

BODY AND SOUL

The body has its own way of knowing, a knowing that has little to do with logic, and much to do with truth, little to do with control, and much to do with division and analysis, and much to do with union.

—MARILYN SEWELL, CRIES OF THE SPIRIT

Our body is both the carrier of our instinctual nature, our basic source of desire, and the home of the soul and spirit during our lifetime. It is a serious error to believe that the body can be turned into spirit or made holy by punishing, belittling, or ignoring it. The body is made holy when we treat it as the carrier of the spirit created by the Divine.

As time left the Middle Ages and marched toward our present era, Western science began to follow a course that separated mind from matter. Since the age of Descartes, we have increasingly objectified our body and most of the natural world. When, as children, we begin to study health and biology in school, we find that our body is presented as an object in a drawing in textbooks. We learn that it is composed of various “systems” such as the nervous system, the digestive system, the circulatory system, and so on. Modern health-care delivery “systems” emphasize the mechanical view of these bodily systems, as if the body operates separately from the mind, emotions, and spirit. To take the example of medicine, fitness, and diet further, the underlying perspectives of our culture lead us to believe we can take charge of our body as though we are the project engineer on a job. Even New Age healing and spiritual practices, which consider themselves more “holistic” than mainstream medicine, also promote the idea that we can take charge of our health. As I work with people I’m often led to wonder if we have forgotten that we *are* our body. Have we forgotten that our sadness is reflected in the heaviness of our body, our joy in its light-

ness, our love in its excitement, and our denial or repression of our vitality in its rigidity?

We are our body, and at the same time we have the capacity to be in relationship with our body—listening to it, responding to it, caring for it, and even loving or hating it. In symbolic language, the body is the intermediary between humanity and the cosmos. Its changes depict the stages of life. The similarity between our bodies reflects our universality, and the fact that each body has distinct characteristics reflects our individuality. In Chinese medicine, the body is a dynamic force of interrelated functions corresponding to the elements of earth, wind, fire, and water, as well as to other symbolic categories. In astrology, the body as a whole is related to the symbolism of the Zodiac. In Christianity, the powerful image of the Last Supper depicts the act of giving the body as a giving of spirit.

Recalling the metaphor of alchemical transformation may help us to understand this relationship between various parts. Alchemy, as we saw, symbolizes the separation of the various ingredients of life and the recognition of the relationship that exists among them. This recognition leads to a reunification in which the new whole is more than the sum of its parts. As I have suggested, the process of transforming base metal into gold can be a metaphor for transforming ordinary life into sacred life, by separating and uniting the basic elements of our experience. Each such transformation becomes another step toward a truer value and meaning of life.

As we view the alchemical process through the eyes of mythos, we realize that we must become conscious of the spiritual aspects of the questions we encounter as we work with matter. Any symptom or state of dis-ease that we experience asks us how we need to change our view of ourselves, our world view, and how we are living. We must ask ourselves things like: Does my weight symbolize heaviness of heart? Does my anxiety mean my life is too pressured or my values too impersonal? or, Are my relationship problems trying to tell me I don't value my emotional life?

Whether great or small, these are spiritual questions. As the metaphor of the alchemical process continues, these questions will

help us separate the elements involved—for example, in order for our self-awareness to grow, we may need to separate our vision of how we want things to be from the reality we face. And we must hold the tension generated until these elements move into conscious wholeness, in a new form that symbolizes a higher harmony. For example, as I said earlier, even after I had made a significant transformation I had to be willing to face the same process again. I had to accept the feeling that I had outgrown my “shell,” even though my analyst and others couldn’t see the reality of my position. I had to hold the tension between an inner feeling and outer skepticism. The dream image of the woman in the cell became a transforming symbol that moved me into a more passionate spirit of life.

We must consciously undertake the task of transforming life by infusing it with spirit, because flesh and spirit require each other to fulfill every level of life. And we must remember that we are the mediators between the profane and the sacred. We are part of creation but can also participate in new creation.

When we are devoted to our task, both the cycle of transformation—life, death, and renewal—and the tension of opposites are enacted within our psyche. There, as we grow spiritually and psychologically, we are transformed. When we fail to devote ourselves to this task, we experience the process of transformation internally as angst, or wounds to our soul—as Joyce and Brian experienced over Brian’s affair, or the fear and revulsion Wendy felt whenever she encountered the bag lady outside her building. Externally, as in the situation of Katlin (the woman who discovered she didn’t love her husband, Alan), we experience it as being stuck in a debilitating and disintegrating situation because of our inability to re-create ourselves on a new level.

Our society’s sexual problems and difficulties reflect our collective fragmentation and need for renewal. However, sexuality also shows us symbolically the path toward healing. When we look at sexual desire in a more complex sense it is a force that seeks to renew life by uniting its separated aspects to produce new creative outcomes. Ken Wilber, author of over a dozen books and a scholar in the field of spirituality and consciousness, labels this reunifica-

tion process the Path of Ascent. Wilber reminds us of Socrates' position that the Path of Ascent is driven by Eros and that as it progresses to greater and greater unions our personality will expand and deepen with each transformation.

Socrates asserted that lovers are taken out of themselves by Eros and enter into a larger union with the beloved, wedding their desire with soul. This path continues as we develop on higher and higher levels—from body to mind, to soul, and then to our origins—in Christian terminology, God.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for knowledge, *da'at*, refers both to knowledge about life and to sexual knowledge. Symbolically, *da'at* suggests that we know something or someone so passionately and thoroughly that the outcome will create something new. In mythology this outcome is represented by the archetypal image of the child, an image that symbolizes fresh potentials in life. The outcome might be a new idea, an intellectual or artistic inspiration, or the beginning of a new relationship with a friend, lover, or some interior aspect of oneself. Like a child, the potential born into our lives must be carefully nurtured, mentored, and directed until it reaches maturity and can be integrated into our life.
