

# Keeping Body and Soul Together

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First Parish in Needham

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## Call to Worship

We gather in reverence before the wonder of life—  
The wonder of this moment  
The wonder of being together, so close yet so apart—  
Each hidden in our own secret chamber,  
Each listening, each trying to speak—  
Yet none fully understanding, none fully understood.  
We gather in reverence before all intangible things—  
That eyes see not, nor ears can detect—  
That hands can never touch,  
that space can never hold,  
and time cannot measure.

—Sophia Lyon Fahs

## Reading: Psalm 139: 1-18

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.  
3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.  
4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.  
5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.  
6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.  
7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.  
13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.  
15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.  
17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!  
18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end —I am still with you.

## Reading: Song of Myself: 48, Walt Whitman

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,  
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul;  
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is,  
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy, walks to his own funeral, drest in his shroud,  
And I or you, pocketless of a dime, may purchase the pick of the earth,  
And to glance with an eye, or show a bean in its pod, confounds the learning of all times,  
And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it may become a hero,  
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel'd universe,  
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million  
universes.

And I [say](#) to mankind, Be not curious about God,  
For I, who am curious about each, am not curious about God;  
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God, and about death.)

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then;  
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;  
I find letters from God dropt in the street—and every one is sign'd by God's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,  
Others will punctually come forever and ever.

### **Sermon: Keeping Body and Soul Together**

On a beach in Mexico, Anne Lamott had a “spiritual victory.” No, she didn't have a vision. No, she didn't achieve enlightenment, or become one with everything. There were no burning bushes, or rays from heaven. But it was a spiritual victory nonetheless. While on the beach in Oaxaca, Anne Lamott, in her own words, “broke through Butt Mind.”

“Butt Mind” had been a persistent state of being for Anne—a state of being concerned with rating her own, and others,' posteriors.

That day in Mexico, she and her young son approached the beach. Anxiety gripped her as she anticipated seeing the lean, young, tan, bikini-clad women that were sure to be there.

In her mind, she knew how they would see her. She writes,  
[T]hey would look at me with cruel scrutiny and see a thinnish woman with tired wrinkly eyes, flabby thighs, scriggly-scraggly hair, as my own son once described it, and scriggly-scraggly teeth. I was afraid they would see the spidery veins on my legs and note that my bottom appears to be making a break for freedom from the confines of my swimsuit; afraid that they would notice all the parts of me that really need to have the fat vacuumed out, or at least carpet-swept.

But this time at the beach, something was different. She thought about what her minister had said, that sometimes “heaven is just a new pair of glasses.” She decided she’d had enough with Butt Mind. So she decided that, “she was going to take her thighs and butt with her proudly wherever she went.” She describes this decision:

I decided, in fact, on the way to the beach that I would treat [those parts of my body] as if they were beloved elderly aunties, the kind who did embarrassing things at the beach, like roll their stockings into tubes around their ankles, but whom I was proud of because they were so great in every *real and important* way. So we walked along, the three of us, the aunties and I, to meet Sam and our friends in the sand. I imagined that I could feel the aunties beaming, as if they had been held captive in a dark closet too long, like Patty Hearst. Freed finally to stroll on a sandy Mexican beach: what a beautiful story. It did not trouble me that parts of my body—the auntie parts—kept moving even after I had come to a full halt. Who cares? People just need to be soft and clean.<sup>1</sup>

Anne’s new resolve was tested immediately by the sighting of not one but *four* teenage girls, each looking tan and model-perfect in their bikini suits. She saw them looking at her. Anne started to feel ashamed, but then had two thoughts: one, that these girls beauty and youth is transient—their clocks, like Anne’s are ticking. And two, that each of these girls had a secret: “that *they* didn’t think they were OK.” She writes, “The smallest one probably thought that she was too short, the other one too tall. The most beautiful one had no breasts, the buxom one had crisp thin hair.”

At this realization, Anne’s heart softened, and she could breathe again. She felt compassion for the girls, and for herself. She suddenly “wanted to give them the good news—that at some point you give up on ever looking much better than you do. Somehow, you get older, a little fatter, and you end up going a little easier on yourself.”

Anne no longer felt ugly. She had begun to break through “butt mind.” She touched her “aunties” gently, reminding them that she was there for them. She went back to her hotel room that night, happy, but then later on couldn’t resist looking at herself in the mirror with a critical eye. Too much here, too little here... Suddenly she was overcome with guilt when she realized it was her *aunties* she was hurting—her sweet, awkward, darling aunties—and she became fiercely protective of her thighs and her rear. They were part of her—they were good to her, and loyal—and they deserved nothing less than her affection and esteem. She apologized to them and rubbed them with rose-scented lotion with the care and attention of a mother rescuing her daughter from schoolyard bullies.

The bully had been her self.

Anne is not alone in this kind of self-bullying. Putting down one’s own body is one of the unspoken Great American Pastimes. For women and girls it often happens under the guise of obsession with beauty. For boys and men, under the guise of athletic prowess. And increasingly men are putting themselves down in the name of beauty, too. Whether you compare your body to models’ or professional athletes,’ the feeling is the same: inadequacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Anchor Books, 1999.

