

Jennifer MUELLER

Feeling the Touch

It's 3:15am Norwegian time. That's 9:15pm New York time and 8:15 in the Midwest. I know this because I'm from the Midwest and subtracting seven has become my most commonly preformed math function since I moved to Europe eight months ago. Eight months ago my world changed. Seven months and 25 days ago, the world's world changed. But that's a separate story.

Tonight, or this morning, depending upon what side of the Prime Meridian you're on, I'm hungry. My stomach wants nourishment before it will submit to my eyes' will to close and before it will bless my body with an evening full of sleep. Full stomach, full night's sleep. Empty stomach, empty sleep. My body negotiates, and drives a hard bargain at that.

These are feelings: hunger, fatigue. Physical feelings. Weaknesses. I search myself for a strong will, for "will power" to overcome these desires (sleep, food). Surely it's mind over matter. Or so I think.

A few months ago I was drinking red wine and enjoying a nice meal at a friend's apartment in Geneva. She was considering a move to Amsterdam. She just wants to go there. She's comfortable there. She imagines herself there. But these are "just feelings", she said.

I encouraged her to try it out, to go. We have feelings for a reason, I said. God gives us feelings.

Really?

A few weeks ago I was sitting in the office of one of my favorite university professors, a Jesuit priest, Father Mueller. We talked a lot about prayer and listening to God's call. God doesn't always speak in an audible voice, Father Mueller told me. Sometimes we have to train ourselves through prayer to hear what God is telling us. We have to evaluate our lives, to reflect, to see where we feel strength and energy and where we feel fatigued. We have to sense where we are weak and where we are strong. That's how we uncover our gifts.

Uncovering our gifts. Evaluating our feelings. Listening to God.

A few days ago I read an article online about listening to our bodies. The author of the article discovered that her attempts to separate her spirit from her physical body left her drained, both physically and then spiritually. (At the end of the day, after she had driven around to this practice and that meeting, she had no more energy to make dinner, let alone meditate or pray.)

It seems that we can't have the spiritual if we neglect the physical.

Bummer.

God gives us spirit and body--and both are good.

Any attempt to develop the spirit while neglecting the body is only half of our mission. God embodies us for a reason. Instead of straining ourselves to overcome and separate ourselves from our bodies, as many philosophies might lead us to try to do, we can actually enhance our spirituality by listening to our bodies. Not only that, we can draw closer to God through our bodies.

And it's not just me saying so. The Bible has examples of God working through physical bodies to get people's attention and to do His will.

Look at Zechariah whose lips were sealed until God's will was fulfilled through the naming of his son. God interacted with Zechariah's physical body, rendering him unable to speak for a period of time, to ensure the proper completion of His will. (Luke 1:20)

Bodies are important. And God, our Creator, shows us that by making us embodied and by communicating with us through our bodies.

Jesus came to us embodied. Embodiment played such an integral role in Christ's mission that he took on human form to share his message.

Traveling in Gerasenes, near Galilee, Jesus heals a demon-possessed man named Legion. After performing the miracle, Jesus instructs Legion to "return home and tell how much God has done for you" (Luke 8:39). When Jesus returned to Galilee, a woman suffering from 12 years of bleeding came up behind him and touched his cloak and immediately her bleeding stopped. Jesus turned, questioned the crowd as to whom touched his cloak, and said to the woman, "daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace" (Luke 8: 48).

Jesus revealed himself, the will of God, and his message of faith in part by interacting with physical bodies. At the same time that Jesus performed miracles and healed physical infirmaries, Jesus taught about faith.

First Corinthians tells us that our body is a temple and we should therefore honor God with our bodies (6:19-20). Our bodies can empower us to perform acts of worship that are pleasing to the Lord.

Eating dinner at the house of a Pharisee, a sinful woman anointed Jesus by wetting his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and showering his feet with kisses. Jesus responds that her many sins have been forgiven because "she loved much" (Luke 7:47).

The sinful woman's love pleased Jesus. She showed her love through acts of worship - through her body.

Can this be true? Is my physical body seriously more than a bundle of limbs and innards that riddle me with desires and lusts and give me more than sensation and limits? Can my physical being, if I listen and care for it, actually help me to draw closer to God?

I think so. And not just with my mind, but with my whole body.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

BARTON Ruth Haley, *Flesh-and-Blood Spirituality*.

WWW.REGENERATOR.COM/5.2/FLESHANDBLOOD.HTML

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. New York, 1995.

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