Our biggest problem now is the inordinate amount of time we must allot to getting dressed in the morning. Did you know it takes half an hour to dress a two year old girl? But what about when my kids are 25 and 27? Will my biggest challenge as a mother then be if my child wants to marry a computer instead of a human being?

It smacks of white people being worried decades ago if their child would marry a person of color, or the same kind of concern some parents still have that their kids might be gay. The film *Her* suggests that AIs will gain the cultural status of a human being. When Theodore Twombly is invited by his co-worker to double-date for a picnic, he has to explain that his girlfriend is an AI, and his co-worker doesn't bat an eye.

It made me think that if AIs could gain human cultural status, they could probably gain legal rights, too. Extending rights to computers reminds me of extending rights to corporations. Our country recognized corporate personhood as part of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment long before it extended equal protection under the law to African Americans. Many say corporations still enjoy more rights and privileges than people do. In both cases of extending personhood rights to corporations and possibly computers, we are missing something – an actual *body*.

There were not many people of color in the film, *Her*. I recall mostly white people and some Asians, suggesting that in the professional class of a technology-based economy, we don't get beyond discrimination. I appreciated that about this film, in that it's saying a lot about our present state of affairs. Not that this is news, but discrimination remains a fact of American society. There's a lot of glass ceiling action still occurring when it comes to perceived or true features about our bodies, whether it has to do with our gender, height, age, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. Because this film was so lacking in racial and ethnic diversity, I'd like to recount a story that occurred last Sunday, at our 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Building Bridges Interfaith Supper.

Neighborhood Church has made a special effort in recent years to reach out to our local Muslim friends, who are beleaguered by the actions of extremists having nothing to do with them. We've built real friendships. On Sunday I was happy to see our friend Riaz Khan, a Pakistani American, who I hadn't seen since a meal celebrating a Muslim holy day at another Muslim friend's house. That was two years ago, and I remember Riaz holding my baby girl the entire time, because, as a father of four, he loved holding babies and he missed it. I asked Riaz last Sunday, you know, have things improved for American Muslims since we began this work almost four years ago? Do you feel more accepted?

Riaz was quick to answer, and it surprised me that he compared the discrimination he feels with that of African Americans. "Obviously, we have a very different history and story in America," he said, "but when it comes to attaining high-profile job positions, we are often not considered." "You feel invisible," I said. "Yes," he said with emphasis, "We still feel invisible."

In the film *Her*, we witness a lifestyle devoid of discussing matters like this, current affairs, politics, civic life. Nobody talked about anything much beyond themselves. The lives of the professional class were myopic, centered on their personal satisfactions and consuming habits. They buy specialized services, such as the service of having a professional letter-writer write letters to your dearest loved ones, which is what Theodore Twombly does for a living. At first I totally didn't get that. Why would you want to receive a letter like that? For example, a letter marking your 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, written by someone other than your spouse?

But then someone explained to me, well, it's not that much of a leap from the greeting cards we buy at CVS or Walgreens. Someone else writes those, too, and we often just sign our names. In *Her*, the industry becomes specialized, customized. Such are the nature of jobs that are going to be available in our near future economy – those services that serve the over-worked professional elite, who don't have time to write their own emotional expressions to their loved ones, and outsource it.

That's the economic picture economist Tyler Cowen draws in his 2013 book, *Average is Over*. The high earners will be those who know how to work with intelligent machines, with computers. And, there will be job expansion in personal services, because the more money high earners pull in, the more people will compete to serve them.

He writes, "It sounds a little silly, but making high earners feel better in just about every part of their lives will be a major source of job growth in the future. At some point it is hard to sell more physical stuff to high earners, yet there is usually just a bit more room to make them feel better. Better about the world. Better about themselves. Better about what they have achieved."

As a preacher, I guess I'm in the business of making people feel better about the world. I'm not doing a very good job of that right now, am I? Today's sermon is more about afflicting the comfortable. Let me work a bit on comforting the afflicted.

We're all afflicted, because we're all human beings, human beings who need to feel needed. And increasingly, we live in an economy that tells us we're not needed. Last Sunday, we heard from our teens about the unbelievable stress they're under to get into the right college, so they can achieve marketable skills and BE NEEDED in our competitive economy. A tech expert said to me recently, "the only thing we haven't outsourced to computers yet is the creative process – and they're working on that."

