Richard Kearney

Recovering Embodied Life

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There is no escape from our tactile incarnation in this world. Those who renounce the flesh pay an existential price. The various attempts of dualists, puritans, gnostics, and ascetics to deny carnality invariably met a sad fate. And in spite of efforts by certain Christian Platonists (betraying both Plato and the original message of Christianity) to renounce the ways of the flesh, most major wisdom traditions attest the truth that spirit exists through nature, soul lives through the body.

Judaism, for example, teaches us that if we want to know God we need to wrestle corps-à-corps like Jacob with the stranger in the night. Christianity proclaims Christ as Word made flesh. Islam professes the hospitable sharing of food at the Hadj as the highest form of divine-human relation. For their part, most Eastern religions remind us of the healing power of embodied practices like breathing, yoga, ritual, and pilgrimage. Indigenous spiritualities across the globe celebrate the sacredness of all sentient creatures—animals, trees, fish, plants—embraced by the four natural elements of earth, sky, water, and fire. American natives express this state of elemental interbeing in the simple invocation: 'all my relations.'

The return to the lived body signals the interconnectedness of all things. As tactile and tangible beings we co-exist with others in a reciprocal circuit of touching and being touched—from the moment we are born to the moment we die. As even astronauts and the birds of the air remind us: what goes up must come down. If you fly from the earth you come back again. We are betrothed to the earth. And our most basic desire is to love and feel beloved on this earth.

Philosophers

Aristotle teaches in the *De Anima*, the first work of western psychology, that our most vital and universal sense is 'touch.' It is also the most intelligent in making us sensitive to all that is different, new, and other than ourselves.

In touching we are tangible and tactile—active and passive at once. And this 'double sensation' of touching and being touched is synesthetically operative throughout all the senses. Even if we presume to see without being seen or to hear without being heard—becoming, in Descartes' words, 'masters and possessors of nature'—deep down our eyes and ears are touched by what they see and hear. Cézanne describes how he felt gazed at by the trees he was painting on the Mont Sainte Victoire in Provence—the forest was seeing itself through him, making the invisible visible through his painting.

A body without touch is dead. Our living flesh (what the phenomenologists call *Leib*) constantly discerns and differentiates; it filters, mediates, re-cognizes, again and again. That is why 'flesh is not just an organ but a medium.' Our truest ideas—no matter how abstract—are indebted to our tangible body. We think well when we think with our senses, tactilely, reciprocally, dialogically, diacritically. Aquinas, interpreting Aristotle's psychology of tactility for the Middle Ages, declared: '*nihil in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*.' And this basic truth about the primordiality of touch is confirmed in the twentieth century by the work of phenomenologists from Husserl and Sartre to Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, who remind us that all consciousness operates, primordially, as a body-subject in relation to other body-subjects.

Phenomenologists show how our conventional 'natural attitude' blinds us to the deep structure of our bodily existence. For instance, it induces us to think of time as one discrete moment horizontally succeeding another rather than interconnecting back and forth. So we require a switch to a phenomenological attitude if we are to recognize each moment as a multi-layering of anterior-posterior horizons—to see through surface time to deep time (seeing according to infinitely receding and acceding layers).

What applies to time applies equally to our spatial embodiment, as persons who act and suffer in life, who create and recreate a persona in a world lived with others who reconfigure us as much as we reconfigure them. Humans exist by mutually configuring each other in time and space. Realizing this again requires a turn from the natural to the phenomenological attitude, bracketing out our normal prejudices and presuppositions which not only reduce time and space to one-dimensional grids but make other people, and even ourselves, one-dimensional as well. This phenomenological turn is illustrated in the dramatic move from inauthentic to authentic life outlined by existentialists such as Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and De Beauvoir —a movement from 'bad faith' to lucid and responsible existence, from living as an objectified numerical body (*Körper*) to a reciprocal incarnate body (*Leib*). We do not just *have* a body; we *are* our bodies. They are not mere instruments for our mental commands. They are our very being.

