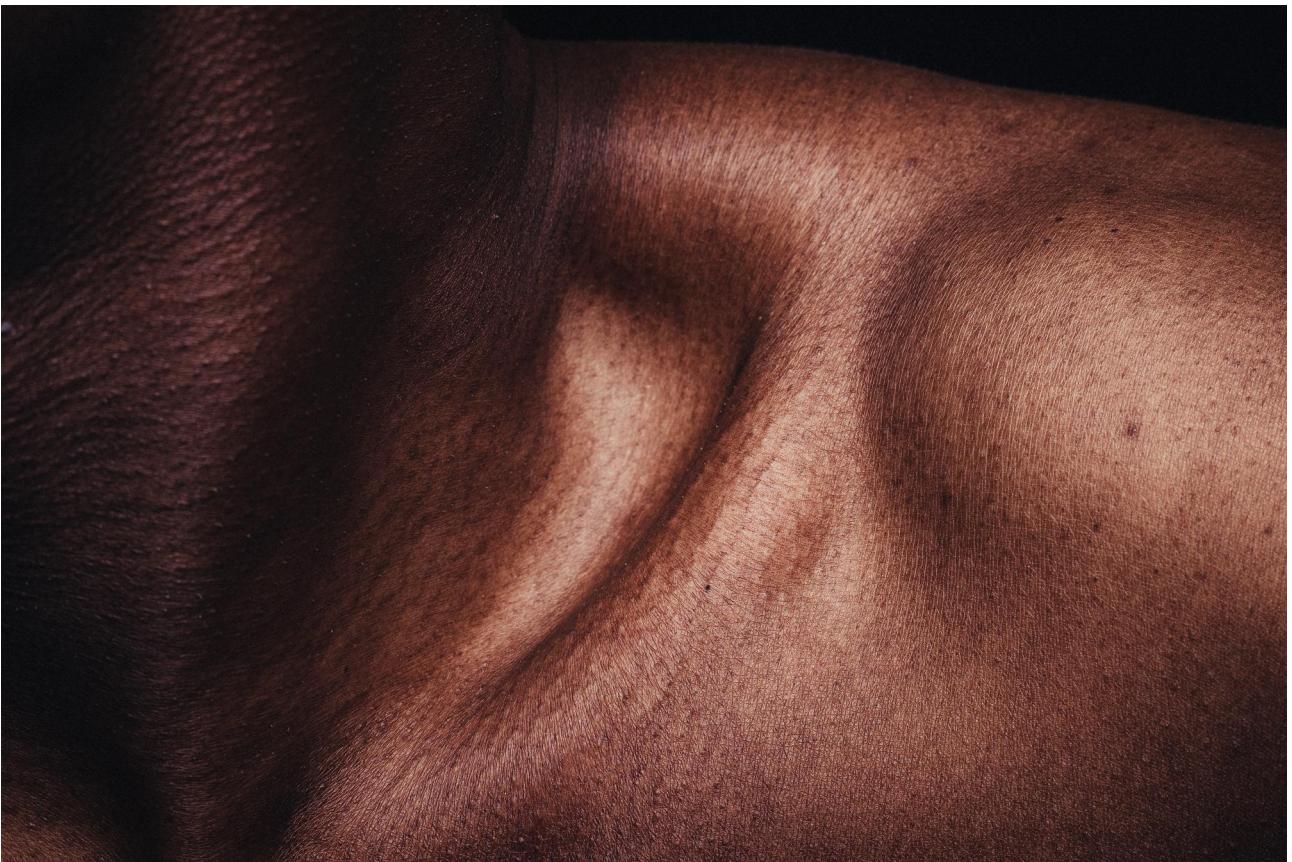


Being Pagan: Being Body

by Rhyd Wildermuth



In attempting to understand the way pagans, animists, and indigenous people understand the world, there are a lot of difficulties we encounter. In the first chapter, I wrote about the pagan time, of time seen not as some mechanical progression of clocks and calendars but a dance of natural rhythms. In the second chapter, I discussed the pagan relationship to land, seeing it as something which has its own sense of time and its own character which manifests through those who live here.

For both of those concepts, I pointed to the difficulties we “moderns” encounter when trying to access this knowledge. So much of our lives now are defined by machines and the urban that we rarely even have moments to encounter the land or these other rhythms of time.

