

The Body in Human Development

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*"I was wondering when you'd notice there's lots more steps."*

Are we there yet?

Most anybody who has grown up in the US has heard themselves, or another, ask this question. Today, with the various electronic toys and 4G-connectivity to the internet in your automobile, perhaps that question is not asked quite as often.

In any case, the excitement about where he is going or who they will see when they get there can lead to anxiety which a child feels welling up in his being. But we are all children; we can't wait till Friday, the next holiday, vacation, the next promotion and any number of other things in life. And though there is some measure of importance to all of these yet they pale in comparison to the weightier things that constitute true human development.

As an entity humanity is certainly not "there" yet. But much of that, for the time being, is a result of falling short in where we could easily be. The apparent lack of knowledge and understanding regarding our essential nature has led to a wholesale non-somatic global existence for the bulk of humanity. Some are focused on the physical to the point that they are little better than relatively smart yet brute beasts.

Others are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. And then there are those whose intellectual pursuits, though brilliant, are bankrupt of any value in a real world practical way or for spiritual and eternal purposes.

Thus we must be mindful of our whole being; the soma.

The physical human body cannot continue to subsist without rest, sustenance and exercise. Without any one of these three, or if they are had in an unbalance manner, these bodies will begin to degrade. Strength, agility and coordination will visibly suffer making it difficult even to perform the simplest tasks. Then the mental faculties will become dulled restricting the ability to recall even the most rudimentary things; usually nouns. I know this from personal experience; when I am able to balance these three I am at the top of my game. But when I don't have that balance, I feel like staying in bed.

Hanna (1988, location 579) refers to Soviet research which indicated that "the human organisms (*also known as people*) remain highly functional and adaptive as long as it is given suitable challenges to which it can respond". This is in perfect agreement with the supposition of Hanna, and Criswell, that aging is a myth. My involvement with the aged indicates that they cease to function. Not because they cannot but because they do not. My own experience with family and friends who have "grown old" is one of watching them sit and do nothing.

But this is not how it is supposed to be; we were meant to live physically and somatically for many years; perhaps hundreds or thousands. So, how would that look? With the myriad obstacles in this world and threats to our existence along with our already vulnerable being, how do we get there from here?

First of all, one must determine not to grow old but to become mature. But there is likely no end in this life where one reaches “maturity”. Maturing is a path taken rather than a destination to reach. Maturing is a constant with continuous changes and tests to build a person. It is acting mindfully and reacting with patience (Boelen via Bentz, 1989, p. 225).

The mental or psychological element of our being is like the physical in that it requires the same consistent and balanced rest, sustenance and exercise. As the old saying goes, “a mind is a terrible thing to waste”. Without the aforementioned three in balance the mind becomes a feeble thing unable to recall even the simplest words and forgetting the names and/or faces of acquaintances. The mind which is constantly learning is being fed just as the physical body is fed. Exercises might consist of learning a new language or doing math in your head instead of resorting to a calculator. But deep meditation that clears the mind of all thoughts is necessary to allow it a time of repose.

That the human existence also includes some element of the spiritual would seem a foregone conclusion if it weren't for the occasional naysayer who proclaims himself an atheist. Most people identifying themselves as atheist, whom I have met, actually turn out to be agnostic. They are reasonable enough to admit that they really don't know. And those with rudimentary training in logic and rhetoric know that they cannot prove a negative. Therefore, they cannot prove that a spiritual reality does not exist. Even Carl Sagan admitted that a spiritual element to the universe could not be disproved (Head, 2006). If that is not enough to convince the naysayer then perhaps the thousands of different systems of faith in practice around the world is evidence that we

are spiritual beings. Either that or we are all exactly what Madeline Murray O'Hare said we are; crazy.

Plante and Thoreson (2007) speak of the relationship between religion and health outcomes and how they have existed for millennia. Apparently this was in spite of the convictions of Ms. O'Hare's and her ilk. It could be contended that not only are humans endowed of a spiritual existence but that perhaps this essence of our being is much like the physical and the mental/psychological in that it requires the same consistent and balanced rest, sustenance and exercise. But it is evident that the spiritual is also inextricably a part of the physical body. Plante and Thoreson (2007) further tell of the connection between the spiritual, mental and the physical as research shows that meditation on compassionate thoughts alters brain functions. In turn the heart has been found to be connected neurologically to the emotional sectors of the brain. They go on to state that "the evidence now available suggests, but does not prove, that spiritual and religious practices are often associated with healthier living and positive health outcomes".

