

BEFRIENDING THE BODY

By MARY ANN FINCH

MAURICE LEENHARDT, longtime missionary to the Canakas of New Caledonia, once suggested to a native convert that what Christianity had brought to the Canaka world view was the idea of spirit. The convert replied that this was not at all the case. What Christianity had added was the notion of body, for prior to Christianity the Canakas did not really think of themselves as distinct persons, but this new notion of body gave them a way of seeing one another as individuals and of experiencing personhood.¹

The body: a manifestation of the spirit

That Christianity can be more a revelation of the body than of the spirit may be surprising to many Christians baptized in Cartesian and Pauline waters, where the mind is clearly the boss, where bodily experiences and spiritual quests are often seen at war on ancient battlefields, and where victory over the body is what finally leads to religious freedom. This attitude is tersely put by Meister Eckhart: 'There is no physical or fleshly pleasure without spiritual harm'.²

While this attitude is still very much alive, this article is not a polemic and will not dwell on the many forms of religious hostility to the body, but will invite you to consider the many hopeful signs for Christians today in reclaiming the body as a manifestation of the spirit. As the humanity of Christ is a sacrament of our unity with God, so our own humanity, our bodily way of being in the world can be a source of spiritual knowledge, a guide on our quest, the very ground of our being and a new Bethlehem where the Word continues to be enfleshed.

As self-conscious creatures, we humans have evolved a capacity for the logical, the rational and the abstract. Our systems of education nurture this capacity. From an early age we train our minds to be the director of information, to order our lives, to make decisions, even to pray. However, we humans also experience

the irrational, the mindless, senseless capriciousness of life—a shattered relationship, a long illness, a sudden loss, a debilitating injury, depression, anxiety, uncontrollable violence. At these moments of intense and crucial living our powers to think, to analyze and to order are often of no service to us. It is at moments such as these that the body can be a friend and guide if it is properly prepared. It is at these marginal moments, as we are about to slip off the page printed by the mind, that we need to listen to the rest of our body with profound attention. Minding our bodies in times of pain and fragmentation offers us the other alternative to rationalizing, avoiding and devaluing our feelings and sensations.

Listening to our bodily experiences can open new doors, can introduce us to another form of wisdom, another way of letting God in, another way of hearing God's messengers—those angels that come with wild, unpredictable and often irrational news. Was it perhaps such an angel of deafness that inspired Beethoven's Ninth or an angel of blindness that challenged Milton to write 'Paradise Lost'? Such attention to our embodied self can only make our lives a fuller and richer sacrament of God's glory.

Befriending one's body does not in any way discount thinking. We do not trample on our analytical powers because we have discovered new ways of knowing. In fact, attention to our bodies can only make our ideas, projections, memories and opinions more whole and human. Minding the body and embodying the mind form a basic continuum for wholistic living. A befriended body is 'on call' twenty-four hours a day to advise, to warn and to midwife us through our births and deaths, the paschal events that every Christian pilgrim can expect on the journey.

The body in its language of movement and gesture and in its very breathing can manifest a spirit grounded in faith, grateful for salvation and fascinated with the mystery of life-in-God and God-in-life. An invigorating sense of bodiliness can attune us to God's prophetic presence in our dreams, desires and images, a presence that is waiting to be called forth from the bone and marrow of us, a presence that can stretch us from muscle to metaphor where boundaries dissolve and we can re-imagine ourselves into God's body for the world.

The body: friend and foe

I once had dinner with a woman who was the superior general of a large community of religious women. She was highly intelligent, witty and clearly understood how to maintain her power in

a patriarchal Church. She was in control of the conversation, in charge of her life and the lives of many others. She exuded competence and confidence. I was distracted, however, by the fact that all her movements were confined to her head with the exception of an occasional flip of the hand. She seemed to have no sense of the rest of her body at all. It was simply being carried around by her head like a piece of luggage. 'Well, what does that matter?' I said to myself, 'Here she is a respected and powerful woman'. But as I shared my life and work with her it became obvious that she was completely out of touch with her body and her feelings. 'Well, so what?' I thought to myself again. But the longer we were together the more apparent it became that something important was missing in the otherwise professional leader. She could not really feel with me or be present to my experience. She could not feel herself; so she could not really feel with another. Separation from one's body unfortunately can mean separation from others. This can be tragic among religious professionals.

No doubt we can all remember times when we felt completely at home with our bodies. Perhaps it was running along a beach with our body wrapped in wind and mist; dancing with abandon; leaping to our feet after a performance that stirred us deeply; or running into the waiting arms of a friend. These are moments of pulse and vigour, moments where flesh and spirit find integration. These can be sacred moments where we are acutely aware of our sensual connection to the Creator, the creation and fellow creatures.