It can be hard for us to pin down precisely why these ideas are now so foreign to our lives, and even harder to notice at all that there was another way of seeing the world. This process is often called 'disenchantment,' the sense that the magic or meaning has gone out of the world and cannot return. That's one reason why many pagans now focus on 're-enchantment,' on becoming more aware of the magic of the world and our lives.

There is another word for all of this, one that comes not from any mystical tradition but actually from Karl Marx: *alienation*. Alienation was a word used to describe what happens when something suddenly becomes 'foreign' or 'strange' to you, especially when previously that thing was a part of you, or you were a part of it.

Alienation comes from a Latin word that means "other," and came to mean later the idea of "belonging to something else." Something that was *alienus* was from somewhere else or belonged to another place, whether that was a person, an idea, or an object. Thus, a traveller from outside of the Roman Empire was alien because they were from other lands, and that traveler's ideas, belongings, and ways of acting would also be considered alien because they came from elsewhere. Basically, anything alien was something that didn't belong or was not part of the society or "us."

When something is alienating to us, it makes us feel different, confused, disconnected. We might say we feel "alienated" from our friends or community, or that a political idea is alienating because it focuses on differences and therefore disconnects people from each other.

Alienation is a good word to describe our experiences from the land and natural rhythms of time. We are alienated from the land and these conceptions of time because they seem strange to us, as if they are foreign things. Another way of putting this, though, is that it is we who have become foreign to the land and natural rhythms of time, because we now are part of a worldview that doesn't believe these things matter any more.

Either way you put it, this concept of alienation accurately describes another thing we have become disconnected from, maybe the most difficult pagan truth for us to comprehend. That truth?

We do not have bodies. *We are bodies.*

When Verbs Become Nouns



This can be an incredibly difficult idea to grasp, so we'll take a slight detour to talk about language instead.

Every known language in the world has two primary kinds of words, what we call “nouns” and “verbs.” A noun is a name for something specific, while verbs describe some sort of action. There are a third and fourth type of word which are much rarer in many languages: adjectives (words that describe a thing) and adverbs (words that describe an action).

Languages spoken by indigenous peoples, by ancient cultures (especially animist ones), and ancient languages that were primarily oral tend to use many more verbs than most modern languages do. On the other hand, our modern languages (like English, French, Mandarin) use many more nouns than verbs.

The reason for this is that those older and indigenous cultures were primarily oral cultures, rather than “literate” (written) cultures. Oral cultures tend to speak more in the present tense (some such languages do not even possess a “past” or “future” tense) and convey ideas through concrete terms, rather than abstract ideas. On the other hand, literate cultures tend to speak of the world in more abstract, conceptual ways.

A strange thing happens when a culture adopts writing. The more symbolic and abstract their language becomes, the more they begin to turn verbs into nouns. This shift changes the way certain things are thought about in some surprising ways.

One of the easiest places to show this is in many older English words with Germanic roots.¹ For instance, take the words “thirst” and “hunger,” both of which are intimately related to human existence and survival.

In English now, we say “I am thirsty” or “I am hungry.” In these expressions, thirsty and hungry are adjectives, because they describe a noun (the “I” in the sentences), and the verb (“am,” to be) is

¹ English is a hybrid language, a mix of Germanic and Romance (Latin) roots, created through the Norman (French-speaking) invasion and occupation of the Anglo-Saxon speaking inhabitants of England.

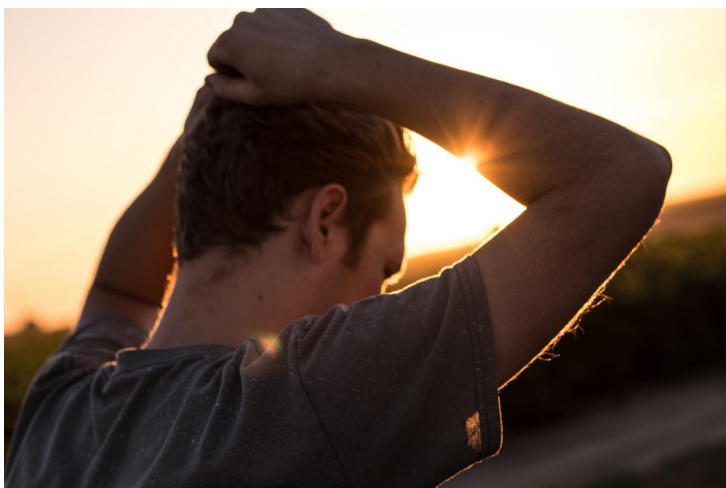
used to connect them. Thirst and hunger are now both nouns that describe an abstract concept or state of being. Thirsty and hungry, then, are words that describe being in that state.

