

Commentary on *What is the Body?*

By Allen Watson

Paragraph 1

The body is a fence the Son of God imagines he has built, to separate parts of his Self from other parts. It is within this fence he thinks he lives, to die as it decays and crumbles. For within this fence he thinks that he is safe from love. Identifying with his safety, he regards himself as what his safety is. How else could he be certain he remains within the body, keeping love outside? W-pII.5.1:1-5

What is the body? Who, outside the Course, would have answered as does this paragraph? “The body is a fence the Son of God imagines he has built, to separate parts of his Self from other parts” (1:1). The body is a fence. What a strange concept that is! (It is an idea expanded on in the Text section entitled “The Little Garden” [T-18.VIII].) Its purpose (the reason the ego made it) is to keep something out; to separate parts of my Self from other parts. The body is a tool for division and separation; that is why we made it. It is a device intended to protect us from our wholeness. My body separates and distinguishes me from all the other “selves” walking this world in other bodies.

We believe we live “within this fence” (1:2), i.e., in the body. Is there anyone who can deny that this is how they approach life, the fundamental presupposition behind nearly all their actions? We think we live in the body, and we think that when the body decays and crumbles, we die (1:2). Much fear surrounds the death of the body. When our quadriplegic friend, Allan Greene, was still living next door, with only one leg and withered arms, and fingers black and shriveled, dead on his hand, most people found it profoundly disturbing to meet him (although somehow, in his presence, many of us quickly got over that discomfort because of his awareness of not being that body). Why do we generally feel such discomfort around disfigured, maimed, or dying people? One reason is that it triggers our own buried fears of the decay of our own bodies, and behind that, the fear of death itself.

The Course is leading us to a new awareness of a Self that does *not* live in a body, a Self that does *not* die as the body decays and crumbles. It is leading us to disengage ourselves from our identification with this bodily, limited self, and to strengthen our sense of identity with the noncorporeal Self.

Why have our egos made the body as a fence? What is the fence keeping out? Strangely, it is keeping out *love*. “For within this fence he thinks that he is safe from love” (1:3). Why would we want to keep love out? Why would we ever believe we needed something to keep us “safe” from love? Love lets in all the parts of our Self we are trying to keep out. Love destroys our illusion of separateness. Love understands that we are not this limited thing we believe we are, and that our brothers are parts of us; it constantly extends, giving and receiving, like a magnetic force drawing all the fragmented parts of the Self together again.

Have you ever experienced, in a moment of intense love for another person, a surge of fear? Have you ever felt like you were about to lose yourself if you gave in to this love? That feeling gives you some hint of the abject fear the ego has of love. The ego wants you looking for love (because you know you need and want it) in order to keep you satisfied (and trapped), but it never, ever wants you to find it. Love represents the loss of the ego identity. To the ego, it is death. And so the body is manufactured to keep love out, as a means of preserving our sense of separateness.

When we see our safety in the body, we identify with it. We see ourselves as bodies (1:4). It is this that promotes and supports the ego's ideal of separation, judgment, and attack. To the ego, this is the purpose of bodies, although it tells us that the purpose is our own safety. It seems to me that it is beneficial, then, to recognize the frailty of our bodies, their temporary and ephemeral nature. The sickness and death of the body, then, instead of being a fearful thing, can become a gentle reminder that this is not what we are. Why would we want to identify with such a vulnerable thing? Recognizing the body's impermanence and the brevity of its existence can impel us to seek a more permanent identity elsewhere. Becoming aware of the lunacy of seeking our safety in the body, we can understand that our strong attachment to the body must come from some hitherto unsuspected motive: the ego's desire for separateness.

How else could he be certain he remains within the body, keeping love outside? (1:5)

If we did not have this strong attachment to and identification with the body, if we realized that what we are transcends the body and dwarfs its significance, we could not keep love away from us. This is the ego's purpose in promoting our bodily identity: to keep love out. This is where our seemingly instinctive need to regard ourselves as bodies comes from. It is a deception and trap of our egos, and when we see this clearly, we realize that it is not something we want at all.

