

## “Bring your Body With You”

Sunday, August 23, 2020

Led by UUFES Member Margaret Rieser

### Reflection - David Wilkins

As I've grown older I've become more and more aware of how often my body sends me a message. I suspect that this has been going on for a long time and that I've just been slow to recognize it. To younger folks (and that would be almost all of you), I'd recommend that you slow up starting now, so that you can hear what it is that your body is trying to tell you.

Almost daily, my body shouts: “David, it's time for your nap!” That's an easy one to notice.

I've been a vegetarian for about 25 years, and once in a while my body will alert me that it's “Time for some protein! Get out the cheese, the eggs, the beans, the spinach, the kale!”

More profound and more meaningful are the messages that come via music. My body seems to respond to music in a powerful way; sometimes it's a downright spiritual experience. Let me share just two dramatic examples:

About 20 years ago at a meeting of artists and art historians in San Antonio, a speaker dimmed the lights in the vast convention center and invited the San Antonio Women's Drum Corps to enter. As this group marched around the arena and the tempo of their drumming increased, so did the beating of my heart and I'm sure, the hearts of everyone there; it was irresistible; my body was in sync with the drums and with the bodies of the hundreds of other people gathered there. We were united; our hearts beating together in sync; it was powerful and, can I say, mind-blowing? I use that phrase intentionally; it was MIND-blowing for me and, I suspect, for the others who were sharing that existential moment!

The second experience I'll share was more intimate. I was lucky enough to be a guest in a private home where three individuals played a Beethoven trio after dinner in the living room. Right before the end there was a sudden and unexpected key change that seemed to resolve everything that had gone before. The music had built to this moment, and as soon as the trio ended we turned to each other in astonishment and said, “Did you feel that? What happened? And HOW did that happen?” We agreed that we had all experienced something dramatic and emotional that was also physical; we had felt that key change in our bodies. Our bodies responded physically in that chord.

As we struggled to put this into words, I said that I had “felt as if I had a plug in my heel, and someone had unplugged it and my whole body had drained out all at once.” I felt evacuated, but I had also felt that I was filled with something airy and expansive, something less physical, more spiritual. I felt happy and at peace.

So:

if I can offer each of you some advice:

Let yourself go when you hear the drums.

Feel the music.

Listen to your body!  
Be mindful!

Reflection - Margaret Rieser

I was walking down the street, after a trip to the market near my mother's house. It was after dark, and I noticed a black man walking towards me. I feel a jolt, like a small electric shock, run through my body. Fear. I wonder, in the span of about 2 seconds, way too quick for rational thinking, am I safe? Are there other people around? Where's my phone?

We pass. I nod and try to smile. I notice the sick feeling in my stomach. What just happened?

I'm telling this story because I imagine other people here have had similar experiences, and I believe that taking this incident apart and exploring it can help us understand something about racism and how it functions in our bodies. And I want to imagine what this experience was for the person walking down the street.

I believe that racism is about bodies. I am white because of the color of my skin, and the color of my ancestors' skin. I knew nothing, nothing at all about the person walking down the street except for my perception of their body. Their skin was dark. Honestly, I don't even know the person's gender. I made an assumption.

We've learned to rely on our brains, our vast funds of knowledge and our ability to think critically, to understand events in our lives. Furthermore, white people have learned to ignore feelings or knowledge related to our whiteness. At the same time that we see some bodies as Black bodies, we have little sense of our own bodies as being white. The event at hand, which has taken place repeatedly in my life, has defied my rational analysis and has led me to explore other ways of knowing.

Resmaa Menakem (I will write his name in the chat later), in his book, "My Grandmother's Hands" lists some of the images and concepts created over the past 400 years by "white-body supremacy", get that, white-body supremacy, surrounding the Black body, in support of our power system.<sup>1</sup>

- The Black body is dangerous and threatening.
- The Black body is impervious to pain.
- The Black body is incredibly strong and resilient--almost invulnerable.

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<sup>1</sup> Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017.

The conclusion, then is that

- “the Black body needs to be managed and controlled--by any means necessary.”

All we have to do to verify this is to think of the murder of George Floyd and so many other Black men and women.

Debby Irving, author of *Waking up White*, spoke last week at a Wolfeboro Library event. Someone described a situation that recently took place in Wolfeboro in which a black woman placed a Black Lives Matter sign in her front yard. A white man knocked on her door and yelled at her about the inappropriateness of her sign. Think of the misconceptions about the black body supported by white body supremacy here. This woman (and her sign), are dangerous and threatening. And Debby Irving's first response was, “I want everyone to hear and FEEL IN YOUR BODY, how traumatizing that must have been.” Can we settle our bodies and imagine this woman's pain?

One of the things that happens for white people in white body supremacy culture is that we learn to suppress our empathy towards people of color. This seems to be true of any power paradigm, even when we don't believe in it. As David Wilkins pointed out in our Seriously. . . discussion this week, men have difficulty imagining how women feel. Cisgender people struggle when they try to put themselves in the shoes of trans people.

As New York Times opinion columnist Charles M. Blow writes in a piece entitled, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Shrieks,” “One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient.”

Menakem describes the damaging myths about black bodies as nonverbal sensations felt by and passed among white bodies. They rest and are experienced in our “lizard brains”, the part of our brains concerned only with survival, fight, freeze or flee. These sensations are embedded in white bodies. Many white people don't remember being taught these things, myself included. But there they are, lurking in my lizard brain, waiting to be aroused. This means that when I encounter an unfamiliar Black body I am likely to constrict and experience a sense of danger. This prevents the rational part of our brains from functioning properly. One of the results is what has been called “white fragility”, overly emotional responses to cross-racial interactions. Far more serious are white body actions that deny Black bodies' inherent worth and dignity, such as deadly encounters with police bodies, underassessment of pain and therefore improper care by medical professionals, and the day in day out impact of interactions with white people who are functioning on high danger alert and are therefore unable to experience empathy.

There is good news here. The messages white bodies translate into behavior, which we experience as unconscious, can move into awareness. With intention, we can begin to notice the

way our bodies pull us to react as if we're in danger, and we can then choose not to react, knowing that our safety is actually not at risk. We can use these skills in any situation in which we feel ourselves becoming upset, or pulled into a reactive state.

As we notice a sense of constriction rising in our bodies, instead of accepting it as a sign of real danger, we can see it as a warning that we need to "settle" our bodies, to stay with the real situation instead of reacting to the one we fear. Menakem talks about anchors to help us settle, or remain settled, as opposed to getting stirred up. He suggests soothing yourself by continuing to breathe normally, simply noticing the sensations in your body, and staying present as you move through the unfolding experience.

For example, on my walk home from the supermarket, when I observed the person walking towards me, and I noticed my body constricting, I could choose to continue to breathe evenly in my regular fashion, which would help me to stay in the present. I could observe that this person is simply walking down the street, the same thing I'm doing.

We must be present to our own bodies, so we can be present for each other. Through being present for each other, and the resulting empathy, we can promote healing.