Oddly, though, these two words were originally words that defined an action. That is, they were once verbs, something we can see in archaic and rare uses of English (for instance, from the Christian Bible, “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”). So, hunger and thirst were not something you were or had, but something you *did*. You hungered and thirsted, which is to say you desired food and desired water.

Consider what this change means, and what the difference between “thirsting” and “being thirsty” really is. Being thirsty is a passive state, a condition that needs to be resolved. It is something that has happened to you, rather than something you are really a part of.

On the other hand, thirsting for water is an active state. It is not happening to you, it is something you *do*. It is part of your desiring, your active agency in the world.

How we came to “have” bodies



This shift in our way of thinking —from active participation in the world to things that are acted upon—is the same thing that has happened to our understanding of our bodies. Just as we externalized hunger and thirst, turning it from something we do to something we have, we have externalized our bodies and separating them from ourselves, made them

something we have, rather than the terrain of all our active engagement with the world.

This shift came about through several historical changes in our cosmology, our way of seeing the world and our place within it. The first of these shifts came through prioritization of the written word over oral tradition, starting with the Greeks. During that change, many crucial ideas became abstracted, became “static” things rather than active processes.

One such idea was that of nature itself. As the writer Kadmus notes in his book, *True To The Earth*:

Our later concept of nature being structured through balance and law make it possible to talk about nature as a stable order. The Ancient Greek concept of nature, on the other hand, derives from the process of *growing*. In oral Archaic Greek (as preserved in Homer), there is no noun for “nature” but only a verbal form. The equivalent in English would be having “naturing” but no word for “nature.” In Archaic Greek, the term is *phuo*, and it roughly means “to bring forth or produce.” In fact, the history of the term “nature” is much the same, deriving from the Latin verb

nasci, “to be born.” For the Romans (who thought in Latin), nature is what is born and bears future generations. Similarly, in Greek, there is a general activity of bringing forth and producing, which later becomes the noun *phusis* which became translated into Latin as *natura*.

That is, our very way of thinking about nature itself changed from the idea that it was an active process (naturing) to a static, external object. This shift came about in both Greek and Roman cultures at the point when the written form of language became more important than the oral form.

This same change happened also in other European languages later. The Germanic languages, for instance, saw a shift between verbing the world (that is, seeing the world as full of active processes) to nouning the world (seeing the world as full of static states and concepts) after the forced conversions of Germanic peoples to Christianity.

That brings us to the second major change that shifted the way we thought about the world. Christianity, which is a monotheistic religion, prioritizes written language and static concepts over a sense of active processes. In addition, the monotheistic cosmology itself is static, with a singular unchanging God who exists outside of nature because he created it.

This framework creates a duality—and an oppositional one—between the physical world and consciousness. God, as the all-knowing figure, is not part of nature nor made from nature, but is wholly external to it. Thus, thought is something external to nature, since God is the ultimate thinking being.

This means that our own thoughts, our own conscious existence, is also somehow external from the nature from which our bodies are composed. You can see this best in the Christian idea of the soul, which is different from Greek and other pagan ideas of the soul. The soul in Christianity is something eternal that stands outside of nature. That is, humans have souls, but those souls are separate from their existence as natural beings and separate from nature itself.

In the pagan understandings, the soul is also part of nature. For the Greeks, the soul was also a body, a body that continued in its existence even after the human body it was part of died. The difference goes a little further, though, because the Greeks didn’t really see dead bodies as really *dead*.

Kadmus explains this point as well in his book:

Pagan animism understands everything that exists in terms of living bodies. The more common distinctions between living and dead are actually distinctions between types of bodies and the changes that occur to bodies, such that nothing is ever “dead” in an absolute sense but only dead to a certain type of life.

This conception of the body is the origin of the idea that the “sum is greater than the whole of its parts.” A body is not an arrangement constituted out of parts, but rather is a whole that alone constitutes the parts of which it is made. A hand cannot be a hand without a body; it is not

possible to put together a collection of various body parts pre-existing the body to create a total body.

The same goes for the body that is the earth, and the many other bodies that make up the cosmos. One can't have a mountain without a valley, and without a range or plain. One can't have a river without the land through which it passes, or a tree without the earth it grips and sky it upholds.

