

## **An Unexpected Sacrament: Autobiography, a Brief Catechism, and a Few Recipes**

by Tim Nichols

*"We do not believe in the immortality of the soul. We believe in the resurrection of the body."*

-James Jordan

I'm on a friend's massage table. She's scattered, in her head too much, not really present. I ask her to breathe. She takes a breath, then another. Puts her two hands, together, on my shoulder. There's no massage stroke, just gentle pressure as she takes the slack out of the tissues...and the weight of her Presence, suddenly, intimately with me in a manner that pays no regard to the boundary of my skin. Overcome by the power of the moment, I find myself crying softly.

You have never touched a living body without touching a spirit. In this life, they can't be separated -- that separation is the very definition of death. But you can be present to the person you touch, or you can be unaware, distracted, haphazard. You can fail to feel what's happening under your hands, fail to feel what's happening in your heart.

### **Touching with the Heart**

"Take here..." I tapped the center of her chest, "and put it here." I tapped the center of her palm. "Then touch." She nodded. If somebody had asked me to explain further, I'm not sure I could have put it into words. But I could do it, and I thought she could too. And she did.

Another day, I'm on another friend's table, on my back while she works on my right arm. Suddenly, I see a towering green forest behind her. A road comes out of the forest, runs past my feet and down a hill to the left into a green valley, across a stream and into a little town far below us. A blue sky arches overhead, and she is...luminous. Not blinding, but still so bright I can't make out her features. I blink again, and we're just in the lab.

Neither of these experiences surprises me; I expected new and profound experiences at massage school. In fact, dreams and visions were part of how I ended up here to start with. What *does* mess with my head in both of these experiences is the familiarity of it all: *I know this feeling*.

I feel it singing the Psalms, saying the Anglo-Kenyan liturgy, coming to the baptismal font, the eucharistic table, the chrism -- giving or receiving. It is the feeling of sacraments, of layers of construct and causality peeled back to expose naked reality underneath. At these two moments, two different people stood present with me, serving as priests administering an unexpected sacrament. What *is* this?

The Rabbi said, "If you can't believe the words, believe the works." I do. They happened. Now comes the fun part: *what did I just agree to?* I don't want to be one of Flannery O'Connor's "unimaginative and half-dead" Christians who "would be startled to realize the nature of what they defend by formula." I want to know: how is this world built -- how am I built -- that these things happen?

When in doubt, begin at the beginning: in the beginning was the uncreated Light. He spoke. It is. The things which are seen are not made of things which are visible -- and we're not talking about elementary particles here. You can "see" bosons; you just need really expensive glasses. When you get done cutting the visible things into smaller and smaller pieces (and then inventing the instruments to see them), what is it all made of? God spoke it into being, and upholds it by the word of His power. It is all made of words, which is to say, magic.

When our turn came, God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." He turned a living, breathing, co-creating (Tolkein preferred the humbler "sub-creating") self-portrait loose in the universe, to cultivate and protect it. As a reflection of the Triune God, I am equally a unity and a composite, a free individual and bound in relationship.

I am a unity; every part of me is somehow involved in everything I do, a fact vividly reflected in my basic needs. Spiritual exertion requires psychological and physical recovery, as well as spiritual -- and so on for other areas. Equally, I am composite: "And Yahweh God sculpted man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."

### **Catechism**

1. What is man? *Man is a living soul.*
2. Of what is a living soul composed? *A living soul is composed of dust and breath.*
3. In the expression, "dust and breath," what is meant by "dust"? *"Dust" signifies the material flesh that returns to dust.*
4. What is meant by "breath"? *"Breath" signifies the immaterial spirit that returns to God who gave it.*
5. Most crucially: what is meant by "and"? *Um...*

I don't *have* a body. I *am* a body, just as I am a spirit. The equal ultimacy of seeming opposites is a running theme in Christianity: individuality and relationship in the Trinity, humanity and deity in Jesus, body and spirit in us. Body and spirit are separated temporarily at death and reunited in the resurrection; the intermediate state is described by Saint Paul as real, personal existence, but he also calls it being naked. We are not complete until the seed that gets planted in the cemetery sprouts and flowers -- a glorious *body*. (Jesus' unquiet grave was the first of many; the rest of the harvest is coming.)

