

Essay

BODY III: Male, Female & Beyond

Chapter 9, Part III

MY SECRET LIFE: Ten Tools for Transformation

© Ann Kreilkamp

Anorexia, The Female Ideal

I grew up thinking of my body as an object in the room, the one which happened to be “mine.” My body was an object that I had to drag around. Wherever “I” went, “it” went too. Like other teenage girls, I also dieted, fasted, wanting to make my body as small as possible.

The summer after our junior year in high school, my best friend Mary (see chapter on Processing) toured Europe with a group on bicycles. Big boned and naturally chunky, she came back thin. Walking down the halls on those first few days after school commenced in the fall, lots of boys complimented her on how “good” she “looked.”

Throughout that semester, Mary continued to “lose” weight. By winter she was down to 90 pounds, and began to stay home from school. I was shocked to discover that she was seeing a psychiatrist in Boise, three hours away (there were none in our town). I had never heard of anyone I knew seeing a psychiatrist.

I had been accustomed to going over to Mary's house after school and on weekends. But now she was confined to her bed, and not even I, her best friend, could visit. I asked my doctor father what was wrong, and he gave me a name, “anorexia nervosa.” I had never heard of that, either.

Nobody mentioned Mary or her “disease” out loud, though we certainly whispered about it. Mary studied in bed, kept up her straight As, and graduated, with me, as co-valedictorians. The last time I saw Mary, 15 years ago, she was still thin, her big bones making her look skeletal. I have a feeling she still “watches” what she eats, and that controlling the food she puts in her body is still a major preoccupation.

We still call “anorexia nervosa” a disease — as if it is something that “happens” to girls and young women, something they “catch.” Females — of all ages — still diet, and many still go “too far” — into anorexia. Yet the anorexic body, displayed in advertising images of bored, morose, zoned out girls and young women, is still the female ideal.

A Female Double-Bind

Like most girls, I hated my body. “It” was not as beautiful as other girls' bodies, so I was jealous. Even so, all our bodies were ripe and blooming, which attracted testosterone stares — and made me cringe. On the one hand I hated my body for not giving me what I wanted — more attention — and on the other hand, I hated my body for being the object of leering, wisecracking attention. I sought to be known for my mind, not my body, and yet even Dick, my wonderful boyfriend, did not take that desire seriously. I was a girl, and girls were valued in terms of how their bodies “looked.”

This early double-bind that our culture puts girls in makes it very difficult for us to finally descend into our bodies, so that we may live inside them. Instead, we are both preoccupied, and usually dissatisfied, with the outside of our female body, its “appearance.”

Menstruation, and What Matters

This focus on the outside is, however, ripped away each month, when we descend into the loggy, heavy, introspective and sometimes crampy aches of menstruation. We try to conceal that fact to others, of course, pretend it isn't happening — take aspirin, use tampons, hate our body for bloating, its metallic odor, its bright to dark red blood — but it is happening. During those few days we succumb to gravity; our consciousness dimmed, we vegetate in dark caves. If we live in a rural area, where the moon's changing light regulates the night sky, then our cycles, like ocean tides, tend to coincide with new and full moons; if we are living with other women, within a few months our cycles coincide, again at either new or full moons. Menstruation, lunar phases, ocean tides, and our sisterhood are all ordered according to natural laws; in the entire animal kingdom, only the female half of the human species participates in this monthly cyclic mystery. Like birthing, menstruation is a blood mystery which we cannot control, and which we, who want to live in our minds, consider a nuisance and try not to think about.

Now that my blood no longer flows, I no longer sense the lunar ebb and flow so personally. Nor do my emotions cycle with such predictable extremes. From this new, more detached (male) perspective, I look back with nostalgia at my blood-times, when I felt so real, so much more real than usual. The discomfort of menstrual cramping was a fair exchange for that automatic and luxuriously grounding descent into Earth/ Moon's great heaving swell.

We are Changing Woman, each month dying to who we were and bloody birthing ourselves anew. Each month entering that secret lunar rite of sisterhood which our culture thinks of as shameful, “the curse,” and which we, attuned to our womb's cyclic death and regeneration, sense as sacred.

Menstruation is sacred as birth is sacred. This more obvious miracle of creation, which, unlike monthly menstruation, we share with female creatures of all animal species, is forever denied to the male. No matter how creative a man may be, he cannot give birth to another human being. And no matter how barren a woman, she carries the knowledge of birth in her womb. The mysteries of death and resurrection, of seasonal

turnings, of cyclical appearance and disappearance — are all more easily accessed through female experience.

During that monthly descent, during that lunar sensing of our connection to all females everywhere, our bodies are more sensitive to touch, to being held, to mud squeezed between our toes, the lime green color of spring, the light sparkling off rivulets, the subtle caress of a breeze. The veil between the worlds dissolves, our minds descend into our bodies and we become earthy, of the Earth, contained and nourished within the Mother. During those brief “periods” we know: mother, mater, matter — matters.

During those brief times our values are Earth's values — where everything matters, and undergoes ceaseless change, continuous birth, death, and regeneration. There is no end to it; all goes round and round, returning to the beginning again. We come to the end, and know it for the very first time. We finish what we started, and know what it was that we began. And why. And what it means. What it matters.

The Unconscious and the Body

I was a typical female in our culture, sensing this native female gnosis during the fertile darkness of menstruation, but usually attempting to override it with the bright light of mind. And though I had experienced a sudden, overwhelming lightning bolt epiphany during my first child's birth, my awareness was not large enough or strong enough to hold that insight, nurse it into larger life.

