



New PERSPECTIVES

A Quarterly Bulletin about Roling and Somatic Awareness

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The Body as the Cultural Unconscious

What place does the body have in our high-tech age which considers abstract information our primary asset—or which can swiftly disembodiment the whole world with the neutron bomb?

Quite simply, the body may be the only rite of passage we have left.

Today, when we have wonder drugs to cure most major illnesses, our bodies seem to be more active and insistent than ever. Anorexia and bulimia show us that some major part of our culture has stopped growing at adolescence. AIDS and cancer afflict others at mid-life whose individuality has been violated or repressed.

These illnesses act like rites of passage because they set us apart from society and force us to pay attention to some needed transformation. They offer us an incubation period in which to discover new meaning for a particular stage of life.

*For the last six years Toronto analyst Marion Woodman has been persistently exploring some of the most intractable of our modern illnesses—from alcoholism to anorexia. She has shared her powerful approach and insights in *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa and the Repressed Feminine; Addiction to Perfection; and the Pregnant Virgin*. She told Tarrytown contributing editor Sally Van Wagenen Keil what these ravaging diseases are saying about our dangerously disembodied way of life.*



"For some time now, I have been hearing dreams—hundreds of dreams from both sexes—about big dark women. These great wonderful black women are a redeeming symbol because they have contact with the body and a love for it." — Marion Woodman

Now that we have the capacity to annihilate ourselves through nuclear physics and to dehumanize our psyches through laser-speed technology Woodman believes we are witnessing a groundswell of protest from our bodies and the earth itself.

Our insatiable pursuit of rationality, recognition and material achievement has left us starving for the life force within. Our heady existence—even our ethereal spirituality—must now be grounded in the body. We have to listen to its wisdom if we want to save the planet and redeem the sacred in ourselves.

[The following interview is reprinted with permission from the Dec. '85/Jan. '86 issue of the *Tarrytown Letter*.]—ed.

Tarrytown: Why are we seeing such an astonishing increase in eating disorders?

Woodman: Anorexia and bulimia are more common because women are further away from their bodies than ever. This breeds a profound inner rage, one that compounds itself from generation to generation. Yet I believe illnesses like anorexia, far from being evil, are the means of healing on a larger scale if we can only understand their message. Food represents nurturing by the mother, and when we reject it like the anorexic, we are rejecting life itself. Women today are being forced to deal with their own death wish—which is precisely what we must do on a global scale. The truth is we are moving toward annihilation because our culture does not respect the earth or feminine creativity.

Tarrytown: How is our rejection of the body related to our rejection of the feminine?

Woodman: All matter is feminine. On this level, men's bodies are embodiments of the feminine just as much as women's. The extraordinary thing is that matter is becoming conscious. For women, there is an anguished realization: "I hate this body!" For men, it comes out in the cry, "This hurts!" Matter is forcing many people to become aware of its sacredness. So we have these scourges of illness like messages from the gods.

Tarrytown: What can we learn from eating disorders?

Woodman: Anorexia and bulimia tell us that our souls are starving. Also that our lives have become too heady. These people are cut off at the neck. They have lived life as a perfor-

mance. There is no ego center in the body, no "I" who senses and feels in the gut. And so they complain they have no *experience* of their lives.

People who are addicted to food or even to alcohol and drugs are terrified of the body and of reality. Their whole life may be a mask which they use to deal with the outside world. Instead of reacting from their own feeling values, their first response is "How can I please in this situation?" They are also addicted to control and to perfectionism. They try to be so efficient every day, then they go home and all hell breaks loose in bingeing, partying, drinking or some demonic ritual. This addiction to perfection is a major problem of our culture.

Tarrytown: How does this addiction play itself out?

Woodman: If you think you have to be the perfect son or daughter, you will drive yourself relentlessly to achieve. This actually is a desire for death not life. It means making life into a sterile work of art. Willpower can keep such people going for a long time. If they can keep running fast enough and the body is strong enough—but finally the body will collapse through fatigue because the power principle *kills life*.

Tarrytown: When do people come to you for help?

