

Handmade
Rev. David Takahashi Morris
First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Jose
March 13, 2011

If you're a gardener, you know gardening is a total experience. From the moment the shovel hits the ground, all your senses are involved. You feel the impact of the shovel blade; you see the fresh soil turned up, loose and dark. You hear the scrape; you smell fresh dirt, cut roots, crushed grass, disturbed mulch and fertilizer, oh, you can smell the fertilizer.

You're imagining as you dig: tomato sandwiches, bouquets for your table, lemon slices in a chilled water glass. You have a plan: you know what you're going to plant, and where the light is best, and what you'll do when your workday and your watering schedule conflict.

At the same time, you know that all your work is not the final determining factor for how the trees and shrubs, vegetables and flowers are going to grow. You're a partner with something else: Call it Life, Nature, God. You're inviting what Dylan Thomas calls "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower" into your small temporary share of the earth.

What does "spiritual" mean to you? Here's what it means to me: The unity of our body, our reason, and our emotions, all connected within, all reaching outwards to make contact with something beyond the boundaries of our finite self. For me, the ability to "be spiritual" doesn't depend on what you believe, or what name you call the source of life and order. It doesn't depend on what words you recite, or on whether you sit on a *zabuton*, or kneel, or *daven*, or sway in the aisles with your hands over your head. The ability to "be spiritual" is the ability to find some way to put our whole being in conscious connection with the Universe.

Working with our hands is one very good way to "be spiritual" in that sense. Maybe you're not a gardener; maybe you're a potter, slapping a lump of clay onto a wheel and raising it up from the flat surface into a graceful shape. Maybe you're a musician, tucking your instrument intimately into the hollow of your neck, or bringing it to your mouth to fill it with breath, singing your own song of life through its vibrating surfaces. Perhaps for you it's woodworking, origami, flower arranging, or baking bread. Whatever it might be for you, it's the "thing worth doing" Marge Piercy speaks of. Whatever it might be, each of us needs some way to know we are fully engaged with the Universe and with our own lives.

Move. Touch your surroundings. Feel your own presence.

Some years ago, a man named John Jerome decided to leave his work as an advertising writer in Manhattan and live full-time on a farm in western Massachusetts. There he took up an old New England country pastime: He decided to spend a year moving an old stone fence out of the woods and rebuilding it closer to the house. Since he made his living by writing, of course he also wrote a book about it. Published in 1989, it's called *Stone Work*.

Jerome studied the design and the history of fieldstone walls; he learned what he could about tools and techniques. Then he went to work, and the stones began to teach him. “Only twelve or fifteen revelations in that first load of stone,” he writes: “About one discovery per stone. . . . Each stone was an extremely unwieldy mass of totally irregular shape, without an ounce of cooperation in it, and here I was proposing to use the damned things for building-blocks. Perhaps I should have thought this through.”

Now, in practice, he learned the techniques for moving rocks heavier than himself from the old wall up onto the wagon of his tractor, then off the wagon and into place, turned just the right way to rest firmly on the ground and to securely support the rocks on top of it. The stones taught him about pacing himself, about using their own weight and shape to move them; about the balance of caution and daring it takes to use prybars and rollers to stand a half-ton pillar of stone upright.

He realized early on that he was learning more than skills. His work as a writer took him into a purely intellectual world far removed from the sensations of his body. The first stone he lifted every day brought him right back. “Oh, right, *heavy*.” He called it “stepping back into the physiology,” reminding himself that he was a physical being surrounded by a responsive world.

Do you ever need that reminder? Maybe you work in front of a computer screen all day or night, or sitting in a call center in a headset, or behind a bank counter, or preparing legal arguments. Maybe you’ve just gotten used to being still, to living in your head. Might you, too, need to “step back into the physiology?”

Separation from sensation is not always our choice. Perhaps an injury, an illness, or a disability has limited our physical freedom, or the changes of age have made movement difficult. We may even have been alienated from our own bodies by a violence or trauma. Yet each of us is a physical being; our known life in this world unfolds in the context of this one body, our unique opportunity to find our physical place in what poet Mary Oliver calls the “family of things.” We all have a physiology with which we can renew our acquaintance.

Move. Touch your surroundings. Feel your own presence. Know where you are.

My way of knowing where I am is setting ceramic tile. A couple of summers ago, I was lucky enough to get a tiling job to do, replacing a small bathroom floor for my wife Leslie’s mother in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Leslie and her mom Arlie made sure I had all the materials I needed and kept me well fed and watered, and for five days I was definitely in my body. Crack, pry and scrape. Measure; cut and set. Make a cutout *here* so the tile fits *there*; turn the notch trowel this way to get an even layer of adhesive. Kneel, reach, balance, push, pull.

