

A mind-body partnership

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We could accuse this week's texts of setting up dichotomies: Romans wants us to live by the spirit, not the flesh. Nicodemus and Jesus trade stories about being born from above rather than below. A bush burns and life changes; unnatural things abound. Everyone knows that when bushes burn, they are consumed. Everybody knows where babies come from, and it's not from "up there."

It's helpful to consider that spirit and flesh are not opposites so much as companions. The texts advocate keeping spirit in the lead, with body right behind. They advocate a mind-body *partnership*, not a dichotomy—a close reading reveals that this interpretation is valid.

Many people struggle with the right relationship between spirit and body. So much of life is action on behalf of the material, the grocery bag that must be filled. Fine. The second we touch the grocery bag with the embroidery of a thankful spirit or the fringe of the amateur gourmet who enjoys making the meal rather than working at it, we have inched the spirit out ahead of the material, without denying the material or putting it down. The bush then burns but is not consumed.

If one more server asks me if I am "still working" on my unfinished dinner, I will explode. I was never "working" on it in the first place, especially at the prices I've paid; I was enjoying it. My spirit was enjoying the experience of eating, which was also fueling my body.

The Benedictines call this the art of washing dishes, while the Marxists call it the eroticization of everyday life. William Wordsworth describes

simple living as "plain living and high thinking."

I say we are living simply and spiritually whenever the inner world has a slight edge on the outer world. We are enjoying, appreciating, seeing, experiencing something—living a life—as well as earning a living. All the things that make a life a life become more clear to us. Then we go to work, hassle traffic, worry about retirement. It's not that taking care of business is not important to us. It is. It is just an inch less important than the inner world, what some call spirituality, which is unfortunately too long a word to be simple.

One morning I took my new dog on a walk. He had come to us from Miami and never seen snow, never seen stairs and never felt cold. In each experience he resisted: sitting at the bottom of the stairs and refusing to climb, feeling the snow on his feet for the first time and trying to jump up in the air, putting a dumb look on his face when he climbed out of the airplane carrier in New England after leaving the tropics only three hours earlier.

What impressed me was that he was only afraid of each thing once. After he managed each bit of cold and fear, he went on. I have declared him brilliant, another companion on the road to spirituality, where we don't have time for repeat fears of the cold. Our bodies may shiver, but our spirits don't. He reminds me of materially poor people whose inner spirit lets them sing in refugee camps at night. There they are free of the poverty of the rich, many of whom have forgotten how to sing.

Spirituality privileges the inner world.

We are reborn from above. When we privilege the inner and the animal over the material, the small over the large, we find that we are on fire but not consumed.