

Body-centred Spiritual Practice

Some propositions

- **creation is the primary revelation of God:** and my body is my primary presence in creation and to creation; it returns me to the here and now as a creature – a child of God.
- **attending to the body and the body's process is prayer** because it is attending to the life of God within us: it is another and immediate way of waiting for the word of God to me today.
- it is a form of **contemplation** = immediate presence in the world, directly perceiving things as they are.
- the **body has its own/is an unfolding process** of which the intellect may have only partial understanding, and that process is a crucial part of our spiritual journey.
- in spiritual direction we are trying to facilitate the flow between thoughts, feelings and sensations, which is an expression of the unfolding life of God in us
- it involves **staying with not knowing**, so the intellect is out of control: it has to wait for the body; all one can do is sit with attention and care. Mostly, as human beings, we don't like this.
- so, an important question: where do you go in yourself to check out whether something is true, or of God, or is God's word to you today? Ultimately, how do you know when something is right? I.e. how do you do discernment?
- it is important in **our work as spiritual directors** because what is happening in our directee's body, their body language and especially when they indicate a part of their body, gives important information.

In the Ignatian day there are 5 exercises, particularly from the beginning of the 2nd week: 2 Contemplations, 2 Repetitions, and Application of the Senses. There is a movement: from thinking about and imagining the matter being prayed over; to dwelling with affective responses; ending up with focusing on the body. The matter being prayed with is being brought home at ever-deeper levels so that our whole body-person is touched. This fosters the process of conversion.

Quotes

So God created humanity in God's own image; in the image of God was created humanity; female and male God created them. God blessed them.... So it was; and God saw all that had been made and it was very good.

Genesis 1.27, 28a, 31a

Thou it was who didst fashion my inward parts;
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will praise thee, for thou dost fill me with awe;*
wonderful thou art, and wonderful thy works.
Thou knowest me through and through:
my body is no mystery to thee,
how I was secretly kneaded into shape
and patterned in the depths of the earth.
Thou didst see my limbs unformed in the womb,
and in thy book they are all recorded:
day by day they were fashioned.
Not one of them was late in growing

Psalms 139.13-16 (NEB)

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made:

Psalms 139.14 (KJ)

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only [s]he who sees, takes of [her] shoes;
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more, from the first similitude.

Elizabeth Barratt Browning: Aurora Leigh, bk.7, l.821

The universe is the primary revelation of the divine, the primary scripture, the primary locus of the divine-human communion.

Thomas Berry

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

e e cummings

Sculpture reminds everyone that we are human and that we are embodied, incarnate, that all your sense of self and being comes through the body which is only fully itself when placed, connected to an elemental world.

Anthony Gormley, 2001

[I] see how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving being; in the plants giving growth; in the animals giving sensation; and in humankind granting the gift of understanding; and so how God also dwells in me, giving me being, life, sensation and causing me to understand. [I] see, too, how God makes a temple of me, as I have been created in the likeness and image of Divine Majesty.

St Ignatius: Spiritual Exercises [235]

The application of the senses differs from meditation in that meditation is more a matter of the intellect, involves more reasoning, and is altogether higher. Meditation reasons about the causes and effects of the mysteries and traces out the attributes of God in them, v.g., his goodness, wisdom, love, and the like. The application of the senses, on the other hand, is not discursive, but merely rests in the sensible qualities of things: sights, sounds, and the like; these it enjoys and takes delight in, to its spiritual profit.

St Ignatius: Directory [156]

... *body* and *spirit* do not stand for identifiable objects: they are the names which people use to indicate different aspects on the continuum of human experience.

Don Hanlon Johnson: Body, Spirit and Democracy

Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains, and the maker of
canyons and pine mountains!
All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds and millions of stars.
The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges jewels.
And the music from the strings no one touches, and the source of all water.

If you want the truth, I will tell you the truth:
Friend, listen: the God whom I love is inside.

Kabir (tr. Robert Bly)

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Mary Oliver: from Wild Geese

The same stream of life that runs though my veins night and day runs though the world and dances in rhythmic measures.
It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.
It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and death, in ebb and in flows.
I feel my limbs made glorious by the touch of this world of life.
And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood at this moment.

Rabindranath Tagore: Gitanjali #69

The human body, however, my body in particular, is a part of the world among others, among beasts, plants, stones, etc., etc. Whoever realises this will not want to procure a pre-eminent place for their own body or for the human body. They will regard humans and beasts quite naively as objects which are similar and which belong together.

Ludwig Wittgenstein: Notebooks 1914-1916