If this seems difficult to grasp, consider a famous Greek thought puzzle called the "Ship of Theseus." In that puzzle, there is a ship which, after years and years, comes to have every part of it—its oars, its sails, the wooden boards, even its crew—fully replaced. The question is: is it still the same ship?

We can ask this same question about ourselves as well. I am 44 years old. My body looks completely different from what it did when I was born. I do not have the same hair. The vast majority of the cells that make up my body have been replaced many times since then². I have lived in many places, had many different sets of friends and relationships, have done many different kinds of work, and have fully changed many things about myself many, many times. Am I still the same person I was?

The pagan answer to this question is a laugh, because in the pagan cosmology, the body is a much larger and dynamic thing than in our modern understanding. Body itself is a process, not just a static object, the same way that nature is an active force, not an abstract and unchanging concept.

A third major change finalized this shift from a pagan view of body to the view of body as an external object we "have" instead of something we "are." That change was the birth of capitalism and the mechanistic worldview, which is the worldview we live in now.



This is shown best by the writer Silvia Federici, whose work has shown how much of the embodied wisdom of humans—especially of women—was displaced and even viciously attacked (as in the European witch hunts) during the birth of capitalism.

In her essay, "In Praise of the Dancing Body," she outlines how the mechanistic worldview

² All the cells that make up the body die and are regenerated multiple times during our lifetime, with the exception of certain cells in the brain and the cells that make up the lens of our eye.

(seeing the world as a machine rather than as a dynamic, active process) changed the way we understood humans-as-bodies:

Mechanization—the turning of the body, male and female, into a machine—has been one of capitalism’s most relentless pursuits. Animals too are turned into machines, so that sows can double their litter, chicken can produce uninterrupted flows of eggs, while unproductive ones are grounded like stones, and calves can never stand on their feet before being brought to the slaughter house.

I cannot here evoke all the ways in which the mechanization of body has occurred. Enough to say that the techniques of capture and domination have changed depending on the dominant labor regime and the machines that have been the model for the body.

Thus we find that in the 16th and 17th centuries (the time of manufacture) the body was imagined and disciplined according to the model of simple machines, like the pump and the lever. This was the regime that culminated in Taylorism, time-motion study, where every motion was calculated and all our energies were channeled to the task. Resistance here was imagined in the form of inertia, with the body pictured as a dumb animal, a monster resistant to command.

With the 19th century we have, instead, a conception of the body and disciplinary techniques modeled on the steam engine, its productivity calculated in terms of input and output, and efficiency becoming the key word. Under this regime, the disciplining of the body was accomplished through dietary restrictions and the calculation of the calories that a working body would need. The climax, in this context, was the Nazi table, that specified what calories each type of worker needed. The enemy here was the dispersion of energy, entropy, waste, disorder. In the US, the history of this new political economy began in the 1880s, with the attack on the saloon and the remolding of the family-life with at its center the full-time housewife, conceived as an anti-entropic device, always on call, ready to restore the meal consumed, the body sullied after the bath, the dress repaired and torn again.

In our time, models for the body are the computer and the genetic code, crafting a dematerialized, dis-aggregated body, imagined as a conglomerate of cells and genes each with her own program, indifferent to the rest and to the good of the body as a whole. Such is the theory of the ‘selfish gene,’ the idea, that is, that the body is made of individualistic cells and genes all pursuing their program a perfect metaphor of the neo-liberal conception of life, where market dominance turns against not only group solidarity but solidarity with own ourselves. Consistently, the body disintegrates into an assemblage of selfish genes, each striving to achieve its selfish goals, indifferent to the interest of the rest.

Federici is explaining this process of “alienation.” We become increasingly divorced from the bodies that we are, viewing them more and more as something *outside of ourselves* that needs to be disciplined, fought, struggled with, shaped, and ultimately forced to do our bidding.

That is because we humans ourselves are treated that way. To live in the modern world, we must force ourselves to wake up whether we have slept enough or not. We must travel often long distances five times a week to a job where we must conform ourselves to whatever tasks we are paid for, whether we would bodily like to do those or not. We must eat not when we are hungry

but when time is allotted for those meals, sleep not when we are tired but when we must in order to make sure we can do it all again the next day.

