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## Introduction: A Story of Habits Learned

MY LIFE, THOUGH I DIDN'T KNOW IT AT THE TIME, BROKE INTO "BEFORE" and "after."

In April 2003 as the cacti in the Sonoran desert bloomed, I sat in Dr. Schwengel's (D.O.) office in Mesa, AZ. I explained to him a searing pain in my cervical spine and my loss of control of my right leg; a couple of weeks before this visit I had been running on the desert trail near my home in the early morning and inexplicably sprained my ankle badly. Even after I stopped hobbling around on crutches my gait involved a significant limp on the right side, while my left side remained quite numb.

After explaining these symptoms Dr. Schwengel looked at the ghostly images of my recent MRI film and saw the eerie white spots floating in space at cervical spine vertebrae four and six. He lowered the film from his eyes, saying with a warm gentleness in his voice that I would need evaluation by other doctors including a neurologist, but he could work on my neck to alleviate some of the pain. When I asked what he thought of the film, he cautiously offered that the images could indicate many possible conditions, including multiple sclerosis. Multiple sclerosis. I wasn't really sure how to pronounce it, much less spell it; I didn't really know what the disease represented, except that it was a devastating chronic disease. These symptoms that I had thought were temporary and just required some medical quick fix now represented a future lifetime of serious illness. Life could no longer be the same; I had left the population of the well and had entered the communion of the chronically ill. I needed to lie down.

As my whole life whirled around me like a tornado, the good doctor led me to his examining room and had me lie down on the table for a brief respite. In midst of arid fear and uncertainty, water sprang up and

started flowing down my cheeks, cutting rivulets across skin that suddenly felt withered and old, though I was only in my late twenties.

As Dr. Schwengel adjusted my back and spine with the osteopathic manipulative method, I consciously told myself, don't ask "why me?" Such a question appeared narcissistic and theologically misguided. The next, tightly holy response would be "why not me?" Yet as the doctor moved my neck one way and then the other and the pain throbbed at the base of my cervical spine, this question rang false as well. The real, most central question seemed to be "what is going to happen to me?" Questions which then followed in rapid succession included: "Would I be in this vortex of pain and debility forever? What kind of illness do I have; is it multiple sclerosis or something else? What do I need in order to endure through this new reality? What spiritual resources can I call upon? Why won't the two little creeks flowing down my cheeks stop flowing? Will I survive this? What about my family—and of my work at the church?" I don't want to become a burden to anyone . . . "Oh God, help me," I prayed. "God give me the strength that I need for whatever is before me."

After the treatment Dr. Schwengel helped me to sit up on the table, and for the first time in weeks the pain in my spine felt diminished. I offered gratitude to him and realized in that moment that I could both experience healing and still endure through ongoing pain simultaneously. I was just beginning to understand that healing would come for me in small steps, would involve my whole being (mind, body, soul), and would require great dedication.

As I checked out of Dr. Schwengel's office the nurse gave me a list of vitamins and supplements to support my beleaguered body. My eyes widened and my gut tightened as she pushed jar after jar of supplements to me. I had taken a Flintstone vitamin or two growing up, but this regimen required Herculean dedication. I wondered aloud if there were any gummy bear vitamins I could take instead and received only laughter and a curt "no." As I placed the bag filled with nutritional jars on my hip and limped out of the door I stepped into a life in which the nurture of whatever health I could have required incredible commitment; my habitual practices of avid running and eating a largely produce-based, organic diet were no longer enough.

After numerous trips to the neurologist with blood draws, lumbar puncture, and examinations, my condition nonetheless didn't fit into a diagnosis and thus I had no treatment protocol to follow even as my symptoms remained. While still popping incredible numbers of supplements

and with a strong determination to learn from whomever I could I began a long, ongoing journey to a wide variety of healers: physical therapists, integrative medical doctors, homeopaths, naturopaths, ophthalmologists, traditional Chinese medical doctor, acupuncturists, massage therapists, yoga teachers, feldenkrais practitioner, Rolfer, sports medicine doctor, hyperbaric chamber operator, holistic dentist, and a second neurologist. I learned to regard the search for a gifted healer as a prayer practice and to offer gratitude for what I garnered from each practitioner. The therapies or protocols that the healers gave me had to be practiced as a spiritual discipline; otherwise I wouldn't have the willpower to adhere to all the requirements. Whether the task was taking vitamins or giving myself an injection or performing some physical exercises, I had to cultivate them as habits which sustained my body so that I had the strength to continue pastoring my church and caring for others. Though I didn't receive physical healing from those habits the practice of them enabled me to persevere through pain, to maintain the health I did have, to have greater empathy for those living with serious illness, and to cultivate hope. The practice of habits that cultivated health enabled me to fully live in and through my chronic condition.

As I struggled to give spiritual grounding to the mundane tasks that I practiced to sustain my body, I longed for a theological account of tending to health. Though I knew the witness of martyrs who had sacrificed their entire lives for their faith, I also felt that the God who gives life intends for us to care for this gift. If our bodies are indeed temples, as the scriptures tell us, then those temples require good housekeeping to remain functional. I yearned for an explication of caring for my body that regarded such a practice, when kept in balance and away from narcissism, as holy. I wanted all the effort spent going to healers and practicing their regimens to be understood not as self-serving or as survival but rather as faithful.

## **A Story of Faith and Habit**

How are we to care for our bodies and our health as a part of faithful Christian living? Such a conversation in the church is certainly fraught with difficulties, since we can hardly talk about the body without mentioning sickness and disease and we have allowed the theological vocabulary of corporeality to be replaced by modern medicine's impersonal,

instrumental understanding of the body.<sup>1</sup> However, such lapses and the deep ambiguity in the church's history regarding embodiment exhibits the profound need for discussion. Christians remain confused about how the care of their health relates to their life of faith. We need a story that teaches us how the quotidian nurture of our beings fosters within us a greater love of God and neighbor.

