



# THE WISDOM OF YOUR BODY

*Finding* HEALING,  
WHOLENESS, *and* CONNECTION  
*through* EMBODIED LIVING

HILLARY L. McBRIDE, PhD



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# Fully Alive

*Exploring and Understanding Embodiment*

I was thirteen the first time I threw up on purpose. I hid in the back of a dark bathroom, just beyond the reach of a buzzing fluorescent light that hung above and to the left of the bathroom stall. I was there with my eating disorder, and together we were beginning what would be a very quick descent into an even darker place—the complete eradication of myself through the disappearance of my body. Physically, parts of my body would shrink away as I became small. My freedom to think about the world outside the narrow container of my fragile mind would evaporate. My voice, both my inner knowing and the vocal sound a body makes, and my ability to want or desire anything would vanish. Soon, I would chip away the parts of myself I knew, like picking flecks of blistered paint off a wall, revealing what had once been there only by its absence.

The room began to swirl as stars shot like fireworks across my vision. I slid down against the bathroom stall until I was

half lying and half sitting. I tried to catch my breath as beads of moisture formed in protest across the back of my neck, the sensation a voice begging me to stop. My body softly whispered the objection: *Why would you hurt me like this?*

## Choosing to Be Fully Alive

That dark moment in a bathroom stall happened almost twenty years ago. Today, I am someone people consider an expert about how we relate to our bodies and what gets in the way of that. Although I have been doing this work for some time—through the academic perils of a master’s degree, a PhD, and ongoing clinical training and research projects—I am far from having all the answers, as if that were a thing that could happen. But I am fascinated by the questions, struggles, and delights of what it means to be human—to *be* a body in this time and place. The deeper I dive, the clearer it becomes: being fully connected to the body is about being fully alive.

For some of us, the complexity and richness of being fully alive is difficult and we struggle to consent to all it holds: loss, grief, pain, aloneness, illness, the pangs of hunger or fullness, the grip of fear, and the finality of death. In fact, we may even be trying to avoid feeling these things at all costs. But in the process, we also lose access to the beautiful things that come with being fully alive in our bodies: pleasure, joy, energy, connection, sensuality, self-expression, creativity, being held, and savoring the sun’s warmth. We can’t avoid the painful things we experience through our bodies without sacrificing the good, the beautiful, the rich.

But we did not find our way to a disembodied existence on our own: we had centuries of help. Western philosophical influences like Gnosticism, the Greek thinker Plato, and later Descartes (whose theories influenced the development of the Enlightenment) all had a significant influence on widespread

religious, philosophical, and cultural thought. They influenced a popular line of thinking that went something like this: the soul and the mind are distinct from the body. Although the church originally condemned Gnosticism as a heresy, the church was not (and still is not) immune to a Gnostic worldview, which at its worst suggested that matter was evil, the spirit and body were distinct, and we needed to escape this world to find salvation. Plato, Descartes, and Gnosticism suggested that the body has needs and limitations but that truth exists in the mind. The goal is to leave the body, rising above it to find that our being now exists in a space not weighed down by the realness of flesh and blood and pain and death and desire.

You might have even heard this idea as an encouragement from someone: mind over body or as it's often said, "Mind over matter." Over time, this line of thinking became the foundation of our common discourse. Through our language and thought, we have carried on this disconnection. We say, "My body won't let me . . ." or "I can't believe *it* won't . . ." without realizing our language tells on us, revealing a problematic narrative woven into our cultural fabric. Still, none of it fully removes us from this essential truth: we *are* our bodies.

The body is central to our experiences, to our sense of ourselves, to our autobiographical narratives. The body is the only way we have to move through life. Yet research about body dissatisfaction and body hatred shows us that the majority of us—up to 90 percent of those of us in Western culture and in communities touched by globalization, inclusive of women and men—loathe our bodies.<sup>1</sup> Numbers this high and this pervasive among both men and women have led researchers to characterize the Western relationship with the body as "normative discontent," so normal we can forget there is any other way to relate to our bodies individually and culturally.<sup>2</sup> We've been taught to see our bodies as objects, as appearances to evaluate. And we get frustrated that our bodies are different from what

