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Learning to be Embodied: A Recommendation for College Curriculum Transformation

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Ever since I was fortunate enough to encounter people who taught me something about how to be embodied, I have been convinced that we need to add to the college curriculum an in-depth experiential, intellectual, and spiritual introduction to embodiment. In fact, I think that such an introduction should amount to a year's exploration added on at the beginning of one's college education. Granted, such an idea would face enormous resistance from curricular programs which change with glacial speed. Moreover, for the idea really to work, it should probably be put into practice in the first grade. Nevertheless, I believe that it's worth speculating about the collegiate curricular structure of such an exploration of embodiment.

I believe that real learning takes place only in connection with a change in one's own body. I am also convinced that many of our contemporary ecological problems are symptomatic of strange attitudes toward and difficulties in inhabiting our bodies. For example, people not at home in their bodies try to cope with the attendant dissatisfaction by consuming more and more things. But consumer culture is ultimately devoid of satisfaction, because you can never get enough of what you don't really want. And what we don't really want are more gadgets, current fashions, and labor-saving devices. If we hope that Western humanity in particular can move beyond an exploitative attitude toward nature and the human body, if we hope for the emergence of people who are genuinely "personal/planetary," we must encourage our children to be Earthlings, i.e., embodied beings, not paranoid Cartesian minds lodged in bodies that are devoid of spirit.

In what follows, I want merely to sketch out some features of my proposed Embodiment Training, the aim of which is to enable people to be with themselves, with other people, and with our beautiful planet in ways that are caring and affirmative. Because of considerations of space and because of the limitations of my own experience, my discussion of such Training will at times emphasize the problems faced by young men. I would love to hear a woman's views on introducing young women, as well as young men, to their embodiment.

As a preliminary matter, I request that the reader recall what it was like to be a 17 or 18 year old person about to enter college. No doubt many of you will, like me, experience resistance to this invitation. Apart from the lucky few who somehow learned to be embodied as teenagers, what most people report about their teen years is painful experience, characterized by shame, confusion, and awkwardness. Much of this painful experiences is associated with puberty-related changes in one's own body, including the onset of secondary sex characteristics, the emergence of sexual desire, and the development of the intense emotions associated with sexuality. Most teenagers lack any effective guide for dealing with these changes. While the teen years are challenging for people in all societies, most North American parents have proven to be largely incompetent in raising children to be "at home" in their bodies. This fact stems in part from long-standing puritanical and dualistic attitudes toward the body, attitudes which were not radically changed by the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s.

Based on my own experience, I know that young men are usually bewildered by the

unexpected flood-tide of sexual desires and emotions. Because their parents rarely possess much insight into or a vocabulary for dealing with such desires and emotions, and because communication between parents and adolescents is usually so strained anyway, teenagers usually blunder their way through the challenges posed by puberty and by the gradual approach of adult responsibilities. In our culture, sexuality is usually not spoken of effectively. Often, it is either condemned or else regarded merely as a source of pleasure. Most religious traditions have great difficulty teaching young people how to integrate sexual desire and sexual activity into their lives. By way of contrast, many secular institutions, particularly the entertainment industry, portray sex as an end in itself, without concern for its spiritual dimension or its role in personal relationships. Given that parents talk so ineffectively about sex with their teenagers, it is little wonder that young people experience such confusion and ambiguity regarding their sexuality.

Often, women understandably complain that "men have nothing but sex on their minds." There is something insistent, almost overwhelming about male sexual desire. Women are not always aware of the extent to which men feel as if they are enslaved to sexual desire. Enslavement to craving leads to suffering all around. Traditional cultures, apparently less sex-obsessed than our own, had some success in showing young men how to express and to channel this sexual energy constructively. We can learn something from such cultures, as well as from sources from our own traditions which emphasize the sacred dimension of Eros. In a culture where sacred is still present, sexuality can be spoken of as the manifestation of a power which is to be enjoyed, but always respectfully. We all know the dangers of partaking in sexual activity when one is personally unprepared for the consequences, emotional and otherwise.

