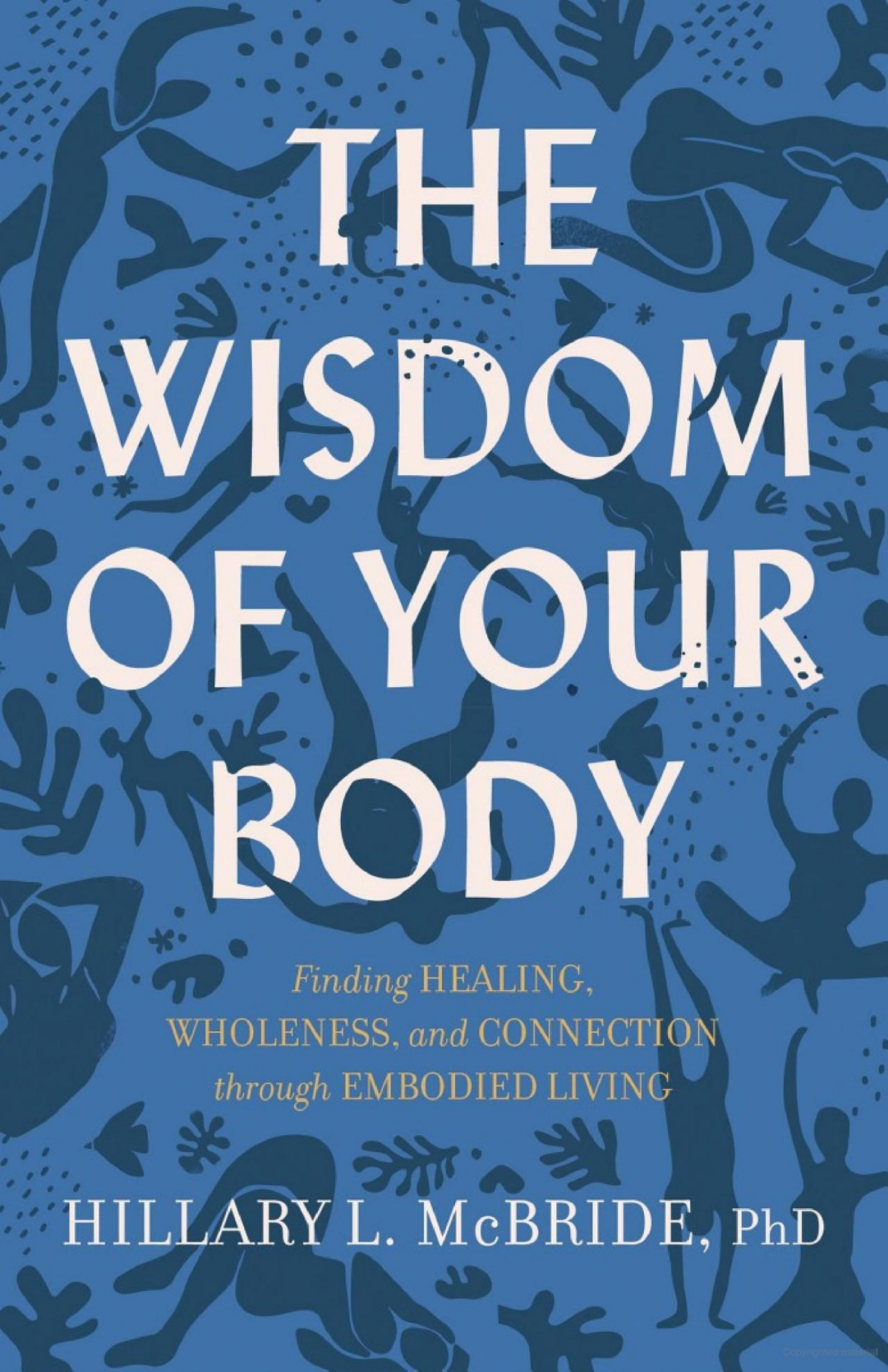

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Contents

An Invitation to Begin

I have a childhood memory that shimmers. It is late summer, and I am out riding bikes with my best friend. We are pedaling as fast as we can down a long stretch of even pavement with ditches on either side that separate the road from the surrounding farmland. To our right, a heron. It stands there immobile and patient, the picture of waiting. To our left, rows of raspberry bushes go on and on until they dissolve into the horizon. The sun is sinking and, as instructed, we will soon be home for dinner—something cooking on the grill, new potato salad, and the front door open to keep the air moving through the house. But until then, we rule the road: sweat and summer sun on sticky necks, part laughing, part squealing with delight, panting breaths as we pedal hard and fast. In this moment, with my bodily senses turned all the way up, I am totally alive.

When I think about being human, the fragile, precious, and mysterious journey we each take from birth to death, I think about the body. The body is the place where all of this happens. We know that when we are young. As babies, we reach out to touch our own feet or stare at the face of a parent, and we know how to take it all in. We learn to walk, and then to run, realizing our bodies can take us somewhere fast—and create an instant game of chase with someone who loves us. We learn to use one part of our body to care for another part of our body: a hand holds a toothbrush to clean our mouths, wields a hairbrush to arrange the hair on our head, or rubs soap into our skin under running water. We learn our bodies can shape the world around us as we jump in puddles and feel we are all-powerful. The delight of it all moves up and out through our lips as we giggle and laugh, telling the world around us through waves of sound that our body knows joy. All of that happens through the mystery of being a body.

Yet so many of us have forgotten about this mystery. For some of us, that forgetting is intentional and swift. We notice things that feel distracting, overwhelming, or inconvenient, and we want them to stop; or someone else tells us that the knowing knot of fear in the pit of our stomach is wrong and we need to make it go away. For others, the forgetting happens slowly over time. It accumulates in receiving disapproving looks from others, sitting still in long work or school meetings, being told to put "mind over matter," or pushing the novelty and mystery of physical sensation into the furthest corners of our awareness. Or we have a defining experience where the bottom drops out and the voices in our head make pronouncements: *Your body is bad*, or *Your body made this happen*, or *You cannot trust yourself*. So we make silent vows to lock away the dangerous parts of us and label them "not me."