we've been told they should be: not white enough, able enough, straight enough, male enough, old enough, young enough, thin enough, muscular enough, not ever quite enough. The list of not-enoughs is endless—and costly. It's a form of hand-me-down shame that robs us of time, money, opportunity, and energy. But ultimately what body hatred costs us—individually and collectively—is the fullness of life. We lose out on the goodness that comes through our body. And if we are our body, we miss out on experiencing our own goodness and the presence and wisdom that comes from deep connection to ourselves. We also lose out on connection with others: the quality of touch offered to soothe a wound, kissing someone who makes our body feel electric, or celebrating how breasts can nourish and nurture a baby. There is so much goodness within and between us because of our bodies, the bodies we spend so much time trying to get away from, control, or blame.

## **Becoming Embodied**

By the time I started seeing Liz, my therapist, I had been sick for a long time. She was my last-ditch effort for recovery from an eating disorder that was stubborn, life-threatening, and eroding all the most beautiful parts of my life. The experts had given all sorts of names to my behavior and the way I was feeling: bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, OCD, depression, and anxiety to start. Those names quickly became my names, indistinguishable from my sense of self.

It was several years after the first time I purged, and my family had tried everything they could to help me get well. But I wasn't really "there" for most of it. I was riding a pain-escape merry-go-round and not reflecting much on it. Thinking back now, it seemed as though *I* did not exist anymore; in my place was a desperate, defensive, and hollow version of me—half a life.

I believed that Liz really saw me. Unlike the medical experts, who saw a set of symptoms or an eroding body, Liz saw *me*. She saw me as separate from the pathology of the eating disorder—that “I” was not “it”—in a way that I was not able to do for myself. She never once asked me what I weighed. We talked about the forces that shape how so many people feel about their bodies—existentialism, feminism, colonization, the sociocultural framework, and more. We drummed together. She described the joy she felt in her short, soft, and round body as she was aging, and sometimes we watched TED Talks on her small office computer. She called me a “philosopher queen,” and when she looked me in the eye, her gaze said, “I know there is more to you than this.”

She cupped her hands around the remnant flame of spirit inside me, protecting the flickering light until it grew stronger, and then placed my own hands around the flame and made me the protector of this growing force. Unlike the early stages of the eating disorder—which felt like a toxic love affair with a violent and abusive lover who also sometimes brought me security and generous gifts—therapy felt like a slow climb out of a hellish pit of madness and darkness so vast it was impossible to imagine any other way of being.

I had been seeing Liz for about three years and had just returned from my first trip to Europe. I felt a rush of excitement as I sat down in the corner chair—I couldn’t wait to tell her about climbing a volcano in Greece, jumping off the front of a huge ship into the Mediterranean, and an adventurous train ride through Bavaria. I expected her to ask me more questions about my trip and about how my eating had been while I was away, but she didn’t say much at all. When the conversation paused, she smiled, her eyes alive with spark and spice. “Do you notice how you’re sitting in the chair today?” she asked.

Silence.

Once more, “Do you notice how you’re sitting in the chair today?”

Silence, again. Her words reached my ears but didn't mean anything. I was unsure how to answer because until this point in my adult life, I had never actually been aware of my body from the inside. I was a floating head. Most of the time, it seemed like nothing existed from my jawline down. If something bodily did exist, I only knew how to scrutinize it as if detached, and from the outside.

"Do you know how you used to sit when we first met?" she asked.

I slowly shook my head. "How did I sit when we first met?"

"You used to sit like this," she said, and pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs, and rested her head on her knees with her gaze turned away. I saw her curled up in a ball and for the first time saw myself from the outside. Seeing this normally unapologetic and fierce woman looking so small in the chair shifted something in me. I felt grief and compassion for the version of me who had to be so tucked away, who had tried so hard to disappear that she had literally taken up as little space as possible.

"It is so good to see you taking up more space," she said. "I can see from how you are sitting that your relationship with your body is healing. You're not hiding as much. What you do with your body says so much about what is happening inside of you, and how it is to be you."