If a whole person is spirit and body, dust and breath, where is the interface, the pneumo-somatic skin where spirit and body touch? "Mind" doesn't cover the territory by itself -- no single word does. But I am hardly the first one to ask this question.

The most common form of the seven-chakra system teaches that Spirit manifests in different aspects through seven vortices in the body. The major work is unblocking and unlocking the flow of energy. While commonly presented as *the* ancient yogic energetic system, in fact it owes its popularity to John Woodroffe (aka Arthur Avalon, author / translator of *The Serpent Power*). Many schools and gurus have had other chakra systems, as David Gordon White shows, but they all work along similar lines. The Taoists have their own analogous set of schemes. The hesychasts of the Eastern Church have a different, very helpful map: soul, *nous*, heart, mind. The major work is allowing the *nous*, the "eyes of the soul," to descend from the distracted mind to the heart, where it can see clearly. In Raphah Pallel energy work, we mediate healing by extensively blessing the whole person at still another series of pneumo-somatic connections.

These schemes persist because they are broadly useful (although perhaps mutually incommensurable). Even operating within a single scheme, nothing is one-size-fits-all. Trauma punches through the body to the spirit (or vice versa) and inflicts a dark knot of localized, enduring pain totally unique to the individual and situation. Any point in the body can be about anything. But in the interests of keeping a complex subject manageable, let's focus on three general (and in the West, generally understood) pneumo-somatic connections: mind, heart, gut.

Mind likes words, analysis, planning. When I'm watching a bodywork teacher, mind knows to watch the edges of the clothing to catch subtle movements that I wouldn't otherwise see. Mind can replay a memory to see something I missed the first time. Mind can think through a skill tree: mind knows not to try to emulate my teacher's tiny shuffling foot movements, but to focus instead on being on my legs at all times. Effectiveness first; efficiency comes naturally with time. (Mind loves abstractions like that.)

As a culture, we are in love with mind. We like to explain, document, quantify (and write essays). But sometimes words are not the tool for the job. Words are notoriously unhelpful in physical disciplines. "If you think, you stink," as one of my martial arts teachers would say. Another mentor says you can develop as a human from the roots up or from the heart out, but not from the head down: mind tends to trap you in constructs that make it easier to see what you want to see and harder to see the world. I don't know if that's true for everyone, but head-first didn't work for me, and not for lack of trying. Heart outward is working better.

### Centering in the Heart

Close your eyes. Settle in. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Now another...good. Cultivate a mild interest in your heartbeat. You don't need to focus too hard, just...be curious. Feel for it. No, don't put your fingers on your pulse. Stay still. Just...feel. It's okay if it takes a little while. It will come.

Just rest. Cultivate the feeling of relaxation in your body, the feeling you get just before you drift off to sleep, that melting, heavy, delicious rest.

Just rest...

Now feel again for your heartbeat. Some people feel it best in their hands, their fingertips. Some can actually hear it. Some just feel a pulsing in their throat, or their chest.

If you don't get it yet, that's okay. Just keep feeling for it. You will find it eventually, and over time it will get easier.

If you have it, just attend to it for a little while.

Heart loves...or hates. The "L" word scares people, so we use evasions: "care for," "like," "attached to," or even "serve." However we couch it, we either engage with other people *as people* and for their wellbeing, or we engage them as objects to be manipulated in our interest. We all do the latter to varying degrees. Nobody *always* remembers that the barista or the grocery store clerk has hopes and dreams; we fall into treating them as vending machines. We seldom remember that the blue-hair driving 45 in the fast lane is a person; we think of her as a vexing part of the scenery, an obstacle to be navigated around. Others we regard as more pleasant scenery, whether professional performers or pretty people we look at on the street -- but we still regard them selfishly, principally in terms of the pleasure we get from looking. We reduce people to machines or scenery, and so our senses atrophy and our hearts wither.

People are used to being looked at, but not used to being *seen*. Heart is about seeing people and treating them with unconditional dignity -- which is to say, loving them. That can't happen without genuine human contact, which is always a two-way connection. What comes back is not always pleasant; that's what drives us into treating people as machines or scenery. We aren't built to handle the amount of human brokenness presented to us in the world. But as the image of the always-relational Trinity, we aren't built to live unconnected, either.