Without some sort of spiritual thermometer it would be difficult to positively determine a person's spiritual health. But I would suggest that physical and mental health might be a reliable indicator of spiritual health.

For examples of the three areas of human growth and therefore development I will share a couple of very personal experiences that I have been having with two young ladies; one I have known since her conception and the other since she was about six and a half years old. Their maturity or the lack thereof is in significant contrast.

The former wanted for nothing while growing up; never going hungry or suffering from the elements. All the while her mother made few demands of her though she was encouraged, by me, to get involved in social activities and sports. Her mother was also angry and verbally abusive to her sons while permissive to her daughter. The example set by me was spending most of the time at work or working around the house to overcome the lack of effort by her mother. And, of course, one can assume from the previous statement that her mother did very little to add value to the home environment. Now, at the age of twenty eight, she is a bit of an emotional basket case. A conversation with her feels like one with a twelve year old. To this day she has yet to complete high school and has never had a job. It is possible that she might have issues as a result of an auto accident though the MRI immediately after the accident showed no sign of physical damage. Still there is the possibility that her emotional condition is partially as a result of the trauma. I have urged her to seek professional help but she and her mother refuse to do so. It is probable that she will never be able to be on her own; at a glance it would seem that she and her mother have a symbiotic relationship.

Her physical state would be defined as overweight but not obese. When I call to speak with her she generally will inform me that she does not feel good. This could be a combination of her mental disposition as well as growing physical issues as a result of her sedentary lifestyle and poor nutrition. While she was raised attending church regularly and taught biblical standards for life she now has little interest in spiritual things.

I say all this with an aching heart because she is my own flesh and blood.

The latter spent much of her life, prior to coming into mine, living in abject poverty. While her mother was working overseas she initially stayed with her grandmother until she was about 4 years old (grandmother died). After that she stayed with an aunt and family (husband and six children) who were subsistence farmers. These treated her like a pariah due to the fact that her mother and father were not married. In that culture single motherhood is far from celebrated. There were times when she went without food for a few days and would eat just about anything she could find rooting around in the woods. She tells the story of one time when she was left by herself for a couple of days, while the family was away, and there was nothing to eat in the house (I use the term "house" with the utmost looseness). She found a dead bird on the ground and then attempted to start a little fire to cook it. The fire got out of control and burned a field full of crops. When the family returned and saw the burned field she hid in the woods to avoid being punished. She came back to the farm the next day and pretended to know nothing about the fire. Her aunt showed rare familial love by appearing to be worried about her being missing for the night. When her mother and I married and she came to the US she was only able to speak enough English to say "I love you, daddy". Because I knew of her ill treatment at the hands of her family in the Philippines, I have always gone to extreme lengths to make sure I show her love and affection. I have also encouraged her to talk about her experiences and assured her that no matter whether she ever knows her biological father or not, she is of infinite worth. I have also recommended that she forgive her family, if not verbally, at least in her heart.

At sixteen she tends to be generally more mature than an average American girl at that age. When difficulties appear she usually will take them in stride. Sometimes, in this respect, she makes me look bad; but I am a spoiled American. At school she steps into leadership roles where ever there is a perceived need. This has led to her being called upon by the faculty to get many extra-curricular efforts done, such as decorating for various events on campus. When she finished eighth grade she was unanimously voted the best all-around student by the faculty. Physically she has the advantage of being required to take physical education. But in addition, when given the opportunity to eat poorly at the school cafeteria, she will choose a salad and a piece of fruit. Her spiritual outlook is one of hope and expectation of good things. Though she has had some ups and downs academically, it is difficult to complain when, as a high school sophomore, she is taking Honors English, AP World History, Physics and Pre-Calculus.

Like those in Bentz's research, these two took different paths. One seems to have led to a dead end-and has stagnated to the point of apparent uselessness. The other, thus far, has appeared to weathered the storm of her early life. But, as I have proposed, this is perhaps a continuing process. One might rise out of her doldrums while the other could very easily fall by the wayside. We can only hope that they will each grow into who they were meant to be in every facet of their respective lives developing as all humanity should; to the fullest extent possible.

References:

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