This conversation felt like a flipped switch—an epiphany. The only way to describe it is that my consciousness, my sense of myself as a person, was stuffed into my skull, like a balloon pinched at my neck. The fingers of patriarchy, pain, avoidance, sorrow, and objectification were firm around my neck, the base of the balloon. Liz's question pried the fingers off the balloon, and my sense of self started flowing into all the parts of me. The awareness was sudden and all-encompassing: it moved down my neck and shoulders, into my arms and out to my fingertips. It filled my torso and pelvis and sit bones, and it poured down

into my legs and ankles and feet. I became aware of how I was filling the chair—sitting cross-legged, palms open and resting on the arms of the chair, my chest open, and my face up and looking squarely at her. For the first time in years, I was fully present—body and mind together in a lingering awareness that spread throughout my form.

I also noticed something else: this awareness and presence felt *right*. *It was rich and safe.*

*How did I arrive here?* I thought, full of wonder. All this happened in real time, in what for her was a few moments of silence but for me felt eternal, as if I'd lived all the lifetimes ever lived in a single moment.

*Does my left foot always feel like it's going to fall asleep when it's tucked under the back of my right leg?*

*Have I ever felt myself while sitting in a chair before, filling the chair, arms and fingers even draped over the sides?*

*How is Liz sitting? Plump body also filling the chair, but differently—her knees bent with feet on the floor, shorter, and sitting back—less upright than myself, more relaxed. Her demeanor is gentle but direct, like she's commanding a ship. And I got all of that just by looking at how she was sitting.*

The ways I had been protecting myself from pain were starting to fall away. I didn't need them anymore. I began to realize that I would always be my body, but the way I experienced my body could evolve—and that evolution could be deeply good.

We all have moments in our lives when we realize how much has changed. We see a current photo next to a childhood photo and are struck by the transformation. This experience was like that. And it woke me up to a whole new dimension of existence. Suddenly, I was more in the room, more of myself than maybe I'd ever been, fully present with myself and with Liz.

I left her office that day a different person. However, it wasn't until several years later that I found the name for what had happened that day: *embodiment*.

## Understanding Embodiment

There is no unified definition of embodiment, but we often hear of it when people are talking about a quality or idea being lived out. Someone will say that a leader embodies the style of leadership that they talk about. But here I'm using the word to describe something broader than that: the experience of being a body in a social context.

I began learning about embodiment through my research and clinical work with body image. I focused on eating-disorder prevention, specifically what it looks like when women love their bodies. A big chunk of eating-disorder prevention and body-love work centers on body image: the idea that we hold in our minds an image of what our body looks like. And generally, we have feelings about that image. We evaluate our body based on what we've been told is good, or not so good, when it comes to that image. It's great to have a positive mental representation of the body, but this is not the same thing as embodiment. It's like finding a beautifully wrapped present on the table at a birthday celebration but never opening the box to experience the wonderful something inside waiting to be enjoyed, received.

I have sat with women, men, and nonbinary folks who thought that changing their body image—specifically, their thoughts about their body—would help them have a healthier relationship with their body. So they tried to beat a new perspective into their perception. It often sounded like this: “If I just notice hurtful thoughts about my body and change them, then I'll feel better about myself.” Or, “Every time I think, ‘I hate the way I look,’ I'll try to substitute it quickly with a positive thought. Then, over time, that will become my new thought, right?”

Inevitably, they end up tired and frustrated. We might want our negative thoughts to disappear, but we can't get rid of them with thought substitution alone. After all, that does not

identify where those thoughts come from in the first place. As proverbial wisdom reminds us, we cannot solve a problem with the same level of consciousness that created it. Thoughts are like blossoms on a flower—there’s a stem and then a whole root system beneath them. Thought substitution alone is like plucking off a dandelion bloom, glue-gunning a daffodil blossom on the stem, and expecting daffodils to keep blooming. In this case, lasting change requires digging up the roots of one flower and planting a new bulb to grow the other. These new bulbs are embodied experiences; the soil is the context that supports our blooming.

The neuroscience of healing has proven to be true time and time again. Change does not happen through trying to trick ourselves out of a story we have been groomed to rehearse through our developing years. Rather, transformation happens from the ground up: when we have a new experience of ourselves and hold our attention on it long enough for it to sink in.