No matter how or why we get there, no matter how well it may have served us, forgetting the body also costs us something—individually and collectively. We lose the fundamental building blocks of human thriving, connection to ourselves and others, and the fullness of pleasure, wisdom, empathy, and justice. Connection to our bodily selves allows us to internalize a sense of safety and connection that tells us who we are, what we long for, and how to be most fully alive. If each one of us is a body, then the body is the constant invitation to see ourselves as connected to each other. The person you come to see as your hero or your enemy took a breath right now, just as you did. Regardless of our circumstances or what we have been told about bodies, remembering and reuniting with our bodily selves is a radical act to undo our need to earn our worth, helping us wake up to the fact that there is something sacred right here, in this moment, always present and always available. That connection to our bodily selves is available to us in every moment. We have always been embodied, but sometimes we need a gentle invitation to remember that. We need to encounter our physicality and to know that this breath, these hands, these lungs and eyes and cerebrospinal fluid, this body is good. Consider this your invitation.

Some of what you read on these pages might feel familiar in a bodily way, as if I am putting words to things you already know. Or it might seem disorienting or incongruent with ideas you have held or have been instructed to hold. As you read, I invite you to be curious, to see every reaction as a doorway to knowing yourself better. Know that your body will be communicating, sending messages, like a quickened heartbeat, a jolt of tension, a long exhale. Please listen—these sensations are initiating a conversation with your thinking brain. Allow yourself to be curious about what that communication might mean for you or what it tells you about your past. This thoughtful engagement with bodily sensation is a form of integration essential for wholeness and healing.

Then keep the conversation going by talking to others. The end of each chapter includes some things to think about and some things to try. Use these prompts to take the content off the page and put it into conversational spaces. Whether you have a formal discussion in a book club or a casual one with a friend, please talk with people in your life about what you are reading (making the choice to share more vulnerable things with the trustworthy people). Just by doing so, you are inviting the people around you into more awareness, integrating your own learning more deeply, and changing how we talk about bodies culturally. As you will learn throughout the book, doing so is good for our individual well-being and the health of our community.

A note on the stories in this book. All the stories are real, but sometimes the names have been changed at the request of the person whose story is being told. When using an alias, I also changed or left out details to protect anonymity. I have also honored each person's choice of personal pronouns, which includes using the pronouns "they," "he," and/or "she." All stories are used with permission.

This book speaks to issues predominant in a Western culture, a context that in different ways and at different times has both afforded me social power and restricted it because of my body. I am in an ongoing process of trying to better see the harmful ways I have been shaped by and perpetuated the dominant culture's problematic stories about bodies. Although the writing of a book must end, my personal learning will not, and for that I am grateful.

I also anticipate that our collective thinking about the body from a biological, philosophical, and sociopolitical perspective will continue to develop. In the future we will know more than we do now. I hope that knowing more will help us create a more just and loving world. In whatever ways you can, please take these ideas as a jumping-off point for you to keep learning, thinking, and experiencing yourself as a body in new, more connected, free, and compassionate ways.

Theresa Silow, a professor of somatic psychology, has said, "The body is not a thing we have, but an experience we are."[1] May this book be an invitation into an even deeper experience of who you are, and may you encounter that experience as sacred, connected, and loved.

1

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.[1] 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.[2] 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-membering of who we really are, because what we picked up along the way was *dis*embodiment. 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."[3] 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.[4] 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.[5]

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.[6] 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."[7]

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."[8] 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.

2

How We Become Disembodied

Lies about Our Bodies and Finding Our Way Home

When I was growing up, my parents often took me to a museum called Science World. Inside were exhibits with live bees in a beehive and installations demonstrating how sound waves work and what happens to different materials undergoing temperature change. Many installations rotated in and out, but a favorite permanent exhibit was located just past the entrance—a series of tall mirrors, each distorting the reflection in one way or another. I could stand in front of one and see how I would look if I were double my size, twice as tall, or had a head three times the size of my body.

I knew what I looked like because I'd seen consistent images of myself in mirror after mirror and photo after photo. So, when I went to Science World, I could laugh at what I saw in these mirrors because I knew they were distortions. But what if I had grown up only ever seeing myself in distorted mirrors? It would make sense that I would believe what I saw there because it would be all I knew.

Mirrors can reflect or distort reality, so mirrors are a great metaphor for our societal and cultural context. The images our contexts reflect back to us, both literal and figurative, over the course of our lives shape how our brains develop structurally, which then shapes how we feel about ourselves and the meaning-making we do to pull it all together.[1] The cultural mirrors all around us are constantly telling us, in both obvious and covert ways, that there is a right way to have a body—and it is something other than yours. Like the mirrors at Science World, this is a distortion. But when all we've seen are distortions, it's hard to distinguish the truth from the untruth, much less to deeply believe the truth. Distorted messages about bodies are so ubiquitous that we rarely notice them. That is the power of our sociocultural context: we are the proverbial fish who are unaware of water, even when the water is polluted.

Naming the Untruths

As long as the pervasive distortion stories of our culture feel normal, they go unnamed. But once the stories are named, we can begin to assess how they shape us. Then we can write true stories—embodied stories—that give us more space to live

within. And we can use our elbows to press out the stories until they are deep and wide enough to include each and every one of us.

To get us started in the process of naming untruths about bodies, I've compiled a list of what I've heard from listening to people's stories and exploring what research says about what causes people pain.

You are not your body. Some of us might have been told outright that we are not our bodies, but that, at our essence, we are our souls or our thoughts. For the rest of us, this is an unspoken but insidious message that undergirds disembodiment. Talking about a body as separate from the person, as if the *self* lives elsewhere, has allowed us to distance ourselves from the lived realities of our bodies. We do this because it helps us cope with pain, fear of death and disease, and the reality of incarcerated or policed bodies, and it helps us disconnect from the site of oppression and trauma. It helps us push through. We can work longer hours, dismiss our hunger, and protect ourselves from being judged as weak for honoring our bodily cues. After all, most of us have been sold a story that bodies have limitations that need to be overcome. But this myth has made us silent about body hierarchies that value some bodies more than others. It has disconnected us from the present, from our pain but also our joy, and from whatever else is right here. When we buy into the distortion that a person is not their body, we collude with oppressive systems that devalue certain bodies, and we perpetuate the negative impact these systems have.[2]

You need to subdue and control your body because it is dangerous. Often when we peek under the hood of control, we find fear. So it is with the body. Because we have learned to fear the body, we have tried to control it.

Somatophobia—fear of the body—is reinforced through long-standing and pervasive cultural, philosophical, religious, and existential ideologies. Among the many things we fear about the body are death, animal and instinctual impulses, pain and illness, and devaluation based on appearance, trauma, and injustice. Although most of us have at some point experienced our bodies as scary places to be, there isn't anything problematic about bodies in general. In other words, bodies are good in the same way that nature is good. What's problematic, and deeply so, are the cultural stories we are told about bodies that have us devalue ourselves and others and that teach us to treat our bodies as things we need to overcome. Along with these disembodying cultural narratives comes our inability to understand bodies as good when we experience things like trauma, illness, and death. These stories and their accompanying fears have created a confirmation-bias cycle in which our devaluing, misunderstanding, and scapegoating of our bodies is considered proof that our bodies deserve that devaluation in the first place.

