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A New Paradigm Body-Self

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MATTHEW SANFORD, *WAKING: A MEMOIR OF TRAUMA AND TRANSCENDENCE*

WE ARE EXPLORING A change in how we think and how we relate to our world as we learn to live as embodied persons, engaging our bodies, listening to them, and listening as well to our Christian traditions of faith. We are on a journey: one that begins with the body, traverses several landscapes, and returns to where we started, our bodies now understood in new ways that point to the paradigm shift we seek. We are persuaded that on this journey of accessing our bodies, we are companions along the journey of God's incarnation in the world.

We think of this book as a conversation-starter about the Christian notion of incarnation, or the central tenet to our faith that God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. It has been a fruitful starting

point for us the authors, and we hope for you the reader as well. There's a conversation here to be had with oneself, and every theme we touch upon may well trigger an interior back-and-forth, leading even to a wider conversation.

Our focus is on body: my body, your body. This should be simple and straight-forward; after all, *body* is very *in* right now, trendy, even. Everywhere we look—TV, movies, magazines, the internet, in all forms of advertising—bodies are at the center. But this centrality of body does not make it simple to understand. In fact, the centrality of the body betrays how fragmented our self-understanding really is. Our very language points to this fragmentation.

At the heart of our quest for the paradigm there nestles an idea that beckons, a kind of Holy Grail if you will, that we attempt to understand and sketch. We call this the idea of *bodyself*. In its essence, *bodyself* asserts that my body is my very self and that myself is a body. Our dictionary, as well as our encyclopedia of ideas, rests on the assumption that body and self are two separate things. After all, the words and ideas that we work with are expressions of our culture, a culture that is deeply informed by a worldview of body/self separation. The reasons for this separation are not difficult to understand: I look at my body and see that it is finite, it is bounded, and it grows weary, is subject to disease, deteriorates, and dies. But that is not my essential self, because I can in my imagination go places my body has never been; I can dream of worlds that have never existed.

Matthew Sanford, an inspirational speaker, author, and yoga instructor, who was paralyzed from the waist down following an automobile accident, marks the goal for us: “*to access my body in a more living and engaged way, I needed a paradigm shift. I had to literally change my relationship to the world.*”¹ That's what we're after, a new paradigm. As we seek out this new paradigm, we find it is an elusive thing, and that will be evident as we move through the successive chapters of this book. It is not just that the paradigm is hard to grasp, it's also that our language isn't up to the task we face—nor are our ideas. Our dictionary does not contain the words we need, and our encyclopedia of concepts lacks adequate resources for our thinking. For example, when a friend suffers from clinical depression, we say that they have a mental illness. We are discovering that our mind, or that which is mental, is not simply confined to the brain, or separate from our bodies, yet we struggle with naming what we call mental illness. If someone is diagnosed

1. Sandford, *Waking*, 149.

with diabetes, we don't tell others that they have a physical illness, and yet diabetes affects the whole person. While what we hope for as authors is a paradigm that challenges the dualisms we have inherited about body and self, mental and physical, self and other, we know that we are caught in the trap of our own cultural expressions which are not adequate to the sense of who we really are as created in the image of God. And to further complicate our task, the sciences and social media (as just two examples) move so rapidly through the shifting boundaries of self and other, self and body that we hardly have time to reflect on the changes.

For hundreds of years, we have talked about body, mind, spirit, and soul—names for ideas that we construct in order to explain our experience. They have worked for us in explaining some of the things we mentioned above—for example, that my body is earthbound, whereas my self can soar to situations and worlds that do not even exist in my present experience. Body, mind, and soul are products of reflection trying to make sense of the experience that is me. This duality of body and mind has a venerable history; today it is institutionalized in our philosophy and science—relating body and soul, brain and mind, has become an industry in itself, analyzed in thousands of learned books and articles.

A basic separation, a deep-down devaluing of body is embedded in our cultural experience, and it shapes how we as individuals view our own bodies. This devaluing is expressed in a bodyself separation that has conditioned us profoundly—from which, we are convinced, by our own experience and by conversations with many other people, it is extraordinarily difficult to free ourselves. Over the ages, our common conversation has separated *body* and *self* so thoroughly that it is very difficult to bring the two together in a meaningful way. At the outset, we must acknowledge that this separation is quite understandable. It grows out of experience that is real and also widespread—even universal. This experience and the motives for interpreting it in terms of bodyself separation are not always negatives, nor do they always cause harm. We want to make this clear as we approach the themes of this book. We want to make two points, however: (1) that the idea of separation is at odds with our wider scientific and religious understandings, and (2) if carried forward in certain exaggerated ways, separation thinking can close off important experience and insights, and it can be very destructive. As we reflect on this separation-thinking, we recognize that it is inextricably part of our own thinking—we do not write as if we are immaculately liberated from it. Thinking in terms of a separation between

body and self challenges us to provide better interpretations of our experience as bodies who are also selves, or selves who are embodied—*bodyselves*.

