

**EXCERPTS FROM THE INTRODUCTION TO  
“REDISCOVERING THE LOST BODY-CONNECTION  
WITHIN CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY”**

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**(From the Editors:** This article has been adapted for *The Folio* from Edwin McMahon and Peter Campbell’s forthcoming book, *Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality*. We are delighted that they have agreed to modify the first chapter of their book for this special Folio issue on *Aging: Focusing Through the Transitions of Later Life*.)

**A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS ON THE BACKGROUND TO THEIR BOOK**

During more than 45 years of our team-research, we have discovered that the ways in which people treat their own bodies and their feelings becomes a reliable predictor of how they will then treat and interact with those around them. This inward experience offers a window on how they will fashion the social and political structures in their societies, their business communities, their systems of economics and education, even how they will design and live out their religious aspirations. In our view, the missing link in our all too human educational efforts for world peace lies in our lack of fully comprehending the structure and functioning of *a more effective pedagogy* which can lead individuals and societies into *their own bodies’ knowing* as an opening doorway along the path of achieving an enduring, global peace. But how can we actually teach this? How do we pass such experience on to the next generation? The overlooked key, of course, is that you cannot teach this as an idea or information in the mind alone. It must somehow be passed on—*within the body and the body’s knowing!* But how?

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*“When we try to pick out anything by itself,  
we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”*

John Muir. (1911). *My First Summer in the Sierra*

*“Religion and science are the two conjugated faces or phases  
of one and the same act of complete knowledge—the only one  
which can embrace the past and future of evolution  
so as to contemplate, measure and fulfill them.”*

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. (1959). *The Phenomenon of Man*

*“A whole school of psychologists now believe that ‘spiritual values’ are in the organism, so much a part of the well-functioning organism as to be sine qua non ‘defining-characteristics’ of it.”*

Abraham H. Maslow. (1964). *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*

*“The only security for a growing person is stability in the process of human wholeness itself.”*

Carl R. Rogers. (1970). *Personal Conversation*

*“Your physically felt body is in fact part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people—in fact, the whole universe. This sense of being bodily alive in a vast system is the body as it is felt from inside.”*

Eugene T. Gendlin. (1978). *Focusing*

*“The path forward is about becoming more human, not just more clever. It is about transcending our fears of vulnerability, not finding new ways of protecting ourselves. It is about discovering how to act in the service of the whole, not just in the service of our own interests.”*

Peter M. Senge. (2004). Forward in Adam Kahane *Solving Tough Problems*

Six different quotations, from six individuals using six radically diverse perspectives, and yet whose striking conclusions fuse together, less by reason of any overlapping information, but more because some common *body-learning* and perspective has led this distinguished group of researchers to explore distinct, yet complementary facets of one and the same embodied human experience. Each of their statements expresses part of a leap forward in our experience of what it means to be human.

We all know we have bodies — and at this point in time some of us have aging bodies. But how many of us consciously recognize in the very marrow of our bones that we each exist as an integral participant within a much Larger Whole, some Greater Living Organism? And how important it is, throughout the process of growing older, that we recognize and incorporate this Larger Whole, as we begin sensing inside our body’s wisdom about the next steps in our advancing years.

Your own body is the missing link enabling you to mature into just such a *felt organic awareness*. Your mind obviously has a role to play when learning to drive a car, but your

body gives you *a feel for the road*. Each of us needs to develop our own unique body-sense for being part of something greater than ourselves, especially as we encounter the innumerable losses that are inevitable as we age. Without some actual *in-the-body-experience* of this Greater Whole, we're left with nothing more than abstract definitions, ideas and cognitive analyses in our minds. We lack some tangible anchor within our own physical organism that can ground our experience, our wondering and our deepest spiritual longing. In his novel, *Nausea*, Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us, ". . . the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence." (Sartre, 1964, pp.170)

