The Revelatory Body:
Does God speak to us through bodily experience?

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Since I wrote a book a few years ago called *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art*, and since you have been kind enough to ask me to address this topic, and since it is impossible to compress the argument of an entire book into a presentation of a reasonable length, I have decided to shape my offering in the form of a mock book-interview. I hope the question and answer format will allow me to cover more ground more quickly, and perhaps even stimulate among you a sense of the way we can think about the body theologically.

Let's start right there (my fictive interviewer says): **What are you getting at with your title and subtitle?**

They were carefully chosen. The title states my thesis, that the human body is the privileged arena of God's self-disclosure in the world --- not the only arena, but the one that calls for special attention. This so not least because, so far as we are aware, human bodies are the only ones that can articulate --- at least for other humans --- the signs of God's presence in creation.

The subtitle states the corollary: if the Living God continues to reveal God's Self through the experiences of the human body, then theology should begin to think of itself as an inductive process --- the data keeps coming in and tends to be unpredictable --- and much more as an art than as a science. What do I mean? Medicine is a science, but surgery is an art; medicine is a science, but healing is an art. Medicine is a science because it is a self-standing body of knowledge all of whose parts interconnect and within which deductions and inferences can be made on the basis of general principles. Surgery is an art, because no human organism corresponds exactly to anatomy wall-charts, and the surgeon must pay attention to the specifics of this living organism, be alert and responsive to actual and particular physical configurations, if the surgeon is to operate in a manner that keeps the patient alive.

Amazingly, for a religion that began in the human experience of God's power through the resurrection, and whose earliest writings are unintelligible apart from the premise of God's presence and power among humans, Christian theology came in the course of time, actually in a remarkably short course of time, to regard itself primarily as a science (*Scientia*), a body of knowledge, based in creeds and scriptures, in which all the parts interconnected and which allowed deductive inferences. And once theology found its final refuge in the academy rather than the church, theology could be carried out as the study of books by dead or almost dead writers who indulged in what they

called "systematic theology," surely one of the most unintentionally oxymoronic phrases ever devised. If theology has to do with the living God, and if the data concerning God and humans keeps appearing in new and sometimes surprising and shocking ways, how could it possibly be systematic?

It is true that since the time of Schleiermacher, some theologians have found it necessary to talk about experience as theologically significant, but rarely is the everyday experience of actual humans a source for such reflections; more often (as in Tillich and Tracey), "experience" tends to be an abstract construal of "the human situation" in some form or other. Other theologians have shown themselves as profoundly suspicious of anything touching on the body. Karl Barth and John Paul II, for example, could talk about sex and gender and marriage as though all that needed to be studied was the first part of Genesis. I called my Commonweal review of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body,* "A Disembodied Theology of the Body."

Theology written in books can be the subtlest of idolatries, precisely because it replaces the face of the living God shining through the faces of God's creatures with words about God. Yes, this applies to my book too! If what I propose in my book is actually to have an effect, it cannot be through writing more books, but by enabling the bearing of witness around kitchen tables.

How did you get to this decidedly contrarian position, and to the writing of this book?

You will pardon me, I hope, if my answer involves personal experience, mine and others. It is a journey with several stages**.** The beginning is my discovery at the age of nineteen of the French existentialist philosopher and playwright, Gabriel Marcel, whose writing invited me to the way of seeing and thinking about things called phenomenology. Now phenomenology properly understood --- in contrast to John Paul II who seemed to consider it a matter of big words and obscure texts --- involves looking at human experience very carefully, with full attention. Marcel showed how to do it in such books as *Being and Having* and *Creative Fidelity*. I learned from him how the use of possessions is a form of body language, just as body language was a symbol of the self, so that a grasping fist is continuous with a gated community and a gated community expresses a spiritual closure just as vividly as open doors express a spiritual welcome. I shamelessly employed such phenomenology in my early book on *Sharing Possessions*, finding that Marcel's insight into human experience and expression also opened up unexpected insight into the language of Scripture. Those were stages one and two.