Learning embodiment—how to be in our bodies in a way that protects us from body shame—requires more than just thinking differently about our appearance. It requires curiosity, attention, sensation, and acceptance, which then allows us to develop a healthier and more stable relationship with our body as a whole. This relationship with our body includes our appearance but also requires relearning how to experience the body from the inside out. Being in our body gives us access to all the wisdom that our bodies hold. This allows us to know ourselves more fully, experiencing ourselves as good and sacred, and hold safety within ourselves no matter what happens around us.

Embodiment is a way to heal the mind-body divide we experience within ourselves and, more systemically, within Western cultures. To do so we need to understand the self *as a body*. Our body and our personhood are so intimately connected that they can never be separated. We are not just

a mind, or brain, carried around by a meat-puppet of flesh and bones. Embodiment is a kind of re-remembering of who we really are, because what we picked up along the way was *disembodiment*. But disembodiment is not how we come into the world. It can be unlearned, while embodiment, our birthright, can be remembered. So embodiment is a coming home, a remembering of our wholeness, and a reunion with the fullness of ourselves.

Embodiment coach and author Philip Shepherd says it like this: “If you are divided from your body, you are also divided from the body of the world—which then appears to be other than you, or separate from you, rather than the living continuum to which you belong.”<sup>3</sup> Experiencing this connection between our mind and body has profoundly significant political, relational, philosophical, ecological, and spiritual implications. It changes everything about how we experience ourselves and others, drawing us into deeper wisdom and often providing us with insight that a fragmented way of being could not produce.

## **Two Ways of Thinking about the Body**

In Western cultures, we’re taught to think about the body through the lens of possession: *having a body*. This suggests that your body belongs to you in the same way your phone or your car belongs to you. We hear this way of thinking in our speech: “I just can’t get my body to do what I want it to,” “My body isn’t cooperating with me,” or after achieving something, “My body really showed up for me today.” The assumption is that I, or the self, is distinct from yet contained within the body—and maybe even unwillingly trapped there. As the thinking goes, if only we could be free of this physical form, then we could truly be free. It’s the belief that there is a self that has a will and that the body may or may not choose

to cooperate with that will. *It* may have an agenda or way of being of its own. A philosopher named Maurice Merleau-Ponty gave us the paradigm for this way of thinking: *body as object*. The body is a thing.

But there is another way of thinking about the body. In this way of thinking, the body is not something you have but something you are: you *are* your body. Although we have all experienced being a body at some point, for many adults it can feel foreign or even impossible. Try repeating after me: I am my body. How does it feel to say it that way? Your body is alive, conscious, and indistinguishable from your *self*—the two cannot be disentangled. From this perspective, the mind is the body and the body is the mind. Merleau-Ponty refers to this perspective as *body as subject*. The body is a being, conscious, and the place where our sense of “I” exists and engages with the world. Merleau-Ponty’s original French can also be translated as *body-for-self*, as if to say the body is not against the self but *for* life and the self, the soil within which the mind and personhood emerges.<sup>4</sup> This nondual perspective of the self invites us to consider the ways in which believing the self to be divided—the mind as separate from the body—has been both damaging and neuroscientifically incorrect.<sup>5</sup>

Being a body, seeing the self as inextricable from our physicality and our physicality as the expression of our personhood, invites us into wholeness. But when the self has been shattered and fragmented—as it has been for many of us—collecting the fragments, believing they belong to us, and naming them as good is a politically rebellious, spiritually powerful, and biomedically healing practice.

While disembodiment on an individual level represents the fragmentation of the self, disembodiment on a cultural level is diagnostic of a cultural pathology. Tada Hozumi, cultural-somatics practitioner and activist, has identified this as the effect of historical traumas from inter-European imperialism.

Such historical trauma is passed down epigenetically and interpersonally through descendants of light-skinned Europeans and is revealed in the fabric of Western, largely white culture.<sup>6</sup> In this culture, it seems we have started to recognize this unease and fragmentation. In our desire to experience wholeness again and remedy the poverty within our context, we have looked to other cultures and traditions, typically those of people of color, for their wisdom, embodiment practices, and insights (for example, yoga, Tai Chi, martial arts, and breath work). We must speak about embodiment while acknowledging that these are not new conversations or practices; otherwise, we rehearse the systemic wounds that divided us from ourselves and each other. Our individual healing can't happen without addressing our need for collective healing, culturally and as a collective human body.

