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Hands and Feet

Jessie Hawkes Wilkey

Except for the rogue bit of pondweed, skinny-dipping wasn't nearly as strange as I thought it would be. Of course, the darkness helped, as did my complete ease around Sparky, my closest friend and confidant while employed at Pondicherry girl's camp. I was uncomfortable only for a second as I shed my sweats, t-shirt, and sports bra, and hastily plunged into the water. I resurfaced with a gasp and a giggle, gazing across the lake to allow Sparky some privacy while she too shed her pajamas on the shore behind me. Treading water in the inky ripples, I breathed out a deep sigh. So this is what it felt like to be naked. Strange that it took seventeen years. I grinned with the adrenaline of freedom and reward; I was graceful, primal, a frizzy-haired blend of Laura Croft and the freshly birthed Venus. Even with the occasional slip of pond algae against my stomach, I felt lithe. Dipping my chin beneath the water, I sucked in a mouthful of pond water and sent it flying against the sky, a projectile, in a long, leisurely arc, like one of those tacky pastoral yard sculptures. It's a terrible and unsanitary habit, but I hadn't contracted giardia yet.

Behind me, Sparky laughed nervously and I heard her splash in with a slurping sound and a gasp of breath.

"You can look now," she breathed, and I sheepishly sank to my neck in the water before revolving slowly, our eyes avoiding each other's white underwater shadows. Why were we doing this?

Growing up on an island in Maine, I was highly familiar with artist communes and spiritual retreats, where bearded men or batik-wearing refugees from the 60s who had settled in the obsolete woods would gather and find their interior selves. My earliest memories of sleepovers with my friends involved hearing bongo drums, sleeping in a teepee, drinking homegrown tea, and falling asleep to my friend's mother strumming the guitar and talking about how to love everyone—even Ted, the strange man who lived down the street. Despite all that, I had retained a healthy skepticism about discovering my feminine spirit through drum circles and incense. Tonight, the touch of water on the unguarded white bank of my stomach

and back triggered a strange new sense of pride in my body. I examined my bizarre collage of warm brown and Day-Glo skin, strangely foreshortened by the dark lake, with only the occasional pedal of my own feet visible to me as I treaded water. I felt feminine, daring, and comfortable within this spongy machine. It was significant; my spirit tugged at me saying that something about this bizarre experience was important, even sacred, if I dared say it. I kicked farther out, along the glinting path the moon left between me and the kayaking docks. I was naked in a lake just weeks before starting college, and it was somehow metaphorical.

I have enjoyed several skinny dipping episodes subsequent to this one, but looking back on this first revealing experience, I admit that it was only the capstone moment of a pivotal summer of self-molding. The three summers previous to the summer of the skinny dip, I had worked at a Boy Scout camp, where the ratio of men to

women on staff was approximately twenty to one and campers to women more than ninety to one. While I enjoyed the raucous freedom that Scout camp entertained with motorboats, kayak trips, and midnight Frisbee games (I demanded permanent membership on the “shirts,” not “skins,” team), I was aware of the dozens of pairs of prepubescent male eyes that seemed to peer at me from every table in the dining

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hall and every dock on the waterfront. I took to wearing shorts with my bathing suit as I instructed my classes. I was hasty to throw on a tank top or a towel over my swimming suit, so I could teach without constantly crossing my arms over my chest. I acted confidently, but did so despite my body, not because of it.

This changed at Pondicherry, my first all-girls camp, when I found myself as a single body amidst a small army of mostly international women. They were loud women, funny, brave: salsa-dancing Cubans, ax-toting Texans who swore in their tents with words no New England lexicon would document, willowy Koreans, Scottish women with incomprehensible accents. Pondicherry employed a cacophony of female bodies.

In fact, the typical discomfort that I felt with my general shape began to slowly fold during my time at the girls' camp. One afternoon, before going to dinner, I climbed onto the lip of the ceramic gray bathtub. It was one of those permanent ceramic ones with the rounded lip and metal-clawed feet. From my precarious position, I could see my waist and legs in the mirror that was perched on top of the sink across the room. Carefully balancing with a hand on the ceiling, I examined the back of my legs for the first time. They were a dark honey brown but met with a wall of white at the top of my thighs, as alarming as a bubble of fat on a piece of undercooked bacon. Despite the unglamorous coloration, the interesting silhouette of my calf muscle fascinated me, the one muscular quality my mother had passed on to me. I examined the muscles and veins that

intersected on the back of my legs, like the subtle features on a topographical map. *Look at this cool body!* I thought, feeling like a five-year-old.