Stage three was my writing in 1982 *Scripture and Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church.* The first version went out of print so fast it left skid marks, but it was reissued in 1996, and has proven useful to more than three people. In this book, I saw what apparently no one before me had noticed: that the narrative in Acts 10-15 showed the early church deciding to allow Gentile believers admission without circumcision, clear against the entire tenor of Scripture, on the basis of human narratives spoken in the assembly about the experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This was, exegetically, something of a shocker. And on that basis, I made bold to discern hard decisions concerning contemporary human

situations involving real bodies, concerning, for example, same-sex relationships.

I would not, could not, have perceived that pattern of God at work in human experience in the Book of Acts, if I however, had simultaneously not been paying attention to the convergence of at least four human narratives of experience in the years prior, the influence of which was only apparent to me years after I wrote the book—God's work in our bodies is not always immediately or unambiguously evident.

The first of these experiences was my behavior as a young Benedictine monk fighting for liturgical reform after Vatican Two (and fighting is the correct word) against the resistance of older, traditional monks. We liberals won, to be sure: all the Latin texts were burned, and a monastic culture built up over 1500 years disappeared in a moment. I learned, as I later thought about my role as a young theological Blackshirt, that there was a difference between being right and being righteous. We champions of historical research into ancient anaphoras were not in the least interested in the experiences of those pious monks who had experienced God through the rosary and novenas and a Latin psaltery. We had nothing to learn from them. They were old and out of date. Like their books, they needed to get out of the way.

The second narrative line was my own leaving of the monastery and becoming—by the laws of the church—a public adulterer. as well as cause of scandal, by marrying a divorced woman with six children. I gladly acknowledged that particular reading of my story --- how could I not? ---- But at the same time, I also felt that, through such public sin and disloyalty, the

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Living God was calling me, precisely through my body's longings, to a higher freedom and a more rigorous discipleship. God, I learned, played both a deep and long game, and the mystery of God's working in life could be right even when it did not appear righteous --- and vice-versa.

The third narrative of experience came through living with my stepdaughter, who, after years of misunderstanding and bullying, accepted the truth of her same-sex orientation, and pushed her very traditional mother and her then very homophobic stepfather into the difficult position of either wholeheartedly accepting her lesbianism as the way God had created her, and fully embracing her, or of rejecting her experience in the name of inherited prejudices. We made both the right and righteous choice, and were able to participate, eventually, in her marriage to her female partner and in their raising one of the brightest and most charming of our thirteen grandchildren.

The fourth set of narratives came in the form of some sixty forty-page journals of students at Yale Divinity School, as the end-product of a course I conducted called "Christian Existence as Life in the Spirit." These journals examined their individual lives over and over again from

the perspective of different religious categories, such as power and idolatry and faith, and leading each of them to examine their lives in terms of such themes as the use of possessions, sexuality, love, anger, and freedom. In some of these journals, students whose integrity and intelligence I respected mightily, used what we would now call this "safe space" to come out of the closet regarding their sexuality. These witnesses, together with my life with our daughter, convicted me, and turned me from homophobe to an ally of those whom God has created differently than me.

Okay, that's a LOT on an earlier book. I do see some connection to the Revelatory Body: you learned to pay attention to specific human experience, to listen to the narrative of that experience, and find in Scripture an important precedent for even contradicting Scripture on the basis of the work of God's Holy Spirit in human lives. But can you get to what prompted THIS book?

The key moment came at a conference at Duquesne University in 2002 on "The Phenomenology of the Body," where I got to speak and interact with philosophers and psychologists who were also looking carefully at human experience and narrative. Preparing my paper for this conference, I suddenly was hit with the realization that Scripture nowhere speaks of itself as revelatory, much less as containing all of revelation. Instead, Scripture consistently points readers to the human body as the place where God's Spirit is especially present and seeks to speak with and for all of creation. So, two immediate realizations followed: the first is that Scripture shows the bodily expression of God's presence and power consistently in the making of covenant, in the verbal and body language of the prophets, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in Jesus' exaltation as "spiritual body" to God's presence where he is "life-giving Spirit," and in the church, which, because it has drunk the one Spirit can be called, and is, the Body of Christ. That is clear, dramatic enough. Scripture says, read me so that you can read human bodies, because that's where God is at work right now. To give glory to God means recognizing the signs of God's presence and power right now.