There are two fundamental motifs that underlie this perspective of separation. The first is the *motif of the essential self*. The term “essential self” is “the kind of thing human beings have had in mind, over thousands of years, in talking of ‘my inmost self’; ‘my self, my inward self’; the ‘living, central, inmost I’; the ‘secret self enclosed within.’”² Throughout the centuries, different body parts have been identified as this essential self: the chamber of the heart, the gut, the breath of life, and now the brain with each part metaphor and literal, locating who we are within our body as the essential core of who we are.

This sense of our essential self is vividly expressed in news accounts of Brendan Marrocco, the first veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to lose all four limbs in combat and survive. The twenty-six-year-old infantryman lost all four limbs in a 2009 roadside bomb attack in Iraq. The language of a 2010 *New York Times* article speaks volumes about the struggle to relate body and self. The headline of the article gives a hint of the issues: “Spirit Intact, Soldier Reclaims His Life.”³ Despite horrible damage to his body, his “spirit” is intact. The author of the article writes that when his mother got her first look at her son, she “struggled to see beyond the wounds, the respirator and the missing arms and legs.” Why should she “see beyond” her son’s body? Because in that beyond, his true self could reassure her. The soldier has also met, fallen in love with, and proposed marriage to a young woman who is a member of a volunteer group that visits wounded veterans in the hospital. She is described as a person who sees “what is there rather than what is missing”—a very suggestive use of words, because they imply that the disabled man she saw led her to see more deeply just who he is. Can we say that she did not have to look beyond his body, because she saw more deeply into his body? Perhaps it is the author’s struggle that is more accurately expressed here, since she goes on to write that the fiancé “has a gift: She can see clearly and comfortably past the disfigurement and disabilities.” Apparently the injured man’s self is visible only to those who have a gift for seeing past or beyond the body. The condition of the body may be considered an obstacle for the self. In her own words, the fiancé’s comments are more richly suggestive as she responds to the family’s concern that her actions are motivated by pity and that “empathy was overriding

2. Strawson, *Selves*, 8.

3. Alvarez, “Spirit Intact.”

common sense”: “Do you really love him? Do you pity him?’ There is no reason to pity him. He had a horrible thing happen to him. But he is no less of a person.” We focus on the language that is used in this article, because whether it is more reflective of the author’s state of mind or that of the soldier’s mother and fiancé, it expresses poignantly the dilemma we all face when we think about the relationship of body to self. The soldier who has lost all four of his limbs poses an unusual, we might say, extreme case, but precisely in such a case we recognize the issues we all face. The language is imprecise; it does not go as far as we would like in our effort to clarify our dilemma—just as most often language fails us. There is also a subtext of faith in the story, elaborated in terms of the strength of the human spirit in face of the body’s devastation. Even miraculous elements are present in the descriptions of the soldier’s perseverance, the medical successes, and the love between him and his fiancé.

The comments that readers have made on this article are equally revealing. One commenter, who identifies himself as holding a PhD and being a minister, writes: “He is severely injured, his body shattered, he IS less of a person, and no amount of scientifically enhanced wooden legs will change that.”⁴ This comment elicited sharp rejoinders, including: “This soldier, with all his limbs missing is more of a man than you will ever be.”⁵ Also: “You may have Ph.D. credentials but they seem to have betrayed you. This young man seems short on credentials, but his humanism honors his struggle and hopefully will come to his rescue.”⁶ The forcefulness of all these comments shows in the first case how difficult it is to relate self to body, and in the rejoinders to how passionately the writers want to preserve the soldier’s self from the destruction that has befallen his body.

This four-time amputee, we discover, is pursuing his physical therapy with a vigor that impresses his doctors and his therapists. Focusing on his incredible efforts and successes with sophisticated orthotic legs, it seems clear that he is not accepting the idea of separating his self from his body. Whatever hopes and plans he has for his body, he apparently wants his body to participate fully. Mobility of body and our dreams for ourselves go hand-in-hand. They are not separated, they are one. That this oneness is so deeply ingrained in our self-image is testimony to the falsity of ideas that separate body and self.

4. Ibid., comment 8, E. M. Camarena.

5. Ibid., comment 11, J.H.

6. Ibid., comment 62, Ron.

We shall pick up this challenge of how our essential selves relate to our bodies—recognizing how difficult an issue it is.