Think about someone who scares you. How likely would you be to walk up to that person and say, "I find you terrifying. Let's explore that." Probably not very likely. Similarly, if our only way of interacting with our body is through a fear-based paradigm, we are unlikely to even try to understand our bodily selves. Yet our

devaluation of bodies leads to psychosomatic disorders and prevents us from honoring the bodily cues we have learned to ignore, messages telling us that something is not right, that we need medical attention, or that it's time to rest or receive care. If we cannot listen to these messages, we cannot begin to live lives of peace (because we are at war with ourselves), presence (because we are not in the here and now), and pleasure (because we are disconnected from our own sensations).[3]

Some bodies are better than others. No one body is more valuable than another body, but body hierarchies are pervasive and are typically reinforced by those who have a body placed higher on the socially constructed value scale. Body hierarchies shape what we believe and how we behave, and they have been used to justify horrific abuse. For example, the devaluation of Black people by white people has been used to justify slavery, murder, rape, incarceration, police brutality, voter suppression, and countless other ongoing atrocities. The devaluation of women by men has been used to discount the experience, expertise, and perspectives of women and to justify barring women from leadership positions, denying women the right to vote, and legislating against women's reproductive rights. The devaluation of people with physical disabilities by those who are not living with a physical disability has helped create a civil infrastructure that prevents those with physical disabilities from changing the systems that oppress them. And so on. If people are not their bodies, then this does not matter. But if people are their bodies, and if we value people, then we are required to dismantle these hierarchies.[4]

Bodies must present within rigid binaries of gender. Assuming a direct relationship between reproductive anatomy and rigid gender roles shapes the gender-based projections spoken over our lives before we are even born. Babies seen to have female genitalia on an ultrasound machine are expected to be sweet and kind, playful and cute, while babies with male genitalia are expected to be tough and sporty, aggressive and self-confident. These expectations shape everything from the toys kids are given and the clothing they wear to what they're told about how they can physically move through the world. In this narrative, there are only two acceptable ways of being in the world—one for males and one for females. Boys can spread their legs wide on the bus, take up both armrests on an airplane, and engage in locker room talk; girls must keep their legs crossed, take up as little space as possible, and be kind and polite.

Of course, the gender scripts themselves have changed considerably over time and differ from culture to culture. Most of us tend to adhere to the script we're given because fitting within a societal groove minimizes the discomfort or even violence we are likely to experience if we step outside that groove. But in adhering to a binary gender script, we restrict our access to the full range of human experience. This inhibits men from connecting to characteristics labeled feminine and women from what has been deemed masculine, and it excludes those in our communities who don't identify with either label.[5]

Ideal women have sexual, young, thin, and fertile bodies. Most of us learn early on that women's bodies are most desirable when they are thin, sexualized, and youthful. This devalues women's needs, skills, ideas, and complexity. It privileges women who meet these criteria but also undermines them by attributing their worth to their appearance or what their bodies can do for others. It teaches younger women that aging women, women who are not mothers, or women without reproductive organs are less desirable or valuable. It creates psychological distress, instills weight bias, and leads to an obsessive focus on appearance. To state it clearly: appearance is not what matters most about women, or any of us for that matter. All women are valuable as people, equal and powerful regardless of appearance or what their bodies can do for others.[6]

Bodies are impure, and pleasure is sinful. Sex, sexuality, desire, arousal, eroticism, orgasm—all of it happens in and through the body. Whether the context is religious or secular, wherever there is a paradigm of sexual control, bodies will be perceived as a problem, which results in a host of distorted stories. For example, when sexual activity is seen as impure, sexual purity becomes synonymous with moral or spiritual purity, and women are expected to be sexual objects for others' pleasure. A belief in the impurity of sexuality is also linked with blaming and shaming women as the cause of impurity in men (an assumption of heteronormative sexuality) and with an overall culture of body shaming. Denying the goodness of pleasure and bodies has left individuals and communities without the skills and understanding necessary to negotiate what constitutes safe, mutually enjoyable, consenting, and pleasurable sexual activity. Further, it creates the illusion that sexuality and spirituality are fundamentally distinct from each other, and it prevents people from experiencing their sexuality as good or even as an expression of Divine indwelling.[7]

Appearance is all that matters about your body. If our bodies are a gift, we have learned to focus on the wrapping and have forgotten how to enjoy the gift itself, not to mention the deeper meaning and significance of the gift. As a result, we often become adept at the game of appearance comparison and control. It doesn't help that other people tend to celebrate this about us, celebrating when we change our bodies to look more like the ideal. But body-image research shows that the closer we get to achieving our ideal appearance, the more conditional our sense of worth becomes, and the more we fear what it will cost us when our appearance inevitably changes. When we conflate appearance with the body—and if we have struggled to appreciate our appearance—it makes sense that we might try to get as far away as possible from our body. That, of course, is only a defensive strategy, because we can never actually leave our body, and even frustration and shame about our appearance are experienced in our body as emotions.[8]

You should change your body. The diet and weight-loss industry is a multibillion dollar juggernaut driven by the false promise that we will be happier, healthier, and more desirable to others if we change our body in one way or another. But the data about diets shows that they are not effective for weight loss, with most people

regaining more weight than they originally lost, and in many cases diets not improve biomarkers traditionally thought to measure health.[9] The belief that we have to change our body to be happy creates conditional self-worth, which means we can be happy and valuable only if our body never changes back. It leads to an unhealthy preoccupation that increases the likelihood of disordered eating, food and exercise compulsions, anxiety, and depression related to rigid thinking and undernutrition. And it promotes the false belief that it's better if there is less of us. Instead of changing our body, what we need to change is how we think about, talk about, and care for our body. Becoming more connected to our body, seeing our bodily self as inherently worthy, good, and lovable, means we can pay more attention to our unique bodily needs, which might include intuitive eating, healthy forms of movement, self-care, and a balanced lifestyle that includes rest and routine care.[10]