The Christian tradition has had an ambivalent relationship with the body. Seeing the body and soul as distinct and separable, the challenge for the Christian was to conquer and control bodily desires, in effect making the body servant to the soul. The early Christians did not say this simply because they were grumpy or puritanical. In many ways, they were realists. It is true that bodily desire—lust for property, lust for sex, lust for violence—can be utterly consuming and corrupting. If, instead, the soul were servant to the body, all hell could break loose. Paul wrote, “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). This theology, while easily interpreted as “body-negative,” has a point: it recognizes the temptations inherent in being human.

But in order to be moral, must we make our bodies servants to our souls? I don’t think this is the holiest way to go. In fact, there is much about such an arrangement that is unholy. The desires of the mind are just as corruptible as the desires of the flesh. Take, for example, the desire to fit into tiny little stiletto heels. The *New York Times* recently ran a story about women getting operations to take bones out of their toes in order to fit into pointy, expensive, Italian shoes. I can tell you, *that* is an idea of the brain. No foot wants that! Feet tell us that it’s painful to wear stilettos. They revolt at the very notion!

Everywhere you turn these days, our society is telling us our bodies are not OK—that we have to buy something to change them. The number of products designed to make our bodies be what we think they ought to be is astounding.

At Fajitas and Rita’s, a restaurant in Downtown Boston, there’s some counter-cultural graffiti in the bathroom. Next to the mirror, someone scribbled, “Hey, you look alright,” with an arrow pointing to the face in the mirror. A friend of mine would make repeated trips to their bathroom, just to get that affirmation.

With entire industries and economies built up on our insecurities, it would truly be revolutionary to simply say, with feeling, “Hey, we look alright.”

I don’t watch television much at all. I got out of the habit when I started having too much homework in high school. I believe that all these years without TV have been good for my mental health. On those rare occasions when I do watch it, I’m particularly sensitive to the obvious and subtle messages in programs and advertising. And every time I watch, I get this creeping feeling of inadequacy. In a way I barely notice, inadequacy washes over me, whatever my mood, invading my mental and emotional space like an unwelcome guest. For those who watch TV every day, these messages of inadequacy can become like the air we breathe. We internalize them. They become part of us.

Hear these words from the biblical story of creation (Genesis 1:27). “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.”

“How many of us, when we gaze into the mirror, see God’s image reflected back at us? Most of us see instead things about our bodies we’d like to change. [...] It is the rare person who is moved to *praise* by the scrutiny of his or her own body.”<sup>2</sup>

When we scrutinize our bodies, exactly who are we scrutinizing? Are *we* our bodies? Or are we some kind of separate entities that “have” bodies?

For Walt Whitman, the body and the soul exist in unity.

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,  
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul.  
(lines 1262-1263)

His poem *Song of Myself* begins with the line “I celebrate myself.” Throughout *Song of Myself*, Whitman celebrates the marvels of his body, and the bodies of others. A deep spiritual theme runs through the poem—one that affirms that all humans are connected to each other through our bodily existence, and that God is in all of us. Or even better, that God *is* all of us. Whitman is a bit of a pantheist—recognizing God in everything.

And he speaks of how our soulful, bodily existence can teach us about living with the sacred. He writes:

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,  
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,  
No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.  
I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself. (lines 1271-1275)

Now perhaps the poet was being baldly egotistic here, but somehow I doubt it. When you think about it, each of us *is* wonderful—wonderfully-made in all of our capacities, in all of our abilities, and in all of our disabilities. The human as an organism is incredible: turning plants and meats into flesh and energy, turning oxygen into blood, animating muscles through an intricate system of nerves. Just looking at our fingerprints, or looking into another person’s eyes, you become aware of all the complexity and pure wonder of the human!

It can be easy for the young and able-bodied to wax on about the joys of embodiment.

Nancy Mairs has a different way of looking at it. She has been living with Multiple Sclerosis for over 20 years, and concludes that those of us who are able-bodied are only that way for a time. She suggests it’s more accurate to see disability as the norm. Those without it are the “temporarily non-disabled.” Because if we live long enough, each of us will have to respond to diminishments in our physical abilities. Nancy describes the experience of having MS:

In effect, living with this mysterious mechanism feels like having your present self, and the past selves it embodies, haunted by a capricious and meanspirited ghost, unseen except for its footprints, which trips you even when you’re watching where you’re going,

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<sup>2</sup> Paulsell, Stephanie. *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002. p. 117.

knocks glassware out of your hand, squeezes the urine out of your bladder before you reach the bathroom, and weighs your whole body with a weariness no amount of rest can relieve. An alien invader must be at work. But of course it's not. It's your own body. That is, it's you.

[Nancy continues,] This, for me, has been the most difficult aspect of adjusting to a chronic incurable degenerative disease: the fact that it has rammed my "self" straight back into the body I had been trained to believe it could, through high-minded acts and aspirations, rise above....<sup>3</sup>

Her disability shattered the illusion that her soul was somehow in control of her body. This was hard to take. Nancy describes praying during mass after a particularly difficult week.

