

The Body Keeps the Score

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Texts: Genesis 32: 22-31

When I was first getting to know my late mentor and friend Peter Gomes, I asked him what he did to unwind after his long and demanding days as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Pusey Minister at Harvard's Memorial Church. I thought for sure he would say he read novels, played his piano, or maybe took in a little Masterpiece Theatre from time to time on PBS. Instead, he shot back: "well I do like the wrestling, you know?" As in professional wrestling on TV. It was actually a great relief for me to hear this and to know that even Peter Gomes vegged out sometimes. There was a time when I too liked "the wrestling," albeit when I was 11 years old. I'd tune in for the Saturday morning matchups. Hulk Hogan, Rowdy Roddy Piper, Jimmy Superfly Snuka and my fav, Andre the Giant! Something about watching those beefy guys headlock, clothesline, piledrive and body slam their opponents was wildly entertaining to the kid in me and apparently in others, as well. But here's the thing: dumb as it was, they never got hurt, not really. It was all for show, a choreographed act for the cameras from which they would walk away unscathed and to which they would return, good as new, week after week.

Not so in our text for today. We find Jacob alone one night by the river and all of a sudden in the midst of a wrestling match of his own. We're not sure who this is -- a man, an angel, some divine agent who allows him to, in his words, "see God face to face" -- yet the text tells us they wrestle, bodies locked in struggle, limbs entwined until daybreak. Jacob's hip gets wrenched, yet he prevails and demands a blessing. His opponent obliges and sends him off not only with a changed name but with a changed body. The mysterious figure leaves Jacob with a lasting limp.

The text raises many questions. What was he wrestling with, really? Was it his shame about the way he deceived his family, or the fact that he ran away for 20 years, or was it something else that happened to him along the way? All of this comes right before his planned return home to try to reconcile with his brother Esau whom he had defrauded of his birthright 20 years before. Was it a moment of moral or spiritual reckoning for Jacob, or of preparation? And why does God let him prevail, especially after all his duplicitous actions in the narrative leading up this moment? No matter why Jacob is wrestling or why he wins this one, one thing is clear. He comes away from the encounter with two things: a lasting wound and a lasting blessing. According to the brilliant scholar, Avivah Zornberg, there's a Midrash that says the two may be connected. She says: "Jacob demands the blessing, he asks for the blessing, because [he had been] injured." She goes onto posit: "There is a connection between the pain and the suffering and the moral right to ask for a blessing somewhere. This is the God whom [he has] entered into such a relationship with, such an intimate and vulnerable relationship, that [he] can ask for a blessing."¹ Hold that thought.

Let's start with the wound. Struck in the hip socket, he's left with a limp. Why send Jacob off with this seemingly permanent mark? I can't help but wonder if it's not to remind him, and us, of some essential wisdom about how our bodies hold pain and trauma and how they can be ongoing sources of healing and blessing. What I find most interesting about the wound is that he walks away with it in his every step.

¹ <https://billmoyers.com/content/god-wrestling/>

It's now a part of him, a part of his story that he can't deny. It shows that he's vulnerable. It shows that he's come through something! Surely, we've all experienced some existential grief or pain or trauma, and perhaps some related wrestling with God. Maybe it's of the how-could-God-let-this-happen-variety, or the it-wasn't-supposed-to-be-this-way-God kind. Maybe it's a clinging sort of struggle, like a lover's quarrel, because letting go, even of your confused or angry or doubting grip, would leave you all the more alone. Still, the signs that we have so wrestled, that we have been so touched right where it hurts, are often less visible. Not so here. The text may be trying to model something here.

William Sloane Coffin once quipped: "It's often said the Church is a crutch. Of course, it is! And what makes you think you don't limp?" Whether we can see it or not, I think it's true, we all have some kind of limp. We all are carrying pain that contorts our bodies and constricts our movement, whether from what we've endured or what we've inflicted on others or likely some mixture. It may be the pain of loss, or of some shame or deep regret, or maybe of some violation or violence that should never have happened. We know these experiences can leave a lasting mark. What we may or may not realize is, like Jacob, we hold it in our bodies, wherever we are and wherever we go! Indeed, the "the body keeps the score," as the title of a recent best seller by trauma specialist Bessel van der Kolk, puts it.

Research on this has been growing. Overwhelming experiences are stored in what some psychologists are calling our 'somatic memories.' These are activated through the different ways our bodies response to stress. Allow me to illustrate. Many of you know I had a stroke at age 7. Given my age, it was an extremely rare thing and the cause is still unknown. I was paralyzed on my right side for a few weeks but soon after bounced back almost completely, except for my right foot and right hand which my brain has hard-wired to remain a bit curled up and clenched. It's relatively subtle. I'm usually the only one who notices. Yet as I've aged, it's led me to sometimes have a limp of my own such that I recently was fitted for a brace to straighten out my gait. All is well. But the limp is not why I'm sharing the story. What I've also noticed, only recently, is that when I'm stressed or angry or impatient, having nothing to do with the stroke, I know exactly where it shows up in my body. My right foot starts moving, my muscles in my toe get activated and start tapping! It's not the only place I hold my stress but I'm pretty sure the reason why it's there isn't just the because of the physiological trauma to my 7-year brain and body. It's also because of the emotional tumult of living through that experience. Turns out it was a super scary thing to be in the hospital, to ask and wrestle with late night questions when I couldn't sleep. My mom shared some of these with me years later from a notebook she kept at my bedside. They were questions I'd ask at night about whether or not I'd make it through, about whether my sisters would be ok! My point is that I hold that fear and pain in my body. For me, when I'm not tending to it, it can literally show up in how I sit, how I walk, how I hold my body. 'The body keeps the score,' and I've only recently begun to notice how.

