

Letter from the Leader

My Summer of the Body

By Hugh Taft-Morales

“Got any plans for your summer, Dad?” One of my wonderful children asked me that question at a gathering of the whole family this past Father’s Day. Between September and May, day-to-day Ethical Culture work keeps me occupied. In the summers, my family knows, I enjoy having time for reading and writing projects. So, I drew some chuckles when, rather than mentioning books, I responded, “I’m going to try to be more embodied.”

I intended my “new-age-type” answer to be funny. But it also was true. Recently I’ve gotten interested in the idea of embodiment, which encourages seeking wisdom not just in the cognitive sense but also through greater connection with our physical beings. Psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem’s work on trauma and healing helped me appreciate how we all carry negative energy in our bodies. While Menakem focuses on racial trauma, practices that he recommends can help heal all sorts of wounds, both psychological and physical.

I’ve long accepted the need to heal from physical trauma. Six years ago, my own healing was facilitated when two artificial hips lifted me out of a cloud of pain and grim thoughts. Since

recovering from my operations, I've been lucky. Despite a bout of COVID, I've had good physical health. For this, I want to be grateful every day.

Growing older has contributed to that desire. My father died of a heart attack when he was 57, an age that strikes me—from my perspective at 66—as positively youthful! I appreciate the additional decade of life gifted to me and hope I never take for granted my years remaining. Recent indications of high calcium in the arteries around my heart remind me of the attention due to my body: something I can forget in my efforts to educate and expand my mind. I am addressing that now, in part, with shifts in medication and diet.

But I'm not concerned just with the physical changes that naturally come with age. Although I have been privileged to live a relatively comfortable life, I, too, have experienced trauma. I feel sadness that needs attention, emotional pain that needs care. When suffering is left untended, when wounds are allowed to fester, that can take a physical toll.

So, this summer I have adopted embodied practices that help me focus on my breath and on my heartbeat. I've been meditating every day and doing yoga a couple of times a week. I also exercise daily, nurturing awareness of my body while I do so. My routines are modest, but they help to alleviate both bodily and embodied pain. They make me calmer and more centered. They are good for my health.

I believe that embodied practices also can improve our relationships. When we are disconnected from our bodies, when we don't take care of ourselves, then we are emotionally less available to others. The good we hope to cultivate in our lives and in the world is stunted. Practicing self-care helps us live ethical lives. It helps us care for others.

Many people I know—including some of you, who are reading this—recently have experienced health conditions *much* more significant than mine. I hold you in my heart as you manage those challenges. I root for those health professionals who are working hard to support you. Finally, I encourage you to nurture gratitude for your body and for the amazing forces of nature that brought your consciousness into being.

*Hugh Taft-Morales is the Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society*