

## Mind, Body, Spirit

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*I preached the sermon this week after completing the Ironman Arizona triathlon. The intervening week was also when the shootings at Virginia Tech took place, and when a gunman killed himself and one other coworker at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. That shooting took place less than a mile from our church. The gunman, Bill Phillips, had visited our congregation several times in the preceding months.*

### Reading:

Do you not know that in a race, all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I should myself be disqualified. [1 Cor. 9:24-27 (NRSV)]

### Sermon:

This is my 100<sup>th</sup> sermon at Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church, and the moment is bittersweet. I had hoped to make this a celebration because I think such milestones are important in the life of a congregation. We will celebrate, but today is most importantly a day for healing. In the wake of senseless tragedy across the country, and literally across the street, we come together, many of us grieving, confused, and anxious. In some ways, the worries in our own lives are trivialized, and in other ways, they are amplified by the shootings in Virginia on Monday and here at the Space Center on Friday.

My topic today is mind, body, and spirit. I debated whether to change it altogether, worrying that it might be less appropriate on a day when our hearts are heavy. But I decided to continue as planned, because we must go on even, and especially, in the face of tragedy. This week we have borne witness to at least two men who had lost control of some aspect of their minds, bodies, or spirits. One of them sat in this sacred place, this sanctuary, with us more than once in recent months—hurting as we often are, searching as we all do, and seeking wholeness, which I pray everyone who enters these walls can find. When our minds, bodies, and spirits are healthy and in sync with one another, we are better able to find the wholeness that we seek in life. We are closer to being our best selves, are better equipped to create a beloved community around us, and to welcome and embrace the shattered lives that dwell among us. When our minds, bodies, or spirits is less healthy than they might be, then we are less likely to achieve betterment and wholeness. We are more likely to experience brokenness in our lives.

I have a confession to make today. I have often said that one of the privileges of being a Unitarian Universalist minister is the inherent freedom of the pulpit that we enjoy. I would be

dismissed from most other pulpits for saying much of what I am able to say from this pulpit. One of the privileges and responsibilities of this calling is to challenge the mind, to speak the heretical truths of freedom, reason, and tolerance in a world too often filled with tyranny, thoughtlessness, and hatred. What I will confess to today might actually get me dismissed from some Unitarian Universalist pulpits, but I trust not this one. I have recently come to the realization that I am a *Trinitarian*!

Now, if you know the history of Unitarianism as an anti-Trinitarian school of thought and religious movement, you recognize the extreme heresy to which I have apparently confessed. We don't have time to address the intricacies of the arguments for and against the Christian trinity of father, son, and holy spirit, but Unitarians and their predecessors for nearly two-thousand years have been refuting arguments that God is one in three and that all three manifestations are co-equal. The issue was vehemently debated in the fifth century, and the Trinitarians, led by Athanasius, prevailed over the non-Trinitarians (who wouldn't be called Unitarians for another 1,000 years), led partly by Arius, and some say, St. Nicholas. The Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed declare belief in the trinity of father, son, and holy spirit as three co-equal entities. The Apostle's Creed, more familiar to modern Christianity, declares a belief in all three, but does not address their relative status to one another.

The argument of the anti-Trinitarians has always been that the Christian scriptures themselves do not include any mention of the trinity. Of course, there are several passages where father, son, and holy spirit are mentioned together, but they do not explicitly address the relationship between them except for one controversial passage that appears in Greek texts only after the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

So, I am a Trinitarian—father, son, and holy spirit. Well, not exactly, but close. Let me explain.

Over the past two years, during my training for the Ironman triathlon, I ran across the following piece of sage advice: “Swim smart, bike strong, run tough.” Swimming, biking, and running are the triathlete's trinity. They are far from equal, but each affects the other in training, and the preceding affect the latter during the race. Any one of them can make or break a race.

Swim smart, bike strong, run tough.  
Swim, bike, run.  
Smart, strong, tough.  
Mind, body, spirit.  
Smart mind, strong body, tough spirit.

In the father or parent, we have the wisdom of the mind. In the son or child, we have the strength of the body. In the holy spirit, we have the toughness of spirit. I am a Trinitarian. Mind, body, and spirit is a trinity I can follow. Father, son, and holy spirit are less meaningful to me, but it's a good metaphor for wisdom, strength, and toughness.

In a triathlon (and I trust that you will carry the analogy and metaphor into life), we have to swim smart because the race is just beginning. After at least a year of training, when you arrive at race day, adrenalin is pumping out of control. You're usually stuffed into a wetsuit that keeps your

body and lungs tighter than they are accustomed to. If you aren't smart, as I wasn't last year when I attempted the same triathlon, you can almost literally blow up before you get started. We also have to swim smart, use our minds, because water is a potentially dangerous environment and we need to stay afloat and keep our lungs filled with air instead of water. Finally, if we start too fast, we risk using up critical energy that is needed for the bike and run. This year, I swam smart. I practiced in the lake for two days before the race. I entered the water early enough on race morning to get warmed up and calmed down. I found a calm place to start and worked on a steady pace during the 2.4 mile open water swim. I finished within three minutes of my planned time, and had plenty of energy for the bike. The swim is the creator, the mind, the wisdom of the triathlon....