The seemingly good reasons for identifying with our bodies, in the Course's eyes, simply do not hold water. Bodies are unsafe vehicles; there is no security in them. Behind the seemingly benign reasons our egos set forth there is a much darker hidden motivation: the ego's blind belief in the value of separateness and difference. The Course is asking us to acknowledge this dark motive within ourselves, and to disavow it, turning instead to the eternal safety of Love Itself, which is our true nature as God's creation.

Paragraph 2

The body will not stay. Yet this he sees as double safety. For the Son of God's impermanence is "proof" his fences work, and do the task his mind assigns to them. For if his oneness still remained untouched, who could attack and who could be attacked? Who could be victor? Who could be his prey? Who could be victim? Who the murderer? And if he did not die, what "proof" is there that God's eternal Son can be destroyed? W-pII.5.2:1-9

The body, of course, is transient. It will not last (2:1). The biblical psalmist compared man's life to grass, as brief as a flower in the field, and quickly disappearing (Ps 103:15).

Our transient nature is near to the surface of every mind, as I was reminded last night in a restaurant, when someone came in and greeted the host with, "How's life?"

"Too short," he replied.

You might think that the shortness of physical life would instantly alert us to the fallacy of the ego's attempt to have us find safety in the body, but the ego quickly twists the very shortness into a proof of its case. The ego wants to prove separation. And what is more separating than physical death? So the short life of the body "proves" that the fence works; we really are separate from one another and from God (2:3). We made the body to manifest separation, and lo! it does. One body can attack another and kill it. If we were really one, so the ego's logic goes, this would be impossible (2:4). The ego is a master of sophistry.

There is a masterful counterargument in Chapter 13 of the Text. There, it says:

For you believe that attack is your reality, and that your destruction is the final proof that you were right.

Under the circumstances, would it not be more desirable to have been wrong, even apart from the fact that you were wrong? While it could perhaps be argued that death suggests there *was* life, no one would claim that it proves there *is* life. Even the past life that death might indicate, could only have been futile if it must come to this, and needs this to prove that it was at all. (T-13.IV.2:5–3:3)

If you have to die in order to prove you were right (separation does exist), wouldn't you rather be wrong—and live? “Even though you know not Heaven, might it not be more desirable than death?” (T-13.IV.3:6). Much of our fear of letting go of our identification with the body lies right here; we're afraid of being proven wrong. If we are wrong in this one thing, so much else of our lives has been wasted effort. We've been pouring our very souls into something that, in a very short time, will be only dust. The Course is asking us to realize the futility of all this, and to look around us and ask, “Is there perhaps something else more deserving of all this effort?” And there is.

Our identification with the body seems to protect us from love. The insanity of the ego believes that death “proves” that we are separate. Yet in reality there is only our oneness. If we are one, the lesson asks:

Who could attack and who could be attacked? Who could be victor? Who could be his prey? (2:4–6)

We believe attack is real, that there are really victims and really murderers. If our oneness remains untouched (2:4), this simply cannot be. And therefore all such appearances must be illusory, or else the oneness *has* been destroyed. The horrors of this world are the ego's attempts to demonstrate the destruction of oneness. Death is the ego's demonstration that “God's eternal Son can be destroyed” (2:9). As students of the Holy Spirit, we deny this.

We do not deny that, within the illusion, victims and murderers exist. We do not pretend that children have not been blown up with bombs, that genocide is not practiced, that atrocities do not occur, that wars are not going on, that lives and families and emotional stability are not being shredded all over the world. All this is true *within the illusion*. What we deny is the entirety of the illusion. We deny that this picture represents the truth. We deny that anything real is threatened. We are aware that what we see is only a dream. We see the dream figures come and go, shift and change, suffer and die, but we are not deceived by what we see (see M-12.6:6–8). We bear witness to reality, invisible to the body's eyes, but seen by the vision of Christ.

The truth is: Oneness is. The world, the body, and death, all deny this truth. Our task as miracle workers is to “*deny the denial of truth*” (T-12.II.1:5). We deny separation, the denial of oneness. We stand, with hands outstretched to help, and by our words, our actions, our thoughts, and above all, by our love, we demonstrate the truth of eternal oneness.