Poets

Derived from the Greek word to 'transform,' *anamorphosis* is used as a technical term in visual arts, going back to Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks. It refers to a technique of perspective featuring a distorted image in a picture seen from the usual viewpoint which becomes properly visible when viewed from another particular angle (where the distortion disappears). With the shift in perspective—sometimes reflected in a curved mirror or through a peep hole—the image becomes truly recognizable. The distortion vanishes so that we may see truly again. This resembles what Husserl calls the 'epoché': a suspending of the distorted and superficial 'natural attitude' so that we may *see again*—more deeply and essentially, viewing things anew in the light of infinitely varying possibilities.

The process of anamorphosis also has parallels with Aristotle's account of poetic redescription, whereby we cease to merely recite facts in a chronicle (one thing subsequent to another) and intuit things according to their essential truth (*eidos*). This involves a therapeutic-cathartic exercise of imaginative refiguration where our carnal passions of 'pity and fear' are distilled and purged into 'compassion and serenity.' Similarly, Wordsworth defined poetic experience as 'emotion recollected in tranquility,' and Yeats spoke of art as 'gaiety transfiguring all that dread' ('Lapis Lazuli').

Novelists too have much to tell us on this. Dostoyevsky portrays several of his protagonists making a transition from conventional opinion to wisdom, triggered by some kind of radical existential experience—of death, beauty, terror, illness, or intimacy. Think of the stranger's kiss of the Grand Inquisitor in the *Brothers Karamazov,* when a doctrinal rant is silenced by the burning flame of lips on lips. The unilateral ideology of words yields to the powerless power of embodied gesture. Or think of Prince Myshkin's fits (epileptic and proleptic) as his body is convulsed by the hidden pain and beauty of the world. Dostoyevsky himself experienced this when he was almost executed as a young rebel in Petersburg—a brush with death does wonders for the embodied soul—and later suffered physical fits of ecstasy and terror, each one infusing him with a vital new compassion. Joseph Frank (2021) terms this a form of 'eschatological apprehension,' arguing that in such 'critical moments' Dostoyevsky realized that what really mattered was 'what we can do for another person right in front of us right now… action at every moment, at this very instant, as if time were about to stop and the world come to an end.' In these moments the extraordinary shines through the ordinary, the eternal flashes through finite time and lights up neglected ontological landscapes of body and mind.

Think also of Joyce's exploration of anamnesis in the 'Proteus' episode of *Ulysse*s. Here Stephen Dedalus resolves to become an artist by reading the 'signatures of all things' in the everyday flotsam scattered on the sea shore of Dublin bay. This requires him to 'see through' surface impressions to the deep core where everything is connected. Epiphany as diaphany. Every

phenomenon is revealed as a palimpsest of silted layers and sedimentations, accumulating and unfolding over space and time.

Animals

While phenomenology in the 20th century recognized the bilateral nature of human seeing and being seen, based on the carnal paradigm of touching and being touched, there has not been much philosophical analysis of how such double sensibility can also apply to the non-human. There is a basic anthropocentrism in western philosophy, no matter how phenomenological or empirical, when it comes to our relation to non-human others. In the Anthropocene our understanding of intersubjectivity refers almost exclusively to *human* subjects. It rarely applies to animals, plants, or other beings of nature.

David Wood, an artist and eco-phenomenologist, has tried to address this in a piece called 'Touched by Touching' (2015). Taking examples of carnal intimacy, artistic paintings of plants, and personal brushes with feral cats, leeches, and snakes, he powerfully demonstrates the recursive character of double sensation. To this end, Wood cites Derrida's famous description of his encounter with his cat as he steps naked from the shower: 'Weren't you asking, even before the beginning, if we could stroke or caress each other with our eyes? And touch the look that touches you?' (Derrida, 75). Wood reminds us that sight is recursive in that it is, like all our senses, synesthetic—namely, crossed by the other senses, but most fundamentally, by the reciprocal sensation of tactility. Sight and hearing for example—no matter how removed from what is seen or heard—are always acts of touching and being touched. When looking at the sun, for example, the eyes themselves are touched by mutual action at a distance: 'Taking in the fact that these very eyes that can see the sun are children of the sun. Without its heat, no life. Without its light, no vision, no eyes. The flesh of the world. Look directly at the sun and your retina will be burned, touched by fire. But are we not already touched, shaped indeed, by what they seem merely to be looking at?' (Wood, 174).