Woodman: Usually not until they are desperate and finally have to listen to their illness. Until then, the body is seemingly living its own independent life and they feel victimized by its symptoms. The truth is they are starving for an inner life. In fact, eating disorders often have very little to do with the number of calories taken in. Many fat women, for example, actually eat less than thin women. The problem is the energy is blocked and so it goes into fat. In therapy, we try to find out why.

Tarrytown: What generally is blocking life?

Woodman: A profound unconscious fear and rage that goes back to infancy. Because our mothers could not love themselves as complete feminine beings, they could not love us. So our fear is archetypal, monstrous. We have a tremendous sense of something within being shut off, abandoned. This is our own self, our own soul.

Tarrytown: So our bodies are like abandoned children?

Woodman: A mother who is trying to mold a child into a work of art cannot accept the instinctual side of the child—the living organic "puking and peeing" side—because she cannot accept her own body. So the child is separated from its body as well.

Tarrytown: How do people deal with this rejection?

Woodman: Food symbolizes Mother: The bulimic wants Mother so desperately she just gorges her down. But the minute it's in her stomach, she can't assimilate it, so she vomits. The anorexic refuses and rejects Mother until she wastes away from her lack



of inner nourishment. The body is like an elaborate metaphor. One may be able to taste and not swallow like the anorexic, or to swallow and not integrate, like the bulimic or the obese.

Tarrytown: How do you proceed from here?

Woodman: You have to get at the meaning of the starving—what the soul is hungry for—in order to feed it. An addict attempts to fill a terrible emptiness inside. But it's a spiritual emptiness, not physical emptiness. Dreams give us the images that can feed the soul. I really think that the body probably manifests in every dream, if you can read it physically as well as psychologically. If a person dreams that part of their house is on fire, that means that there has been a short circuit in the energy somewhere. There is too much energy in one part of the psyche, not enough in another part. By looking at

this dream image, one can understand that the energy is being blocked off, and it is not available to consciousness. This results in depression. The dream can tell you exactly what the problem is and even where in the body, months before a doctor could have diagnosed it. The image doesn't usually come as a picture of the body, but as a symbol—a car, a house, a tree. Often the soul manifests as a plant or a tree which is broken or endangered somehow.

Tarrytown: How do you work with dreams?

Woodman: First we identify a positive dream image and then we feed it to the body via the imagination. For example, a woman dreams of a beautiful flower. I ask her to picture that flower inside her body—in a place that she experiences as "dark", usually the uterus or feminine organs. When she does this, she generates energy in this area. This is liable to make her sick in the beginning. If she has never had consciousness in that place, the energy may be too great. She may become nauseous or dizzy. Yet this difficulty passes once she recognizes her body is carrying her through a profound inhibition. It is leading her to her own individual path in life.

Tarrytown: Is this a completely new way of working?

Woodman: Not entirely. The Eastern sages knew about the relationship of symbols to the body. You can see it in their description of the chakras. But in our culture, there is a failure of imagination. We confuse spiritual or soul food with actual material food. As a result, the soul is left starving and the body is abandoned. We also don't feed ourselves images that are healthy. The images of war and violence we see on television are actually soul-destroying. But more fundamentally, the soul is not being fed because people can't receive.

Tarrytown: So we've lost a sense of communion between the body and the soul?

Woodman: Yes. For me body work is soul work and the imagination is the key to connecting both. To have healing power, an

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image must be taken into the body on the breath. Then it can connect with the life force, and things can change—physically and psychologically. A man might come to therapy and say, "I can't cry." Yet if I ask him to breathe in a symbol of his grief, the tears will start. A woman may say, "I can't express my anger." But if you ask her to image this anger and then breathe it in, in a very few sessions, she may be experiencing her rage uncontrollably. That's why it's important to do this work with someone. It can be frightening on your own. Most of us keep our breath as shallow as possible because the eruption of feeling is too intense if we inhale deeply. Breathing is very important because it is a matter of receiving and that is the feminine principle incarnate.

Tarrytown: Is our fear of rejection related to our breathing?

