

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality

by Edwin M. McMahon, Ph.D. & Peter A. Campbell, Ph.D.

#### A Book Review by Ann Marie Wyrsh, MS\*

The authors' preface clearly states the purpose of their book, which they call a workbook. Its goal is to serve as the "primary resource, both psychological and theological, as well as the experiential format through *body-learnings* and *exercises*, for a program in Christian transformational living."

*Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality* begins with a rationale for the book. It starts with six different quotations, from six individuals using six radically diverse perspectives. The common thread is that each of their statements expresses part of a leap forward in our experience of what it means to be human. This leads into a very interesting history of the authors' search for a more *embodied* approach to helping people experience themselves in the Body of the Whole Christ. They write:

If the very core of Christian spirituality does not include an experience of discovering ourselves as living membranes within the Body of the Whole Christ whenever we are most overwhelmed, filled with fear and hurting, then we miss the essence of St. Paul's unceasing prayer that we come to know in our own bodies the reality of who we really are within the suffering and healing Body of the Resurrected Whole Christ.

They proceed to present the case for a more ancient, embodied way of knowing—using the body-brain in conjunction with the head-brain. This chapter concludes with a suggested exercise to help the reader begin acquiring the habit of noticing and nurturing their important feelings after reading these pages and with a few further suggestions for using this workbook.

The rest of the workbook is organized around 6 *Body-Learnings*. These body-learnings as stated in the book are:

1) *Noticing*—changing the relationship to your own body by noticing your feelings and how you treat them; 2) *Nurturing*—growing into an inside, *physical presence* that helps you care for the burden and pain your body carries around difficult feelings when you make them into enemies; 3) *Balancing the difference* between what your head knows about the body of the Whole Christ and how your body *feels* it; 4) *Living Christ’s new commandment of loving as God loves*—maturing into the gift and freedom of loving as God loves transforms our self-awareness of who Christ really is today and who we are in Christ; 5) *Process-Skipping*—growing beyond process skipping habits which lock in addictive patterns, blocking the body feel of grace and the experience of living within the Larger Body ‘in Christ’; and lastly, 6) *Creating families and groups of companions in Christ as cellular models* for living Christ’s new Commandment to love as God loves.

These Body-Learnings lead the reader on an ever-deepening journey fostering growth in wholeness and holiness.

One of the things I particularly like about this book is that material is included from earlier writings by Campbell and McMahon and other authors. It offers a compendium of the best of the best from previous writings and updated experience and information. For experienced BioSpiritual Focusers, this workbook provides not only a refresher course but so much more. It includes a further fleshing out of the process and the scriptural underpinnings. For newcomers to BioSpiritual Focusing it provides all that is needed to begin the journey. This book is the culmination of the authors almost 40 years of experience in fostering spiritual and mental health. It interweaves Scripture, stories, practical applications and exercises. It is more than a book to read for information alone. It is more than a workbook. It is an experience.

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# **Rediscovering the Lost Body-Connection Within Christian Spirituality**

*by Edwin M. McMahon, Ph.D. & Peter A. Campbell, Ph.D.*

## **A Book Review by Robert J. Willis, Ph.D.**

**THIS BOOK EXPLORES** the causes of disconnection and proposes a life-affirming solution.

Broken relations rack our world. Nature revolts by leveling Haiti in a flash, by drowning Pakistanis midst roiling floods, by suffocating Chinese villagers under a cascade of roaring mud. In a less showy display, it unleashes plagues of AIDS and cancer to decimate whole peoples.

Human beings mimic nature's heartless devices by striving to dominate others into connection. Al-Queda directs suicide bombers into the World Trade Center, the U.S Government retaliates with shock and awe; the Taliban shelter Al-Queda, American forces destroy the shelter; Iran blusters, the world squeezes, Iran raises the amplitude of its imprecations; North Korea boasts and postures, civilized nations question its sanity and impose sanctions.