The second realization is that it is the body precisely as revealer of spirit that interests us theologically. Without spirit, we can only speak of human corpses, not bodies. It is the living body as revealer of spirit that draws us into God's self-disclosure. When we speak of the human spirit, we mean the capacity of human bodies to get outside themselves and into other bodies, through knowledge, imagination, love. When we speak of God as Spirit we imagine this capacity of transcendence as absolute, so that, as Augustine suggests, God is more interior to us than we are to ourselves, that God is the unseen cause of all that comes into being at every moment, and thus is revealed by everything that comes into being at every moment.

Two further questions then occurred to me. First, if Scripture keeps pointing us to the ever-changing face of actual human life, why do we think of theology as a deductive science derived from scriptural revelation, or worse, theology as "systematic" when that clearly contradicts what Scripture itself tells us about the Living, always moving, usually surprising, and sometimes shocking, God who is the subject of theology?

Second, how can we actually go about thinking of theology in terms of an inductive process in

which Scripture participates but does not dictate, and in terms of an artful response to real life rather than the scientific analysis of dead texts…bearing in mind Paul's words that the letter kills but the Spirit gives life?

At last, sir, we seem to have reached the Revelatory Body. Can you tell us --- I hope in briefer fashion --- what you actually did by way of getting at an inductive theology? Quickly, now!

The first part of the book, alas, is stuffily academic and theoretical. The academic part tries to trace the sorry story of how Christianity, which in the New Testament is all about God's empowering Spirit in bodies, managed, via creeds and doctrinal disputes, to make theology into the dissection of concepts more than the discernment of bodies. The theoretical part attempts to define such slippery terms as body and spirit and their complex interactions, not only within humans but within God's creation.

The rest of the book looks directly and carefully at the human body as revealer --- and at times suppressor --- of spirit as found in diverse activities and circumstances . So, I look at the body at play, the body at work, the passionate body, the body in pain, and the aging body. This part of my book was great fun but also greatly demanding. Thinking about theories is relatively easy, for they stand still. But thinking about actual bodies, my own body, your body, can be a scary exercise. They keep moving, as does God's creation, and require quick mental feet to keep up.

So, do you have any overall impressions from this effort, besides its being fun and hard?

I do. The first is that I found myself avoiding such obviously "revelatory" experiences as prayer and mysticism, or healings and exorcisms. For one thing, I have talked enough about those things elsewhere. For another, they are low-lying fruit, too easy to pick. But play and work, desire and pain, aging: these are experiences all of us have and yet seldom consider as expressions of God's presence and power. How can the sheer secularity of our everyday experience point us to God?

Second, I found that when I started with the actual experience of bodies, and then tried to engage Scripture in light of that phenomenological analysis, Scripture either didn't say much about such experience, or say much that was helpful. On some subjects, Scripture says virtually nothing. Have you ever googled the Bible for play, or work? You won't find much. On other subjects it has a great deal to say, but not much that is helpful to actual human experience. The preeminent example is human suffering. The Bible is filled with talk about suffering --- but notice that ALL of it is connected to the great meta-topic of sin and salvation. Humans suffer because of the sin of Adam and are saved from sin and suffering by Christ. Not only is this wrong about suffering --- humans suffer pain because they are sentient creatures not because they have inherited or committed sin --- but it never addresses the pain of a living human body. Try reading Job to someone with a four-day migraine if you think Scripture helps with suffering.

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Can you give us some examples of how your preliminary investigations --- they are certainly not exhaustive but only suggestive --- suggest how find the body can be "revelatory" of the human and divine spirit? Let's start with the chapter on the Body at Play.

I started with play for two reasons. The first is that the Bible says next to nothing about an activity that is properly and essentially human, linking us to our earliest ancestors, indeed to other primates. The second is that play has been wonderfully analyzed by such anthropologists as Johannes Huizinga, and has fascinated me since I first used his classic study *Homo Ludens: The Play Element in Culture* when I offered a course in the liturgy in 1970 that began with an analysis of body-language and the patterns of play.

