

MY SECRET LIFE: Ten Tools for Transformation

Chapter Eleven

BODY I: Moving into and out of the Mind/Body Split

Birthing My First Child

I am 21 years old, lying on my back in the hospital, breathing in time with what they call “labor pains.” I don’t sense them that way. My training in “natural childbirth” breathing techniques is paying off. The contractions aren’t painful exactly, though they are extremely intense — building to a crescendo and then subsiding. By consciously working to entrain the rhythm of my breathing and sounding to the wave-like motions of each contraction, I move in tune with them. By breathing in and out with the alternating flow of internal events, I feel at home, at one with my body, the spectacular energy of this utterly natural process.

Since I can’t stop the process anyway, since it is out of my control, I have only one alternative to becoming one with my body — and that is panic!

When I lose focus, I panic. Zooming out of my body, I separate myself off from the contractions and tense against them, feel pain. Extreme pain. Horrible, unbearable agony.

Trust and Panic

These two attitudes, the first, of moving my consciousness down into my body, becoming one with it, and surrendering to its natural process; and the other, of remaining separate from my body, defending myself against whatever is going on within it, have colored every experience of my life. They are also the two ways people tend to view any process involving the birth of something new. Either we trust the process, move into it, go with it, or: tearful, panicky, we tense against it, and experience pain.

Growing Up into Separation

The first attitude is inborn. We come into this world, like other baby animals, at one with our bodies. Consciousness is oceanic. We don't sense ourselves as individuals. That must be learned. The process of growing up in this society can be described as that of separating out mind from body, taking control of the body as an instrument which we learn to bend to our will.

According to developmental psychologists, by the time we are twelve years old, our minds have completely separated from our bodies. The famous philosophical remark of Descartes, “I think, therefore I am,” has become real. We identify with our minds, and think of our bodies as part of the external world. That world is now mirrored inside our minds, as images and ideas. Substituting images and ideas for things, we manipulate them according to the rules of formal logic. The more logical we become, the more we think we can “control (external) reality” — including the reality of our own body. The body is external to the self (the mind), and is relegated to the status of an object, mechanical. Like any machine, we “think” it is predictable, controllable, and its parts can be taken apart and put back together again. There is no mystery to it, there are only problems. And any problem, once analyzed, can be solved.

Birth & Death as Mysteries

Every “problem,” that is, except death — and birth. Death remains a mystery, no matter how we try to avoid it. Death is inevitable, and we do not understand it (we can’t predict it, or control it, or stop it), so we find it terrifying.

Nor do we understand birth, though very few contemporary mothers experience birth's profound mystery — they are so drugged, and/or so afraid.

The mysteries of death and birth both arise out of processes that involve dramatic transformations of the body. In the first, the “spirit” or “life force” leaves the body, and it putrifies, dissolves back into compost from which new bodies of all kinds form.

Some of us die suddenly, with no time to prepare for this great passage. Others know they are dying, and have time to consciously create closure.

Unlike death, we normally have nine months to prepare for birth. I remember my awe, in feeling the little heart beat for the first time — the heart of another human being, separate from me, living in my body! My body had transformed into a vessel and nutritive source for the creation and ravenous growth of another living being. My body knew exactly what it was doing, and did not need “me,” my mind, to help it, to inform it, of anything. Nor could my mind or will control it. My body was proceeding according to its own laws, laws both natural and inevitable. As my pregnancy advanced, I noticed how my consciousness, usually outside and above my body, was moving in and down, to center in my womb. “I,”

my mind, had become one with this ongoing physical transformation. I had never felt so grounded, so alive, so “real.” I loved being pregnant.

By the time I went into labor, it was easy to do the breathing exercises I had practiced, easy to trust my body’s mastery of this climactic part of the process, too.

After eleven hours, the second stage of labor, “pushing,” began. I was wheeled on a gurney into the gleaming delivery room, and hoisted onto the table, under steely bright lights. My feet were positioned awkwardly, in stirrups, my body was draped, and the macho wisecracking doctor sat on a stool behind the drape. Pushing felt like they said it would, like having a bowel movement. (So why wasn’t I squatting?) My baby’s head was so big, and his 8-1/2 pound body so large, that pushing took extreme effort.