Fat bodies are unhealthy. Fear of fat often begins for us when "fat" is an insult hurled at us on the playground. But before it filters down to taunts among children, the bias against fat and the preference for thin masquerades as a health concern for those with bodies higher on the weight spectrum. Everything from New Year's resolution weight-loss campaigns to parental concern at the dinner table to before-and-after images on social media has convinced us that fat is both morally problematic and unhealthy. The weight-biased culture has construed fatness as synonymous with laziness and gluttony; in some faith communities, being fat is even identified as a sin. Although many of us assume such health claims are based on science, we might not know that weight bias and thin preference emerged about a hundred years before the medical establishment became concerned with fat as a health issue.[11] In fact, it was the preference for thin that ultimately drove the research to prove that fat was bad and thin was good. In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Dr. Sabrina Strings demonstrates how fear of fat is inextricably linked with racism, the American slave trade, classism, and European migration in the nineteenth century. The most recent scientific research reveals that what constitutes health is much more complex than weight alone.[12] Health is composed of several highly individualized factors impacted by environmental, psychological, economic, and genetic history, as well as current and future needs. Health also includes mental well-being, relationship satisfaction, and community belonging and safety.[13]

Others get to decide what is best for your body. If you were ever told as a child to give Aunt Grace or Uncle Bill a hug, even when you didn't want to, then you've experienced what it's like to have someone else decide what's best for your body. And it doesn't end in childhood. Doctors, partners, and political and religious leaders (and their corresponding structures) all have power to take away your right to choose what's best for you—particularly as it relates to size, appearance, health, gender, sex, and power. Because we exist in social contexts in which people in power make choices about our bodies, we can know two things: (1) ultimately, our body is

our own, and (2) we can advocate for the fair treatment of all bodies, and we can advocate that those in power protect our right to choose what is best for our bodies. Given how early the body-for-others paradigm begins, we could all benefit from making a regular practice of acknowledging that we do in fact have ownership over ourselves. To say "this is my body" is to state that this body belongs to no one else; it is not an object anyone else gets to own or control. In so doing, we reclaim the body-for-self paradigm.[14]

Bodies get in the way of what really matters: theology and intellect. Theology and intellect aren't superior to the physical aspect of human experience, but we have a history of using them as a way to escape, or bypass, the difficult realities of our bodily existence. But prioritizing theology and intellect over other forms of wisdom, knowing, and spirituality is in many cases a by-product of privilege. Who has the luxury of being able to identify more with thinking than with bodily existence? Traditionally, it was men of high status who could spend their time in the academy or seminary rather than engaging in physical labor or caring for children. Others with less privilege or status could not escape the needs and demands of their bodily existence, especially since social status related to the amount of physical labor a person did. Historically, those with the least social status have been people of color, women, and those with physical disabilities. The paradox here is that the individuals who had more social power because of their bodies did not experience themselves as defined by their bodies, but they made choices that affected the day-to-day bodily realities of others. Obvious examples of this include men determining the reproductive rights of women, or people without disabilities designing buildings that restrict building access for those with disabilities.

While thinking, theology, and philosophizing in and of themselves are not bad, we miss out on the full picture of being human when we use these things to get away from the life lived as bodies. And we miss out on the ways in which rooting these practices in our bodily experiences creates even more grounded, complex, nonhierarchical practices that lead to integration and the honoring of lived experience.[15]

This list of distorted stories is a lot to take in, isn't it? I confess I didn't enjoy writing it. Still, it is important to name the insidious narratives that shape our perspectives, slip into our conversations, and influence our thoughts about others. Naming them allows us to notice them in action, to see the polluted water we have been swimming in, and to craft a new set of ideas that help us move forward. In order to begin moving forward, we need to understand how the ideas we choose to believe work their way into our everyday lives.

How We Become Embodied and Disembodied

While researching body image early on in my graduate studies, I came across the work of Dr. Niva Piran, a scholar who spent three decades researching embodiment

and how it can help prevent and treat eating disorders. Her research has heavily influenced my own clinical and academic work.

Piran describes embodiment as feeling a sense of positive connection or being at one with our body.[16] We feel power and agency in our physicality, and we sense that we are not just observing our bodies from the outside but living through them from the inside out. When we feel embodied, we can take up space, move freely in public and private, and challenge external appearance standards. We can connect to the needs and rights of others while simultaneously experiencing and expressing our individuality. We can experience emotion as anchored in the body, care for and protect our body, and use our body as a source of wisdom when interacting with the world. This matters for our health as a whole person and for our individuality as well as our interconnectedness.

Piran describes disembodiment, or disrupted embodiment, as an experience of disconnection from our body.[17] When this happens, our body is the place where we feel disempowered and constricted as well as lacking in competence, safety, and presence. Disembodiment leads us to harshly criticize our body based on sociocultural appearance standards, and it negatively shapes our body-based behaviors, such as how we exercise, rest, feed ourselves, and care for ourselves when ill. How we treat our body is based not on what we need but on what others tell us to do. This makes it difficult to identify our needs, express them in the world, and trust our body as a source of valuable information. Behaviors characteristic of disembodiment include self-harm, forgetting or disregarding bodily needs, trying to make our body disappear or conform, following diets instead of hunger cues, and pushing our body to the limits even when doing so causes us pain or injury.

Through extensive research, Piran has identified three domains or pathways through which we develop embodiment or disembodiment: the *mental domain*, the *physical domain*, and the *social domain*.[18] Depending on what happens in each of these domains, we can move toward either a more unified sense of self or a more fragmented sense of self. What we experience shapes the kind of relationship we have with ourselves as a body—including our ability or inability to believe we are our body at all.

Three Domains of Disembodiment

Disembodiment happens in the *mental domain* when we experience "mental corseting," or when we buy into constraining social ideals. This happens when cultural distortions become so integrated into our thoughts that we lose our ability to challenge them. As a result, we might self-silence by rarely expressing our needs and emotions—a phenomenon associated with depression—or we might see our body as an object. This often happens early in development, especially to girls. When their bodies change and their social interactions change as a result, they learn that their bodies exist in the "public domain."[19] Mental corseting can also include holding to narrow definitions of gender.

In the *physical domain*, we experience disembodiment as "physical corseting." We are physically corseted when the body is unsafe, neglected, or violated. As a result, we might live with limited freedom and movement or with externally imposed restrictions on desire, appetite, and comfort. This often happens as a result of sex-based discrimination or gender scripts, such as being told, based on your sex, that you should or should not move in certain ways. Girls are often told to keep their legs together when sitting, to be quiet, and to play politely. "Do not climb that tree in your pretty clothes!" Boys are often shamed for any movement or expression considered feminine and are encouraged toward more masculine forms of play. "Go throw a football around." Another example of physical corseting is the expectation that as we age, we become more "mature," which is often code for physically restricted and sedentary.