To do all of this, we rely heavily on chemicals to get ourselves through—coffee in the morning, aspirin to deal with headaches, alcohol to calm our nerves and help us relax in the evenings. We rely also on technological distractions as well, especially screens like smartphones and televisions which “take our mind off” whatever is happening around us that we don’t have the emotional energy to deal with.³

What Pain Can Teach



When something goes “wrong” with the body, we often treat it either as an inconvenience or a crisis to be dealt with, rather than something we should learn from. As I write this, I am nursing a knotted muscle in my lower back. Years ago when such a thing happened, I would take a pain killer or a muscle relaxer and hope the problem went away so I could get back to work.

Now, I have learned to look not just for ways to ease the pain but reasons for the pain itself. What was I doing which caused those muscles to over-extend themselves? What was I thinking about and what was my emotional state during the time which caused me to over-extend them? And what is this pain trying to tell me?

This way of looking at the body is closer to the pagan and animist view. In many ancient cultures, including current cultures

which have preserved much of their ancient knowledge (such as China and India), the body is seen not just as a static thing to be fixed but an entire interconnected system to be healed. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, for instance, ailments are seen as related to emotional and

3 Including boredom, which is really just a state of not wanting to be in our present situation.

psychological states, not because the emotions and our mental states affect our bodies, but because emotions and mental states are part of the body itself.

For instance, emotions related to fear are seen as connected to the kidneys. When a person experiences a trauma that makes them fearful, or when they are afraid (including being timid, not speaking up when you want something or going along with what other people want instead of engaging in potential conflict), Traditional Chinese Medicine sees this as a blockage or depletion of the energy of the kidneys. External events can deplete that energy, and also depletion of that energy can cause fear reactions to external events.

Problems with the lower back in this system are related to the kidneys as well, and I know precisely the emotional state which led me to do things which caused this current back problem. I had been thinking a lot about some situations which made me afraid and fearful earlier in the week, and choosing each time to respond to those situations with avoidance, 'not rocking the boat,' and not speaking my mind. And then, inevitably, I woke up one morning after that with severe pain in my back, after having slept in a bodily position that reflected my emotional state.

Treating the body as something external, as something alien to us, makes such thinking sound bizarre. Since we see the body as an object rather than a process that composes us, we see pain as an isolated incident that must have one cause and one solution. This also makes us see the body as a machine to be "fixed" or "repaired."

This alienation has led to a lot of other ways of seeing the body that would have been completely unimaginable to ancient cultures, to pagan, animist peoples, and are even still unimaginable to indigenous people who have not been fully "colonized" by the modern way of seeing the world.

For instance, consider the way we sometimes talk about being "trapped in our body," or the way some come to speak of the body as a "meat cage" or "prison of flesh" that needs to be escaped. Or the way we can find ourselves talking about how we "hate our bodies," and then flee into fantasies of "inhabiting" different bodies.⁴

This way of thinking would be incomprehensible to pagan, animist, indigenous, and ancient cultures because the body wasn't something that could be spoken about as a separate thing from who we are.

Granted, many times when we use such language now, we are likely experiencing pain of some kind. A person who is very ill or disabled might speak of feeling "trapped" in their bodies, and it's easy to sympathize with these expressions of suffering. Yet even when we ourselves experience this kind of pain and maybe say the same things, we also intuitively understand that it is impossible.

4 This is different from the desire to *change* the body. The body itself is a *process of change*, constantly becoming. Guiding that change (as, for instance, in working out to get stronger) isn't "escaping" the body. However, the fantasies of having our entire consciousness "uploaded" into computers or transferred into other bodies is escapism.

In fact, moments of extreme pain are often moments when we are most aware of being body. It is impossible to ignore our physical existence when something hurts about that existence. Pain brings us “back” to the bodies we are and makes us profoundly aware of the terrain of our existence.⁵

Such moments can be extremely unpleasant and almost terrifying when we are not accustomed to thinking of ourselves as bodies or when we have lived a long time ignoring our bodily existence. We can find ourselves panicking and looking for escape, perhaps trying to further disconnect from the body through the use of drugs or alcohol to deal with any degree of pain.⁶

“Mind Over Body”



There are other results of this alienation that are often subtle and difficult to unravel. For instance, because we make a distinction between ourselves and our bodies, we often tend to prioritize our thoughts and thinking over our physical reality. This can lead to one of the most common ailments we see discussed on social media posts: *anxiety*.

Anxiety means “troubled mind” in Latin, and usually refers to a sense of apprehension, worry, or fear that we cannot shake. In moments of anxiety, our thinking tends to circle back on itself, cycling dark and worried thoughts repeatedly through our heads despite no obvious or definable external cause.