Tearing up someone else’s work, probably from 1980 or so, my thoughts echoed Octavio Paz: This was never meant to last for thousands of years; no doubt in another 30 someone will be tearing mine out. I wouldn’t say my handiwork taught me how to die, but I was certainly

reminded of the age of my knees. I was instructed by a hammer to pay attention. I was also reminded that I *need* this kind of work. I need to find ways to live fully in my body, to embrace, to touch, to connect with the physical universe. I think we all do.

If you work with your body for a living, this may all sound a little naive. It's one thing for me to spend a few summer days in an air-conditioned house tearing out and installing one tile floor. It's quite another to set all the tile in a new Holiday Inn, before the HVAC units have been installed. There's a class divide in our culture that says if you have to do the work, if you do it every day, it can't be spiritual. We tend to think that physical work can only be spiritual if we think about it and talk or write about it in sophisticated ways; otherwise, it's just labor.

And yet. . . . I learned my tile-setting basics in a few economically-stressed months just before I started Duke Divinity School, working with a man named Bob. Bob was a chain-smoking, foul-mouthed tile-setter who learned the trade from a Union school here in California and moved to North Carolina because his favorite NASCAR driver was based there. He was very particular about how I took care of his tools, and he was perfectly comfortable letting me wheeze a few hundred pounds of tile and cement board up to the third floor of whatever McMansion of the week we were working on.

Bob got up early every morning, drove to the job and did pretty much the same thing as the day before, and he pushed himself to do as much of it as fast as he could, because he needed the money. As we got into a rhythm of working together, I noticed a few other things: Bob never left a tile out of line; his layouts always ended in perfect finishes with uncut tiles in all the most visible sight-lines. He was incredibly fast; his body knew exactly what to do next. There was never a hint of drudgery about Bob's work.

That same spring, I watched one afternoon as a brick crew from El Salvador finished the top of a wall on a big house. It was too muddy to get a forklift onto the uneven ground close to the house, so they set up a line of six guys about 10 feet apart, including two on the scaffolding outside the house, and passed the bricks up by hand. They would throw the bricks two at a time, pressed together; the person who caught them would clap them back together if they'd drifted apart and toss them to the next person. Bricks went up the scaffold like 15-pound red butterflies, floating from the ground to the first level, across and up to the second, then into the hands of the mason who turned them back into bricks and set them into the mortar.

The people I met in my season of manual labor did not speak about their work in poetic or thoughtful language. They went to work every day because they had to, they pushed their bodies way too hard, and some of them lived pretty hard lives outside of work. And yet their work often had the same quality of mind, body, and heart in connection with the physical world that I find in the most artistic of handwork. Who could possibly say their work wasn't spiritual?

I have long been struck by the way we human beings are tuned to respond to the physical world we're part of. Rereading *Stone Work* recently, I was reminded that physiologists have a name for this: It's called "proprioception." Proprioceptors are nerve endings in our muscles, tendons, and joints that tell the brain about the position of our body parts, the load we're bearing, the speed with which we're moving. This is the source of our capacity to respond to what our other senses tell us about the world. Whether we're pushing, standing, grasping, throwing, bowing, or caressing, this is the sense that takes us out to meet what the rest of our senses receive.

All of us are instruments designed to interact with a world that offers itself to us at every moment. We need to know how to tune ourselves. The work we do with our bodies simultaneously strengthens and celebrates our capacity to connect and respond to the world. That mutual responsiveness we share with the world: I would call that "grace."

Move. Touch your surroundings. Feel your own presence. Know where you are. Connect.

What's your way? It doesn't matter so much whether your handiwork is hobby or livelihood, artistry or arduous toil; what matters more is how we experience ourselves in the work. You may not be up for building stone walls; you may not even be able to get out of the house much, but you can probably find some way to be in contact with your body and the world.

It isn't how hard the work is or what kind of product comes out of it that's important; it's finding a way to help our bodies remember how to love the world. Whether we are kneading and shaping one perfect loaf, or standing at the end of a belt sliding 8,000 loaves of nine-grain pumpkin-seed Asiago artisan bread every night into plastic trays that stack shoulder-high on a pallet so the forklift driver can put them on a truck headed for Santa Barbara, we need to let our bodies answer the invitation the world is always offering:

Move. Touch your surroundings. Feel your own presence. Know where you are. Connect.

Live.