Paragraph 3

The body is a dream. Like other dreams it sometimes seems to picture happiness, but can quite suddenly revert to fear, where every dream is born. For only love creates in truth, and truth can never fear. Made to be fearful, must the body serve the purpose given it. But we can change the purpose that the body will obey by changing what we think that it is for. W-pII.5.3:1-5

The body is a dream. (3:1)

This whole melodrama of attacking and being attacked, victor and prey, murderer and victim, is a dream, with the body playing the chief role. Think about the implications of my body as a dream. In a dream, everything seems completely real. I've had some really gross and terrifying dreams about my body. Once I dreamed that all my teeth were disintegrating and falling out. But when I woke up, nothing of the kind was happening. It was all in my mind while I slept.

By calling the body "a dream," the Course is saying that what happens to our bodies here is really not happening at all; it is happening only within our minds. It is saying that the body itself is not happening; it is not a real thing. We are not really here, as we think we are; we are dreaming about being here. My son, who is working in computers in the field of virtual reality, was once hooked up to a robot by computer, seeing through its eyes and touching things with its hand.

He had the very weird sensation of experiencing himself on one side of the computer lab while his body was on the other side; he even looked across the lab and "saw" his own body, wearing the VR helmet. Our mind experiences itself as being "here," on earth, in a body; but it is not here. *Here* is not here. All of it is within the mind.

Dreams can picture happiness, and then very suddenly revert to fear; we've all experienced that in dreams, most likely. And we've experienced it in our "lives" here in the body. Dreams are born of fear (3:2), and the body, being a dream, is born of fear also. Love does not create dreams, it "creates in truth" (3:3). And love did not create the body:

The body was not made by love. Yet love does not condemn it and can use it lovingly, respecting what the Son of God has made and using it to save him from illusions.
(T-18.VI.4:7-8)

The body was made by fear, and the dreams that result will *always* end in fear.

The body was made by fear for fear, yet "love can use it lovingly." When we give our bodies to the Holy Spirit for His use, we change the dream. For now the body has a different purpose, motivated by love.

Our minds chose to make the body. We made it from fear, and we made it to be fearful. Once that purpose is in motion it will continue, unless the purpose is changed. The body "must serve the purpose given it" (3:4), and it will continue to serve fear as long as we do not question the premises on which it was made. It will continue to preserve our separateness, fencing us in, protecting our little self from love.

Our minds have great power, however. Our minds can choose to change the purpose of the body. Our minds do not serve the body; the body serves the mind. If, within our minds, we change what we think the body is for, the body will begin to serve that new purpose. Instead of using the body to keep love out, we can begin to use the body to extend love, to express love; to heal rather than to hurt, to communicate rather than to separate, to unite rather than to divide. Instead of being a fence, it can become a medium of communication, the mechanism by which the Love of God can be seen and heard and felt and touched in this world.

This is our function here.

Fail not in your function of loving in a loveless place made out of darkness and deceit, for thus are darkness and deceit undone. (T-14.IV.4:10)

We are here to express the Love of God, to be the Love of God in this dark and loveless place. God's formless Love takes form in our forgiveness, and in our merciful and grateful acknowledgement of the Christ in all our brothers and sisters (see W-pI.186.14:2), as we reach out our hands to help them on their way (see W-pII.5.4:3).

Paragraph 4

The body is the means by which God's Son returns to sanity. Though it was made to fence him into hell without escape, yet has the goal of Heaven been exchanged for the pursuit of hell. The Son of God extends his hand to reach his brother, and to help him walk along the road with him. Now is the body holy. Now it serves to heal the mind that it was made to kill. W-pII.5.4:1-5

What a shift there is as paragraph 4 begins! We have been told the body is a fence to separate parts of our Self from other parts (1:1); the body is impermanent (2:1, 3); the "proof" in its death that God's eternal Son can be destroyed (2:9); and a dream, made of fear, made to be fearful (3:1, 4). Now, with a change of purpose, everything suddenly changes: "The body is the means by which God's Son returns to sanity" (4:1).