Anxiety feels to be “in our heads,” and this is certainly true. But it’s easy—especially in such moments—to forget that *our heads are part of the body*, that mind isn’t some external thing but part of the very same flesh that composes the rest of our physical existence. Oftentimes, anxiety

5 Pain also brings us back into the “present,” into a state of direct consciousness with the world around us. That is why many mystical teaching traditions (for instance, Buddhism) use pain to help students become conscious of their surroundings and the present moment, often in the form of a brief slap across the wrist with a bamboo rod. This is also the root of the phrase “pinch me, I think I’m dreaming.” A pinch—painful but not harmful—brings the person to present consciousness so they can see things clearly.

6 Of course, there are levels of pain for which such things are helpful. The world has always been full of plants which will ease bodily suffering, and pagan ways of understanding the world recognize these plants as kind helpers in such moments.

can turn out to be related to something else occurring within the body, a “symptom” rather than a cause.

I first learned this through a really helpful friend who, whenever he saw that I was anxious, would ask me how recently I’d had anything to eat or drink. I’ll be honest—the first few times he asked me this, I felt quite angry at him, as if he was belittling me and not taking me seriously. Eventually, though, I’d have to admit that I hadn’t eaten all day, and couldn’t remember when I’d had a glass of water (though I’d had plenty of coffee, of course). After admitting that, I’d go eat something or drink some water, or do other things he would suggest like taking a deep breath, going for a short walk, or just sitting up straight.

The anxiety always went away soon after.

After finally learning to ask myself those questions whenever I felt anxious, I then learned to explore other such mental states and look for possible physical causes. Sometimes I’ll have a sense of utter despair and feelings of failure and self-hatred. More often than not, a short nap will make all that go away completely. Other times, I’ll have a feeling of dread or deep irritation, a sense that nothing is going right in my life and everyone around me is just out to annoy me. In my experience, that’s often related to simple things like my posture or some subtle pain or irritation in my back or legs that I have been ignoring.

As someone who lived much of my life alienated from my physical existence and often hating my body, it’s taken a long time just to come to this level of understanding. I wish I could say that this is all intuitive to me now, but it isn’t. I have a mental “checklist” I run through whenever I am experiencing anxiety, depression, irritation, or other such conditions. I run through the checklist, ticking off each item: have I drunk water? How much sleep did I get? When’s the last time I ate? How is my posture? How long have I been sitting in front of a screen?

The Consequences of Not Being Body

There are many other consequences to our modern alienation from body besides just the personal. For instance, because we do not see ourselves as bodies, we also do not see others as bodies either. Thus, often our interactions with other humans have a disembodied quality, a sense of distancing that can lead us to treat others as ideas, as symbols, as stereotypes, or mere background to our lives.

One place this is particularly evident is in our interactions with others through technological communication, such as “social” media. We interact with our perceptions of others, perceptions assembled from their words and profile images, and easily forget that beyond all those representations is another human body. So, we can find ourselves saying or thinking things about them—or to them—that we would never say in person.



We do not communicate only with words and sounds, but also with body. The language of the body is something we learn as infants well before we learn the spoken language of our parents.

The writer and physician Gabor Maté, who is renowned for his work treating addiction, tells a story from his own childhood that shows this. When he was very young, too young to understand what was happening in the world, he constantly cried. This concerned his mother, who called a doctor to ask for help. The doctor replied that he would come check on the child when he could, but he was very busy because *the children of all his other Jewish patients were also crying as well.*

At that point, the Nazis were taking over Hungary, where he and his parents lived. Of course, Gabor could not have known this as he was still an infant. But what he and the other infants the doctor spoke of did understand was that their parents were nervous, scared, stressed, and worried. These emotions manifested through the bodies of the parents, which the children could then physically feel. And so they responded to their parents' fear and anxiety by being anxious as well.

This ability to feel the emotions of others comes through the body. The body is constantly sensing, experiencing the physical world of which it is part. This is often called an “animal” sense, and we are taught to ignore such sensations and instead prioritize our thoughts.

Yet, the brain isn't a "sense organ." That is, the brain does not directly experience the world, but rather interprets all the other senses of the body (of which it is also part). On the other hand, our skin, which marks the external boundary of the physical body, is constantly in relation to the world around us. We can sense movement even without hearing merely by feeling the change of air pressure around us. We sense subtle shifts of heat and cold, feeling the warmth of sunlight or the chill of a draught. When we are close to someone we can feel the heat of their body, when we touch them we can feel all manner of things about their mood (if their muscles are tensed or relaxed) or their health (if their skin is hot and feverish, or cold and clammy, or rightly balanced).