Where there has been dissociation, we want association, weaving back together parts that were never meant to be separate. With this level of fragmentation, viewing the body as an object—a thing, but a precious thing—is an entry point for healing. Perhaps it is even the first and most important step of remembering our wholeness and ultimately affirming our bodies as the place of our being-ness.

Sometimes I imagine this process as collecting the shattered pieces of a family heirloom. To put it back together, we have to search for all the fragments, even the ones that scattered under the fridge, as if to say, “This, yes, this part is also essential for being whole again.” We need to reclaim every shattered fragment of our body to experience wholeness. Healing happens as we invite our bodies back into the narratives of our lives. Even if our body still feels somewhat separated from the self, this invitation can be the first act of acceptance and arrival to learn to say to ourselves, “This is my body.” Because every moment comes with an invitation, I invite you to pause and say to yourself in this moment, “This is my body.”

## **Practicing Embodiment**

You might be familiar with the adage about fish in water. In a 2005 commencement speech, David Foster Wallace describes two young fish swimming along when an older fish swims by and says something like, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” Once alone, the two younger fish look at each other and wonder, “What the hell is water?” Wallace goes on to say that “the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.”<sup>7</sup>

Embodiment is the water in which we swim. We have never known any reality outside of our bodies. And yet, it is precisely because we are so immersed in being bodies—and because our collective thinking has been shaped by a particular cultural framework of post-Enlightenment, settler colonialism; heterosexism; supremacy of white bodies; and patriarchy—that we often forget that the body is the very center of our existence. It doesn’t help that even writing and reading about embodiment is an abstraction of the real thing. So, to take embodiment off the page and into real life, try this experiment. It’s an exercise designed to help you experience how the two ways of thinking about the body—body as object and body as subject—are both related and distinct.

Use your dominant hand to hold the forearm of the opposite hand in front of you. Imagine your dangling arm and hand as an object. You might use your dominant hand to jostle your nondominant arm and hand around and see how your fingers move, flopping about. Do your best to mentally categorize your arm and hand as a thing. Notice how they hang there, limp and motionless. Then set your nondominant hand onto your lap, as if it were part of a machine being operated from the outside. Try to notice how this makes you feel. What would happen if you really started to think about your arm and hand this way?

Now, imagine your arm as yourself—alive and conscious. You can decide how you would like to move your hand and arm.

You might wiggle your fingers, but this time it is you who does the wiggling—the movement comes from the inside out. You might reach out to touch something and experience yourself extending into the world. Perhaps you decide to move an object and realize that you are enacting that choice through your own movement. If you moved something, try holding in your mind that the object was displaced by you—you as a body made an imprint on the world. You also might want to try moving your hand in a manner more expressive of who you are. If you were in fact your hand, how would you reveal yourself as a hand? What motion would you make? Would you point? Move your fingers and hand up and down? Clasp your other hand? Do nothing at all? Is this the first moment in the day when you felt free to make a conscious choice about the way your body moves in the world?

Whenever I do these exercises, I notice an uneasiness when thinking about my arm as a series of parts that function as a flesh-machine. But when I practice moving my hand freely, this little experiment of choosing movement reminds me of my capacity for agency and the pleasure of making choices about my own body.

## The Story of Who You Are

The way we are in our bodies tells the story of who we have been up to this point in our lives. It reveals what we have been told by others about ourselves, how we self-identify, and what we believe about the world and our place in it. For this reason, our embodiment may be our most comprehensive nonlinguistic form of autobiography. Embodiment is the self in motion, the living, breathing story of who you are and the culture and people you have come from.

Perhaps the simplest way to describe the experience of embodiment is this: the *way* that you *are*. Merleau-Ponty defines

embodiment as the “perceptual experience of engagement of the body in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Embodiment is the conscious knowing of and living as a body, not as a thing distinct from the self or the mind. It is the how, what, why, where, and who of existence—the ground zero of consciousness, of present-moment living. It is to be present to yourself and your experience from the inside out.