Disembodiment happens in the *social domain* when we experience social disempowerment. We are socially disempowered when we are treated with prejudice or are objectified and when we sense that we need to use our appearance to maintain or reclaim that social status. In Piran's research, girls with less social privilege wanted to change their appearance to gain more social status; girls with more social privilege were more afraid than their peers of losing social power if their appearance changed. Because social power is identified through appearance and ability, those whose bodies are subject to oppression or marginalization, or those who fall lower on the made-up body hierarchy, are likely to experience disempowerment. The body becomes a place that is unsafe, is treated as a scapegoat for a person's suffering, or is changed to accrue more social power.

While each domain can be a pathway to disembodiment, each can also offer us a pathway to embodiment.

Three Domains of Embodiment

We are more likely to experience embodiment in the *mental domain* when we have mental freedom. Mental freedom shows up in three ways: (1) the ability to challenge societal ideas about the body, (2) the ability to challenge rigid gender stereotypes, and (3) the ability to freely express ourselves. Mental freedom also includes the ability to passionately engage with parts of the self that have nothing to do with appearance. Some of us had mental freedom growing up, and others of us did not. But all of us can experience it now by challenging the restrictive labels society puts on us. Though we are handed ideas about our body and about others' bodies that often hurt us more than we know, once we're aware of the distortions, we can tell new stories that help us feel free and authentically ourselves.

We are more likely to experience embodiment in the *physical domain* when we have physical freedom. Physical freedom includes physical safety, care, respect, rest, movement, and competence, as well as the freedom to accept without shame our physical desires, appetites, and developmental changes. Our social context shapes how much freedom we have; some contexts make it more or less safe for a person

with intersecting marginalized identities (like race, level of ability, gender, and size) to have access to physical freedom. Some of us were told we could be free in our bodies but only until a certain age when we then had to behave ourselves.

Finding physical freedom as an adult means engaging in movement that feels comfortable and playful, allowing us to be how we want to be. For me, that has included dancing, often wildly and with abandon. I've danced in group classes with strangers who were using mobility aids, naked and alone in my home, and in a moonlit desert with other women also seeking whole-person freedom. We experience physical freedom when we pay attention to our desires and needs, and when we are willing to challenge any social, familial, or religious beliefs that conflict with those desires and needs. For many of us, full physical freedom means reassessing what we learned growing up—through friends, the media, or parents—about everything from how much food we can put on our plate to what kind of activity we're allowed to do for fun.

To increase our physical freedom, Piran suggests (1) engaging in physical activity that feels free, expansive, and unrestricted by appearance standards; (2) existing in spaces where our bodies are safe; (3) tuning in to ourselves and providing self-care; and (4) connecting pleasurably to our desires. Because we are all connected to each other and my physical freedom is bound with yours, we need to be creating communities where all of us can experience physical freedom.

Piran's research has showed that, when it comes to the *social domain*, we are more likely to be embodied when we have social power. This means having the freedom to be outside the role of "other" and feeling empowered to stand up to inequity. Embodiment in the social domain also requires addressing the sociopolitical context that marginalizes certain bodies. If you have social power, you have a responsibility to both acknowledge your privilege—the social stories and systems from which you have benefited—and widen those stories and systems to make them inclusive for everyone.

If you have not had access to social power everywhere, it is essential to find spaces where you can experience power, access your resilience, and be free from the discrimination that makes you feel unsafe or othered (because of gender, race, ethnicity, weight, social class, sexual orientation, abilities, etc.). Even if the dominant cultural script has suggested otherwise, you can build social power by investing in validating relationships with those who share similar identities and experiences.

Those of us in leadership positions also must create spaces where all bodies are valued. That includes empowering and supporting people who have been marginalized or othered to speak up about what makes them feel valued, and modeling that it will indeed be valued when they are courageous enough to speak up.

Becoming, Again, the Bodily Self

While most of us think that change happens because we learn new ideas—and, yes, that is part of it—the deepest and most lasting change happens when we have new experiences and then integrate them into the larger story of our lives, and our collective story.[20] Embodied experience is undeniably the most powerful channel of change. Ultimately, remembering our bodily selves, becoming embodied again, is slow work—it is compassionate instead of perfectionistic, communal instead of individualistic, process oriented instead of achievement oriented, and mutual instead of hierarchical. We cannot arrive there through the same mechanisms that pulled us out of our bodies in the first place. When we have embodied experiences little by little, and go about this in a new way, we are able to craft a new story and enter into a new experience of ourselves. Then we wake up one day and realize the world has become a better home for all of us to be in our bodies.

We've already covered a long list of lies and distortions that lead to disembodiment, so here is something more hopeful—a list of truths you can use to begin walking the path of embodiment. Think of them as invitations to remember what you once knew about your body before you unlearned it. These are not items on a checklist or things to achieve, as if you could arrive at embodiment and stay there forever. They're more like suggested directions to a new home; once you've practiced the route often enough, any time you leave you can find the way back by heart.

This is my body. After leaving your body, intentionally or unknowingly, the first step back to embodiment is reminding yourself, "This is my body." Simply acknowledging that you have a body can be a revolutionary act; it can also be a painful one if it requires acknowledging the reasons, individual and collective, that you left your body in the first place. This might highlight your need and your right to take care of your body—learning to pay attention to what your body needs, such as food, sleep, safety, care, play, movement, pleasure, boundaries, and comfortable clothing (or non-oppressive pants, as my friend Madison calls them). If you've lived disembodied for a long time, you might need to get to know your body again: what was true about your body the last time you were aware of your body may no longer be true now. Allow yourself to be curious, to update your narratives, and to need new or different things. You might also be surprised by the wisdom there, gems for the journey inward.

My body and my mind can be friends. Integration of the fragmented parts of us is integral to our experience of wholeness. One way to generate integration is to think of your mind and your body as friends. Doing this allows us to take a thing you know how to do in your outer landscape (friendship) and use it to map out a new way forward for your inner landscape (mind-body connection). You can't expect your inner world to feel like kinship if you don't treat yourself with the same kindness and respect you offer to others. For example, how you talk to your best friend on your worst day is surely nothing like how you talk to your body on your worst day. If you wouldn't talk to your friend or child or partner the way you talk to your body,

then it's time to flip that around—borrow what you know about talking to others and use the same kindness and care when talking to your body.

This is one way to move from treating the body as an object (a thing) to treating the body as a subject (a person). Most of us think about and treat an "it" with less care and attunement than we treat a "someone." So try that. Think about and treat your body as a friend you want to know better. And feel free to use a pronoun to help humanize your physicality. Calling your body "she," "he," "they," or "you" can cue your brain to remember the "personhood" of your body. When my stomach makes an audible growl in a meeting, I might say, "Oh, she's telling me I'm hungry, and I'm learning to listen to her, so let's take a break for lunch." Or when I'm alone and feel a tightness in my chest, I might ask, "What are you trying to say?" Then, like I do with any of my other friends, I listen to see what happens next. In deep friendship, we often say we are sorry, so as you build friendship between your mind and your body, at times it may be appropriate to say "I'm sorry I left you" or "I am sorry I believed you were against me. You never have been, and I am learning that now."