Could this be why there's a heroin epidemic raging amongst our young people? In places like Kentucky, Florida, Indiana, Delaware, and especially Vermont? The latest issue of Rolling Stone magazine has great reporting about this. The commander of the Vermont Drug Task Force, Matthew Birmingham talks in the article about how, "for all the natural splendor, growing up in Vermont can be difficult for some. 'Especially when you're young,' he says, 'there can be a feeling of being removed from the world.' Combined," the article goes on to say, "with a socioeconomic landscape that increasingly provides opportunity only to those born with it, the underlying complexity of the matter begins to take shape. 'Kids today don't feel part of anything,' says Jessi Farnsworth, who works at Howard Center, an organization that runs [addiction] treatment clinics in Vermont. 'People need to feel appreciated, that their contribution is important. When people feel isolated, it's easy to want an escape from reality.'"

Isolation and loneliness is a huge problem in our society. I want to read a bit from a great sermon my colleague in Washington DC, The Rev. Rob Hardies wrote, called "From Loneliness to Solitude. He says, "Loneliness is a horrible thing. And it is far more pervasive than we can imagine, partly because when we are lonely we tend to think we're the only ones. But loneliness is not confined to those who live alone. It plagues married and partnered people, families with and without children, people with lots of friends, young people, the elderly, the middle-aged – loneliness runs the gamut. Indeed, therapists confirm that it is the most frequently cited reason that people seek professional counseling."

There are a lot of reasons for our loneliness, but let's focus on solutions. One of the very best solutions to loneliness is to feel needed, to feel essential.

It's no accident that at the climax of the film *Her* we witness poor Theodore Twombly's disillusionment with Samantha. Up to this point, he thinks he's all she's got. He loved the relationship because he thought he was showing Samantha the world, helping her experience it in her bodiless state. He feels essential to her, truly wanted by her. But then, he comes to find out (spoiler alert), she has over 600 romances going on at once. I wish at that point, Theodore had just hung up on her once and for all, and dumped her cyber ass. But so great is our need to be needed, that the romance stumbles toward its demise when, finally, Samantha can no longer provide the illusion and Theodore is not wanted at all.

What are we to make of this sad, modern parable?

It's not just a harbinger. It tells us a lot about where we already are. We got here because of thousands of years spent on de-valuing the body. Our bodies are not evil, nor should they be denied or erased. Our bodies need to love and be loved, honored, cuddled, and adored. The most ridiculous and disturbing part of that film was when Theodore says he feels cuddled by Samantha. Is that how far gone we're going to let the body go – until we accept that it's just no longer there? How self-sufficient and alone are we going to be told we have to be in order to live in our modern world?

Lonely people make great consumers. If the message we get from our society is that it's more important to work and earn and achieve than it is to make sure our minds, bodies, and spirits get what they actually need, the loneliness epidemic is going to get worse. But maybe that's exactly what the money-makers want. If our culture is so lonely that it becomes socially acceptable to fall in love with an AI, then it will be one more consumer product that we compliantly consume.

I can't end on that depressing note, so bear with me here. There are thousands of ways to address the conundrum of needing to be needed. This problem can only be solved in numbers, with others, and it's not *Her* problem, it's a human problem, it's our problem. As we move forward into this brave new world, we have to be creative, courageous, and have faith in each other. We can do that.

There's a reason why Unitarian Universalists state in their first of seven principles, that we "covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." There's a reason why Unitarian Universalism has embraced sex education more than any other religion in America. We hold the body sacred, not just with our words, but with our actions, with how we understand what it means to live a good life.

Even so, we can get stuck in our heads, and be as seduced as anyone else by the limitlessness of the mind. So let's give ourselves permission to live that good life. As much as we can, let us move into our hearts, and move into our bodies, as sources of true happiness and wisdom. Let us admit and surrender to this great truth: that our path to health and wholeness must begin in our bodies; that the Rabbi was right. Limited though it may be, our bodies are the most important things in our lives, worthy of our greatest, most wondrous love.