It's worth stopping and repeating that to myself: "The body is the means by which God's Son returns to sanity." With all the apparently negative things the Course says about the body, this is an astonishing statement. Most of us, certainly myself, could do with a good, solid shot of some positive thoughts about the body like this. I find that making it personal helps to bring it home: "My body is the means by which God's Son returns to sanity."

Instead of the negative, almost hateful attitude of some religions towards the body, attitudes that make a person impatient to get out of the body and leave it behind, this statement of the Course gives one an affirmative attitude towards the body. "This body is my way home!" How can the body be our way back to sanity?

It becomes that when we change its purpose. We substitute "the goal of Heaven" in place of "the pursuit of hell" (4:2). We begin to use the body to express and to extend the love that the body was made to shut out, and shut in. Clearly this implies physical activity in the world, since anything involving the body is, by definition, physical. Remember what Jesus said to us back in Review V:

For this alone I need; that you will hear the words I speak, and give them to the world. You are my voice, my eyes, my feet, my hands through which I save the world. (W-pI.rV.In.9:2-3)

This is how the body becomes "the means by which God's Son returns to sanity." As we give our bodies to serve God's purposes in this world, using our voices, our eyes, our feet, and our hands to give Jesus' words to the world (perhaps verbally, or by example, or through physical assistance, helping and healing), our minds are healed, along with the minds of those around us. In this physical dream, God needs physical messengers. And you and I are those messengers.

How does it work out, practically, when we change the purpose of our bodies from murder to miracles, from the pursuit of hell to the goal of Heaven? "The Son of God extends his hand to reach his brother, and to help him walk along the road with him" (4:3). It's that plain and simple. We reach out and help a brother. We put our hand under his elbow when he stumbles and help him walk with us, to God. We allow ourselves to be the first to smile in welcome. We drop our pride and become the first to seek reconciliation in a wounded relationship. We visit a sick friend. We *help* one another.

Some people say that since our only responsibility is accepting the Atonement for ourselves, there is no connection to outward actions. It's all a mental thing. I say, "Bushwa!" Accepting the Atonement for ourselves is the sole responsibility of "miracle workers." This means that if you *do* accept the Atonement, you will work miracles. If you aren't working miracles—bringing healing to those around you—you aren't accepting the Atonement. The two go hand in hand. Read the paragraph in which that "sole responsibility" statement occurs (T-2.V.5), and notice what follows that statement. By accepting the Atonement, your errors are healed and then your mind can only heal. By doing this,

you place yourself in a position to undo the level confusion of others. The message you then give to them is the truth that their minds are similarly constructive. (T-2.V.5:4–5; see entire paragraph)

In order to be a miracle worker, you must accept the Atonement for yourself; to heal the errors of others, you must have your own errors healed first (see M-18.4).

If you are familiar with Christian theology, this confusion about healing myself versus healing others is like the old argument about salvation by grace versus salvation by works. Doing good works will not save you, the Bible says; salvation is only “by grace through faith.” And yet, it also says that if you *have* faith you will do good works; the good works are the evidence of the faith. Therefore, “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:20). Similarly, accepting the Atonement is all that is necessary, but the evidence of doing so, the “proof” you have accepted healing for your own mind, is the extension of miracles of healing to those around you. The Course repeats this over and over, saying that the way you know you are healed is by healing others.

That is why miracles offer *you* the testimony that you are blessed. If what you offer is complete forgiveness you must have let guilt go, accepting the Atonement for yourself and learning you are guiltless. How could you learn what has been done for you, unknown to you, unless you do what you would have to do if it *had* been done for you?” (T-14.I.1:6–8)

So what these sentences are saying (back in “What Is the Body?”) is that the body becomes holy as we use it in service to others. By extending our hands to help, we bring healing to our own minds. Reaching out instead of drawing back, seeking to heal rather than to wound, is *how* we accept the Atonement, or better, how we demonstrate to ourselves that we have accepted it. The mind that has accepted Atonement can only heal, and by healing, we know our true Self. Notice here that *the body* “serves to heal the mind” (4:5). Yes; the mind is what needs healing, but the body serves to heal it, by acting in healing love towards our brothers.