Huizinga noted several essential things about this form of communal activity that he defined as "purposeless but meaningful activity." While we work to accomplish something. We play because we experience something. Work is pragmatic, play is non-pragmatic. Yet is has real form and substance. Huizinga noted, for example, that play is always serious, always demands our full attention. He noted that play is always strictly bounded by rules of time and space, observed by all participants. He showed how cheating corrupted play, and pointed to the way that sports, above all professional sports, moved humans far from play into in the realm of work.

What fascinated me most, though, is the way play enables us to enter with others into an alternative reality not defined by the "realism" of everyday life, how it provides a space apart, a time off, shared with others, and how, when we play well with others --- as when we sing together in a chorus or are "in the zone" while playing basketball --- the patterned movements of our body (producing sounds in harmony, passing the basketball with speed and accuracy) actually takes us "out of ourselves" into a larger, shared self. In play, we experience transcendence, as our spirit, through our bodies, enters with the spirit of others for a moment, for a space. Play is our bodies and spirits experiencing the freedom that comes from entering with the bodies and spirits of others into a larger world than defined by toil and gain.

It is not a large leap, then, to think of authentic worship in terms of play. Anthropologists universally recognize the family resemblance between play and ritual. Thinking of Christian worship as play offers us a number of insights as to how worship might be distorted or corrupted by becoming a form of work, a burden or work rather than a leap of freedom. But more than that, seeing how play liberates the human spirit gives us perhaps a glimpse at the way God's Spirit is at play in creation, helps us perhaps understand why the Book of Proverbs speaks of wisdom the way it does: "When he fixed the foundations of the earth, then was I beside him as an artisan; I was his

delight day by day, playing before him all the while, playing over the whole of his earth, having my delight with human beings" (Prov 8:29-31).

Here, I ask you to pause just a moment to contrast this body at play, which finds transcendence into a larger spirit so easy and joyful, with the body in pain, where the spirit finds itself cramped and confined. Pain sucks us into ourselves, virtually makes us the sum of our symptoms: I am my toothache, my cancer, my aching limbs; pain isolates us (willingly or unwillingly) from the company of others, limits our horizons to this bed, this chair, this set of medical procedures. The body in pain is naturally solipsistic, for the spirit is so buried in the body's misery that it needs to work full time just to keep its weak lamp lit.

But precisely this truth, which we have all observed in ourselves and in others, makes the more impressive the testimony to the reality of transcendence by those who somehow manage to reach beyond their body in pain to touch others with compassion and care, who leap (with, to be sure, aching freedom) into the shared spirit of others. We each know examples in the bodies of the saints like Teresa of Avila and Simone Weil; my personal example is the witness borne over a life-time of chronic pain by my wife Joy, who never failed to attend not to her own need but the needs of others, who refused to allow pain to remove her from the fellowship of the spirit. And we all seek to live by the example of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who in his body of pain breathed out his Spirit to embrace all of creation.

Maybe I am wrong (says my interviewer) **but I think I can guess how the chapter on the body at work might go. Plus, I am eager to hear about the passionate body! What did you discover there, if it can be shared?**

This is one of the cases where looking at living bodies led to conclusions in tension with Scripture. Here, the phenomenology of the body enlarges and enriches the perspective that the Bible shares with the nearly universal view of ancient moralists. For this whole tradition, passions --- human drives and desires of every sort --- were for them a huge moral problem. The very term "desire" (*epithymia*) came to connote "evil desire." The whole point of moral discipline was to keep the passions under control, achieving a*patheia* and *ataraxia* through the control exercised by the mind. Plato's image was famous: the passions were like unruly horses capable of driving our lives over the cliff; the charioteer directed and controlled the passions through cool rationality.

For Scripture as for these Greek and Roman moralists, emotional impulses: fear, sexual desire, pleasure in food and drink, were intrinsically dangerous and potentially destructive, unless kept under the strict control of the mind. Now, there is a certain self-evident truth to all this: uncontrolled passions can express themselves as greed and envy and gluttony and drunkenness and violence and murder. Low impulse control is not a virtue. The addictive pursuit of pleasure or power or possessions is ultimately destructive. This is all true.