I felt panic-stricken. My multiple sclerosis was getting worse, almost by the day, and my resolve to cope bravely, in a manner befitting my stern Yankee heritage, was weakening even faster than my muscles were. I just wanted to get rid of the damned disease. "God, God, God," I prayed, "please, heal me!" And then, for the first and only time in my life, I got a response. I'd never heard voices, and I didn't hear one now. Three monosyllables simply materialized in my consciousness: "But I am."<sup>4</sup>

In a moment of panic, she had cried out for her disease to be gone. But inadvertently, she had said, "heal me" rather than "cure me." The response, the phrase "But I am," suggested that healing could come, disease or no disease, in a way of *being*—in being whole.

Being whole is keeping body and soul together. Being whole is experiencing life not as a head, a heart, a hand, a hip—not as a body, a mind, a spirit—being whole is experiencing life as a full human. A fully embodied human. Abled and disabled. Sacred and vulnerable.

Nancy Mairs writes as a whole woman. She writes about motherhood, sex, God, literary theory, guilt, love, prayer, bathrooms, Western Philosophy, hope and fear. She writes from her embodied existence. A thinking, feeling, embodied, whole existence. Body and soul together.

There are few places, I believe, where the human has more longing than to bring body and soul together than in sexuality. Just as our commercial society has conditioned us to long for perfect airbrushed bodies, it has also conditioned us to long for perfect, airbrushed sex. Add to this the traditional Christian teachings that associate sin and shame with the sexual body, and you have a recipe for sexual brokenness on a national scale. Sex is trumpeted from the headlines, it's on TV, in movies, on billboards—we can hardly get away from its representation. Some would say it's a good thing, that as a culture we're overcoming our sexual repression. But I ask, do these representations serve wholeness? Do they help us keep body and soul together? Absolutely not. I believe that the sexual conflicts in our society run deep, right down the middle of our very selves. But it doesn't have to be this way.

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<sup>3</sup> Mairs, Nancy. "Carnal Acts." *Carnal Acts: Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. pp. 83-84.

<sup>4</sup> Mairs, Nancy. *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993. pp. 177-178.

Our religious movement challenges sexual brokenness every day. By teaching *Our Whole Lives*, a sexuality education curriculum, in church, we affirm that we are concerned not just with the health of the spirit, but the health of the whole person. By putting ourselves on the line to advocate for the rights and dignity of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, we honor their process of coming out—which is indeed a process of putting body and soul together.

But there's something more, something more than advocacy or teaching that can create wholeness where there was once brokenness. It has to do with the spirit that we bring to our own sexuality. In the context of a loving relationship, sexual intimacy can be a powerful force for wholeness, rooting us in the very ground of our being.

The novelist Martin Amis tells a wonderful story about the mending power of sexual intimacy in his memoir, *Experience*. After years of unrelenting tooth pain and disease, all of his teeth were removed and replaced. In the midst of this long, excruciating process, he had to wear, for several weeks, a prosthetic device that filled his mouth with saliva, made it difficult for him to talk or eat, and made him feel distinctly unlovely and undesirable.

“That night,” he writes to his wife of the night after he had been fitted with the false teeth, “you came belly-dancing out of the bathroom wearing (a) your silk bathrobe and (b) my teeth. Both were then removed.

“This was the war against shame.

“The next morning I woke early and lay there quietly laughing and weeping into the pillow. I felt fragile, guileless, and exquisitely consoled.”

Fragile, guileless, and exquisitely consoled. That's a pretty good description of how we [can be] rendered by good sex with a loving partner. Fragile, because it is always a risk to expose ourselves, unguarded, to another. Guileless, because, in the deepest sexual encounters, the many ways we defend ourselves—our masks, our self-deceptions—fall away. And exquisitely consoled—ah, yes. To have our desire met and satisfied by the desire of another is exquisitely consoling.<sup>5</sup>

Honoring the body, and honoring another's body, in this intimate way can lift the soul. It takes trust and courage to simply let ourselves be the sacred and vulnerable creatures we are.

Becoming whole is a holy act. And, as the Psalmist and Walt Whitman so eloquently state, being sacred and vulnerable can put us in touch with what is sacred beyond us.

In a world that continually tells us we are not good enough—assaulting us with images of the young, the strong, the impossibly perfect—wholeness can be ours. By honoring the body as one with the soul, we bless life. We become holy—wholly human, wholly humane.

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<sup>5</sup> Paulsell p. 155.

Honoring the body is an act of love. Just like Anne Lamott and her aunties, Nancy Mairs and her MS, Martin Amis and his wife—each found love and consolation in faithful relationship with their body.

In faith, in hope, in search of holy wholeness, we choose to live, we choose the only life we know—that of our bodies. And we bless them. And we honor them. And in so doing, we honor the sacred.

Amen, and blessed be.

**Benediction (adapted from Gary Kowalski)**

Go in peace, speak the truth, give thanks each day.  
Care for your body; it is a wondrous gift.  
Be guided by your faith and not your fear.  
Know that in all of your days, you walk in beauty.

Amen.