Of the five basic senses, touch is the most active of them. Hearing, sight, smell, and taste are all receptive, but touch is a constant act of agency. We reach out to feel things, grasp them, and move throughout the world with our skin boldly facing all that is outside of us. That is why disembodied existence through technology can be so alienating, because we cannot use our primary "animal" sense to orient ourselves. Instead, we can only use sight.

Sight is a powerful sense, but it is often the most unreliable of them. For instance, fear of falling is directly related to the unreliability of sight for judging balance at heights and distance. When we experience vertigo, is it because our sight is giving us information that is less accurate than our other senses (including our internal balance system in the inner ear). We experience a disconnect between what we are seeing and what our body is feeling, and those who have not learned to rely more on those other senses in such situations will feel like they are falling.

Sight functions as a kind of shorthand for our body, something that can also lead us awry in many ways. For instance, most of the time when we look at a person, we only ever really give attention to certain parts of their faces, just as when we read we do not look at every letter of a word. We do a kind of "educated guessing," which is usually but not always accurate.

One place we can see this inaccuracy is when a friend or lover chides us for not noticing they had changed or cut their hair. What happens here is that we did not look at the entire person, but rather at the shorthand cues (the shape of their face), and our minds "filled in" the rest of the image incorrectly.

Reading is of course a sight-based skill, and as an editor I can vouch for how inaccurate sight can be. We do not actually read every word in a sentence, but rather make those same "educated guesses" about which words come next. Thus, misspellings are incredibly easy to miss even to a trained eye because our mind isn't looking for them, but rather for the meaning being conveyed. This explains much of why people seem to "jump to conclusions" in disembodied communication, because reading actually *requires* us to do so.

On the other hand, sight does have a powerful ability which is crucial in personal communication but useless in social media. With sight, we can judge the posture and stance of a person as they speak. Even if their voice is calm and their words apparently neutral, we see subtle things about

their body which tell us there is something else on their mind, or that they are lying, or that they are scared and worried. This aspect of sight as sense is missing in disembodied communication, thus leading many times to us misjudging the motives or intended meaning of someone's words.

Something else happens during our use of such technologies that is even more subtle and more disembodied. When we stare at a screen, we are not looking at anything else. One of the other useful aspects of sight—peripheral vision, the ability to sense our surroundings—isn't used at all in such communication. Oftentimes we focus only on what is on the screen and forget where we are or even that we are a body at all. We often stay in postures that are not good for the body, slump our shoulders and crane our neck in a way that reduces the amount of oxygen we take in, and even cause long-term damage to our upper spine as well as weaken certain neck muscles, causing prolonged pain.⁷

Again, this is a result not of personal defect but rather our modern society's alienation from the body, of seeing ourselves as having bodies rather than *being bodies*. What the body wants and needs is seen as secondary to what we want and need, which is a false dichotomy. We try to make our bodies conform to our activities as if we are not our bodies, and thus must convince ourselves that the body is external to us, something we have instead of something we are.

Everything is Body

There is one more place where this alienation from the body can be seen not just as unhealthy but deeply destructive. The body within a pagan worldview is not only what we are, but also what all of nature is as well. Animals and plants are bodies, as are forests, rivers, oceans, air, and everything else that exists.

Consider a forest. A forest is composed of trees, and shrubs, and fungus, and many other plants. It is also home to animals, birds, and insects. All of those things together make up the body of a forest, the forest-as-body.

⁷ Just such a problem happened to me many times, which caused me to finally stop using my smartphone so much. In particular, I would get debilitating headaches and also feel an odd sense of dread and irritability, both of which were coming not from some mental disorder or actual external source but from the reduced oxygen and blood flow that being in such positions caused.



This is all much like the human body. We are bone, skin, organs, and blood. But we are also home to untold numbers of micro-organisms which live on our skin and in our gut. These micro-organisms help us digest food, fight off infection, and perform many other tasks the way that animals, insects, fungi, and bacteria do in a forest. Insects pollinate plants and eat the corpses of dead animals and plants. Animals dig up the earth, aerating the soil. Fungi and bacteria decompose old leaves and other bits of dead things and return the nutrients which they held back into the ground.