The native female gnosis was, for me, mostly held in denial until my 40s, when I began to honor and enjoy my menses. It was as if my menses took me by the hand, and with a single lantern, led me down, down, down a winding stairway of memory, at the bottom of which reposed an astonishing surprise. For what I discovered, during my quest to face, embrace and erase the emotional charge of frozen, hidden, painful memory, is that the unconscious mind is *identical* with the body.

All experiences are registered in the cells of our bodies. Our bodies are in continuous transformation, responding to the way we process (or do not process)

events. Imagine the body as an archeological site. As pottery shards yield clues to the culture of those who made them, so does the current state of one's body reflect one's habitual way of interacting with the world. Are we stiff and unyielding? Our bodies will show that. Are we too adaptable, with no boundaries? Our bodies will show that too. Are we confused? Do we walk the world in fear? Do we wish we weren't here? All these ways of being are reflected in the way our corporeal reality situates itself within time and space — and can be “read” by an acute observer.

Everything that happens to us is coded into memory which, when denied, freezes energy into matter. Denied mental images and ideas condense — into body. As memories come to light (to conscious awareness), our bodies automatically respond: the vibration of matter quickens, releases into energy. And energy, as Blake said, is “eternal delight.”

The actual process of releasing memory, of turning matter into energy, is female, i.e., right-brained, beyond reason. We cannot control this process. The memories will come, when coaxed, when loved, when assured they will not be judged. And yet these denied memories are buried within us all, male and female. The unconscious is patterned into the body, no matter what its biological gender.

The Midlife Search for Wholeness

I began to consciously commit to my own healing process when I hit 40. This is not surprising. It is a well known psychiatric truism that in midlife the unconscious seeks wholeness. Whatever has not been accepted into conscious awareness comes up for review, seeks to be honored and expressed. In our culture, this usually means that what must be accepted is female, since in a patriarchal culture both men and women are trained to prefer male to female qualities.

In order to become whole, most men and women in midlife are asked — or forced, by the unconscious — to incorporate female qualities. This means they must descend into the body, and allow the body to transform in ways which render it, in various ways, more “feminine.”

The diagnosis is simple. The prognosis is not. Most men — and most women — are determined to practice “mind over matter.” Since we tend to treat our bodies as machines, we have great difficulty giving up control and surrendering to what, initially, might feel like chaos.

Allowing for exceptions, both sexes tend to value mind over matter. This priority is not quite so obvious when we are young. The aging process exposes it: both men and women fear and despise aging, since we no longer even come close to the youthful (i.e. static) bodily “ideal.” What is even more frightening, our bodies participate in an accelerating process of disintegration — and at some point, beyond all the face lifts and hair dyes and wrinkle erasers and exercise plans and nutritional supplements — there is no way we can avoid this descent into death, life's final mystery.

By learning to acknowledge and honor the aging process within our own bodies, men and women also learn to recognize the cyclical, seasonal, death and regeneration aspects of all of nature. At some point, increasing “aches and pains” force even one with a most rarified spiritual consciousness to acknowledge that he or she is inside a body.

Aging is a natural process, and the more we attune to our own body's changes, the more we become aware that our bodies are a part of nature. Our bodies are portions of Earth's body organized into a certain temporary form, which we happen, for now, to call “ours.” And, as luck would have it, by surrendering to the feelings within our own body, we find that we are not alone, that our feelings are shared.

Earth Mysticism

Our bodies, frozen culturally into thick condensed blocks by a repressive society, frozen individually by our painful memories in denied form, can, through the healing process, melt into unity, sensitivity, a subtle resonant connection with all that is, all that matters.

“From dust thou comes, to dust thou shalt return!” — Yes! Dust to dust, and the in-between is dust, too. I am dust, I am consciousness utilizing dust, and being utilized by dust. The more I attune to my own body, the more aware of the earth body I become; my

body and earth body are one — not just made of the same substance, but one. In surrendering my mind into matter, I become one with matter. Ego dissolves. There is no separation. We are all one, we are all one within Earth's body.

As we feel pain, so does she. As she feels pain, so do we. As we attune to our own denied pain, we begin to awaken to her pain. Learning to appreciate our own bodies automatically opens our capacity to feel the flow of rivers, the opening of a rose bud, the falling of a leaf, the sap weeping from the tree, canyons cleaving in two.

Our lungs breathe as one. Our hearts beat as one. We have the same needs for survival — water, food, shelter, love. No matter what we are feeling, others have felt it before, and are feeling it now. Feelings are carried on waves, feelings *are* waves, sweeping through whole populations, putting economies and egos into “depression,” lifting economies and egos into “inflation.” There is nothing that happens within “me” — my ego — that is merely unique. As we descend into our felt bodily experience, we sense our oneness with others, and with all of Nature. Our bodies are extensions of Earth's body, sensing devices for Earth and her larger purpose. Yes. Our bodies *are* matter, and they *do* matter.

Our personal bodies are tools which we can use to attune to the larger earth body, since they are portions of her, the portion of her to which we have been assigned, since birth. Earth teaches us through our bodies who she is. She gives us the lessons of incorporation in precisely this manner.

The more we attune to the mysterious depths of our unconscious minds, the more we tune into the inner reality of our own bodies, the more we attune to the inner reality of everyone and everything. The link to Earth is through our own bodies.

This discovery process is ours, no matter who we are — male or female. The deepest lessons of embodiment are not gender-based. The unconscious doesn't care whether our body is organized to be male or female. Either way, what the unconscious values is wholeness. That we come to recognize our ego selves as embedded within a body. That we come to recognize our body as an aspect of the larger body of Earth.

Earth, in turn, is one body within the solar system, a mere part within that larger whole. As we attune to and through Earth, we sense her as one extrusion of the vast solar system being. And so on and on. Each enormous whole is encased in something larger, there is no end to it. The universe has no circumference. The center of the universe is everywhere. You are in the center of the universe. Be here, now.