Experiences are hard to describe because they happen outside of language. Simply thinking about how to describe our body, or our experience of our body, takes us out of the sensory and into the abstractions of language: categories, constructs, and symbols we use to build bridges between our experiential knowing and others’ experiences.

To truly experience embodiment—and not just think about it—try noticing what you’re sensing as a body right now. How is your body positioned? Where are your limbs? How are you holding yourself? Are you fidgeting? Lying down? Is a particular sensation making it difficult to take in this information? Are you feeling comfortable? Contorted? Are you trying to take up as little space as possible, or are you stretched out—arms and legs flopping down where you feel most at ease? Are you trying to avoid something sensory, such as fatigue, hunger, or pain?

The way you are in this moment says something about you, and it might reveal something about your internal state—for example, that you are tense because you are stressed or that you are fidgety because you are anxious. It might reveal the social messages you have received: perhaps you are closed in on yourself because you have been shamed for taking up space, or perhaps you are sitting up straight because you’ve been told you should have a strong, confident posture. What might your posture right now have to say about your family of origin, your sense of security in your environment, your inner emotional state?

Your embodiment is always telling a story.

Learning to listen to, interpret, and work with this story is central to connecting to wisdom, an integration of what we sense and how to make sense of it.

Exploring embodiment can sometimes be overwhelming and at other times feel like a treasure hunt of self-discovery. Either way, these questions are helpful only if they're engaged with compassion and curiosity. Come back to them again, perhaps at a different time, and see how your emotional state, environment, or social context changes your answers—exploring whatever you find with gentleness.

## The Pain Point

I am sitting across from a fifty-something man wearing a sharply pressed suit; he has come for a session on the way home from work. He lays his suit jacket neatly beside him on the couch. When sitting, his pant legs rise up to reveal colorful striped socks that don't quite match his "I'm-someone-important-at-work" look. I raise my eyebrows and glance at the socks. He catches the nonverbal cue and smiles. "A gift from my daughter," he says, eyes gleaming.

He knows I have some background information because I have already spoken with his cardiologist, who regularly refers clients to me. These days, most of the referrals seem to be for midlife, workaholic men doing their best to be successful and stoic. My client tells me he has never been to therapy before and is confused about why his biomedically focused heart doctor sent him to a "feelings and talking doctor," which is how he describes my line of work. He says he has been having some medical problems and that he is coming to me to comply with doctor's orders but doesn't think he needs to be here. The message I hear is, "Don't get too excited; there's nothing to see here—this is just an issue of the heart," a double entendre in this case. I wonder to myself, *What is the organ of*

*his heart saying about what it has been carrying for so long? What would it say if it could use words instead of sensation to communicate?*

I know better than to disclose my flicker of excitement about all the vibrancy and ease on the other side of our work together. In time, he will come to be someone I adore, and his wife will send me notes once in a while to thank me for helping her husband come back to life. But first, we have to get to the heart issues he so wants to avoid.

In another time and place, I am sitting in silence with a nonbinary teen who is staring at the ground, both focused and far off. It's hard to tell if they are bored, gathering courage, or deep in thought. Eventually I will ask, "What happened inside? Where did you go?" But first we will sit quietly together, week after week, making friends with the silence. Some things are better felt than said, and so we drop into the living moment to be with *what is* without rushing to describe it.

This young person evokes such a sting in me, my sadness overflowing out of my chest into my throat as I recall our work together. They, too, have been referred by a doctor; their physician giving them my name after a long list of medications failed to curb the exhausting panic that was spilling into their life. This tender human had survived an act of sexual violence, which had left their body wrought with fear. It had made certain places terrifying, as if another act of violence were always just about to happen. We will do trauma work for longer than we were both expecting, because more traumas will happen. We will be crushed and resilient, together. But these moments of silence that run like a meandering stream through our connection will set the foundation for their body to feel at rest again—a home no one can take from them.

We may think of these two people as being from very different worlds. We have learned to focus first on the differences between us—our clothing, skin color, body shape, posture,

and patterns of movement. We forget that the body is a great unifier—a thread that weaves all humanity together.