I can imagine that one aspect of Embodiment Training would be a comprehensive seminar on sexuality. This seminar, led only by people mature enough to admit that they are still in the process of exploring their own sexuality, would: 1) provide instruction in the biological dimension of sexuality, including the role played by hormones in the acquisition of secondary sexual characteristics, mood changes, alterations in personality, and the emergence of erotic desire; 2) explain the extent to which human reproductive processes, both social and biological, are also at work in other species; 3) describe how society constructs and usually imposes on its members relatively constricted gender roles and identities which often prove unsatisfying for many people; 4) examine how these sex roles help give rise to problematic attitudes toward the body, only one manifestation of which is the prevalence of dietary disorders among young women; 5) explore how gender stereotyping and ignorance lead to much suffering on the part of men and women in their erotic relationships; 6) introduce participants to social/psychological skills and vocabulary aimed at facilitating relationships with members of the other sex; 7) consider the possibility that long-standing cultural attitudes, e.g., patriarchal views about nature as "feminine" and thus subject to masculine control, have helped lead to serious ecological problems.

For a significant number of the seminar meetings, male and female students would meet separately to explore and to share their own experience of sexuality. Participants would be encouraged to recollect and to examine honestly their initial stirrings of sexual desire, the emotions which accompanied their early "crushes" in junior high school, their experiments with sexual activity, and their attitudes toward members of the other sex.

In small group discussion, men would be encouraged to explore the extent to which they objectify women, particularly by viewing them primarily as sexual parts, not as whole people. There would be a place for frank discussion of sheer "horniness" and the common male experience of desire for sex with numerous partners, including (and perhaps especially) total strangers. Both in the segregated sessions and in mixed sessions, students would explore the differences between male and female expectations and experiences connected with sexuality. Crucial here would be exploration of the thesis advanced by Nancy Chodorow and others that women and men have a different sense of "self" and

thus a somewhat different attitude toward sexuality. For example, while men may feel a greater capacity for intimacy *after* having sex, women may feel the need for being intimate *before* having sex.

Also important would be discussions of feelings about sexual attraction to members of the same sex. This topic is particularly threatening to most young men, many of whom fear the possibility of being homosexual. Such fear often prevents young men from exploring and deepening their love for other men. I recall how profound was my realization in college that I could love my male friends, without this fact meaning that I was homosexual. I had been highly conflicted about feeling so strongly attached to my men friends. Slowly, I discovered that love between men is not only healthy, but vital for communal life. Because this discovery opened up my friendship with other men and let me move beyond the homophobia of my teen years, I would want this topic to be integral to the seminar.

Running concurrently with this seminar would be one devoted to emotions. Here, I would place a lot of emphasis on experiential work designed to allow students to discover the "constructed" character of many emotions. We tend to divide emotions into categories, such as "good" ones and "bad" ones, as if these categories reflected a given reality. In fact, however, emotional phenomena are primarily manifestations of energy that are in themselves neutral. Consider, for instance, that the anxiety and excitement have virtually the same physiological symptoms, though the former is considered "negative" and the latter "positive."

Experiential work would include role-playing in which students explore the close relation between language and emotions. The body, in which our emotions reside, respond to linguistic triggers, even if we are only "kidding." Consider the following example. In a workshop I attended, participants paired off. Partner A was to ask partner B for something, such as "May I borrow your pen for a moment?" Partner B was supposed to respond simply by declining the request. A was to be persistent, but so was B. The point here was for both participants to observe what was happening in their bodies during this process. As B's continued to decline the request, A's tended to act as they normally do when faced with a real decline or refusal: their bodies became increasingly agitated; gesticulation mounted, as did voices. Analogously, B's began to fidget in their chairs; their bodies began showing signs of stress associated with turning down someone who was requesting something very simple. It became clear to everyone that the bodies in the room did *not* know that the participants were playing "make-believe." To the bodies, the language of requesting and declining was "real." Next time you are feeling emotionally down and you reply to someone's greeting by saying, "Oh, I'm doing fine," notice how your body responds.

Observation of the relation between language and triggering off of bodily phenomena (emotions) is a necessary prelude both to changing our language and to altering our emotional/bodily responses to language. The aim here is not to get rid of emotion, but rather to discover ways of suffering less - and of provoking less suffering on the part of other people. All this requires deep, demanding, and often terrifying work. As a result, most people, particularly men, would prefer to do almost anything other than explore their own emotional states.