If we are surprised that our very bodiliness can lead us to such liminality, carrying us across sacred thresholds, if these moments are rare and infrequent, then perhaps we do not see our body as friend and guide, perhaps we do not consider our own incarnation as the centrepiece and hearth of human living. The simple fact is that our own bodies hold the secret of who we are. By becoming more fluent in the language of the body we can learn to relate more honestly and responsibly to ourselves and to the feelings of others.

Every day in my work as a body-based counsellor and spiritual director, I encounter people who assault, reject and punish their bodies. They work relentlessly, neglecting nutrition and exercise. Like so many others they take their bodies for granted until they are beset by some illness, physical or psychological; and then often look for a quick fix. Even among many who exercise regularly the mind/body connection can go unnoticed. One can run for miles

each day and still be totally out of touch with the messages the body is giving. The war of mind over body rages in the poshest of fitness centres. The good news, however, is that this destructive process can be reversed. It is possible to establish a loving relationship with one's bodiliness, and through acceptance, awareness and respect to befriend oneself as a spirited body.

For reasons of religion, culture or parenting many of us grew up believing that our bodies were undependable, that they could get sick, injured and let us down. We were rarely given permission to love our bodies or to take satisfaction in the joy to be had through them. Perhaps we were cautioned against touching our bodies. How often after infancy were we held in healthy loving ways? Many of my male clients rarely remember an embrace from their fathers.

The one generally acceptable source of corporal pleasure could always be found in giving our bodies or using our bodies in the service and care of others. Doubtless, service to others is a precious human gift, but can we really serve, really feel into the needs of others when we are ignorant of our own inner wisdom? We can serve out of our own deprivation for only so long. It will surely overtake us in the form of disease, exhaustion, resentment, anger and rage. If, however, we can serve out of generosity to ourselves, out of self love, drawing from our own corporal wisdom, listening to the language of muscle and blood, then our service to others will not only be fruitful but less tiring.

Developing a 'conscious' body, i.e., developing a healthy awareness of one's body and heeding its messages, is the first step to befriending one's body-self. Calming the clamour of the mind with breath and movement restores the human balance and results in an epiphany of the spirit—a true sign of well being.

The body beautiful

In the last two decades the body has enjoyed the spotlight in the vast commercialization of physical fitness with its attending products which promise the virtual correction of all the Creator's mistakes. Exercise has become a part of the everyday life of millions of people. The parks are filled with joggers; memberships at health clubs are at an all-time high; corporations are encouraging their employees to participate in stress management classes; some businesses have built their own fitness centres and allow employees to use the facilities on company time; retirement centres advertise

programmes in fitness and nutrition; people practising yoga and T'ai chi ch-uan can be seen along beaches and in public parks; body therapies, such as massage, not long ago considered suspect and self-indulgent, are now regularly prescribed by physicians, psychotherapists and spiritual directors. Almost every bookstore stocks a health section with the latest magazines, books and videos in nutrition, exercise, beauty tips, relaxation and meditation.

This current interest, if not compulsion, in health and fitness reveals, on the one hand, a genuine desire to experience the life of the body as one's own. On the other, it is so intent on producing results that conform to cultural ideas of health and beauty that the real learning may be missed. It is, in fact, the fitness industry that helps perpetuate the tyranny of thinness, the hard body and the flat stomach. The cry of the spirit may be difficult to hear amid the clamour of the Nautilus machines, the rattle of the weights and the pounding of the aerobic beat.

Exercise is wholistic when it allows information from deep within to come forth. Rather than beating the body into submission to fashion trends, in wholistics, we honour the body as a holy temple. We condition the body through exercise, proper diet, rest, relaxation and meditation in ways that allow self-learning and self-healing to occur. The exercise itself is what is important in wholistic spirituality, not the possible end result. It is in the process itself, in the journey itself, that one finds and feels the integration of body and spirit. One does not reach wholeness by receiving a diploma at the successful completion of a fitness programme. One achieves wholeness in the daily awareness of oneself as body, in the fits and groans that bring the spirit to birth from the skeletal and organic depths of one's self.

In a wholistic approach to spirituality we celebrate not the body beautiful but the body sacramental. Process is the essence of this model, and as such, it is the antithesis of dualism. This approach finds the locus of God's presence in the very bodiliness and sensuality of each unified human being, and celebrates the body as a sacrament of God's life, a sign of on-going creation and unity with the Christ and all who make up Christ's body.

