

Introduction

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Many of us are told as children that our bodies are temples of God, houses of the Holy Spirit, and that within our very beings exists a spark of the Divine Itself. Following this joyful pronouncement, we learn that our bodies are dirty, shameful, not to be touched, enjoyed, played with. We're taught to deny ourselves pleasure, to fight temptation, to hold back, go without, resist carnal connection.

The Imitation of Christ, by Thomas á Kempis, was first published 500 years ago and remains in print today. It has been translated into nearly every language and has a reputation as being second only to the Bible as a guide and inspiration. In the latest version, we read: "Sometimes you must use violence and resist your sensual appetite bravely. You must pay no attention to what the flesh does or does not desire, taking pains that it be subjected, even by force, to the spirit. And it should be chastised and forced to remain in subjection until it is prepared for anything and is taught to be satisfied with little.... You must know that self-love is more harmful to you than anything else in the world. You should give all for all and in no way belong to yourself."

It was this contradiction, this kind of training, that kept me confused and disembodied for the better part of my life. I grew up reading *The Imitation of Christ* every night before bed, from age eleven through thirteen. I was trying to be as good a Catholic as I could be, and I thought if I read that book I'd end up being more Christ-like. But its message only helped me sever my soul from my body, kept me from tuning in to

its urgent, loving messages, fortified a fear that all light was outside me and all darkness within. I trusted, as a young one, those voices of authority, placed my faith in their words, turned my power over to the ones who “knew.” And only now am I coming around to my body’s wisdom, coming back to the Source of my passion, my light, my deep, dawning ecstatic joy.

The great tragedy of Western religion is that it elevates disembodied love over embodied love, leading us to believe that it is better to be *out of* our bodies than in them. Even in Webster’s dictionary, the definition for *carnal*, which simply means “of the flesh,” is charged with the added connotation: “usually stresses the absence of intellectual or moral influence.”

It’s not specifically a Roman Catholic upbringing that will distance the soul from the body, for this mentality pervades our whole culture, and it has for hundreds of years. There was a time when humankind honored its oneness with the natural world and lived in peaceful, full-bodied harmony with nature. There are statues made in the image of the Mother, figurines of fabulously abundant bodies with huge breasts and hips, the image our early brothers and sisters had of the One they looked to in praise and supplication. During the time when the Goddess was honored as the source of life, fertility, and abundance, there is no evidence of warfare, no weaponry, no relics of battle.

But all this changed as the energy shifted from feminine to masculine in the normal cycle of ever-changing poles. The Great All-Loving Mother of Nature was replaced by the male All-Powerful God in the Sky. Religions were constructed and codified, once an alphabet was in place, and words upstaged the image.

In the fourth century B.C.E, Aristotle became a voice to be reckoned with. His pronouncements were revered and accepted, turning the citizens of the day into the first misogynists the world had known. He considered femaleness a “deformity” and maintained that whatever is superior should be separated as far as possible from what is inferior. Because, in his opinion, males possessed the superior faculties of reasoning and deliberation, males were naturally superior to females: “For the female is a mutilated male, and the catamenai (menstrual discharge) are semen, only not pure; for there is only one thing they do not have in them, the principle of soul.”

This patriarchal attitude rooted itself in every institution, and the voice of authority became a masculine voice, bent on domination, separation, and the violation of women’s right to participate in the creation of culture. Nature, associated with the Feminine, also took a blow at the hands of Francis Bacon and René Descartes, both of whom formulated sharp distinctions between soul and body, mind and matter. Bacon attacked Aristotle’s ideas as passive, weak, and feminine. He wanted to inaugurate the “truly Masculine birth of time,” leading men to “bind Nature to your service and make her your slave ... to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations.”

Up until the sixteenth century in Europe, people believed in the earth as a nurturing mother, but this attitude shifted with the scientific revolution, which promised security from Nature’s “wildness.” The new world view, according to Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature*, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women “by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism.”

Religions, other than the nature-based traditions of aboriginal people, were all colluding in this tearing apart of heaven and earth, devaluing nature, the body, and the

feminine in one fell swoop. Some historians estimate that during the Inquisition more women were burned at the stake in Europe than lost their lives in concentration camps during World War II. It's no surprise that someone came up with this tragicomic bumper sticker: *There was a time when religion ruled the world. It's called the Dark Ages.*

Our bodies hold these memories in their cells and sinews, and it is no wonder why we fear rising up, speaking out against this madness. But the time has come to re-pair what has been torn asunder, for we are on the edge of disaster here and our own lives as well as life on earth depends on our actions. Patriarchy triumphed because it separated not only nature from heaven, male from female, body from soul—it triumphed because it separated us from ourselves and us from each other, denying the most basic truth of our existence: that we belong to each other, need each other desperately.

Real enlightenment will never occur until we embody the soul and ensoul the body. There is nothing to learn, but a lot to let go of—a lot to unlearn, unravel, undo. And if we listen well enough, our bodies will lead us toward what is true and away from what is false. We'll feel a gut response about something, we won't be able to stomach it, we'll need to walk away from it, we won't be able to put our arms around it, or our heart into it. We will know from the inside out all we need to know to *be that lamp unto ourselves.*

A tremendous power will be unleashed when energy flows as freely through our bodies as it surges through the redwood. In the Gospel of Thomas, we're promised:

When you make the two into one,

And when you make the inside like the outside

And the outside like the inside,

And the upper like the lower,
And thus make the male and the female the same,
So that the male isn't male
And the female isn't female
... then you will enter the Kingdom.

It is not after death, it is not after confession, it is not after lamenting and penance and sacrifice that we enter into the light we've been seeking— it is the moment that we climb into our bodies and feel in our bones the oneness we are that contains the two: matter and spirit, male and female, mortal and Divine.

This book is a map for that journey inward, where we'll meet the Divine in every fold of flesh, every brain cell, in every heartbeat, for as Plotinus said, “While it is nowhere, nowhere is it not.”