But the full development of Christian moral theology has been impoverished by its lack of attention to the ways in which healthy desire works within actual human experience. It has

emphasized far too much the control or even suppression of desire, and learned too little from the positive benefits of desire, among which we can count ambition to excellence in any endeavor (from music to massage, from physics to fishing), the discovery of life-partners and the begetting of children, the defense of the weak and the fight for justice. Worse, it turns out to be both foolish and futile. The mind, after all, is a notoriously weak and fallible instrument. Putting it in charge of the emotions is like hiring a nanny who wears herself out trying to keep the kids quiet, and in the process makes them rebellious and out of control, and in the process has no energy left for doing what she (the mind) does best. If she would just let them play --- which is what kids want to do ---- the whole house could be at peace, and the nanny could do what she really should be doing, teaching them through her companionship. As for those horses of Plato: they are not nearly so fearsome as pictured; basically, they want to get out of harness and back to their barn or pasture. Horses can find their way back to their barn just fine while the rational charioteer is still puzzling over his GPS.

Our bodies and their desires, in short, are not our enemies, but our friends. They do not tell us what we ought to do, but they are unmatched in showing us what is actually happening in our embodied selves. Attention to my craving body, for example. indicates that my addictions to drink or drugs or sex or things, are less symptoms of an excess of pleasure than the signs of the deep and depressing condition called anhedonia, or the absence of pleasure. My body tells me I am angry; it does not tell me the appropriate expression of anger, but it tells the truth about what the effect of hurt and danger on my body. My body tells me clearly that I am crazy about this person; whether that desire can be fulfilled is a more difficult discernment, but such discernment benefits by a recognition of the truth. Our bodies, in fact, frequently reach where we need to get faster than our minds do. They are, indeed, revelatory. It is not by accident that the most powerful language for the human quest for union with God, from the Song of Songs, to Teresa of Avila to the Sufi Rumi, is erotic, the expression of human sexual desire.

When you wrote this book (my interviewer notes) **you were seventy years old and your wife was eighty. Is this a clue as to why your chapter on the aging body seems to be the one that most readers find most pointed and poignant? Or maybe your readers have all reached your same stage of senility?**

This chapter, in fact, almost wrote itself. Describing the aging body was basically doing a self-inventory! Much of this is a catalogue of diminishment: my body used to look this way and could do this or that easily; now it can perform them, if at all, only with great and often painful effort. The words grace, speed, alacrity and strength no longer apply as once they did. Such diminishments and humiliations are known --- or soon will be --- to us all. They are a common human condition; as my dear Joy used to say, "we are all common clay." During the three months of recovery after my recent back surgery, I discover that my body seems to work best at the vegetative level: it produces easily and rapidly such unanticipated outgrowths as toenails, skin-tags, liver spots, and hair in unexpected and often unwelcome places. The only appropriate response seemed to be to grow this beard, plus the secret hope that I might be mistaken for Sean Connery!

The flourishing of the vegetative aside, however, aging is mostly the story of loss: loss of mobility, balance, strength. More than all these, to be sure, is the loss of memory and mental competence, which to some degree comes upon all but the blessed few. With the loss of memory and cognitive sharpness comes the loss of the sense of self. Becoming truly aged means also becoming increasingly lonely. I am so aware at the age of 75 that all the scholars whom I revered are long dead, that all the scholars with whom I worked are retired and gone, and worse, have been replaced by youthful strangers whose ideas I deprecate, whose music I detest, and whose names I can never seem to match to their faces. I don't understand them, and to the degree I do Understand them, I don't much like them. How curmudgeonly is that? Those with whom I have shaped and shared a world are no longer with me in that world. To be aged means increasingly living in a world inhabited by one. Or as I put it in the book, the world seems to leave us before we leave the world.

Perhaps this is one of God's tender mercies, by which God prepares us, makes us in fact glad to leave, a world that is no longer ours in the way it once was. I should like to think so. More certain is that our hope for the resurrection becomes at this stage of our lives both counterintuitive and heroic, as our actual sense of the force of life grows weaker. It is one thing to affirm "the sure and certain hope of the resurrection" when life blooms all around and within us. But when the leaves fall steadily off our own frail limbs and the sap that always surged within us withdraws in the face of winter, that confession is much harder.