The body sacramental

One approach to body-based spiritual development can be found on the campus of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. For the past five years the Center for Growth in

Wholeness has provided the opportunity for a diversity of people, young and old, lay, religious, ordained and non-ordained, to learn about and to practise an embodied way of spiritual formation. Here, through creative movement, exercise and meditation one can transform an *a priori* spirituality into one of flesh and bone, of touch and feeling. Hatha yoga, t'ai chi, zen sitting, healing visualization and massage all become pathways to knowledge of self and God through the body.

This method of attending to oneself as body, of getting to know oneself as body allows hidden messages of hope, reconciliation and resurrection to come to light by means of one's own story. The narrative of one's life is woven in many ways into the tissues and joints of the body. In this mode of spiritual formation the body is one's primary spiritual director. The various forms of body work tap the body's inner wisdom in search of healing, wholeness and enlightenment.

Three areas of body work that have challenged and nurtured hundreds of theological students and Christian ministers at the Center for Growth in Wholeness are the Body Praise daily exercise programmes, the Movement Therapy sessions and the workshops in Massage as the Art of Anointing.

Today throughout the industrial world exercise is proffered as a necessary aid, if not antidote, for the so called 'diseases of civilization', i.e., those diseases not caused by germs or microbes but by life styles. While any kind of exercise may help a sedentary life style, not every type of exercise will enhance body awareness—some exercises may even widen the rift between body and mind. Sports activities focused on winning or looking good can diminish the value of exercise as a way of feeling one's self as body. However, when exercise is placed within the context of one's spiritual journey, it becomes body praise. The energy, flexibility and gracefulness that one feels in the body through exercise and the awareness of being more fully alive should be a prayerful moment, celebrating the ever unfolding mystery of the kingdom within.

No one can simply give or teach another person awareness of the bodily self. The process of reconnecting with our sensuality, of balancing mental and physical energy is one that each person experiences alone and within. In body-based spiritual formation, the practices of deep relaxation, visualizations, yoga, t'ai chi, zen meditation and similar exercises give direction, often drawn from

ancient wisdom, that aids the sojourner in achieving an experience of wholeness that has God at the centre.

Another area at the Center for Growth in Wholeness where body work aligns with spiritual growth is through improvisational movement. Here, a variety of body disciplines are combined into a process which explores the relationship between inner and outer space, between motion and emotion. The participants, who seldom have dance training, learn a movement vocabulary, a non-verbal language that helps them to explore the puzzle of opposites embodied in the human person. The movement itself can produce a feeling of reconciliation between body and mind. The external quality of the movement, however, is of little importance and the creativity never results in a performance. This is inner dancing!

A third area of body work that spiritual directors and pastoral ministers are steadily incorporating into their practices is massage. In a pastoral context massage becomes a sacrament of touch, an anointing, for it combines one of the oldest and simplest of medical treatments with the ancient healing powers of 'the laying on of hands' and 'the anointing with oil'. Hands are symbols of human service and communicators of the healing potential within. Oil is a biblical symbol of the divine gift of health, strength and respect for the whole person. In massage these symbols coalesce to heal, comfort, soothe, relax and strengthen the whole being.

The physiological and psychological effects of massage are well known, but massage as the Art of Anointing is an experience of touch that opens up possibilities for healing on the spiritual level as well. The experience of human touch is primal. In a religious context massage re-enacts the Creator's original touch, moulding and rejuvenating the person, breathing life into listless flesh. In its sacramental dimension massage reaches and soothes deep wounds, memories and fears by releasing the healer within, 'the Anointed One' within. As such massage is a prayer and a celebration of the body itself as a sacrament, a fit and respected temple, a hospice for the holy.

Namasté

In parts of the East it is common to see people greet one another in a gesture of bowing with hands joined in the traditional posture of praying hands. This rite is called *Namasté*, a Sanskrit word meaning, I honour in you that which is whole. The two hands join to reconcile the positive and negative, the male and female,

the left and right, the body and mind. *Namasté*: the God in me honours the God in you.

Namasté is a rite that summarizes what it means to befriend the body. In the midst of the tension, anxiety, unresolved conflict and fragmentation of daily living, my body calls me in this simple but elegant gesture to respect myself and the other, to remember that I am more than the sum of my opinions, ideas, scars, bruises and bones. I am a sacred union of feelings and thoughts that daily unfolds the spirit, breath upon breath. It is in the incarnate being that God is manifest; so take a bow to your embodied self and breathe. *Namasté*.

NOTES

¹ Fenton, John Y.: *Theology and body* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p 130.

² *Meister Eckhart*, a modern translation by Raymond Blakney, (New York: Harper and Row, 1941), p 90.