



Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Embracing Embodiment: A Review of The Wisdom of Your Body

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Embracing Embodiment: A Review of The Wisdom of Your Body

Abstract

"*The Wisdom of Your Body* has a valuable message for all of us, but could be especially useful for those who are seeking to improve their self-image or feel more present in their God-given, image-bearing bodies."

Posting about the book *The Wisdom of Your Body* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/embracing-embodiment-a-review-of-the-wisdom-of-your-body-finding-healing-wholeness-and-connection-through-embodied-living/>

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Comments

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Embracing Embodiment: A Review of *The Wisdom of Your Body*

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Title: *The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection through Embodied Living*

Author: Hillary L. McBride

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Our energetic and spritely nine-month-old puppy loves to chase her own tail in circles in the middle of our living room floor. Her tail, though obviously connected to her body, is suddenly enemy number one. She seems to have forgotten that this thing she wants so badly to chew on is a part of her. This seems to be normal puppy behavior and while it's entertaining, it's made me wonder if sometimes we, as humans, don't sometimes treat our bodies the same way. We've all had legs that have "fallen asleep" or hands that have gone numb from lying in the wrong position, but our disconnection from our bodies can run much deeper than a numb appendage.

In her book *The Wisdom of Your Body: Finding Healing, Wholeness, and Connection Through Embodied Living*, Dr. Hillary McBride journeys us through her own sense of disconnection from her body. Battling an eating disorder early in life and later experiencing two traumatic car accidents, McBride recounts sitting in her therapist's chair as a teenager, when the therapist noted that McBride's body language had shifted substantially throughout the course of treatment. In her earliest sessions, she had sat curled up, holding her knees, trying to take up as little space as possible, but as she began to heal and reconnect with her body, her posture changed to one of comfort and spatial presence. She remembers her therapist noting that the body can often signify what is happening inside and McBride recalls this as epiphanic in her recognition of embodiment.

McBride is a registered psychologist whose clinical work and research initially focused on eating disorder prevention through improving body image. She quickly found, however, that just substituting the way people thought about their bodies wasn't what led to lasting change. Using cognitive behavioral models to try to change thoughts like "I hate the way I look" by substituting it with a more positive thought like "my body is good and strong", clients and participants in her research quickly became frustrated when substitution of negative thoughts

with positive ones was not enough. Rather than persisting with just changing thoughts, McBride began to embrace the idea of embodiment to help people reconnect their minds and bodies. The dualism of mind and body is problematic in many Western cultures, according to McBride, and embodiment is a "way to heal the mind-body divide we experience within ourselves" (p. 13).

We often think about ourselves as having a body in the same way we think of having a pet or an iPhone. Embodiment involves a shift in instead recognizing that we are our bodies. Healing this fragmentation and dissociation from our bodies can help us reintegrate the fragmented and shattered parts of ourselves. This fragmentation of mind and body has happened in part due to the myths around bodies that permeate our culture. These messages and myths include:

- You are not your body
- You need to subdue and control your body because it is dangerous
- Some bodies are better than others
- Ideal women have sexual, young, thin, and fertile bodies
- Bodies are impure and pleasure is sinful
- Appearance is all that matters about your body
- You should change your body
- Fat bodies are unhealthy
- Others get to decide what is best for your body
- Bodies get in the way of what really matters: theology and intellect. (p. 30-37)

While we all likely experience some barriers to embodiment, those who have suffered trauma are most likely to experience in greater significance. Trauma often leads to dissociation, or a moving away from what's happening in our bodies by separating our minds and thinking processes from it. McBride likens trauma memories to the way we gather ingredients to bake cookies using the flour, sugar, eggs, baking soda and by putting all these things together we create something entirely different. Similarly, trauma memories are made up of "ingredients" like smells, time of day, a specific season, places, people, sounds and packages those together. These ingredients by themselves can "trigger" a trauma memory in an attempt to keep us safe, warning us that one of those "ingredients" might be a warning of an impending danger. They can, however, also put us in a trauma response when, in fact, there is nothing to be fearful of. For example, smelling brussels sprouts cooking might remind someone of a time when their parents had a violent argument over what was being made for dinner. The brussels sprouts in and of themselves are obviously not dangerous, but because that smell is packaged with a trauma memory, a person can experience similar bodily responses to it (chapter 3).

McBride proposes that we can use embodiment to respond to those trauma responses by using techniques like grounding and orienting. Using our bodies in this way can help our minds return to a state of regulation. Using deep breathing or focusing on the sights, sounds, and smells around us can help to reorient our bodies and calm our minds. The body can be a powerful tool to help bring about healing after trauma.

Bodies can experience trauma and they are often also judged by their appearance and image. In a small study I completed in partnership with one of my graduate students, we found that Christian women (the sample we surveyed) experience this and many of them cited scripture to justify their punishment of their bodies for not being up to society's standards. Using verses like 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 which says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body." Women in our study used this passage and others to judge their bodies as unacceptable "temples" while blending this with societal standards on ideal appearance. The context of this verse is not often considered and, in our study, we heard many women using this passage and others like it as a justification for punishing their bodies because they felt overweight or "unhealthy" due in part to their appearance.

What can be done about struggles with body image to improve and embrace embodiment? McBride suggests that moving from body negativity to positivity requires embracing non-appearance related embodiment. This includes, in part, using positive affirmations with ourselves and others like "my body is good without condition" and "my appearance is part of me, but is not the only or most important part of me". Moving from a medical/pathology model that sees the body as the problem, we are to transition toward the recognition of a more healthy social model which counteracts the way society has narrowly defined the ideal body.

The Wisdom of Your Body has a valuable message for all of us, but could be especially useful for those who are seeking to improve their self-image or feel more present in their God-given, image-bearing bodies. As I raise my daughter, teach students, and critique my own body complexities, I found McBride's approach to be very practical and useful. *The Wisdom of Your Body* gives a thoughtful and deep reflection on the ways in which the mind-body disconnection continues to be perpetuated and how it can have significant effects on both mind and body. This book also provides important and practical ways we can work to rebuild that connection. McBride uses personal experience and research to give readers a better understanding of embodiment and how we can work to practice it personally or share these ideas with others—friends, family members, or clients. McBride's examples are helpful to evaluate, and I've already appreciated the relatability to my field of social work. Rather than continuing an unhealthy 'chewing on our own tails'—approach like my puppy dog in thinking about our bodies, I hope we can challenge ourselves towards embracing embodiment.