Finally, as the head began to crown, and then squeezed out, followed by Sean’s slippery body . . . there, right then and there in the sterile hospital delivery room with the gleaming steel lights and the macho doctor I slipped into another dimension, entering sacred time and space. For one brief, stunning moment I experienced childbirth as the

template for creation, and identified myself, my body, as Woman, the Creatrix. Many years later I would call this Goddess Consciousness. At that time, May 1964, I would struggle to retain even a glimpse of that uncanny ancient knowing.

Return to Mind/Body Alienation

Two weeks later, I was rocking in the new rocking chair with my new baby. Nursing him — and feeling strange. Knowing that this was supposed to be the most beautiful experience in my life. And it was not. Despite the tug of his perfect little lips sucking on my nipple, and the tug of my womb in response, I felt disembodied. My mind was cathecting back, out of body. Already, I was returning to my pre-pregnancy state of mind/body alienation, where I would remain, for years.

My children suffered from being with a mother who was distracted, not there. I suffered too, wanting to feel my children, but terrified. I “thought” I feared being caught up in the role of “mother,” of becoming “just like my mother,” whose eight children (I thought) had rendered her a slave to household chores. In reality, I was terrified of feeling my own children’s pain at being abandoned by their mother. And, as I would come to realize many many years

later, that terror masked the original one: of feeling emotionally abandoned by my own mother when I was a child.

So while my mind sought freedom, dominion, the capacity to choose and become whatever I wanted, my body's pain and longing to remember its bond with its child (and its mother) continued. The tragedy of this profoundly ambivalent attitude towards my own mothering — an attitude that paralyzed me, rendered me incapable of committing to either myself or my two little boys — would lead, six years later, to that first peritonitis attack, when I finally had to take charge, take responsibility for my life, or die. Six months later I told my husband to leave the house, and two years after that I left the children with their father, a karmic choice, for which we all paid dearly.

Logic and Instinct

The split between mind and body, between logic and instinct, painful as it is when we begin to feel it, goes unnoticed. Once the mind separates out completely, there is no more pain, because there is no more feeling. We have numbed ourselves to our own bodies, in order to achieve “rationality,” logic. Our entire culture is geared towards producing this duality in each person within the first 12 years of life, though

we don't know it. We identify with the mind, and treat the body as "other," one more object in the room.

Any duality, when unrecognized, produces conflict. The denied pole fights for recognition; and when it is not granted, resorts to sabotage. The body introduces an unconscious countercurrent to the mind's conscious intent, creating ambivalence, emotional paralysis, and finally, illness. My ambivalence towards mothering, and the resulting peritonitis, is an example of what happens when the conflict between mind and body becomes acute.

We all remember this conflict, how it raged during adolescent years — especially those of us growing up during the '50s, when we both thrilled to and simultaneously denied the strong new juices flowing through our bodies. For me, this made weekly confessions to the priest exercises in hypocrisy. Over and over again I promised never to kiss my boyfriend "that way" again, knowing full well that, despite my best intentions, I would succumb to temptation. I hate myself for my hypocrisy, for not being able to control my body; I hated my body, its power over me.

Earlier, as a nine year old, I had had the good fortune to be one of the few girls who love horses to actually get her own horse — only because I begged my father for so long and so insistently that he finally gave in, promised to get me that horse if I would do all the dishes for the entire family (there were six children at this time) for a whole year, with neither complaints or forgetting. (I think he assumed I would be unable to fulfill my end of the bargain.)

Immediately, I got out a big sheet of paper, drew a grid on it with 365 squares, and started crossing out each day.

I was lucky. Not only did my busy and preoccupied father keep his end of the bargain, but my own logical mind was so developed at that early age that I was capable of holding a focus for an entire year. Moreover, for that brief period of time, logic and instinct united to get me the horse so that, running her bareback through the fields, my legs spread to embrace her sweaty pounding muscles, I was in my body and our two bodies were one.

My horse, “Goldie,” Golden Sunlight, became my first obsession. When I wasn’t riding her, I was drawing her, or pretending I was her, crawling around with one of my little brothers or sisters on my back. Everything she ate made my mouth water: hay,

grass, oats, carrots, apples — she was my body, my big, beautiful, glorious, strong, swift, full-hearted, heroic amazon body. She was the body I never had. Riding her bareback, racing into the wind, I could be anything, do anything, go anywhere. Nothing could stop me. My mind and body joined with Goldie's body; we were at one with the natural world. On Goldie, for the one and only time in my young life, I was happy.

Then I turned 13, and met Dick, and was faced with a choice: either keep Goldie, or sell her so that I could spend the money to ski with Dick. I sold my horse, and that brief spell of communion with the natural world was over. Now came the torment of puberty as experienced by a saintly Catholic girl who loved a fine young man within a strict puritanical culture.

