

Odes in Letters.

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There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the “angel with the flaming sword.” Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes “the angel with the flaming sword” to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of “the fluid area of your consent.” This is your crucial link with the Eternal.

— Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*

Dear Body,

Somehow, you’re the closest, most intimate part of me and yet you aren’t. How many times since birth have you and I been attuned in such a way that there was little, if any, distinction between us? When I look in the mirror, it’s you that I see but as soon as I turn away from the image of you, I forget you. The next thing on my schedule fills my attention and without skipping a beat, you make the next thing happen. Without giving it a second thought, my feet move me to the refrigerator to fill my stomach with nourishment or to the desk to work or to respond to the needs of someone in my home or at work. And it’s not only my feet that go into autopilot mode – it’s my hands, my knees, my eyes, my fingers, my internal organs, all working in harmony to do what I want and need to do. Each part of you, Body, simply knows.

Remember that time in high school when we were wading through the packed corridor, minding our own business, trying to get to class when that kid told us to go back to our own country? You, through flushed cheeks, confusion, and a racing heartbeat, signaled shame and fear; all the while, legs kept moving to pretend like nothing happened because the life of a kid of immigrants was tough enough. You protected me. And so you would for decades. Literally, you, Body, kept me going. Without any thought and whatever the circumstance, heart beats, inhale/exhale, neurons fire, digestion happens, inhale/exhale, nutrients are distributed, senses register, inhale/exhale.

Over the years, Body, enfleshed me, you supported my life. Without you, who am I?

And yet, I don’t treat you well. You have become an appendage to my ruminations and pursuits, a servant of my aspirations, not always virtuous.

Remember when the dissertation was due? The herculean effort to coordinate typing fingers, to support vertebrae, spinal muscles, strained eyes, hands and shoulders flipping through pages, and

a strained lower back, all the while carrying a fertilized embryo. I had a feeling, but I wasn't sure. The deadline loomed and Body, you marched on because you had become accustomed to being second, third, fourth fiddle. The deadline loomed.

Only after the first draft was submitted did you, Body, get the attention you needed. Congratulations, you (Body) are growing an embryo! Thirty minutes pass and there's still no heartbeat. "We're so sorry for your loss."

Body, you have shouldered unexpected loss, your skin color has been scorned, you've been judged because of your parts, and what you do and produce has been a tool to harvest acceptance, worth, and love.

We hear about self-care, work-life balance, and Sabbath-keeping, but don't change. Body, have you given up on being known? Has it really come to the point where it takes a massive flu, insomnia, migraines, depression to signal something is off with you?

Dear Mind,

I don't know where you begin and I end, or where I begin and you end. At times I mistake you for me. I can barely keep up with your frenetic pace and don't recall a time when you weren't the center of me. Aren't you tired? You scan the horizon moment-by-moment looking for any blip on the radar that will require you to swoop in and rescue, soothe, justify, defend, and protect. You're a soldier, marching to an internal rhythm set by the rolling cadence of protect, surveil, protect, surveil.

Outside of you, there's just as much chatter for you to distill. Mornings, for instance, as soon as we wake up, when tired and achy Body is already running on autopilot, you take charge as you're simultaneously processing the day's schedule and countless external demands. As if this wasn't enough, the people and places

"outside" us are connected to the clamor of our inner world. What will people say about us if we can't make that deadline, if we say the "wrong" thing, if we don't act the "right" way? Ugh, why did I say that? Is there really a distinction between outer and inner? The judgmental voices, pointing fingers, and harsh gaze I once thought were outside of me, I find within. Mind, you've perfected the skill of turning awareness away so that we can stay the course, not feel, and attempt invincibility.

Your good intentions keep a good night's sleep out of reach. Perseverating on a classroom dynamic, replaying that conversation, and worrying about a loved one fill you to capacity. But you march on because you want to keep us from falling apart, so much so that you, Mind, overwhelm me and I succumb to you.

Aren't you tired? What would happen if you relaxed your grip? Could there be more space for calm, for connection, for delight? I've noticed this sliver of space when you catch yourself in a daydream, staring off into space, soaking in the images outside the window or simply gazing upon whatever, and resting. Until you snap yourself out of it to resume keeping things together.

I want rest for you. But I'm also tempted to depend on you too much because I wrestle with the notion that you're the One to keep things together. Mind, I believe that you're best equipped to take in data, assess situations, and filter pressing demands. I believe that you'll guard and protect. And so, I succumb to you. Can I afford to loosen my hold of you?

Dear Spirit,

You are me but I'm only aware of this when I stop long enough to know this. Because of you, we have endured. When I couldn't fathom a way through grief, when the Mt. Everest of heartache was impossible to see or feel beyond, you carved a way for us. A decade

later, the blur of Dad's final twenty-four hours and his funeral are too real, but we can look back because of the foundation you are.

You're elusive and something of a mystery even though you were there from the beginning. You are ever-present but never clamoring or vying for attention. Like the eye of a hurricane, you are the calm amidst our swirling life. Strangely, this calm isn't compelling enough to fuel our yearning for more and we march on to the beat of Mind.

In the quiet moments of dawn or at the close of a day, we may remember that you're there and we can settle. Or perhaps in desperation, when it seems like there are no options, we search for you. Words like anchor, ground, center, and attune describe the felt sense of security in being held when we finally join you. Why did it take so long? You were here all along.

It doesn't take much. A word, a scent, a moment outdoors, a deep connection with someone, all these are portals to you. Countless times, we've asked why we ignore you. We're perplexed. Have the distracting pulls of acceptance, power, security, and worthiness eclipsed what we've known, that you have been and are the source of these?

Fueled by Source beyond us or anything we know, you haven't been snuffed out by innumerable temptations to throw in all towels, to give up on humanity, and to no longer care because our efforts just don't seem to matter. Despite nonsense, you connect us to the holy. Tethered to you and despite fear, the *you* we experience within and in others, from distant and familiar times and lands, teaches us *to be* in mystery. You invite us to catch our breath and to breathe when heart races and we reach the point of overwhelm. When answers are illusive and pain is a constant and unwelcome companion, *you are* and we can lean into senses and cognitions that call us back to you and to who you say we are.



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