Paragraph 5

You will identify with what you think will make you safe. Whatever it may be, you will believe that it is one with you. Your safety lies in truth, and not in lies. Love is your safety. Fear does not exist. Identify with love, and you are safe. Identify with love, and you are home. Identify with love, and find your Self. W-pII.5.5:1-8

What was pointed out in Lesson 261 is echoed here: “You will identify with what you think will make you safe” (5:1; see W-pII.261.1). If we think our physicality and individual identity are what make us safe, we will identify with them; if we understand that being the love that we are is what gives us safety, we will identify with that, rather than the body and ego. If we identify with the body, our life becomes a cramped, futile attempt to preserve and protect it. If we identify with love, the body becomes simply a tool used to express our own loving being, which is God expressed through us.

“Your safety lies in truth, and not in lies” (5:3). The body is a lie about us; it is not what we are. The truth about us is that we are love: “Teach only love, for that is what you are” (T-6.I.13:2). That is where our true safety lies, and that is what we must learn to identify with.

What seems “more real” to me today? My body, or my loving Self? Where does my emphasis lie? On what do I center most of my time and attention? What takes most of my care and concern? The practice of the Workbook lessons can be very revealing in this regard, as I begin to realize that rarely, if ever, do I fail to take care of my body, giving it food, clothing, cleansing,

and sleep. How well do I care for my spirit? When my attention to my spiritual needs and to the expression of my inner nature has become paramount, when I would rather miss breakfast than miss my quiet time with God, I will know that I have begun to shift my identity from lies to truth.

If in observing myself I realize that this is not yet the case, let me not make myself guilty about it. Guilt accomplishes nothing positive. My identification with the body is not a sin. It is simply a mistake, and an indication that I need to practice unlearning that identification, and learning to identify with love instead. When I practice guitar and notice that I am missing a certain chord, I do not feel guilty about it; I just intensify my practice of that particular song until I learn it.

I can even use my habit of identifying with the body to help me form a new focus. When I shower or wash my face I can use the time to mentally repeat the day's lesson and think about its meaning to me. (What other more valuable thing is occupying your mind at those times, anyhow?) When I eat, I can remember to give thanks, and let it be a trigger to remember God. If I am alone, perhaps I can read a page from the Course, or a lesson card, while I eat. I can make the body into a tool to help me walk the road to God. Love is your safety. Fear does not exist. (5:4-5)

When I do not use the body's eyes, this is what I will see. When I let go of my unquestioning trust in my perception of things, I will see love. My body's eyes were made out of fear and made to see fear. I need to end my reliance on this mechanism of perception, and ask for a new one: Christ's vision.

The statement "Fear does not exist" may seem incredible to me, particularly as I advance in my practice of the Course, because one of the consequences of practicing the Course is that all kinds of buried fears bubble up in my mind. The Course teaches me, however, that what has happened is this: In order to hide my own true nature of love from me, my ego invented all kinds of fear; then I found them so terrifying that I repressed or denied them and covered them over with deceptive disguises, supported by my perception of the world. Now, as I let go of my confidence in my perception, the disguises are dissolving, and the fears I have buried are surfacing. This simple message, then, is an antidote to those surfacing fears: "Fear does not exist." In other words, what I am seeing is not real; it is an illusion I have made.

How can I escape from my fears?

Identify with love, and you are safe. Identify with love, and you are home. Identify with love, and find your Self. (5:6-8)

As I begin to look within, I see all these different forms of fear. Rather than fighting the fear, or running from it, or burying it again, I need to learn to see past it to the love it is hiding. We have to go through what the Course calls "the ring of fear" in order to reach our Self, our home (see T-18.IX, especially paragraphs 3 and 4). This is where most of us get stuck. The fear seems too real.

Let me, today, allow the Holy Spirit to show me that this seemingly impenetrable wall of fear is really nothing. It is made of clouds that cannot stop a feather. Let me take His hand and allow Him to lead me past it to the truth, to my Self, and to my home. Let me choose to identify with love, and find my safety.