

This my Body

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An article in *The Guardian* in November last year described Highgate cemetery as 'the last resting place of 166,400 *souls*' (italics mine, needless to say).

Recently an elderly friend of mine remarked that the trouble about getting old is that the body wears out while the mind stays bright as a child's. If pressed (somewhat pedantically) she would readily have agreed that the trouble is really that parts of the body wear out while the brain part of the body does not.

Sometimes we use *soul* for the whole of a person ('there is not a soul left behind'). Sometimes we use *body* for the whole (as in 'anybody' or 'somebody'). Other times we use these words as opposite parts ('keeping body and soul together').

The ambiguity of our language betrays our uncertainty about who or what we really are. We have many implicit models as to what *body* is, and it is a mistake to try to tidy up the ambiguity or opt for a single model.

There are two main ideas, or models. One is that my body is a thing I have. The other is of body as a mode of being which I am.

The former, '*I have*', model sees body as a biochemical system of cells, flesh, blood and bones, in which the real me dwells. Perhaps, even, happens to dwell. Body is something which enables me, and burdens me, a blessing and a curse; and somehow I can do without it.

This model is associated, more or less, with Plato, Greek stoicism, perhaps Augustine, certainly Descartes, a good deal of writing on 'the spiritual life', and modern scientific approaches to medicine. (It is much encouraged by transplant surgery, for instance.)

This '*I have*' model is the more common for most people today. The other, '*I am*', model is very uneasy about such ideas of body (or soul) as a thing, other than the person as a whole. Body is what I am as a person, seen from a bodily point of view.

This holistic model is more or less associated with Aristotle, Hebrew thought, St. Paul, Aquinas, Teilhard de Chardin, holistic approaches to 'spirituality', and psychosomatic approaches in medicine.

To clarify this latter, '*I am*', model, I will tell three stories.

My father had a medical colleague who was a highly proficient brain surgeon, a quiet, thoughtful and devout Irishman. He came to see us from time to time, and on one occasion, when he and I were alone, I put to him a question I had longed to ask: 'I hardly know how to phrase this, but just suppose—and I know it is fanciful—that we had the technical ability to do a complete analysis of the whole biochemical condition of a person, including the state of all the neurons in the brain, however complex. Could we imply from that analysis what sort of temperament, abilities, virtues and vices, that person has? I mean, does everything in a person that is habitual (honest or dishonest, generous or mean, able to ride a bicycle, have a sense of humour, be at peace ...), does all that have an exact correlative in the person's biochemical state? Is there a one-to-one relationship between what we think of as spiritual habits and virtues and what we think of as physical condition?' He paused for a long moment and said in his quiet way: 'I think, on our present evidence, that I would cautiously answer "Yes" to that.'

The longer I have lived with his reply the more has it interpreted all sorts of human experience. Take, for example, St. Benedict's teaching on humility. He first describes a series of practical steps a monk can take consciously and with endeavour. He can discipline himself to be a fitter-in, a believer, a forgetter-of-self and so on. Benedict then concludes that when these practical steps have been taken, perhaps for many years, the monk will come to live naturally and freely and unconsciously what he previously only lived with effort. And he adds that this is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. (God's will for us is not to be conscious obeyers but to run freely in the ways of the Lord. Many writers, from Aristotle onwards, have stressed that the truly good person is one who knows it not, because goodness has become natural. Self-conscious virtue is not really virtue.)

The point here is that the conscious will and conscious endeavour shape up our physical, biochemical condition (all those myriad neurons etc!) until, instead of being unresponsive, it becomes responsive of the corresponding attitudes and behaviour. In other words, we become humble (or generous or intellectually honest or ...) not merely in some 'spiritual' sense but in our whole incarnate selves.

The second story is one that each of us has been through. When we were babies and had been through the initial stages of trying out our vocal chords with various gurgles and cries, followed by a period of relative quietness, we then began to name things, or rather to learn their names. Our mother, probably, introduced us to our environment by naming: Daddy, table, wow-wow, tree, bird. It was from naming, and then making connections, that we came upon language, and with language the ability to think, to imagine, to reason, to love. In other words, it is our

environment that enables us to know and to love, our environment that provides even the analogies to know what is beyond the namable—our deeper knowledge of one another and indeed of God.

To be human persons as we are is to belong to this environment and this planet earth. We are not independent strangers who could just as well be somewhere else. (And we know too that any other planet, closer to or further from the sun, could not have evolved human personality recognisably like ours.) What we are as bodily human beings is part and parcel of our earth-community. As the Chinese saying had it: we are that in which the earth comes to appreciate itself.

The third story is of a colleague of mine who is somewhat of an expert on the Holy Shroud. He was recently invited by a friend to speak to a group near Oxford. On arrival he was alarmed to find a gathering of top nuclear physicists. But he went ahead, presenting all the pros and cons as to the Shroud's authenticity, including the latest findings of some unbiased scientists, that there seems no known way in which the image on the Shroud could have got there except by a very intense heat radiation of very short duration.

Expecting a good deal of scepticism, he was amazed to find that nuclear physicists had far fewer difficulties than most of us in accepting the possibility of a transfer of matter from what we normally think of as physically solid into another mode of existence within the cosmos; that the Shroud (or the empty tomb) could be the negative evidence of 'a bridge between a tangible and confined mode of existence and an intangible and unconfined mode', none the less real.