Seeing the forest as body rather than just a collection of separate beings leads one to understand that we cannot destroy one part of it without damaging the entire forest. Killing off one kind of insect, for example, or hunting too many of the birds or animals that live there, or felling too many trees, is much like removing an organ from a human. Though in some cases the forest may survive, in many cases the entire body has been damaged by that one act.

The same goes for the oceans, rivers, and other “bodies” of water. Their health and existence are reliant on many other beings, plants and fish and mammals that clean it and keep it in balance for other species. Damming a river or taking too many fish from a lake can turn the entire system into something unlivable for everything there.

It is only possible for us to do such destructive things to the natural world because we do not see it as body, but rather separate things unrelated to each other. And we can only see nature that way

because we see ourselves that way as well, beings “trapped” in bodies with futuristic fantasies of one day escaping completely.

Those fantasies, always technological in nature, seem only to increase the more we destroy the nature we rely on, from which we are composed, and of which we are a part. The more the earth’s climate becomes inhospitable for humans and the more we destroy of our environment, the more we hear of billionaires and techno-futurist ideologues preaching of escaping not just the bodies we are, but the body of the planet itself.

Yet the climate has changed and the environment has been destroyed through that very same logic, the alienation of ourselves from our bodies and the bodies of all that exists.

Being Body Again



It is not only possible to be body again, but we *already are body*. That is, we don’t need to change all of society in order to see ourselves as body, we only need to reconnect to something that is already true.

This may sound difficult, but only because you may be attempting to use your mind and the power of your thought to become body again. The answer isn't more thought nor theory, but rather something much easier.

To be the body you already are, you must begin to act as body, by which I really mean just act. Do, stretch, feel, taste, thirst, and hunger again, and do this all with the joy, curiosity, and delight of a child exploring their world.

Most religious and spiritual traditions of the world—with the glaring exception of the three monotheisms—have some sort of physical practice which aligns the person back into the body and away from the prioritization of thought. Yoga and other similar practices are obvious examples of this, but so too are practices like meditation. The goal of meditation is not to enhance our mental powers or to put the body under the control of our thoughts, but rather to bring the mind back into the body as just one part of our whole existence.

Many martial arts similarly work to realign the mind with body, but it is not necessary to join a club and get trained in order to be body again. Other physical training practices like weight lifting or even running or jogging can do this same thing, because using the body helps us remember it is our existence.

This need not take the form of strenuous exercise at all, but such work really helps, especially if your life is generally sedentary. Engaging in exercise that raises your heart rate, makes you sweat, and pushes you a littler further than you normally go can help awaken senses in you. After exercise, skin gets more sensitive such that currents of air, or sunlight, or touch feels more profound, while, at the same time, thoughts tend to be more focused and less distracting.

Stretching can accomplish something similar. When you stretch, stagnant areas of the body reawaken, get more oxygen (one of the reasons why we often yawn while stretching), and likewise become more receptive to sensations. Stretching also will help you have a sense of the body's existence within the space around you, how much room you take up and often how much more room there is for you to be in.

Bodywork practices, such as massage, also help us be body. We often do such things only when we are stressed out or in need of healing, but getting massages or acupuncture can often prevent ailments before they start. And while professional massage can be a delightful experience but often expensive, we can all learn basic techniques of massage for use on ourselves or those close to us.

These are all incredibly useful practices, but there are many simple things we can do that require no money, no special equipment, and no training. When is the last time you walked barefoot through grass? How long has it been since you've napped in the sunshine and let the warm light bathe your skin? How about a hot bath, or a swim?

Engaging the world around you with the senses is a powerful practice that helps you be body again. Even things as simple as sticking your nose into a flower and inhaling deeply several times, or crumbing wet earth between your fingers, running through freshly fallen leaves, or eating a fragrant meal with herbs and spices you don't normally use are all ways to bring you back to yourself and the body.

There are many, many other ways. Sitting in front of a fire and feeling the heat of the flames while gently inhaling the wood smoke. Wrestling with a friend or hugging them. Getting tickled. Taking a cold shower. Rubbing your face along your pet's fur.

The idea of all these suggestions is to help you return to body, to be the body you are, to learn from your physical existence and to crave it like you would a lover. Because ultimately, *the body is you*, the one constant thing you can always be assured of throughout your entire life. Embrace your body with joy, and you embrace yourself in joy.

Rhyd Wildermuth



Rhyd is a druid, theorist, and writer, and the director of publishing of Gods&Radicals Press / Ritona a.s.b.l. He lives in the Ardennes.