What unifies these two people and their stories is the experience of a pain point—bodies crying out to tell stories that have been disregarded or dishonored. Most people forget about the body until pain, aging, illness, trauma, incarceration, or impending death brings it to the fore. These experiences are a frustrating reminder that we can never truly put mind over matter and overcome our physicality. The body tells the truth—the painful parts, the joyful parts, and everything in between.

The mind-body divide undergirds mainstream thinking, but our collective tension is visible. When we are hurting psychosocially—our pain revealing itself in our emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships—most of us don't seek help until suffering shows up in our bodies, as if the emotional suffering is not reason enough to ask for support. One of the underlying messages here is that the body needs to be paid attention to only when there is a problem. The body becomes the scapegoat and, as a result, we often miss the more subtle bodily messages that come before the alarm bells. And there are messages before the alarm bells sound, believe me.

While learning how to have an attuned and compassionate relationship with the body was central to my research on embodiment, my curiosity accelerated when referrals from physicians and other health care professionals started pouring in to my clinical practice. A gastroenterologist sent patients with irritable bowel syndrome to learn about stress regulation; a cardiologist sent patients suffering from chronic anxiety; an allergist sent patients who had reactions despite the absence of allergens. A gynecologist referred patients whose sexual trauma resurfaced during vaginal exams; a chiropractor referred patients who had debilitating back pain despite clean MRIs; and a urologist referred patients who had erectile dysfunction as a result of emotional and relational stressors. In each narrative

it was impossible for me to ignore the mind-body connection. Our bodies are telling the stories we have avoided or forgotten how to hear—and sometimes our inability to feel our feelings (the messages that precede the alarm bells) means our bodies have to scream in order to get some attention.

## **Bodies and Society**

We have a subjective experience of ourselves as bodies, but that exists in a social and cultural context. Your way of being as a body does not occur in isolation. How and why you are the way you are has a lot to do with where you're located, with whom you self-identify, who has called you an outsider or insider, and what has hurt you. This may be a painful realization if we think of ourselves as independent of the world around us.

As much as we think of ourselves as individuals, we are located in social, historical, environmental, political, and spiritual contexts. We must look at the larger social and political ideologies that shape us, including our collective disembodiment, to understanding how we became so disembodied. This could mean, for example, realizing that our mind-over-matter mentality isn't something we came up with so we could play a football game with a sore ankle but that it comes from the influence of Greek thought and Enlightenment ideology woven into our social fabric. It also means grasping that our cultural views of land as an object to be used, conquered, or stolen are relics of settler-colonialist ideologies—as is the belief that we are hyper-rational individuals who can exist and thrive outside of community. These cultural views have cut off the deep knowing of our interconnectedness to our bodily selves, each other, and the earth.

Together, these influences create the proverbial water in which we swim. They dictate the scripts we are handed about gender, religion, family of origin, ethnicity, and socioeconomic

status. So embodiment is the way you are in the world, but that embodiment is influenced by who you have been allowed to be—through what has been discouraged and encouraged—and your sense of safety and agency in it all.

For some, especially those for whom being in the body feels unsafe, disconnecting from the body can be an unconscious survival tactic. For others, disconnecting may feel like a moral choice, especially if we have been taught that our body is inherently evil or that it caused the hurt or violation done to us by others. In these contexts, we might even feel morally superior for being able to disconnect from the body. If so, an invitation to reconnect to the body can feel terrifying or dangerous, as if being embodied requires embracing the very things we have been trying so hard to flee.

While for some of us it may take an event—a serious illness or a trauma—to remember that we are bodies, many people do not have to wait for a specific event to remember the centrality of their body. That’s because their body is placed outside the cultural hierarchy of the “ideal body,” and so they learn early on that their body makes them “other.” Most forms of oppression are directed against the body as “isms”: racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, ageism, sizeism, and so on. The message underneath these isms is this: *You are less valuable in this society because of your body.* This exemplifies the body-as-object narrative mentioned above: people are reduced to body-objects, not empowered as body-subjects. Because of their inability to leave or transcend or conquer their unruly body, the social context suggests to some that they are nothing more than a body, less-than in a world that does not value the inherent goodness of bodies. This creates a trap: their body becomes central to their identity while also being something they are unable to conquer in a social context that privileges the conquered body.