Woodman: Yes. If, for example, a person has an intense mother complex, this usually manifests in a plugged throat, plugged nose, sinus trouble, asthma and all kinds of difficulty. Sometimes in body work, the mucous starts to pour out—it just comes in ropes, out of the eyes, the nose and the mouth—when the complex is releasing! This usually signals the end of asthma and related diseases. Such people also cannot give you their chest if you try to hold them. They will arch. But when they start to trust, the body will begin to free itself and they will be capable of a full embrace. However, as you solve these problems you often encounter new ones. The whole vaginal area is related to the throat and the breath. So if you release something here, you also release energy at the other end. Then you're dealing with a problem that is sexual.

Tarrytown: Can you tell us how?

Woodman: Women find themselves with vaginal problems when they are in a relationship that's incestuous. The body is saying, "Get him out of here! I want an adult male partner. I don't want to play Little Girl to my son-father anymore." The body recognizes the truth of this relationship before the psyche does. It will force you to move to a new level if you listen.

Tarrytown: What does this tell us about honoring a woman's sexuality?

Woodman: Sexuality will be crippled if a mother does not learn to love her little daughter's body. When she grows up she will want a man to be her mother. Ann Landers asked her women readers whether they preferred to make love or to be held. Seventy percent said they wanted to be cuddled by their husbands. But when a man has to be both mother and lover, it emasculates him. Meanwhile, men are no more mature. Full sexuality is pretty rare in our

culture. Most of us are little boys and little girls, floundering around, trying to get out of our incestuous relationships with mommy and daddy. Why? Because we have no real contact with the feminine.

Tarrytown: Are our bodies trying to teach us how to live as women?

Woodman: They certainly are. Take premenstrual syndrome for instance. A lot of women find their bodies swelling up with water. If you look at that symbolically, you see the body filling up with the unconscious. In the olden days, women would have gone to the menstrual hut and looked inward, stayed with the unconscious, listened to the body, and brought this wisdom back to the tribe. But in our culture, there is no time given, no respect paid to that period. It's like the dark of the moon. When we menstruate there has been a death. A child will not be born. Out there is the possibility of new spiritual life, and evidence of our capacity to nourish it. If we don't take time to respect these mysteries, we feel a terrific tension. The body swells up and says, "Come down into my healing waters and I'll give you the symbols which will make it possible for you to go out into new life, into a new cycle."

Tarrytown: Why haven't we been more sensitive to the female body and to these warnings?

Woodman: One of the problems is the taboo against death in our Western culture. People just don't want things to die. They are afraid to let go of the old and go on with the new. The true feminine knows life is cyclical, that the caterpillar must die for the butterfly to emerge. We all must experience this chrysalis stage periodically. Women have such potential to bring into the world a totally new insight into the cyclical pattern of life. But if they keep trying to run that straight line of perfection and performance, the body catches up with them. And the body will only be outraged for so long before it takes revenge.

Tarrytown: What happens when we don't use the body fully?

Woodman: We are disconnected from soul, from the purpose of our lives. Life is a matter of *incarnation*—the soul is an entity we have to live with in our human body. The problem is too many people in our culture try to skip over this step and go straight up into spirit. Overspiritualization is a real danger, but usually the body starts to scream. People will get symptoms or an addiction. Then they can start coming down to earth again. The anorexic men I'm working with are really worse off than the women because they are such disembodied spirits, just barely on the ground. They are magnificent people, but they don't want to be here at all. I just keep

trying to bring them into the body and into the feminine side where they can accept life. We have got to face the agony and the ecstasy of being human—something we are not too good at in this culture. Many people don't want to be human; they'd rather live on idealization and perfection. They don't want to take responsibility for their lives because it's much easier to fly off into spirit and try to live out an archetypal dream. Psychologically we call this *inflation* and the only end is to crash down to earth—or to recover earth—through depression or illness.

Tarrytown: Has our overly masculine culture been seduced by ideas and left the body far behind?

Woodman: Yes. But I am not at war with patriarchy. I think the world had to go through a patriarchal stage. There had to be certain "Thou shalt nots" and we needed them in the early stages of our civilization, just as children need them. I see patriarchy as the power principle, not as genuine masculinity. It's the Father on the archetypal level. It is Jehovah, Father Law. Father Law upholds Mother Society, Mother Convention, Mother Church, Mother Social Insurance. Yet these archetypes leave us with a view of our own humanity that is very incomplete.