But the most certain thing of all that I took away from my reflection on aging was that, like the experience of the body in pain, we can only learn how the body reveals if we care enough to pay attention. If we are among the healthy, we learn about pain only by being attentive to those whose bodies bear witness to the constricting force of pain; when we are young and vibrant and surrounded by friends and partners and children, and can run down stairs without watching where our feet land or without holding to a rail, then we can learn about aging only from the witness of those whose bodies are preparing to leave the world that in most respects has already left them. And listening to those grown old about the experience of their lives, then and now, is at once the greatest gift we can give to them, and the greatest gift they can give to us.

Well (sighs my imagined interviewer) **that was certainly cheerful. Thanks. I think. Can we please conclude with some final reflections concerning the revelatory body?**

My concluding thoughts are simple and straightforward. I have become more convinced than ever that the simple and singular vocation of every human being is to bear witness to the truth as they perceive it from their specific and particular embodied condition. We can bear witness with our bodies and from our bodies. No one can bear this witness for us, and we cannot borrow another's witness as our own. Thinking of theology as inductive art is another way of expressing this reality. We are all required to observe and learn from our embodied existence in the presence of others. We are all called to recognize the presence and power of God within creation. This is not a matter of having a theology degree or holding a chair in theology. It is a matter of participating in God's revelation by discerning, to use Peter Berger's wonderful title, the

"rumors of angels" that come to us in the incidents and accidents of everyday life.

Everyday life has been the focus of my reflections because our lives are mostly quotidian and ordinary. It is not difficult to perceive God's Holy Spirit at work in prayer and prophecy, in healings and exorcisms, in the flights of mysticism, for that's the whole point of those activities. But what about the activity of the work we do every day? How can that engage, elevate, or destroy the human spirit? My call is to look closely and carefully at the things we all experience, like work and play, like passion and pain, like aging. What intimations of God's presence and power can we discern in the things all of us experience when we are not being churchly but worldly? Theology in this sense is not for writing in books, but for responding more deeply in the obedience of faith.

You may have heard in my remarks some disparagement of Scripture as a source for theology. But I am not so profoundly a self-despising professional as to disparage the texts that have shaped and continue to shape my life.

> Our bodies and their desires do not tell us what we ought to do, but they are unmatched in showing us what is happening in our embodied selves.

My point was not that Scripture was unnecessary --- after all, it provides the lens through which we can perceive the world as God's creation in the first place --- but that it is inadequate. It needs to be read with the stuff of everyday experience to come alive as it should.

Are there specific moral or religious dispositions that we need to cultivate in order to participate in such inductive theology?

Let me suggest one of each, very briefly. Religiously, we need to cultivate the disposition of reverence. It is when we are struck with wonder at the isness of things, at their sheer existence, at their coming into being at every moment, being brought to visibility and audibility by the unseen and silent power whom we call God, that we are best prepared to perceive and receive even the most ordinary moments of life as disclosing the presence and power of God. When we are reverent toward creation, then we can hear the stories of others as revelatory, can perceive in their play intimations of transcendence, can intuit in their pain the compression of the Spirit, can indeed experience all that we hear and see and feel as bearing the possibility of God's revelation.

The corresponding moral disposition is attentiveness. In a small book called *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians*, I used the phrase, "the asceticism of attentiveness," for the sort of discernment brought to bear on lived human experience that philosophers might term as phenomenology, but with this difference: our disciplined attentiveness, our willingness to take the time and make the space necessary for paying attention to our own bodies and the bodies of others, has the goal, not of being more accurate

ethnographers of the body alone, but more adequate detectors of the human and divine Spirit at play in the world. True theology is not the sort that seeks to find expression in a set of slogans that we can put on bumper-stickers. Authentic theology is an inductive art that seeks in every human exchange and experience the implied presence of the unseen God, so that as the one who is without change glories forth in new and unexpected ways, we might, with the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins, declare, "Glory be to God for dappled things."

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Creating Dialogue

1. Have you ever been aware of a law, a call, or a revelation that came through your bodily experience?

2. How does understanding the body as revelatory change your image of God?

3. How does the revelatory body impact health care?