We are inter-beings, beings between species, with no rigid divides between us, in spite of the separatist essentialism informing western metaphysics. As Wood boldly observes, 'anthropocentrism oversimplifies the *anthropos,* strips us of our layerings and differentiations. Man is a species that is not one' (175). Which is not to deny that we humans, qua *homo sapiens*—or more specifically qua *zôon logon echôn* (rational speaking beings)—have a distinct mode of language. But we should never forget that human speech is always founded on a carnal language of gesture and resonance operating before verbal language.

> Before language, within language… there is rhythm, pulsation, touch, difference, perhaps even desire of a sort…. Who or what are we that we can be moved by words? A carnal hermeneutics finds new ways of showing how the

> imagination inhabits our bodies, from the pores of our skin to the way we schematize our dynamic corporeality and our engagements with others. The erotic spawns some of the most telling ways.' (Wood, 175-9)

And he boldly adds, 'The flesh is equally a site of lawless excitation and incitement—pain as well as pleasure, excess, and violence.' What comes back through the flesh is as often pain and trauma as joy and expression. Commenting on a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe, 'Two Calla Lillies on Pink' (1928), Wood concludes with these challenging questions: 'If sexuality is something at some level we share with plants, does not that fact make sexuality all the more puzzling? What would it be to understand it better? Is it that whatever else, our sexual being is our incompletely thematizable ground, driving us in ways we cannot wholly explain, and accounting for our existence and the shape of our dwelling in the first place?' (178).

I grew up in southern Ireland in a family of seven with as many dogs to go around. My parents loved animals—in particular dogs and horses—and each time my mother came home from hospital with a new child my father came home with a new dog for the previously born child (about to be replaced). That way, we each bonded with our dog and lived a happy communal life largely free of sibling rivalry. My dog slept on my bed for the first twelve years of my life before I left home for boarding school. I refused to go at first—as Scamp seemed infinitely better company than a bunch of boys from middle class Ireland marooned in a faux-medieval monastery. And so it would have remained if I had not fallen madly for a glamorous neighbor who praised Benedictine education to the skies and said it would be a crying shame to prefer a dog to God. I was on the train to boarding school next day leaving my Scamp to my numerous siblings. I did actually manage the transition from dogs to gods—and girls—quite well but was absolutely inconsolable when I got news of Scamp's demise when I was a student in Montreal in 1977. I suspended my dissertation, midway, to write my first philosophical disquisition—'On the immortality of dogs'—hoping to convince myself it could be my dog looking at me through the eyes of other dogs I passed in the street.

Horses

I also had a special connection with horses growing up. My siblings and I rode bareback in our youth in West Cork and had a horse called Billy in our garden by the river. Growing up, our mother imparted a deep love of the equine, having spent a happy adolescence herself riding Connemara ponies with her Daly cousins in Ballinrobe, County Mayo, sheltered from the devastations of the second world war raging on the neighboring island.

The most precious thing by my bedside as a child was, I still recall, a rosette horse prize given by a Daly relative placed beside a statue of the Virgin Mary. My favorite films, from the beginning, were about horses—from *Black*

Beauty to *Crin Blanc* and *National Velvet* (identifying with Liz Taylor on her beautiful mare was my first childhood experience of transgender and transspecies imagination!).