My body is a resource. Our bodies are constantly speaking up, telling us who we are and what it is like to be us. These signals tell us what feels good, when we feel alive, when to eat and sleep and cry, what is unsafe (or what has felt scary in the past), what matters to us, and how we are different from or similar to the person next to us. All of these messages are resources, giving us what we need to get through the day and the journey of life.

If you're willing to pay attention to and dialogue with what's happening inside of you, you'll find that your body already knows the answers about how to live a full, present, connected, and healthy life. Even a trauma response is a resource, helping you to get ready just in case and to stay safe after things have been very unsafe. If you notice a sensory cue, even as simple as hunger, fatigue, or the tingling of a foot about to fall asleep, try thanking yourself for providing the information about what was needed.

If it is hard to understand the body as a resource (because you are used to thinking of it as a liability), try this instead. Identify a *context* in which you have felt a lack of freedom—where it would have cost you something to listen to your body. For example, perhaps you felt shame or insecurity noticing how your belly spilled over the top of your jeans. Once you have that context in mind, instead of being critical of your body, be critical of the context—specifically, the ways in which it limited your freedom. In the example above, this could mean being critical of the body stories you learned through images and advertisements that made you feel shame about a body that did nothing wrong.

My body is a resistance. Bodies are political, meaning they wield power in the public sphere—and some are granted more power than others. Having power can mean feeling safe within a physical space or having access to certain kinds of spaces, such as boardrooms, an elected office, and leadership positions. Likewise, how we

engage our bodies is political. How we are as bodies in space is a form of voice or an expression of ourselves. If we enter spaces where bodies like ours have been invisible or rejected, our mere presence is beneficially disruptive—challenging the political narrative about who gets access to what kind of space—and paves the way for bodies like ours to enter that space again. Additionally, if we have a body that society deems valuable, and if we stand with other bodies that our dominant culture marginalizes, we are using our body to break down the barriers that enforce body hierarchies.

We can also use our bodies to resist problematic systems. I have learned from scholars and theologians Robyn Henderson-Espinoza and Tricia Hersey that in a culture that has been oriented toward consumerism, profit, and achievement, it is a form of resistance to listen, rest, and be present. This could mean intentionally practicing rest or stillness to untangle ourselves from the drive to perform or achieve. Because of how much our heads are down, looking at our phones, it can even be an act of resistance to put down our devices and look up and around in the world, keeping our hands, eyes, and minds free from constant stimulation and the ensuing anxiety or numbness. While there are many forms of resistance (some forms are more or less accessible or poignant for each of us), we can be thoughtful about how we use our body to resist injustice and oppressive systems by paving a way for a future where all bodies can simply be as they are.[21]

My body is a sanctuary. A sanctuary is a sacred space—a place we go to encounter the Holy and sacred. But then we leave that place and come back to our regular lives, where we have been led to believe that things are ordinary and unsacred. I used to think that the sacred place where I met the Divine was always somewhere else, somewhere that was not "here" in the rhythms of my daily life. But now I see that the Holy is very much here—my body is a sanctuary, a mobile home of the Divine.

Ask yourself, "What do I miss out on if I believe the Divine is out there but not here? How does that change how I treat myself? How I treat others?" Believing that your body is a sanctuary provides helpful reminders and invitations that can lead you back to embodiment. For example, if the body is sacred, do you treat your body as such? This could mean being gentler, being more nourishing, or choosing to listen to your sensory cues instead of ignoring them, understanding we are not just form or function but being itself. Historically, labeling the body as the dwelling of the Divine has been harmful for many people's bodies, resulting in bodily control, food restriction, and all-or-nothing practices of sexual purity. Instead of using this paradigm to move into more rigidity and guilt, we can remember that the sacred is already here just as we are, in us from the get-go, which invites us to know that we do not have to change to be loved or valuable. And sometimes in knowing that, we are inspired to treat others' bodies and our own from a place of love, care, and connection.

If your body is the place where the Divine dwells, then you always have direct and immanent access to the Divine. That is sometimes comforting, sometimes healing, and sometimes a reminder that you do not have to keep trying to earn love—you can access it, always. And if the body is sacred without condition—meaning that not just male bodies, white bodies, nondisabled bodies, or thin bodies are sacred, although those are sacred too—then your body and the body of your neighbor deserve to be treated as sacred as well. When you know this deep down in your bones, you're also more likely to challenge any social structure, idea, behavior, or system that tries to tell you otherwise.

Choosing Mirrors

All of us heard stories spoken about our bodies that we had no say over. Some of them were true; some pressured us to fit in; others were damaging and hurt us in ways we may still be discovering. Most of us were handed distorted mirrors on a larger scale too, mirrors that reflected culturally distorted stories about bodies—and most of the time, we didn't even know it was happening. But everything we've experienced has also brought us here as we are in this moment, with questions or longings for something new. We have the ability to change and to choose. It is never too late to create new experiences of ourselves as a body, to tell new stories, and to join the long line of people who have been doing this work and walking the path of embodiment long before we came around. We can always pick better mirrors on purpose.

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

- In what ways was your body restricted when you were younger? In what ways was your body allowed to be free?
- What early messages did you learn about bodies?
- If you could go back and tell your younger self something loving about your body, what age would you go back to? What would you say?
- What kind of friend are you on your most loving days? What would it be like to treat yourself the same way? What love languages would you use (for example, words of affirmation, quality time, giving gifts, acts of service, physical touch)?
- What social or cultural messages shaped how you experience your bodily self?
- When have you felt the most social power? How was that experience related to your body?

SOME THINGS TO TRY

- Put your hands anywhere on your body and say, "This is my body" or "Here I am." Try doing this several times, letting your hands rest somewhere different each time.

- Place a hand on your chest or belly first thing in the morning and feel yourself breathing. Say to yourself, “Good morning. I’m glad we get to spend the day together.”
- Notice the media you consume and take note of what it makes you think or feel about your body or the bodies of others.
- Find a physical activity that makes you feel good, and go do it. Maybe it’s jumping in a lake, sitting in a sauna, or dancing. If you’re not sure what it could be, start paying attention to experiences that help you realize you are a body, and do those activities more often.