A massage therapist who helps in our programs once told us, "I have a client who has *fought* cancer for some years. Last week during treatment I helped him listen to some tears that had leaked from the eye corners. Suddenly, he realized how harshly he had pushed against the cancer when what he most needed was to hold in a loving way *how* his body carried the cancer. In that moment of realization his entire body relaxed, and a pain that had been felt in his shoulder for years lessened dramatically. He can now not only achieve very satisfying treatment results, but continue an inner journey that was blocked because of fighting vs. holding in a loving way *how his body* was carrying the cancer." *The issues are in your tissues*. The answers you seek hide quietly in your own back-yard. The failure to include what your body knows masks the missing link. Our aim in this article is to help bring that neglected piece of awareness back into everyday faith-experience.

## AN HISTORIC INTERCHANGE

Many years ago, during our search for a more embodied approach to helping Christians experience themselves in the Body of the Whole Christ, we found wisdom and learnings in the writings of Joseph Campbell, an American author, scholar and professor of comparative religion, who enabled us to realize how myth and legend brought powerful, *bodily-felt* purpose and meaning into the lives of ancient, preliterate peoples all over the world. Campbell also shared how all of us today need this same *embodied* sense for life-meaning and a felt awareness of purpose in order to have our own lives make any sense, especially as we age, in our heady, informational, wired-up world.

Both of us were fortunate to have been invited during the 1970's to attend a series of summer conferences on Voluntary Control of Internal States of Consciousness sponsored by the Menninger Foundation and led by Elmer and Alyce Greene, well known pioneers in the field of biofeedback research. Like ourselves, Joseph Campbell was an invitee. He spent many long hours sharing with Ed because he was fascinated with our search for a healthy, more transformational body-spirituality that could fill a growing void within first world cultures. As we expand beyond our more familiar tribal, monarchical, ethnic and even beyond national identities and their myths, which have held societies together in the past, the body-experience of being an integral, living membrane of some Larger Body begins to fade. At least in the past, people had a body-sense for the common good of their tribe, and that inwardly-felt experience was integral to their spirituality.

Joseph and Ed often discussed how it seemed that our very survival depends upon an ability to rediscover this Larger Body Experience beyond such limited tribal identities, as

well as their religious, cultural and historical divisions and differences. These divisions still continue to feed most of the senseless and destructive wars as our unbridled technologies clearly outpace our exploration into *a unifying inner process of peace-making* that might instead result in an embodied sense of the global common good.

Walking in the evenings together, Ed and Joseph wondered whether a more interior process of unification, common to all humans, really existed within each person. Furthermore, does the development of this inner process need to *precede*, or at least *accompany*, efforts at peacemaking in the politico-social world, in order to achieve any enduring diminishment of violence?

Joseph thoroughly understood that in our time most of the old myths we have inherited today become, at best, what he called, *artificial*. They no longer provide the meaningful *body-connections* which draw us into a sense of some physically-felt Larger Cosmic Body or Presence at work in our modern-day lives. The leftover residue of such myths tend to support survival of institutions crafted from and for the past, instead of nurturing greater wholeness and a sense for the global common good in people living within those institutions today.

However, the main issue which always surfaced in their discussions invariably came back to the same question: Can some universal, yet personal *inner human process* that lies beyond all the historically conditioned, male dominated, tribal and institutional traditions enable each individual to discover his or her own fresh, new *personal metaphors* and unique body-sense for living within a Larger Presence and its unifying common good?

Such an inner process, while not new in human experience, may be quite new within our ordinary, everyday awareness of it — becoming a puzzle only because we don't know how to access and attend to it. That then leads to the more pointed question: What holds us back from even being able to notice what our bodies already know so we can then act upon what they tell us? Here, finally, we come to grips with the problem:

**. . . recognizing something new does not necessarily lead to acting differently.** For that to happen, we need a deeper level of attention, one that allows people to step outside their traditional experience and truly *feel* beyond the mind. For example, countless businesses have been unable to change in response to changes in their environments even though they recognize those changes intellectually. Why? As Arie de Geus, author and former planning coordinator at Royal Dutch Shell, says, “The signals of a new reality simply could not penetrate the corporate immune system.” Conversely, when people living inside a shifting reality begin to ‘see’ what was previously unseen *and see their own part* in maintaining the old and inhibiting or denying the new, the dam starts to break. This can, happen in a company or a country. (Senge, 2007, pp. xiv — xv).