Once again, Chodorow's work in object relations theory helps explain this disinclination on the part of men to explore our feelings. Not only are men socialized to be "hard" and "unemotional," but their early experience with their mothers makes them open to such socialization. Many boys experience rage and grief as they lose their early close association with their mothers, in the process of becoming little men. This early experience of loss and even betrayal leads boys to be suspicious of opening themselves to subsequent relations, especially with women. Moreover, since the early identity of little boys is primarily female (so closely are they identified with their mothers), and since the

available male role models for little boys are often inadequate, the process of becoming a little man is a negative one. To be a man means *not* being female, i.e., means disavowing and denying those aspects of oneself - including emotional expressions and sensitivity - which are female. A man is whatever a woman is not.

The power of women is great in the life of every man. Many men fear falling under the control of women, i.e., into a situation which resembles the perilous one they knew as little boys. Hence, there is a tendency on the part of men either to avoid women all together, or to objectify them as sexual objects. Patriarchal society reflects the widespread fear of women on the part of men. Women are belittled, degraded, prevented from participating fully in society. They are associated with the merely "natural" affairs of childbirth, childrearing, and food preparation. "Cultural" matters, ranging from politics to business, are reserved for men. Some ecofeminists argue that there is a close relation between the domination of women and the domination of nature. The validity of this argument, then the emotional education of men would be a vital step toward changing their treatment not only of women but also of nature.

Insights into our emotions can be effective only if we are capable of *noticing* what transpires in our bodies. Emotions occur, but they can be overlooked. Hence, Embodiment Training would involve lots of practice in perceiving bodily states. The capacity to make appropriate discriminations of bodily emotional states could be developed by various kinds of meditation, body work, the Alexander technique, Tai Chi, yoga, and so on. There are many powerful disciplines available. Students simply have to be introduced to them.

What if men were capable of noticing what they felt when cutting down a tree? With increased awareness of one's own body, one becomes increasingly aware of the living bodies of others, including non-human others such as trees. Would a logger really be capable of carrying out the clear-cutting of a whole forest if he noticed how much his own body winced as the chain saw or axe cut deeply into a living tree? Would he not stop to question the purpose of his activity? Would he not demand an alternative way to make a living? Being able to feel means being attuned to the world in a way not disclosable by reason alone. Reason is capable of feats of abstraction which separate the reasoner from the natural world. Feeling reminds the reasoner that he or she is embodied and thus inextricably related to natural bodily processes. Embodied beings are mortal. Hence, to learn to feel is to learn to be a mortal.

Learning to be mortal may be *the* crucial step necessary for transforming our currently destructive and domineering attitude toward nature. Surrendering to our mortality enables us to let go of what Ken Wilber has called the "God project," the attempt by the finite ego - primarily in its patriarchal guise - to make itself immortal, infinite, godlike. So long as the ego denies death, it will attempt to dominate nature in the literally mad attempt to turn the mortal into the immortal. Learning to surrender to one's mortality, however, requires a kind of spiritual training, in which one is prepared for direct insight into the fact that, even in our embodied state, we are manifestations of the eternal. Perhaps this is the key to understanding the symbolic meaning of Christ's crucifixion: Christ surrendered wholly to his mortal status, died, and was reborn. In other words, to experience eternity, one must surrender completely to one's incarnate status. Similarly, Mahayana Buddhism contains the saying, "This very body is the body of Buddha." In other words, becoming enlightened does not mean transcending the body but rather means becoming wholly this bodily event. Nirvana and samsara are not separate. Just so, it is possible for people to experience eternity and thus vast contentment as Earthlings, without craving the false eternity of an everlasting ego-subject. It is such craving, in my view, which has helped to fuel the current production-consumption frenzy responsible for much of the ecological crisis.

The sexual, emotional, bodily, and spiritual studies and practices which I've mentioned

above would help shift students into a very different mood than the mood in which most entering college students dwell. Now equipped with insight into and skills for dealing with emotional and sexual issues, as well as with issues concerning mortality and eternity, students would be prepared to study history, psychology, chemistry, literature, philosophy, and so on with a different sensibility. Of course, now that I'm designing my own college curriculum, I might as well go ahead and make the appropriate alterations in the rest of the curriculum as well. But discussion of those proposed changes, which would obviously build upon the introductory year, must be postponed to another opportunity.

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