3

The Body Overwhelmed

Healing the Body from Stress and Trauma

This chapter is about trauma and stress. Trauma responses are unique to each of us—what is benign to one can feel overwhelming to another. If you have some responses to your own trauma or mine while reading, this chapter will help you understand those responses by explaining how traumatic memory works. On the pages that follow, I discuss some details of my own car accident trauma, but other mentions of physical, sexual, and emotional trauma and abuse are presented without detailed examples. If you have trauma, know that this chapter might be useful to read, challenging to read, or both. You are not required to read it, now or ever. If you have concerns, you could choose to read it more slowly or to read it in the presence of someone or something comforting.

I was lying on my massage therapist's table, face in the padded hole, and Chopin was playing softly in the background. As the therapist worked her strong but kind hands across my back and down my left side, her oiled fingertips tried to assure my shoulder, "You don't need to hold on so tight. Let me help you let go of whatever you are holding on to." My body had been lying there long enough that I had started to sink into that delicious, heavy place of full relaxation. Then: a striking pang, and a scream was spilling out of me, half pleading, half commanding, "DON'T HIT ME!" Instantly, I was sitting in my car watching a truck swerve across the center lane and speed toward me.

Then, as quickly as the flashback came, it was gone. But my heart was beating furiously, and any semblance of relaxation I had felt had turned to high alert.

We both got very quiet. She knew about the car accidents; it was the reason I was seeing her. She bent down and whispered, "Are you okay?" Panting and feeling as embarrassed as I was scared, I hesitantly offered, "Yeah. I think . . . I just got so scared. I thought the truck was going to hit me again. Right when you pressed into that spot, I was back there." We both held the silence for what felt like longer than it probably was.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I know you were not going to hit me; you have never hurt me. I think I was just remembering what happened, like it was somehow stuck in my body."

A flashback. A memory emerging like a ghost out my shoulder, taking over my mind, my whole body, and throwing me back into the scariest moment of my life.

We paused again. I started to settle enough that I could once again hear my favorite nocturne playing in the background. Still crouched next to me, she put her hand on my back and said, "I know. Are you okay to keep going, or do you want to stop for today?"

Another long pause. "I'm okay," I said.

"Only when you're ready," she replied.

I was seeing the massage therapist as part of a comprehensive treatment regimen suggested by my doctor following two car accidents that had happened only two months apart. By this point, I clearly met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The first crash had happened on a December morning four months earlier as I was driving to work on the highway. As traffic in front of me hit a natural lull and I started to slow down, the driver of the car behind me, distracted, continued at highway speeds. I saw him coming in the rearview mirror and watched him plow into the back of my car. Then everything went black.

I came back to consciousness like a computer rebooting, the progress bar showing I was only partway there. According to the clock, it had been only a minute since the crash, but it was eerily calm for a highway during rush hour, and my neck and head were already pulsing. I could see people scrambling out of their cars and coming toward me, and I could hear the familiar sounds of West Coast December rain rhythmically hitting my windshield.

My physical rehab was coming along, for the most part. Nearly two months later, in early February, I was able to resume running for a medium-length distance without suffering a headache or back or neck pain. I was by no means recovered, but I was making progress.

Two days after that run, an unusually large snowstorm hit the Pacific Northwest. Although roads in some areas of our city were perilous and residents were warned to stay at home, everyone at my workplace was expected to come in—if the buses could make it to the university campus, we should too.

That afternoon, the weather conditions worsened. With the December collision at the front of my mind at 1:47 p.m., I informed my supervisor that I had rebooked all my afternoon clients and was leaving early. At 2:08, I sent a text to a friend at work to let her know I was going home and would see her later that week. At 2:12, my car had been hit head-on by a truck that had swerved into my lane. The impact sent my car spinning, tossing my body like a rag doll. The car came to a rest only when it slammed driver's side first into cars parked along the side of the snowy street.

When I opened my eyes, all I could see was shattered glass and the powdery airbag smoke. The smell of my burning clothing in the air, and I couldn't catch my breath. I couldn't speak. I couldn't figure out what had just happened. My body shook uncontrollably as I coughed and gasped for air.

This time, there was no post-accident calm. Because it was early afternoon, families were outside enjoying the snow and several people witnessed the accident.

Through ringing ears, I could hear people shouting. One voice rose above the rest: "Call the ambulance! I think someone died, someone is dead in there—call 911." I couldn't see outside the car. I couldn't find my voice to clarify that I was very much alive. But I also remember wondering in that moment whether the voice might be right. *Had I died?* I was still shaking, more violently now. My body was moving out of control, as if trying to thrash its way out of this smoky, ice-cold trap.

So many parts of this experience were unimaginably awful. Seeing the truck coming and having certainty in that moment that I would die. Being hit, and then having a second collision when I slammed into the parked cars. Not being sure if I was alive, dead, or somewhere in between. The catastrophic rush of pain that hit my body when the shock seemed to wear off—pain that was quite specifically everywhere.

Then the ambulance arrived—and it was driving straight toward me. As I saw the headlights appear through the dust and smoke, a very small part of me knew the ambulance was approaching slowly, but the rest of me thought it was coming at me just as the truck had done—head-on and fast. I squeaked as I tried to scream, my voice finding its way out of my throat again, "No, no, no! Stop! Don't hit me!" I said it over and over again as the ambulance crept its way carefully toward my car.

In my mind, in my body, I was about to be hit again. I had no concept of time. Context was irrelevant. The only thing I knew was that a second set of headlights was now crossing the same part of my visual field exactly like the first set of headlights, and I was stuck there, trapped in the car with my clothing on fire.

A team of first responders rushed to help me get out of the car, weaving my body out of the crumpled metal like thread through the eye of a needle. They were supporting my fragile body in specific ways under the assumption that my neck, pelvis, knee, arm, and back were broken.

Once I was finally in the ambulance, a tidal wave of tears came cascading out of me. Combined with involuntary shaking, the tears made for a particular sensory duet. I got a very strange look from the paramedic who was in the midst of comforting me when I suggested that my body was likely discharging a sympathetic stress-mobilization response that had been impaired when I felt trapped in my car. It was a strange moment for my prized knowledge about the neurophysiology of traumatic stress to make an appearance between jolts and tearful gasps. One part of my mind was narrating with exquisite accuracy the phylogenic hierarchy of the stress response, while the other part of my mind was still trying to figure out if I was actually alive. All the while, I continued shaking violently and gasping for air.

When Information Helps

Although part of me was terrified, another part of me knew that everything I was experiencing made sense. The shaking, the crying, the memory fragmentation, the thinking it was happening all over again when the ambulance approached my car—all of it was important and part of the holy survival mechanisms embedded in

human biology over hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. And survival mechanisms are good, for exactly these moments.