A second motif speaks of *the body as instrumental*, as a means for achieving other values that are important to us. This view puts great emphasis on our bodies and on the value we place on our body in relationship to others. Fictional stories like *My Sister's Keeper* by Jodi Picoult or *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro reflect our fear of who we become when we simply treat others as means to our ends—as replacement parts.⁷ In *My Sister's Keeper*, Anna, the younger sister who sues her parents for medical emancipation, explains how she came into the world: “They sat me down and told me all the usual stuff, of course—but they also explained that they chose little embryonic me, specifically, because I could save my sister, Kate. ‘We loved you even more,’ my mother made sure to say, ‘because we knew what exactly we were getting.’”⁸ The novel became an instant success because, like Anna, most people can understand what it is like to be used for someone else’s purposes instead of feeling valued simply for who they are. In this story, body is central to the parents’ actions.

Since the condition of our body is a high priority, we treat it as any other valuable object—our cars for example. We keep it buffed, take pains to keep it in good condition, see that it gets regular service and repairs, and we agonize when it doesn’t live up to our expectations. Like the things we acquire in our consumption-oriented society, we expect our body to make a statement about who we are—a statement that others will admire and even envy. When our body does not make the statement we wish for, we may become angry, depressed, or even self-debasing—think of anorexia, cutting or obsessive cosmetic surgery, for example. Americans spent almost \$12 billion in 2008 for more than 10 million cosmetic procedures—surgical and non-surgical. Even though this strategy takes our body seriously, it makes the body, on the one hand, into a thing apart from the calculating self that manipulates it, and, on the other hand, depicts the body as totally subservient to the wishes of the autonomous self.

The same can be said about the Transhumanist (TH) Movement whose mentality permeates our culture today. In its efforts to extend the human life span, TH approaches our bodies much as if they were automobiles that can be rebuilt to extend their mileage. In the TH perspective, however, the body serves a desire to extend the length of life. Further, many in the TH

7. Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*; Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*.

8. Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*, 8.

movement are artificial intelligence researchers, who seem to show an almost gnostic contempt for the human body. “You’re stuck in the mire of pig shit. All of us are. You’ve got to be free of that. You’ve got to become pure mind,” stated programmer and hacker Charles Lect.⁹ The robotics and artificial intelligence researcher Hans Moravec sees a human being “as the *pattern* and the *process* going on in my head and body, not the machinery supporting that process. If the process is preserved, I am preserved. The rest is mere jelly.”¹⁰ Such researchers desire nothing more than to upload the contents of human minds from its container—the brain, encased in the body—into robots capable of artificial intelligence, thus releasing the mind from imprisoning human flesh. This objectifying emphasis on the body as a thing to be manipulated is not what we intend in our focus on body. In this book, our view of the body is not instrumental, as if the body exists solely to promote other ends and values.

In the so-called “wellness movement,” which is fostered by many businesses and other organizations, caring for the body serves as a means to reducing medical expenses and therefore the financial outlay for health insurance. Even church bodies who consider it progressive to recognize the place of the body have fallen into this instrumental mode of thinking. In researching the background of three large Protestant denominations’ emphasis on wellness, we discovered that the program originated in the denomination’s agency that deals with health insurance. With the best of intentions, that agency proposed to the denominational governing board that an emphasis on wellness might stem the ominously increasing demands on the health insurance offered by the denomination. Churches often underscore that clergy perform their duties better if they maintain healthy behaviors. This instrumental approach is not necessarily wrong or evil, but it is at bottom a demeaning of the body as such. It is certainly not adequate for comprehending the depth dimension of our existence as bodies who are selves.

My body can be disabled, paralyzed, lose body parts through amputation, but myself goes on—imagining, creating, relating to other people, compensating for my body’s limitations as I carry on my life. My body lives its life close to the ground, while my self is a high-flier, not limited to a nose-to-the-ground existence.

9. Fjermedal, *The Tomorrow Makers*, 199.

10. Moravec, *Mind Children*, 117.

This self of mine is very precious. It has integrity, is aware of moral obligations, engages in acts of love and caring, and recognizes other selves, as well. To go even further, my self relates to a higher power, to God. My self is reckoned as precious to those other selves, and even more profoundly, to God. It seems appropriate to speak of the precious center of my self as my *spirit* and also as my *soul*. It seems obvious that my self's core identity, as well as its significance and meaningfulness are not coterminous with my body; a deep chasm separates them.