Religions, self-professed exponents of connection, bless the carnage. In vain efforts to control, Sunni extremists slaughter Sufi pilgrims, Taliban authorities compel villagers and family to stone an eloping couple, Episcopal congregations abandon their communion rather than share faith with gay communicants, Catholic bishops excommunicate public proponents of religious equality for women. For millennia, religious zealots in the name of some god or other fashioned in their own image and likeness have tortured and condemned, ostracized and banished those branded as heretics or unbelievers.

No one wants this plague of rupture, but it persists, despite a Christian faith that preaches, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Over its history, Christianity has tried every conceivable ploy of domination to force others to love one another and itself—but even torture, death and the certainty of hellfire fail. We must find an alternative to violence as the path to unity.

WHAT KEEPS THIS demonstrably failed strategy locked in place? In their new book, the fruit of a lifetime of research and practice, Drs. McMahon and Campbell detail with meticulous care and precision an answer. In the face of disturbing emotions—fear and pain, anger and despair, guilt and anxiety—humans have opted for the illusion of control. By avoiding and repressing their chaotic feelings, they realize a moment's ease of discomfort without addressing its causes. Using a process-skipping mechanism, they rush to a solution that leaves the problem in place. Because this psychological maneuver lessens tension, it reinforces itself and becomes a habit. In families and schools, in churches and communities, youth learn to treat their troubling feelings as enemies to be conquered in order to have interior peace. Defense mechanisms masquerade as adult skills; in reality, they avoid any mature confrontation with one's self.

What alternative strategy could we employ? Only a constructive habit can effectively counter a destructive one. The authors propose the following: notice and nurture uncomfortable feelings, pay attention to them and listen to their needs, until the way these feelings are residing in the body shifts in a positive direction. In offering this solution they utilize the relational approach of Carl Rogers and the focusing strategies of one of his disciples, Eugene Gendlin.

**WITH WISDOM** borne of experience, Campbell and McMahon recognize that knowing a solution does not make it happen, especially when it involves growing beyond a bad habit and substituting a positive one for it. Their book, actually a workbook, introduces the reader to a step-by-step process of relating to one's body and its feelings, rather than severing relations in a fruitless bid to escape from discomfort. As they explain new ways of being with one's feelings, they illustrate each suggestion with sensitive examples from their own lives and from the accounts of their trainees. Moreover, they provide sample dialogues that the reader may have with his or her self as one's own inner life begins to open. They consistently encourage the reader to stop, spend quiet time in response to the reading, to move inside to identify and listen to feelings aroused or exposed by the presentation.

As psychologists of religion and Catholic priests, Campbell and McMahon speak directly to the Christian community. They bemoan its history of violence, one causing searing scandal even today. They utilize the theology of Sts. John and Paul to highlight a paradigm shift that Christian faith requires but which religious structures have consistently avoided. They set aside a redemptive theology that emphasizes sinfulness and this vale of tears en route to a transcendent God in some far-off heaven; they espouse an incarnational theology that takes to heart God's loving presence to, and union with,

creation. For them Christian spirituality grows, not through turning away from matter, but through moving into it to touch the Love and the Life that sustain it. One's important feelings require attention so as to provide a material window through which one may experience the presence of the Spirit of God.

In this regard, they drive home a startling point. Taking St. John at his word, they accept that "God is love." They further agree with him "Where love is, God is." They draw this conclusion: when we embrace others, God loves them through us; when we relate with gentle care to our troubling inner feelings, God is loving them through us. In fact, our love and God's are identical. When we love, God loves and assumes a visible presence in our material world.

**GEORGE BERNARD SHAW**, a non-Christian, allowed: "Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it." G. K. Chesterton, a convert to Catholicism, expanded on Shaw's remark: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried." We may reasonably ask both: "What has not been tried?" Campbell and McMahon offer a way beyond the control that replaces faith, disconnection that forestalls love, and violence toward oneself and others that rules out hope.

**AS I CLOSED** their book, I experienced two strong responses. In the first place, I did not feel sad on the last page, as I would retiring an engrossing novel. The difference lies here: I was not leaving the book or its authors, only continuing with them an ongoing process. Secondly, I still felt their touch, whole people who not only talk Christianity, loving men who walk courageously with Christ—and with us.

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