Knowing this meant two things. First, I did not have to rush through any of the processes to make them go away. I could advocate for myself and for the space I needed to begin to process the trauma, even while at the scene of the accident. Second, I did not judge or shame myself for what I was experiencing. When we have nearly died—or encountered anything overwhelmingly scary or stressful—the last thing we need is to feel as if there is something weak or morally wrong about our reactions. At best, such judgments may temporarily diminish the reactions only to drive them deeper inside the body and compound the trauma.

What we need when we are hurting is patient understanding that proves to our whole brain-body system that we are safe. This shows us that whatever we went through is in the past—it is not happening again in this moment as we try to make sense of it all. This kind of compassionate response—generated internally or from others—begins the process of healing the stress and trauma, even within moments after it occurs.

So what do we need to understand about the systems that help us survive during stress and trauma? Here are five true things about the whole brain-body system that most people never learn in school.

1. The brain and body are not separate but intimately connected and in constant dialogue (no matter what we might do to silence that dialogue).
2. Our brain-body system is wired primarily for two things: survival and social connection. Survival and social connection are so closely connected that they are interdependent.
3. Stress and trauma responses are not inherently bad. In fact, they are necessary adaptive responses to things that threaten our survival/relationship drive.
4. If we stay in survival responses too long and without receiving help, our brains and bodies adapt, making it easier to remain in survival responses than to get out of them.
5. We can heal. Our brain-body system is adaptive, and we can use safety cues and relationships to return to a state of rest. This takes time, but it is never too late. And because social connections are central to our survival, we can get back to safety more quickly when we engage the healing process in the context of relationship.

On the following pages, we'll sort through what this means. But for now, take a moment to notice what happened in your body as you read each of the statements above. Did anything make your body tighten and feel hot, or soften and relax? Did anything evoke compassion for something for yourself or someone else? If you reacted to something, be curious about what you felt. You might even choose to say, "This list makes sense, even if I don't understand it fully right now."

Onward, to the Nervous System

The nervous system is a complex information highway that uses nerves and neurons to send messages from the very bottom of your feet to the top of your skull and throughout all your organs, muscles, and cranial tissue. The nervous system has two distinct but connected components: the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord) and the peripheral nervous system (everything outside the brain and spinal cord). A basic understanding of the nervous system reveals that who we are as human beings is so much more than just our ability to think or plan or do abstract reasoning—it is our whole self.

While some branches of our nervous system are responsible for our conscious action in the world—such as reaching for a glass of water when thirsty—most of our nervous system operates unconsciously, either because it is pre-programmed into our wiring thanks to evolution or because of what our body has experienced regarding what is safe or unsafe for us.

We call this unconscious operator the autonomic nervous system (ANS). It is doing things all the time to help us stay alive: triggering the release of hormones we need to dodge a moving car, coordinating digestion and sleep-wake cycles, and letting us know when it's time to go to the bathroom. We don't even think about the ANS most of the time because it does its work in the background. But sometimes our ANS does something that is impossible for us to ignore—it triggers an unexpected and confusing response to stress and trauma.

Defining Stress and Trauma

I use the words *stress* and *trauma* together because they are lesser and greater degrees of the same thing rather than two totally different things. Stress is an activation of the mind-body system in response to experiencing *a stressor*—illness, traffic, death, important events, big life changes, natural disaster, or even the anticipation of those things—together with *the perception of threat posed by that stressor*.

Whether or not we perceive a stressor as threatening is unique to each of us, usually determined by a combination of past experiences, genetics, and the meaning we give to something. In other words, the same event might create stress in one person but not another. For example, although running a marathon is a huge physiological stressor, it's unlikely you'd perceive it as a threat if you signed up for it, trained for it, and had friends cheering you on. Because you have control, you would perceive the experience as meaningful rather than threatening. You can imagine it would feel very different for a person forced to run a marathon against their will.

The stress response is good! We need it for survival; it is a helpful and necessary response to what is happening around us or within us. However, this good thing can be damaging when we experience it for too long or too frequently, or when we have learned to be afraid of it. You may have heard stress described as the "silent killer."

When we fear stress itself, we might feel afraid or shame ourselves for having a stress response. We get stressed about stress, and all it does is overload our nervous systems. How we *perceive* stress determines whether the effect on our physiology and even our cognitive performance is positive or negative.[1]

A stressful event becomes a trauma when we feel overwhelmed and powerless. *Trauma* is a Greek word that means "wound." In the therapy community, trauma is defined by how a person experiences an event, not by the event itself. Dr. Rick Bradshaw has offered this helpful definition: trauma occurs when something *negative* and *unexpected* happens, and it leaves us feeling *confused*, *overwhelmed*, and *powerless*.[2]

Not all of us have experienced the big traumas that can cause PTSD (we call these *big-T traumas*, the life-threatening ones that are central to a PTSD diagnosis), but almost all of us have experienced small traumas (we call these *small-t traumas*). Small-t traumas can include everything from non-life-threatening injuries to emotional abuse, racism, bullying, loss of a significant person, harassment, a messy breakup, unexplained losses, unplanned expenses, or a job change. They might seem less significant, even part of everyday life, but when they happen frequently enough, they can affect our emotional and nervous systems even more significantly than big-T traumas.

The Staircase of Stress Response

Although our bodies prefer to be in a rest state rather than a stress state, when something threatens our survival—whether the threat is real, remembered, or perceived—a branch of our nervous system is designed to help us get through the danger and back to a rest state, where we feel calm, playful, and present. Because these survival systems developed a long time ago when threat of attack by wild animals was much more likely, the following wild-animal analogy will illustrate what these processes look like in action.

On a sunny afternoon, I go for a hike in the mountains near my home. Suddenly, I see a cougar on the trail. My survival systems kick into gear: my body releases a cascade of stress hormones to help me move fast, spot additional threats, and pause things not currently a priority, such as digestion, rest, and preparing for a lecture. All this energy helps me back away slowly until the cougar is out of sight and then run down the trail back to safety. When I get back to my car and close the door, I breathe heavily as I feel my body begin to return to normal. I might then call my husband or a friend to tell the story, processing it verbally and establishing a connection that further helps me feel safe and not alone.

That's a best-case scenario. But life, and our brain-body response, is often more complex than a stress-response system that turns on or off like a light switch. Because we are social creatures who need connection and relationship to survive, the threats we experience most often happen between us and other people (not cougars). Instead of an on-off switch, think of the stress response as a staircase with