Nestled within the depths of the *Summa Theologiae* Saint Thomas Aquinas offers us the outline of such a story in his questions on habit. His theology of habit offers a healthy alternative for contemporary Christians struggling to live whole lives in an era of chronic disease and a bewildering array of health/diet/exercise advice. In contrast to extremely ascetic diet and fitness programs that often result in failure, habit enables an agent to act well consistently, successfully, and with ease--without the exertion of constant moral deliberation and reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

As Aquinas understands them, habits are particular qualities or characteristics that accrue to a person after he or she has acted a certain way over a period of time.<sup>3</sup> Good habits give us the ability to act well when oriented to the performance of our proper function and created end, which leads to a virtuous life (if we practice habits that ruin our functioning and keep us from loving God, these habits result in vice. Such vicious habits cannot nurture health).<sup>4</sup> Through long and consistent practice habits become natural and enduring to a person—almost like his quasi-nature. Habits come to make an individual who he is; habits capture what our behavior makes of us. In the Latin *habitus*, the same word from which we derive “habitat,” indicates that habits describe how we dwell in life. For Thomas good habits are virtues that offer us the ability to transform into our best selves and become more like Christ. Habit comprises not yet another diet/exercise program or solution to obesity—habits offer instead the possibility of true transformation. They direct us into deepest happiness and a life of flourishing with God. A Thomist account of habit gives Christians a theology for the cultivation of health as an element of the faithful life in the midst of a very sick world.

In order to fully explore this story of habit that Aquinas offers to us (in I-II qq 49–54), I'll first look at the classical roots of habit in

1. Shuman, *The Body of Compassion*, 6–9; McKenny, *To Relieve the Human Condition*, 21.

2. I am dependent in this definition upon Klubertanz, *Habits and Virtues*.

3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II 49.1.

4. *Ibid.*, I-II 49.4, 55.3.

Aristotelian thought (chapter 2). Aristotle's understanding of habit and the cultivation of virtue, I'll argue, can encompass practices of health. Aquinas adopts key aspects of Aristotelian notions of good habit—stability, action-orientation, repetition—and adds the possibility of infused virtue and a *telos* oriented to God (chapter 3). Thus, Thomas provides a moral approach for Christians in which the cultivation of habits that sustain good health constitutes part of the virtuous life with God (chapter 4).

This life with God is a holistic one for Thomas—one that necessarily includes body and soul. Aquinas, by parsing out different kinds of habit in the body and soul (entitative versus operative) allows that the body does indeed participate in habit. This insight, coupled with Thomas's holistic anthropology, means that habits of health incorporate all of our being—body and soul. Bodies, for Aquinas, orient to God. This means our bodies, just as our souls, are for beatitude with God (chapter 5).

The interwoven nature of body and soul in habits of health includes our emotions. Thomas believes we are creatures who must feel in order to act. Over those feelings we retain moral responsibility—and ultimately those emotions yearn for the complete love we only find in God. Our yearnings for a healthier, fuller life motivate us to habits of health that ultimately enable us to land in the lap of God.

Having argued for what habits of health are and how they incorporate our whole selves (mind, body, and heart), you might want to know “how to” nurture this wonderful moral life that leads to flourishing. Obliging, I'll show how reason and will function to help us launch a new habit of health. This action will be placed in conversation with a psychological account from J. Prochaska, J. Norcross, and C. DiClemento that offers practical, contemporary template for the action of developing healthy habits. I'll use an example of the practice of running to make the action of habit come alive (chapter 7).

The whole discussion of habits thus far leads to the end of habits of health—which for Aquinas is God. Getting to the end (both of the discussion of Aquinas and the *telos* of God) involves a deeper discussion of the journey of the virtuous life. This journey to happiness with God includes the theological and cardinal virtues. Chapter 8 explores those virtues and then leaves us at the destination of any and all habits of health—the heart of God.

In chapters 9 and 10 I'll examine two actual ministries that are implementing good habits of health as part of the life of Christian virtue. These chapters consist of an analysis of fieldwork with missionaries of

Word Made Flesh and with United Methodist clergy in North Carolina who participated in the Clergy Health Initiative. Though not purposely Thomist, these two faith groups exemplify transformations wrought by the intentional practice of habits that sustain good health. This chapter demonstrates that Thomas's theology of habit provides a hermeneutic to interpret why people in these programs became happier, vibrant, and more virtuous human beings in deeper love with God.

In sum, Aquinas offers an account of health as virtue determined habitually. Thomas's understanding of habits offers a holistic approach to the tending of body and soul such that we live our best lives possible to the glory of God. In the end, unlike the ascetic practices of contemporary diet books (Christian and secular) that often lead people into despair, Aquinas's understanding of the role of virtue in health directs us into deeper joy and happiness.<sup>5</sup> Thomas offers that our transformation to healthier people occurs not through fad diets, weight loss programs, or specific fitness regimens, but through our life-long participation in habits oriented teleologically to love God and our neighbor. The theology of habits of health means that our quotidian care of our bodies is not only faithful, but directs us toward becoming more virtuous people who love others and God with greater joy.

5. Torrell, *Aquinas's Summa*, 40. Torrell offers the insight that Thomas's orientation is to the positive. Though he recognizes sin, Thomas upholds the power of God's grace. This is a marked contrast to the impulses undergirding much of the Christian "self-improvement" dieting books, which strongly emphasize sinfulness in eating. Griffiths, *Born Again Bodies*, 207.