And when I succumbed to deep depression in my early thirties I was healed by a mare called Mary. She belonged to my sister in Law, Olive Murphy, and I rode her daily on Myross Island (West Cork) during the darkest moments of my life, when she gradually healed me back to life. She had been abused by a stable hand and would only allow women and children to ride her. But she allowed me, sensing, I suppose, a psychic wound which needed her equine empathy. She was my 'wounded healer' and whenever I later felt depression descend I always found a horse and rode until I felt well again. I now have a mare of my own—BG or Beautiful Girl—and she is one of the joys of my life.

But my discovery of horse healing was not just personal. When researching for my book *Touch* (2020), I was fascinated to discover the extraordinary powers of equine therapy. I learned of this mainly from encounters with horse healers—Petra Belkovich in Croatia, Nerina Latigan in South Africa, Nathalie Gallagher in New Jersey—and from my reading of trauma specialists like Bessel van der Kolk, who documented the benefits of equine therapy for various patients. Here is what Petra Belkovich wrote to me:

> In 1993, in the middle of the war in Croatia and Bosnia, Dick and Marj Fischer moved to Croatia with a dream to open a center for therapeutic horseback riding to help those who had bodily and spiritual injuries from the war…. I was thirteen when I started to volunteer for the organization. I would prepare a horse and walk beside it watching over our new riders. The task seemed so simple but the benefits were incredible. I learned that the horse's movement allows the rider's muscles to relax and to function even in people who had lost control of their limbs. The riders would report going off all of their medication (for pain and spasms) after a few weeks of this equine therapy. I also loved seeing how blind children learned to communicate with horses, gaining a new sense of control of their environment and their bodies. The horse would lend their eyes to the child, giving it a new sense of freedom and confidence.

Belkovich's testimony is borne out in studies conducted by the Institute of HeartMath on the bidirectional 'healing' that occurs when people are near horses. Horses possess a 'coherent' heart rate pattern (HRV) which can make one 'feel better' when one is around them, inducing positive affective states like calm and joy. 'Research shows that people experience many physiological benefits while interacting with horses, including lowered blood pressure and heart rate, increased levels of beta-endorphins (neurotransmitters that serve as pain suppressors), decreased stress levels, reduced feelings of anger, hostility, tension and anxiety, improved social functioning; and increased feelings of empowerment, trust, patience and self-efficacy' (Michelle Trevisnon, cited in Barbier/Katsamanis).

Mark Patrick Hederman celebrates the ancient therapeutic powers of this extraordinary animal. He notes that horses evolved over sixty million years ago as *Eohippus,* a four-toed, leaf-eating forest dweller with the figure of a middle sized dog. Today's horse, *Equus Caballus,* has been around for almost twenty million years. Late Paleolithic humans hunted horses for food, deployed them in rituals, and painted them in cave art all over Europe. As a herbivore, a horse does not prey on other animals, but was often the target of predators such as large cats and wolf packs.

Horses are wont to take flight under stress, but when domesticated for farm work or for battle, the horse has been famous for courage and selflessness. If there is belligerence in horses it has been our doing, not theirs. The horse's relation to us is generally one of empathic mirroring: 'The movement of the horse affects a rider's posture, balance, coordination and sensorimotor systems. Horses can become emotional mirrors for humans. They respond to the feeling state we are in. Being herd and prey animals, they have a strong emotional sense which they have used for centuries as a survival tool. They feed off of and respond to other horses in the herd. They carry this natural and encoded empathy in their encounters…. To see, smell, touch, mount a horse in the flesh is to feel the stirrings of energies dating from at least 35,000 years of human contact with the horse' (201).

Hederman cites Martin Buber's evocative childhood encounter with a horse: 'When I stroked the mighty mane… and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as if the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of Thou and Thou with me' (202). In a symbiotic healing process we learn to let horses *be,* not just for us, but for themselves, teaching us in turn to be well by simply *being*. Interspecies empathy is not just about us. Or more precisely, it is not so much about feeling the horse is like us but that we are like the horse.

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