

Chapter Three

Flesh: The Body's Grace

“Physical, emotional, and spiritual are more entangled than we guessed, more interactive in every direction, and this knowledge is a form of power.” —Krista Tippett

OPENING QUESTION

Medicine became an art of treating our parts, not our whole. Religion divided us inside with high mystical notions that we are souls trapped in bodies, and theologies that made flesh and sin indistinguishable. Strangely, interestingly, the Enlightenment fed into this too. . . . “I think, therefore I am” became a simplification of what makes us human and a demotion of our spiritual and physical selves in that picture.

What messages did you receive in your early life about body, mind, and spirit?

DISCUSSION STARTERS

Tippett quotes the yoga teacher Matthew Sanford, who says he has never known someone become more at home in their own body, in all its flaws and its grace, without becoming more compassionate towards all of life.

Is there a physical activity that plants you in your body and changes the way you move through the world?

“Our bodies tell us the truth of life that our minds can deny: that we are in any moment as much about softness as fortitude. Always in need of care and tenderness. Life is fluid, evanescent, evolving in every cell, in every breath. Never perfect. To be alive is by definition messy, always leaning towards disorder and surprise. How we open or close to the reality that we never arrive at safe enduring stasis is the matter, the raw material, of wisdom.”

Reflect on an experience that has opened you to the wisdom of your body and made you more broken and more whole at once.

Tippett makes the argument that our bodies carry wisdom, and that “we can insist on delight as a virtue.” *Are there areas of life where this rings true for you? Have you experienced delight to become an opening to virtue?*

Tippett calls beauty a virtue that clarifies the interplay between what is sensory and spiritual. She takes John O’Donohue’s definition of beauty as “that in the presence of which we feel more alive.”

What are the sources of beauty in your life? And to echo a question Jacqueline Novogratz asks in every community she visits, what are you doing when you feel most beautiful?

KEY QUOTATIONS

“We are matter, kindred with ocean and tree and sky. We are flesh and blood and bone. To sink into that is a relief, a homecoming.”

“Our bodies are longing and joy and fear and a lifelong desire to be safe and loved, incarnate.”

“I taste, touch, smell, see, and hear, and my mind entwines with my senses and experiences. I live and move and have my being, as the Book of Common Prayer more lyrically describes it. Therein, I become.”

“Philosophers and physicians didn’t mean to divide us up. It’s what we do instinctively with great truths—we take them to extremes.”

“Rituals are sophisticated ancient intelligence about the body. Kneeling, folding hands in prayer, and breaking bread; liturgies of grieving, gathering, and celebration—such actions create visceral containers of time and posture. They are like physical corollaries to poetry—condensed, economical gestures that carry inordinate meaning and import. Rituals tether emotion in flesh and blood and bone and help release it. They embody memory in communal time.”

“[Jon Kabat-Zinn] says that scientists make the best meditators because they are most comfortable with knowing what they don’t know.”

“These days I suspect that, in everything, how we inhabit our senses tests the mettle of our souls.”

“We can trust the wisdom our bodies offer, again and again, and in the most ordinary circumstances. Convenience is an illusion, merely shifting the burden of process and consequences. Labor is real. But so is pleasure real and enduring. In old/new ways, we can factor in pleasure with a heightened awareness. We can insist on delight as a virtue.”

“Dan Barber says that when it comes to food, the ethical thing is almost always also the pleasurable thing.”

“We need our bodies to claim our souls. The body is where every virtue lives or dies, but more: our bodies are access points to mystery.”

“Our bodies tell us the truth of life that our minds can deny: that we are in any moment as much about softness as fortitude.”

“To be alive is by definition messy, always leaning towards disorder and surprise. How we open or close to the reality that we never arrive at safe enduring stasis is the matter, the raw material, of wisdom.”

“The core of life is about losses and deaths both subtle and catastrophic, over and over again, and also about loving and rising again.”

“Grief and gladness, sickness and health, are not separate passages. They’re entwined and grow from and through each other, planting us, if we’ll let them, more profoundly in our bodies in all their flaws and their grace.”

“Might beauty be a bridge we can walk across occasionally to each other, a bridge that might help humble and save us?”

“There is light in darkness, strength in weakness, and beauty in the brokenness of human existence.”

“Loving reality in all its imperfection is the necessary prelude to discovering God present and alive.”

“People ask me about the common denominators of the wisest people I’ve encountered. Alongside all the virtues that accompany and anchor wisdom, there is a characteristic physical presence that Jean Vanier epitomizes with others I’ve met like Desmond Tutu, Wangari Maathai, Thích Nhất Hạnh. Here’s what it feels like, what I can report: an embodied capacity to hold power and tenderness in a surprising, creative interplay.”