Physicists today perceive matter no longer as little atomic bits, but more mysteriously, as localised energy. Indeed, their language is as analogical as that of theology. ('How do you now perceive matter?' one physicist was asked. 'Well', he replied, 'can you picture a very beautiful ballet without any dancers?')

I have dwelt on body-as-mode-of-existence, the *I am* model, because it is much more difficult to get a real feeling for it than the dualistic *I have* model. But it is very important that we do so, and spend time in doing so. We live in a rather blessed age, from that point of view. Many intimations today from our knowledge of evolution, of physics and of psychology would have delighted Aristotle and Aquinas, with their understanding of form and matter, and St. Paul, with his profound use of *soma*, body, and his wonderful reference to the whole of creation being involved in the liberation of humanity. And they would have delighted Teilhard de Chardin, with his alarming belief in the spiritualisation of matter. ('My matter, or my own body, is not a *part* of the universe that I possess *totally*: it is the totality of the universe

possessed by me *partially*', he was writing in 1919, in 'What exactly is the Human Body?').

Theologians and scriptural exegetes need to be delighted too! For these insights into what it is to be body could help in our current discussion of three precious doctrines: the virginal conception of Jesus, the bodily presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I will comment briefly on the first two, and say a little more about the third.

1. Our Christian faith is not that Jesus was a human being who was also God. It is, rather, that the pre-existent Son of God, the one closest to the Father's heart, was incarnated, made flesh, became bodily human. That is such a stupendous and unique event that we have no other event to give us insight into what it involves as regards 'matter'.

To say that Joseph was the father of Jesus, and that scriptural language about Mary's virginity is myth-language to describe Jesus' divinity, does not in fact make essential truths easier to believe—except for those whose rationalism and humanism will hardly accept the primordial reality of God in the first place.

2. The bodily presence of Jesus in the Eucharist cannot be understood if 'body' means no more than a crude collection of cells (the first model).

In fact the relation of the bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ derives from the relationship of the material world to the risen Lord. Without a fuller understanding of the mystery of Christ's risen body as both his glory and also the fulfilment of his incarnate presence in the world, we can hardly avoid reducing his eucharistic presence to magic, crudity or mere memorial.

3. The bodily resurrection of Jesus has been so much in debate recently that one is cautious of adding any further comment. Obviously we have got to do better than either of the two inadequate beliefs: that the risen Lord was a resuscitated corpse, or that he rose only spiritually in the faith of the early believers. Each of those interpretations rests on an over-dualistic model of human bodiliness.

My own impression is that the debate has rested too much on scriptural exegesis and not brought in other evidence of the Spirit's guidance into truth. The New Testament sources were themselves part of a growing awareness by the Church of the nature of the Easter event, and clarification is added to that scriptural knowledge by the way in which the tradition became believed and expressed in the later liturgy, creeds and beliefs of the Church. It is a form of sophisticated fundamentalism to forget the abiding guidance of the Spirit, and rest too completely on

scriptural studies.

The question I would like to pose is whether it is correct to think of the resurrection as a miracle—miracle, that is, in the sense of a particular, perhaps arbitrary, intervention of God.

This is one of the questions which have worried David Jenkins, Richard Harris and others. If the resurrection was a miracle in the sense of a special, perhaps arbitrary, even capricious, intervention of God, why did he intervene in the case of Jesus's suffering when he evidently does not in so many other people's?

My suggestion is that the resurrection of Jesus was not a miracle in that sense at all. If we could truly appreciate what it is to be 'bodily' (perhaps along the lines I have mentioned), we might glimpse the fact that a fully integrated person, one in whom all parts were together and unscattered, could not but rise from death.

As human beings our growth in maturity, integrity, liberation and love is like the gradual self-transcending maturity of a great orchestra from its first painful practices to its final flight of beautiful music. Our 'body, mind and spirit' are all involved, with our spirit acting as conductor, enabling our bodiliness to transcend itself. Our spirit, yes—where the Spirit enables us, by gift, to become truly ourselves.

Of course, the orchestra is never wholly free of discords, untuned violins, uncertain oboes. However free and loving and 'single' we may become, there are always elements of self-interest, pride, fear, discord. Our bodiliness is never wholly integrated. But it can be and will be because in two cases it was and is.

For Jesus that liberating integrity was his by nature. The Holy Spirit and his spirit were one. He was fully human because he was divine. The Cross was perfect love, integrity, the high point of incarnation, bodiliness. That was where resurrection sprang from, not an arbitrary additional intervention from on high.

For Mary, likewise, but her liberating integrity came not by nature but by grace and participation. The Spirit communing with her spirit had full sway by virtue of her obedience. But it was that integrity of her whole person, her bodily person, which flowered in her bodily assumption, not some additional intervention. The disintegration of death cannot in the end overcome the integration which had matured in Mary (and is promised to us all).

Finally, I would like to see us broaden the context in which we understand Jesus's resurrection. Perhaps by broadening an understanding of our own bodiliness as a part-and-parcel involvement with our world as a whole, we could regain a perception of Christ's resurrection, not as an isolated event of an individual, but as pledge and initial movement of the liberation and resurrection of our world. 'The first-born of all creation ... until God shall be all in all.'