An embodied ideal: Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:(1-9), 10-18

by Frank M. Yamada in the December 30, 2008 issue

Whether we choose to believe it or not, we human beings are embodied creatures. There have been many times throughout the history of philosophy and religion when great thinkers have tried to minimize or deny the physicality of human existence. Simple phrases such as “mind over matter” and biblical passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:27, “but I punish my body and enslave it,” have contributed to the misleading belief that we are at our best as human beings when some spiritual core that is separate from our physical nature governs our lives. Experience teaches us, however, that we make the best sense of ourselves and our world when we understand the intimate connection of our lives to our bodies and to the physical ground upon which our feet tread.

The deepest human emotions are physical by definition. The Hebrew Bible makes this clear through idioms such as “the nose burning hot” as an expression of anger. In the ancient world and in many contemporary cultures, tearing clothes and throwing earth on one’s head express mourning. In the psalms, the writers declare again and again how persecutions from enemies, worldly anxieties and even guilt from transgression cause the body to groan, hearts to melt and bones to be out of joint (cf. Ps. 22:14-15). In Jeremiah 31, it is not enough for the prophet to declare God’s consolation toward the Northern Kingdom after its exile; the great expression of God’s compassion is framed in visions of loud singing and dancing. Lest we miss the profound embodiment of this passage, the prophet declares that even less physically mobile community members—the lame, the pregnant and the blind—shall be part of the sea of humanity that returns in that day. In my own imagination, I envision the returning exiles as overcome with the moment and collapsing to their knees as they kiss the earth. This time they do not bow in homage to another empire’s king, but give thanks for their reconnection to the ground. Our experience teaches us that we understand God’s compassion, grace and mercy in the material reality of our bodies.

My father was never a physically affectionate person. In many ways, Japanese-American culture tends toward the lighter end of the spectrum when it comes to

things like kisses and warm embraces. Maybe this is a classic East/West cultural distinction—or perhaps internment during World War II taught my parents' generation to be cautious with bodily expression. Yet my father understood the importance of the body for expressing love. When I was returning from a visit to Princeton Seminary as a prospective student, Dad insisted on bringing my one-year-old son to the airport even though my flight was not arriving until late in the evening. When I arrived at the gate, my dad stood waiting with a beaming bundle of joy, who waddled toward me as fast as he could. As I lifted my son into my arms I caught a glimpse of my father's face—and a look that said, "This is how I have always felt about you." As I embraced my son it was as if I was also embracing my father. Then I understood how much he had always loved me.

As I write this reflection, I am struck by the U.S. "at such a time as this" (Esth. 4:14). In the fall of 2008, the United States of America elected its first president of African-American descent. University of Chicago theologian Dwight Hopkins recently remarked that Barack Obama was elected not because he was a politician who could be recognized unambiguously as a person of color, but because his identity as a mixed-raced person helped him to transcend the binary of black/white. He was a compelling candidate, one in whom many in the country could place their hopes. History alone will judge the success of Obama's presidency, but regardless of whether one considers oneself a Democrat or a Republican, conservative or liberal, it is a profound moment when a symbolic body can represent the conflict, suffering, redemption and hope of a diverse and sometimes divided people. There is something about embodiment of our hope that makes these forces seem simultaneously more real, more difficult and more profound all at the same time.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said, "For all our failure to honor them, our bodies remain God's best way of getting to us." God's great reversal—whether it takes the form of a long awaited reunion, the proclaimed hope of an impending return home or the incarnation of Godself in a logos, a Word—is a transformation that we understand most profoundly in our bodies. God's goodness to us is not only something for which we hope—some disembodied ideal that exists only in our minds. The fullness of God's love for us is experienced in the touching, the seeing, the hearing and the tasting of God's good pleasure extended to us. As the psalmist declares, "O taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8).