Nevertheless, in light of our experience, our scientific knowledge, and our Christian faith, we believe that this worldview of separation, understandable though it be, is inadequate. Our dictionary and our encyclopedia of ideas were compiled so as to make this dominant worldview understandable, to provide the basic ideas and the words to express them. Little wonder that a shift in understanding, an attempt to frame a new paradigm, will have to compile its own new encyclopedia and construct a dictionary to go with it.

As we proceed, we come to see even the idea of *body* is strange. In my most fundamental awareness, I simply *am*; I feel, see, smell, hear, taste; I also think, make judgments, know pleasure and pain, joy and fear, attraction and repulsion. I definitely do not have a sense that I am a spirit or a mind encased in a body. When I look at my hand, I see myself, not a body. When I cut my finger, it is not something called my body that hurts, it is me, myself. In that moment of pain there is no separation, no mind or soul mired in human flesh, just the oneness of me, myself.

The new paradigm we seek is no less reflective than the body-soul paradigm, but it retains a fundamental oneness. We're helped by an aphorism heard years ago from a friend: "Mind is what the brain does." We want to rephrase it as, "Myself is what my body does." This aphorism accomplishes two things: it roots myself in my body, and it revises traditional views of body-mind with an explosiveness and an expansiveness that can take us into the new paradigm of *bodyself*.

Bodyself is both a given and a work-in-progress that has yet to be attained. It is a given in that it is our first, primal awareness of ourselves; it is a work-in-progress in that it is not easy to grasp, even harder to talk about. We are so conditioned by our heritage of body and mind as two separate things that it is difficult for us to let a new set of ideas shape our self-understanding. We use external ideas and words to guide and shape our subordinated bodies, rather than listening to the struggle of our bodyselves

to form the ideas. We tend to think that our bodies are *object* and as such we need to apply our best knowledge and our religious truth to them. But our bodies are also *subject*; they are seeking knowledge and truth. We are not using our bodies and brains to seek understanding, just as we are not using our bodies to write this book. It is our bodies that are seeking and perceiving truth; it is our bodies that are writing.

The idea of bodyself is also both vision and challenge—vision because it is not yet fully real to us, not in our linguistic expression, not in our conceptualizations, and not in our personal awareness of ourselves; challenge, because as we will discover as our book unfolds, our scientific knowledge, our classic theology, and our experience require the new paradigm of bodyself. In our journey toward the new paradigm, we will at times see through a glass darkly, we will contradict the very bodyself oneness that we aim for—after all, our dictionary is still composed mostly of the words from bygone eras.

We have said that we are initiating a conversation about our bodyselves. How do we converse about ourselves? Where do we start? If you have attempted to write a personal memoir or autobiography, you recognize that it's a tricky business—on several counts.

For one thing, there are many perspectives to consider. We have a professional life, a career—most resumes and obituaries focus on this aspect. But I am also a social being, with a family and friends who have a perspective on me that my professional colleagues may rarely see. I have a psychological life—ups and downs, highs and lows—that is right at the center of myself, kept very private, perhaps only known to my counselors and most intimate friends. What about my personal history—childhood, in which the foundations of self are laid, adolescence, and the rest of my biography?

Besides these various lives (professional, social, psychological), there is the storyline of our life as a whole. Where does the story begin and where does one bring the story to a stop? Everything is refracted through the lens of today, where I stand at this moment, and the story is by no means linear in its unfolding. We do not experience our lives as a movement from A to Z, as if we were starting at Go on the game board and proceeding by steps, space by space, to the end. Many great novelists and poets—James Joyce in *Ulysses*, for example—have abandoned this A to Z format, but a non-fiction book can follow no other format. While our lives only rarely experience the heights and depths of great literature, our lives do follow a course of

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S-curves and switchbacks, and the telescoping of past, present, and future just as surely as the scripted lives of fictional characters.

Multiple perspectives and nonlinear storyline merge in our reflections on our bodyselves and in our attempts to understand them. We warn you now not to be misled by the one-chapter-after-another format of this book. The reader would do well, as the book unfolds, to consider each chapter as a fragment of a film script. When you have finished reading, take some time to construct the storyline as seems most meaningful to you, filling in with the scripts you supply from your own story. Finally, keep in mind that the story is about you as bodyself, not a self separated from body, not a self inside a body, but a *bodyself*. While we hope to explore new paradigms for interpreting the landscape of our bodyselves, we realize that our journey seems as much like science fiction as what the journalist reports from the front lines. What the “hot button” topics in the media reflect are the images from our past, images of who we are and where we are going in the future. Part of the problem and possibility of what we are trying to do is that we are characters in our own crazy storyline and we embody multiple perspectives as authors and we also know that we cannot speak for all the characters whose lives are linked to ours.