And, we would add, by necessity within religions and spiritual traditions as well.

If nothing else, in our experience, many Christians today sense some need for developing new eyes to see and ears to hear. Feeling beyond the mind today has become not an idle luxury, but a stark necessity for finding our way forward by learning how to peer over the next horizon. In his Foreword to *Theory U*, a book on the social technology of Presencing, Peter Senge writes of the author, Otto Scharmer’s vision that

Virtually all well-known theories of learning focus on learning from the past: how we can learn from what has already happened. Though this type of learning is always important, it is not enough when we are moving into a future that differs profoundly from the past. Then a second, much less well recognized type of learning must come into play. This is what Scharmer calls “learning from the future as it emerges.” (Senge, 2007, p. xvi)

Ed shared with Joseph our own personal and professional search for just such a new way of learning by sharing our experience working with an inner process of unification, which the American psychologist Carl Rogers had called *congruence* and which his former graduate student, Eugene Gendlin, was further exploring through a teachable process called *Focusing*. This approach, in our view, offered the best potential for opening up a profound, meaning-filled and readily-experienced process within personal, *human growth itself* as the inner global metaphor opening a new doorway for future psychological exploration as well as discovering ourselves within the Mystery of God-with-us. Perhaps just such a process and metaphor might introduce an enormous breakthrough stretching well beyond tribalism and the *strong man* or *old boys’ club* mentality, with its religious, racial, ethnic and social tensions still locked in place on a globe rapidly becoming economically and ecologically interdependent.

For both Rogers and Gendlin, the word *congruence* simply meant being able to feel your feelings physiologically and allowing them to symbolize themselves accurately. While the description may seem relatively easy to grasp theoretically, growing into such an experience as an actual *habit* within your own body, in most self-escaping cultures like our own, becomes quite another matter. It means sailing across uncharted waters within cultures where institutional religion and education generally ignore the body’s vital contribution to personal and spiritual meaning.

In the light of Gendlin’s research, *meaning* not only expresses itself through the mind; it rises up from within the body as well. Moreover, such *felt-meaning* animates the power of myth, legend and metaphor. Ed told Joseph that if the combination of Rogers’ and Gendlin’s findings could move out into the global body, especially into any of the world’s great religions, it would model an evolutionary step for the rest of humankind. Joseph smiled knowingly and pointedly asked Ed, “Is this what you and Pete are trying to do for Christianity as psychologists of religion?”

Ed answered, “Yes. We’ve been collecting pieces of this puzzle that we feel may fit together. By trial and error, we are slowly learning how to pass this missing link on to those who find themselves hungry for experience and not just more talk or ideas about God but

rather, in the words of St. Luke, that they would, ‘ . . . *seek, reach out for, and perhaps find the One who is really not far from any of us—the One in whom we live and move and have our very being . . .* ’ ” (Acts 17: 27- 28 TIB—The Inclusive Bible)

One of the important pieces of this search has certainly been Joseph’s research on the central role of *metaphor*. For our purposes here, it can help to recall that metaphor may be defined, in general, as a comparison of two unrelated things without using the words *like* or *as*—which if employed would create a *simile*. The simile would be, “Muriel runs like a deer.” The metaphor: “Muriel is a deer.” This simple description, however, only explains the linguistic *structure* of metaphor, not its more profound *embodied function* in human life and spiritual development. The latter, involving more investigation and research, has challenged the two of us for more than 40 years.