I might be able to give a technically good massage without engaging my heart, but I hope to never find out. My engaged heart changes the quality of my touch. I am more deeply present to my client, and I'm able to serve in ways that go well beyond physical relaxation. I have to make time for self-care afterwards, and trust God to show up, but He does, and it's worth it.

I didn't always think this way. I used to be so scarred that real engagement was nearly impossible. My gut used to get squirmy about anything that involved trusting another human being, not because there were no trustworthy people in my life, but because I was so

heartbroken and traumatized that I couldn't recognize the good ones anymore. Gut is raw instinct about the facts and needs of a situation -- a kind of unconscious induction conditioned heavily by experience. Mind has a way of talking me out of listening to my gut, but in a mind-gut conflict, gut is usually right. A heart-gut conflict is another matter. When God asks me for a noteworthy act of faith, my gut nearly always objects. (Gideon, Peter, and Mary had the same reaction. At least I'm in good company.) If I had trusted my gut in those cases, I would have missed out on some of the best opportunities of my life: making friends, getting married, working with Mosaic Church, starting a business, going to massage school.

### **Alignment**

Close your eyes. Visualize a glowing orb in the center of your belly. Got it? Good; hold on to that, and visualize a second one in the center of your chest. Hold onto those two for a moment. Take your time; there's no hurry.  
When you're ready, add one more, in the center of your head. Take your time. Got them all? Now: what color is the bottom one? The middle? The top?  
Are they aligned?  
Gently, without hurrying or forcing anything, bring them into line, one atop another. How does that feel?

All parts of the interface are both body and spirit. Thoughts happen in the brain. We can watch the FMRI light up, yet the mind/brain problem remains intractable. The Eastern Fathers tell us the spiritual heart -- the part of us we're referring to when we talk about being heartbroken -- is located in the physical heart. It's obviously not the same thing as the pumping organ it's co-located with, but we feel it in the same place. The enteric nervous system rivals the brain in number of neurons and complexity, but our gut instincts do not reduce to it. But more important than enumerating our constituent bits is learning how to get the whole congeries moving in the same direction.

### Heaven and Earth

Breathe. In-2-3-4. Hold-2-3-4. Out-2-3-4. Hold-2-3-4. I repeat the cycle five times, counting one number higher each time.

Center. I call all my scattered parts, all my energy and attention, back to me, and send it all to settle into my lower dantien. Where it goes, I go.

Ground. When I touch the ground, it touches back: every corner of my feet can feel the ground pushing up and out. The power comes up through the legs, directed by my waist, transmitted through my back and arms into my hands...where it means nothing at all, if I'm not present with it. You can bust heads with ground connection alone, but healing requires something more.

Mind has already done its work helping me practice and absorb the training, interviewing the client, and making a plan for the session. In the moment, gut makes the choices. As my hands settle onto my client's body, I pray:

*God bless this body and every body  
Spirit, heal this spirit and every spirit  
Christ, commune at this table and every table  
Use my hands as Thy instrument  
Use my hands as Thy instrument.*

I let my heart reach down my arms to the center of my palms, the place the old Taoists called *lao gong*, the palace of labor. Good things happen when heaven and earth meet in the palace of labor. "Good things" is an understatement. *Magic.*

Sacraments use ridiculously ordinary means -- water and oil, bread and wine -- to convey extraordinary grace. Nothing is more ordinary than touch, but when we present our whole selves to serve another person through compassionate touch (or allow ourselves to be served in the same way), we open a window through which we can glimpse bare reality: we are already and always in relationship. Massage affirms and confirms the connection; it accomplishes what it signifies, as sacraments do. As sacraments do, massage conveys a healing grace, a divine gift beyond our power to give -- but God is pleased to dispense it through us.

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(but I owe them anyway)

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**Not-Doing**

All these recipes are Dumbo's feather. (Don't knock them -- at a certain point in the story, Dumbo *needs* that feather.)

The prayers are another matter. They are already a way of not-doing.