That summer my body rowed, backstroked, and rescued with new assurance. All of these things it had done for years at scout camp behind a self-conscious veil became genuine acts of self-celebration, without pretense. The summers before, I had imagined my competency as an aquatics instructor being evaluated by how I looked doing aquatics. Now, surrounded by women, the task itself became the focus, and I was delighted to find I could swim, set up docks, dive, and run a waterfront without the intervention of an awkward body.

My body was useful for comforting as well, pulling girls close when they were afraid at night, rubbing their backs as they sat next to me on my cabin steps; this physicality was forbidden at boy's camp. It was a body for singing and giving grace at dinner, for learning to say "xiè xiè" to the Chinese cook, for juggling sleeves of Girl Scout cookies to entertain the masses while it rained. And now, lounging in the lake, I felt that I had a natural and artistic body, one that blended effortlessly with the mutter of the water and the creak of the trees lining the shore. It was not limited to being a sexual body (although I felt the comfortable tick of feminine sexuality in the ease of being bare under the stars); it was calm and stately, dark and pale, strong and soft, and irreducible and intensely complex, like the patters on the water reflecting the sky above.

I remember one of my first lessons on spirituality and the body as I embarked on my first discussion of modesty in my Young Women class at church. Growing up as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "modesty" was a catchall phrase that meant the way we dressed and spoke. Because of the very literal belief that one's body is a gift from God, modesty is a frequent staple of church discussions, especially for teenage girls. And while the word itself has many implications, it was often reduced in conversation to a matter of hemlines and midriffs.

Our teacher explained some of the practical instructions of modesty (even words like "low cut" and "bust line" made me blush) and then continued onto the "why" of modesty. I don't remember exactly what she said, but I am positive that she touched on making sure that we don't give the wrong impression about ourselves, distract young men in our congregation, or, perhaps most importantly, encourage them to have inappropriate thoughts.

Let me take this moment to interject and give you some insight into my appearance as a twelve year old. My favorite outfit at that time was a pair of white overalls with bad threading and a navy and white striped sweater from L.L.Bean. My sense of social graces hibernated somewhere with my fashion sense, which led me to a several-year long misunderstanding that "matching" was synonymous with "articles of clothing being the same color." My mother maintained a charitable laissez-faire policy with my fashion, only stopping me occasionally when I would

start out the door sporting wind pants, a t-shirt, and a sweater, each a different shade of plum. In addition to this fundamental misunderstanding of clothing, I also believed my hair to be straight. This was a more well grounded claim; up until fourth grade my hair was blonde and straight, but during my fifth grade year, as if overnight, it snuck into gnarly, coarse brown curls. I refused to accept the change. “Poufy” became a swear word in my home; to retaliate against the onslaught of volume I combed my wet hair back so tightly against my skull that I looked bald from the front. In the back, the ponytail exploded like a suppressed mane, swinging fully behind me as a sarcastic nod to my lack of success in the hair wrestling department. I completed the look with a pair of gold, wire rimmed glasses, colorful braces to subdue the beaver teeth, and a permanent malady of chapped lips. Needless to say, I was not a prime candidate for seduction.

I am ashamed to admit, that listening to the Sunday modesty discussion as a twelve-year-old perched on my plastic chair in my mismatched outfit, Vaseline smeared on my skin, and probably with Halloween orange and black elastics on my braces, I almost laughed.

Me? You don't want ME to give the young men bad thoughts? I ran the roster of my church's sixteen-year-old boys through my head: Rob, Scott, David, and Zach—all

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much older and eternally more attractive than I was or could ever hope to be. I gazed back, amused at my teacher. *It would be miraculous if the young men thought about me at ALL, much less had disracting thoughts about my body.* I agreed not to wear anything revealing (*revealing WHAT?*

I could have rightfully asked), dismissed the lesson as generally “one for later,” and continued unconcerned down the very same path of unfortunate, but incredibly modest, fashion.

Since that time, I have had at least three dozen other lessons about modesty, including several when I was serving a mission for the Church and one last Sunday, from the president of the Church's women's organization, the Relief Society. I have come to love and appreciate these discussions as a woman, although I found them to be ironic and discouraging as a youth.

I have come to understand what my gawky twelve-year-old self missed and what my skinny-dipping self was only beginning to understand: a body is more than a structure to tent our spirits. I don't hold the classical Christian belief that the goal of mortality is to transcend the chains and inherent evils of the flesh. In fact, my church's doctrine teaches that the spirit and body compose the *soul*, together. Even my callused feet and wild hair, they are part of my soul. In these moments of physical self-acceptance, silly as standing on a bathtub or swimming in a lake, I face a fuller and more sensual facet of soul-ness.