Ancient Hebrew teachers realized that including *the body’s knowing* was integral to effective communication of the Word of God for an illiterate people. Information alone can never successfully convey the total message. Knowledge of God somehow thrusts deeper roots within the human organism itself even beyond the mind’s ability to think and analyze. These teachers, therefore, sought a more efficacious way to enter into the body’s knowing as well as into the mind thinking. This accounts for the *metaphoric* flavor present in so much of Hebrew midrashic teaching. Experiencing this more *embodied function* of metaphor in healthy spiritual growth reaches deep within the human body’s knowing. Symbolic language interacts with the body’s awareness in a way that introduces a *knowing* that reaches well beyond conceptual thinking and information.

Symbols touch and interact with a meaningful sense, felt in the body, even when the content of such experience cannot yet be articulated in concepts and words. The world which Eugene Gendlin has entered into and explored throughout his years of research into Focusing has opened a vast frontier for future exploration which still continues to this day.

Joseph Campbell introduces this deeper world of personal felt-meaning carried within the human body as follows: “Let me begin by explaining the history of my impulse to place metaphor at the center of our exploration of Western spirituality . . . ” (Campbell, 2001, p. 1)

Failure to appreciate the metaphorical nature of religious literature and discourse has led to numerous embarrassing crusades or expeditions to defend the biblical accounts of creation . . . Men mount expensive expeditions to locate the remains of Noah’s ark on Mt. Ararat but, of course, they never find it . . . The ark, however, can be found easily and without travel by those who understand that it is a mythological vessel in an extraordinary story whose point is not historical documentation but spiritual enlightenment. To appreciate Genesis as myth is not to destroy that book but to discover again its spiritual vitality and relevance.

Metaphor comes from the Greek *meta*, a passing over, or a going from one place to another, and *phorein*, to move or to carry. Metaphors carry us from

one place to another; they enable us to cross boundaries that would otherwise be closed to us. (Kennedy, 2001, p. xvi)

Too many people today find themselves in a psycho-spiritual vacuum of purposeless disconnection, where no embodied sense can mature in the awareness of our responsibility and accountability for a common good. Our bodies ache with an inner knowing that boundaries yet lie waiting to be crossed and grown beyond, inside ourselves and our societies. And, as we age, we start to wonder — and sometimes panic — about where the next ‘boundary’ lies and what yet lies beyond this life.

At the same time, media marketing and entertainment still run 24 hours a day, distracting people with products that simply turn us into a mirror image of what we buy—and still this never satisfies. Some missing link fails to connect. Our sense of *interdependence* with all that sustains life on this earth disappears beneath a wave of unsettling and addictive diversion so perceptively identified in Alcoholics Anonymous as—*endless talking the talk without ever walking the walk*.

We have always attempted to fill that void, which Joseph Campbell urged the two of us to pursue. And, our ongoing goal has always been to provide a support structure within which the development of a body-habit of noticing and nurturing our important feelings can become the *doorway* into a life-long metaphoric process through which we become more fully ourselves within this Larger Body we all share in as interconnected, living cells.

A fresh horizon opens out before us within just such faith experiencing. But this challenging new frontier rises up in a form as ancient as the origins of religion itself. Symbol and metaphor offer a transformational key into the human body and heart with profound spiritual significance. When unlocking this inner door, we find ourselves poised at the edge of our own creative human potential, being drawn forward as an integral part of something far greater than ourselves, along with the exciting possibility that such experience introduces an entirely new personal and social order: *The Kingdom of Heaven* truly does lie within each of us. It does not rest buried beneath frozen heights of the windswept Mt. Ararats of this earth. Our generation, those who now come face-to-face with aging, need travel no further than inside ourselves. We are invited to notice and nurture our important feelings and felt-senses, allowing them to unfold not only our often unheard inner stories, but also the melody of a deeper story and song written within our own bodies’ knowing—a story bringing us all together into a greater union than anyone might ever have even begun to imagine.

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