Tarrytown: How can we grow toward maturity?

Woodman: I see the world as going through an initiation into puberty. People are no longer willing to live by thou-shalt-nots. We are coming into something completely new: a new femininity balanced by a new masculinity. The goddess is coming to light.



She is coming through the Earth and through our physical bodies, but we have to relate to her with our own individual consciousness. Otherwise we could be sucked back into unconscious patriarchy.

Tarrytown: What is the *positive feminine* that we're moving toward?

Woodman: Love is the essence of feminine consciousness—in men and women. It is the recognition and acceptance of the total individual, and loving the individual for who he or she is. The feminine is the loving container of all conflict, all physical and psychological processes. They must not be rejected, but safely, lovingly contained. Suffering and conflict are the only way to grow. As life moves from phase to phase, you have to suffer the death of one and the birth of the next.

Tarrytown: Tell us more about this rite of passage. The feminine soul is what grounds us, it loves and accepts us in our totality. Our challenge today is to *embody* this. For some time now I have been seeing dreams—hundreds of dreams from both sexes—about big dark women: they appear as dancers, magnificent gypsies, a Portuguese cook or people they met in the Bahamas. These great wonderful black women are a *redeeming symbol*. They are a saving image because they have contact with the body, and they also have a love for it. They are reminiscent of the Black Madonna, the dark earthy virgin who was worshipped in the Middle Ages and is still worshipped in many European countries today.

Tarrytown: Can individuals find wholeness if they adopt a new attitude toward the body and the life force in it?

Woodman: Certainly. We receive life through the orifices of the body: the eyes,

ears, nose, the pores of the skin, our sexuality. If we can *really* see and hear and sense, we are continually growing. Illness, on the other hand, is indication of blocked emotion. Jung called cancer a disease of despair, arthritis a disease of rage and anger. Skin problems indicate conflicts that are very close to consciousness. If the problem is profoundly deep and a long way from consciousness, it will manifest in the bowel. So you see, if we are not aware of what we're feeling, the body will exaggerate it.

Tarrytown: The irony is that our culture has paid great attention to physical fitness but without gaining any new awareness of the body.

Woodman: Whether all this emphasis on Nautilus and running and so on brings the person into greater consciousness of the body, I wonder. Running, for example, does bring lots of oxygen into the body and like many addictions gives a sense of euphoria. I think some people can run and be very much in contact with their body, while others are just running away from everything. A person on the nautilus machine could be entering an intuitive communication process or fashioning an armor.

Tarrytown: What happens when the body is finally listened to?

Woodman: It becomes eloquent. It's like changing a fiddle into a Stradivarius. It gets much more highly attuned. As it becomes more sensitive, it protests against all manner of psychological and physical poisons coming in. It may want different foods. When people listen to the body, they also develop an acute sensitivity to nature. I have seen so many men and women come into my office crying over a tree that has been cut down, a bird that has been hurt. Once you

come into contact with the pain of your own body and its devastation, you become more aware of the ravages of nature. You also recognize the agony of others who are not living in their bodies. You can see the body twisting and turning and trying to send up messages.

Tarrytown: How long does this process take?

Woodman: I tell the people I work with to give the body an hour a day and really listen. If you're not worth an hour a day, there's nothing the body can tell you and nothing I can really do.

Tarrytown: When you begin this dialogue with the body, are there different levels of communication?

Woodman: Yes. Let me give you an example. At menopause women may be given pills to keep their rite of passage at bay. If, however, they listen to their own body, it finds a way of bringing about genuine transformation—psychically and physically. The pills work for awhile but then the body finds a way of getting its message through. The body will keep sending messages from different layers until you reach different levels of awareness. I've seen obese people lose a hundred pounds. But if they haven't dealt with their inner conflict fully, the body may break out in rashes. The interface is still wrong between the inner need and the outer attitude. Warning signs are to be heard and obeyed. Rather than being ignored, starved, gorged or made drunk, the body must be attended to. When the body is fully open, we can trust our own feelings and actions; they anchor us in an inner home. The body protects and guides us—its symptoms are the signposts that reconnect us to our own lost soul.

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