Even when it's not connected to a physical event, our bodies hold memories of stressful moments. Increasingly, counselors, yoga teachers, massage therapists these days are trained to track a person's body language, to ask questions like, where in your body are you holding your emotional pain, stress and why there? How can we tend to it, notice it, be present to it? How can we learn to relax our stress responses and stay present in the moment rather than conjuring up those old narratives and somatic memories and stress responses that make us want to fight or run, or that freeze us up!

Consider the alternative to this kind of mindfulness which is probably where many of us live most of the time. We can deny our histories of pain and trauma and how they are held in our bodies. We can start thinking we live in a world of professional wrestling, pretending we can walk away from all the weekly

body blows of violation and violence that we encounter without so much as a mark. We'll sometimes do whatever we can to distract us from the sitting with the pain. Overwork. Overconsumption. Overly defensive postures. Mindless scrolling of social media. Huge swaths of our culture and economy are built around such avoidances! And yet the unavoidable reality of Covid and of this moment of racial reckoning is making it harder and harder to deny the pain and fear we are holding. And herein lies an invitation, to tend to our bodies, to notice the pain, to remember our limbs, to integrate them into our every step.

Minneapolis based social worker Resmaa Menakem has been gaining prominence recently for his work with what he calls racialized trauma, the pain we all carry in our bodies - pain and fear in white bodies, in black bodies, in police bodies. After generations of exposure, he contends we won't find the healing we seek unless we tend to the trauma we all hold in our bodies by virtue of living in this society. We can see the stress responses - the fight, flight and freeze - playing out on the streets right now, but we can see it too in church book groups and conversations. It makes me wonder whether the impulse and urgency many of us feel to do something is our bodies telling us to run from discomfort of just sitting in and noticing our white bodies! Does this mean we shouldn't take action when we can? Of course not. It does mean we should take our steps whatever they are with utmost intention, with our systems as calm and non-defensive and present as possible, and less anxious about saying or doing the right things. Consider the leadership of John Lewis, his remarkable poise, the way he carried his pain, his physical scars from beating after beating, the way he shared stories about them, integrated them, metabolized them, and how grounded his sense of conviction and hope for a better future. He knew it in his body and in his very bones!

Just yesterday, a particularly choice selection of Menakem's words came through in Richard Rohr's daily devotional that some of us reading together this summer. Mindful of how we all "carry our pain and fear in our bodies", mindful of how "we pass it along to those around us, and we pass it down from one generation to the next," Menakem explains how we might work towards healing!

Few skills are more essential than the ability to settle your body. If you can settle your body, you are more likely to be calm, alert, and fully present, no matter what is going on around you. A settled body enables you to harmonize and connect with other bodies around you, while encouraging those bodies to settle as well. Gather together a large group of unsettled bodies—or assemble a group of bodies and then unsettle them—and you get a mob or a riot. But bring a large group of settled bodies together and you have a potential movement—and a potential force for tremendous good in the world. . . .²

Back to Jacob and his limp, and to the midrash connecting it to the blessing. What if the limp was what would allow Jacob to remember and be present with his pain and shame and fear, as opposed to denying it or numbing it out. What if the blessing he demanded as a result was the gift of a settled, albeit limping, body! He's about to return home here, to face his past, to face his brother whom he robbed of everything. Talk about a reckoning. Imagine it. And the invitation to hear a new name for himself before he goes! No longer Jacob, but Israel, which means literally "wrestles with God."

² Adapted from Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Central Recovery Press: 2017), 141, 146, 151–152.;

Like the risen Christ, who appears to Thomas, still bearing the wounds of the cross, his body, too, was settled, no longer writhing or wrestling with his doubts about God forsaking him. Instead he appears to Thomas and to us all settled. Enough to breathe God's peace. Enough to break bread. Enough to share his broken body with us. Friends, what if communion itself, this meal we share is an invitation to sit together, to settle together for a time, to nourish our own broken and limping bodies for the work of peace making and justice. Imagine this church, settling our collective body, easing up on all our sometimes frantic doing, doing, doing, settling into an even more grounded approach, to more intentional steps on the hard road ahead. And imagine us, too, called by a new name, by God's blessed name for us, all children of Israel, wrestling with God, yet *beloved of God*. Imagine our being calm and settled enough to hear that, to let it sink into our bones, from our heads to our shoulders, from our hips to our toes. Each of us, *beloved in God's sight*, no matter what we've done or not done! And together, a beloved community, the body of Christ, all the more grounded, embodied, and ready to return to the siblings we've wronged, all the more ready to breathe Christ's peace into the world, all the more ready to break bread and to be one body, limbs and all! Imagine that. May it be so. Amen.