Bike strong. In the Christian trinity, Jesus is both God and man, carrying with him the wisdom of the parent, but embodied and strong in his own flesh. It takes the entire body to bike 112 miles across the Arizona desert in 20 mph winds with 40 mph gusts where bikes were literally getting lifted off the pavement and thrown with their riders on them. Thank goodness for a little extra weight on my part. You might think that the legs take most of the beating during approximately 30,000 revolutions, which is what I estimate it took me to cover the distance. Not so. My arms, my feet, my back, and everything except my legs hurt from about mile 60 on. The whole body has to be strong for hours on end—almost 8 hours in my case—to finish the bike leg. While there were pros passing me as if I were standing still, I saw many others along the way changing flat tire after flat tire, getting blown off their bikes, running alongside their bikes, which wouldn't go any further on their own. I saw people on the side of road in tears. I counted my blessings for a strong, 8 hours of no flats, no failures, no crashes. I was lucky. The bike is the strength and the body of the Ironman triathlon.

Now, once the bike is over there is the minor detail of running a 26.2 mile marathon. If you haven't been smart, or if you've used up all of your strength, then no measure of spirit will carry you through the run. But spirit is all that is left. In Hebrew, the word used for spirit—*ruach*—means breath. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, God is constantly filling people with the spirit—inspiring them, ordaining them, empowering them, calling them into action with the breath of life. When I started the run, I wondered whether I had the spiritual strength—enough life in me—to finish. I soon found out that I had been filled with the spirit. Although slow, I had one of the most consistent marathons I had ever run. And I have run many. The temptation at this point, ten hours after the swim started, is to walk and to find excuses not to finish. Your spirit can wither quickly. But remember, this is a trinity. We carry the mind and the body with us even into the spirit. If we aren't still thinking about proper nutrition and pace, if we haven't built up enough strength in the preceding months and years, then we can still end up a spectator on the side of the road, defeated. I ran and ran and ran with enough brainpower left to keep me fueled, enough strength left not to cramp and crash, and lots of spirit, which I actually lifted even further with coke and chicken broth along the course. Fifteen hours and 37 minutes and 44 seconds after that first stroke in the water, I found myself crossing the finish line. The run is the spirit, the breath, the life of the race, but no one makes it to the finish line without the entire trinity of mind, body, and spirit.

How satisfied are you with your mind, with your body, and with your spirit? Now, I've learned that most people tend to zone out when I start talking about swimming 2.4 miles, biking 112

miles, and running 26.2 miles. I understand that it just doesn't appeal to most of you. The most common question is "All on the same day?" Yes. Then the next question is usually, "Why?"

When I ran the Comrades ultra-marathon in South Africa four years ago, their slogan was, "Because we can." An accurate enough slogan, but without much purpose. I like their new slogan better. "It will define you." We define ourselves during our journeys through life. The triathlon, the race itself, is simply an event. It is the culmination of a particular part of our journey. The journey is what is important because the journey, not the reward of a perishable wreath, is where we define ourselves—where we keep our minds, bodies, and spirits strong and healthy.

For many years, running has been my daily spiritual practice. This is where and when I meditate, pray, replenish myself, and even sometimes write sermons, solve problems, etc. Running has changed my life; saved my life; literally keeps me mentally, physically, and spiritually healthy; and at least partially defines who I am. I doubt I would have found my call to ministry without my running.

Have you ever played the game with a group of friends where you each predict where you'll be, what you'll be doing, or what some particular aspect of your life will look like in five or even ten years? My experience is that our predictions are usually wrong. Our journeys in life take us to places we have not even imagined if we remain open to the possibility of being defined by our experiences. Ten years ago, I hadn't even imagined being a Unitarian Universalist minister.

While running in the Ironman last week I saw a great inspirational quote, which said, "Doubt your limits." If you can't imagine doing something because it seems too daunting, too time consuming, too difficult, then doubt yourself and imagine it.

There was a time when I couldn't imagine getting a PhD. I had been a B student in high school and college. I wasn't *smart* enough. But an opportunity presented itself. I began that journey, and eventually finished it, although there were several forks in the road and even roadblocks along the way.

There was a time that I couldn't imagine completing a marathon, and an Ironman was simply fantasy, if not insanity. I wasn't *strong* enough. Then I found out by accident that I had the endurance it took to be a long distance runner. I could just go out and run 10 or 15 miles with little preparation. I was literally bored one day back in 1983 and went for a long run. I still remember that run. I imagined my first marathon in 1986, and actually trained for several weeks, but got an ankle injury and couldn't continue. I would run my first marathon 12 years later in 1998. The journey was long, but I made it. A couple of years ago, I doubted my limits and ran that ultramarathon in South Africa, and then I doubted myself again and trained for two years to complete the Ironman last week, with failure along the way. What was once fantasy became reality.

There was a time when I couldn't imagine even being a spiritual person let alone a minister. I wasn't *tough* enough, and certainly wasn't filled with the breath of spiritual life. But an opportunity presented itself. An epiphany or two or ten hit me over the head, and I began this

journey toward and now through ministry. Ministry, like the run at the end of a triathlon, is the toughest journey of all, but also the most fulfilling—the most filled with mystery, wonder, joy and miracle. Also the most burdened with sorrow and tragedy. But it is who I am now. A Unitarian Universalist Trinitarian. Redefined...strong in mind, body, and spirit....

You are smart enough, strong enough, and tough enough to doubt your limits, to redefine yourself, to embark on journeys not knowing where they will lead, but knowing you will be richer for experience, as will those around you. You can achieve the unimaginable in your life. This community of faith can achieve the unimaginable in our world.

Swim smart, bike strong, run tough....

In mind, body, and spirit. Amen.