Acknowledging the social landscape that our embodiment exists within is complex. For some, embodiment is a valuable

foray into personal growth and self-connection; for others, it is like stepping back into the scene of a crime. Embodiment comes with a particular kind of ache, liberation, or both, depending on whether the person experienced body violation, illness, or pain. To say that you are your body is not to further overidentify each of us with the ways our bodies have been made objects, but rather to remind us that our personhood is inextricable from our physicality. This is meant to rehumanize us all and to distance us from the paradigms that separated us from our bodies in the first place, as if any of us could ever transcend our bodies.

The body is where life happens—both the beautiful and the painful, our individuality and our relationships, the now and the past—but many of us have forgotten ourselves as bodies. We did so in order to survive the pain or to be compliant, but in the process we left behind so much of the beautiful. We cannot leave one without leaving the other. At best, most of us have a conflicted relationship with our bodies, forgetting there is more to being a body than our appearance, or tolerating that appearance. At worst, the stories we tell ourselves are ones of shame, hatred, frustration, confusion, or indifference. But there is another way.

## **Remembering**

It has been years now since that moment in therapy with Liz when I remembered myself as a body, but I am still learning what it means to be embodied. I research the relationships we have with our bodies, specialize in this work in my therapy practice, and write and speak about it, but all of these activities are relatively disembodied. The irony is not lost on me. I can sit all day reading about neuroanatomical structures responsible for how we sense emotion as a bodily process, only to realize hours later that I have forgotten to eat a meal or that my leg is

numb. To do what I ask people to do—to live embodiment and not just think about it—I have been looking for ways to weave myself back into wholeness, for thread to stitch back together the fabric of my life into something greater than the individual parts. And so, on Wednesday nights, I clear my schedule, drive to a dimly lit community center on Vancouver’s West Side, and gather with strangers for several hours of movement and music to practice coming back into my body.

This particular evening, it is cool outside as the sun sinks away from the darkening blue sky. I have to pull hard on the door of the studio to get it open. I almost walk away, but the door opens on the fourth yank. Nervous, expectant, I climb the long flight of stairs up to the second floor where the air is thick with heat and I can feel the vibrating drumbeat in my bones. I am here to move; I am here to dance into my muscles the reminder that being a body is good, that I am free, that I no longer need to disappear.

The long, open room is filling quickly with all sorts of people, and I’m trying not to think about what anyone else is doing or thinking. I’m there to remember myself. The volume and tempo of the music increases, and Bettina, the woman facilitating the evening, invites us to drop down into our bodies—to allow our bodies to speak, to respond, to sense, to move. “Between our heads and our toes, there are a million miles of unexplored wilderness,” she says. And with that, I imagine removing the part of my brain that censors and judges the way I take up space. I put it in a jar near the door where my shoes sit, and I give myself over to the music, letting my body lead the way, telling the stories of all I have known and felt, each story held within this body.

Remembering our embodiment, actually practicing the goodness of being a body, is something like putting together a puzzle one piece at a time. Together, we will start with the edges and work our way in. If you do puzzles, you know to start

by fitting together the smooth outside edges to set the frame within which the rest of the picture can take shape. I am still learning to do this, and you will too—we will do it together.



To help you process and practice what you read, every chapter concludes with something to think about and something to try. My hope is that this book serves you well by helping you go beyond a set of disembodied ideas and into an experience of being fully present and connected with yourself and with those around you.

## SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- How and why is my body positioned the way it is right now?
- What stories have I been told that might make me feel like this is the best or only way to be in my body right now?
- What if the stories were different?
- How might I be differently, as a body, if I were in another setting?

## SOME THINGS TO TRY

Here's an exercise to get you out of your thoughts and into your senses. Start to tune into yourself and notice: What are you touching right now? What is your skin in contact with? What is the temperature of your body? What about the temperature of the air around you? What parts of you feel tight? What do you smell? What emotions do you notice emerging in your body? Take a deep breath in, and let it slowly out. Thank yourself for taking a moment to slow down and pay attention.