The body's desire was wonderful, terrible. I loved it, longed for full communion; I hated it, refusing to surrender. I loved it, wanted him to push closer, further, deeper. I hated it, knowing I would have to confess once again.

By the time I was a junior in college, the dichotomy between mind and body, between logic and instinct, had gone on so long that my vigilant virginity was exhausted. I wanted to experience sex. And I wasn't

going to do it unless I was married. In November of 1963 I was faced with a decision, to go back with my original high school boyfriend Dick, whom I still loved (and who would years later become my second husband), or to stay with my college boyfriend Patrick, whom I admired for his talent, but did not love. Instinct would have led me back to Dick. Yet the most authentic choice, I intuitively knew even then, was to choose neither man, to learn how to live on my own. I also consciously knew that I was so afraid to be alone that I wouldn't allow it as an option. Cynical, hating myself as a coward, in a sort of perverse negation of rationality, I flipped a coin.

I flipped a coin to decide which man to marry.

The present boyfriend won, and soon after, I married him.

That early decision, to flip a coin to decide my fate rather than do what I was afraid of, may have been the unconscious impetus for the personal rule I would adopt later, after divorcing that first husband, to always do what I was afraid of.

A decade later, when I finally yielded to instinct, and reunited with Dick, I told him the story of flipping the coin, and he replied that during an earlier time

when we were apart he also had flipped a coin! And that, unlike me, when the coin came up to *not* remain with me, he felt so badly that he knew it was the wrong choice. For him, instinct was primary, and he honored it.

“Free Love” and Addiction

Like so many in my generation, after that disastrous first marriage I ran headlong and dancing, giggling, stoned, into the arms of “free love.” I thought that I was being spontaneous, natural, free; actually, I was treating the most intimate of acts as if it were casual entertainment. I convinced myself that I was satisfied with mechanical sex, and my heart, already locked up, tightened into a fist.

I was running, pell mell, from one experience to another, without slowing down to fully feel them. I could not afford to fully feel them, because if I did I would be inundated by an upsurge of buried pain. I stayed “on top” of the anxiety by being “busy.” During those times when I was not “doing” something, and anxiety surged, I would pick up another cigarette, or pour another cup of coffee, or smoke another joint, or eat another sweet roll, anything to dull the continuous murmuring panic.

By the time I was 40 years old I could not go on living that way. Something had to change. I was physically and emotionally and spiritually exhausted, and I knew it.

And I knew that until I stopped smoking, I wouldn't be able to accomplish anything, because my own disgust with this habit would undermine any project I undertook. I hated being a slave to something, and, once again, felt like a hypocrite. Me, who had always loved freedom, caught, in the vice grip of this addiction!

What is Freedom?

Freedom was my most important value, had been for a long time. But my understanding of what this value meant was changing. My generation's love of freedom as doing-whatever-we-wanted-without-thought-for-the consequences was mutating into something more tangible. I was beginning to glimpse a much more spacious sense of freedom — the capacity to be truly present, to be fully here and now, open, relaxed and trusting. While I had glimpses of this other, this never-never-land, this nirvana — what I felt most of the time was a terrible urgency to understand. To know what was going on. To figure it

all out. To control. I was on the front lines of a war, on guard and alert to danger from any direction.

Along with elusive hints of what I now call “presence,” I was beginning to sense that I was haunted by a shadowy past that sent up continuous tendrils of muted terror. Another sensation went along with this, that of feeling dense, stuck, rigid. I was beginning to notice that somehow, somewhere, sometime, my body had hardened into a continuous “fight or flight” state of readiness.

I became fully conscious of the defensive stance of my body one early spring morning, while lying in bed. I had just awakened and was aware of a robin singing in the tree just outside. Though I was intellectually thrilled to hear this harbinger of spring after a long mountain winter, I was simultaneously struck by the realization that my body felt like a thick cement wall filling the space between myself and the robin’s song. That this wall was preventing me from being fully present to the music. I vowed then and there to work to thin the wall, to transform the wall into a membrane. Intending that my body become like a drum, I imagined every cell resonating to the beautiful sounds of birdsong.

Burdened by the dead weight of the cement wall, I vowed that early June morning to transform my body to the point where my entire self would become fully and sensually present in each and every moment. This, I realized, would be true freedom.

But how? How to get there from here?