This supports my strong notion that my soul has its origin with God. I believe

that I am a literal daughter of God. More accurately, I work to believe that I am a daughter of God. Despite risking cliché in my church for its frequent repetition, the concept can be hard to internalize. This imperfect and prone-to-be-sick body, my impatient and hotheaded self, from God? The principle requires all the repetition I can get.

The way I treat my body, then, is an indication of my respect for God, who is my Father, and for myself. Then, how do I feel about my body in conjunction with this notion? At age twenty-three, I find myself with a loose commitment to vegetarianism, a love of exercise, a prideful disdain for pencil skirts, and a sympathetic horror at the spiritually cutting grip of eating disorders. I didn't adopt any of these things as a conscious effort to respect God; they came as a natural progression of wanting to be happier and teaching myself to be satisfied with this body. Still, even growing up in a Mormon setting where I am taught that the body is a divine aspect of the soul, I am exasperated at my complete inability to snowboard, and I constantly tug at the seams of any bathing suit I wear. It is so easy to blame problems of personal failure on the body. I can only imagine the utter frustration if God was removed from the equation entirely.

In the lesson I was privy to this past Sunday, the Relief Society president mentioned that we should be modest even when we are alone in our homes. This echoed something pivotal to my concept of my modesty, that it is *not* for other people, but revolves around a personal understanding between the Lord and ourselves. It is *not* about "giving" bad thoughts to people. It is *not* about being attractive or unattractive. In fact, the very idea of attractiveness should be divorced from its association with modesty or immodesty. On the contrary, modesty has everything to do with who I am, understanding the gift I have, and desiring to take care of it appropriately. It is the difference between the way I treat my Volkswagen Jetta beater from high school and my roommate's SUV when I borrow it to drive to the store; when something of high quality is loaned to me, I drive more carefully, avoid feathering the gas pedal, and am much less likely to leave banana peels on the dashboard. If I can recognize who I am, where I come from, and to whom I belong, it should fundamentally change the way I act, speak, and dress.

One of the most glorious promises God gives us is that this is a rent-to-own contract: everyone who has a mortal body in this life will have a perfected one in the next. The hope for an eternal life with a perfected body comes as a relief to me; instead of just being a spirit wandering in some marshmallowy otherworld, I could go swimming! Eat ice cream! Roll in the leaves! This concept draws substance into the experiences I have now because my body isn't designed to just keep me from getting bored on earth while I try to perfect my spirit. Imagine: holding hands and eating ice cream in heaven too. The thought makes heaven that much more tantalizing.

Looking back, I used to be surprised by how often the resurrection was mentioned in the scriptures; it just didn't seem like a big deal that we would have bodies in

the next life because I couldn't imagine myself without one. It was the part I always forgot when our Sunday School teacher drew those seven circles that are universally familiar to any member of the Mormon church on the whiteboard and asked us to label the events of the Plan of Salvation. "The Plan" is a roadmap of pre-earth, earth, and post-earth experiences, and is just about as common as modesty on the itinerary of lessons one hears at my church. *Oh yeah, resurrection, that's right*, I'd think, squiggling a line before "Judgement." Since that time, I've come to recognize that resurrection doesn't seem to be just a lucky door prize of enduring life on earth; it is the crowning gift in conjunction with spiritual sanctification that the Savior Jesus Christ offers us. The main event of the next life.

During the eighteen months that I served as a missionary for the Church, I met people whose bodies, lives, and hopes were mangled. One single mother, who

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couldn't have been much older than I was, toted an oxygen tank through her oatmeal-colored apartment in her housing project, the creaky wheels following her like one of her own children. Another woman faced tragedy in the death of an infant granddaughter who had been hit by a car. Harry, who loved beagles and

that 60's scream band Iron Butterfly, sat in a wheelchair with feet the size of small cantalopes. Some would look at us hungry for answers to their pain.

Over and over, I found myself drawn to speaking about themes of resurrection. From the Book of Mormon, I found accounts of men who watched their own nation gnaw itself into bloody ruin, who then had the clarity to write and hear God speaking to them.

And what it is that ye shall hope for? Behold I say unto you, that you shall have hope through the Atonement of Christ and the power of His resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and this because of your faith in Him, according to the promise (Moroni 7:41).

Other experiences with death close in: the passing of an aunt to cancer and a friend's mother's fatal accident. Only a month ago, my family faced the death of a cousin—an accidental overdose in an empty hotel room. Until then, I had never really seen death; I had just caught its aroma in someone else's family. Even with this most recent loss, I experienced death packaged with flowers, accompanied by sentiments expressed in pastel cards, surrounded by gripping hugs, and set off by classical music. It finds my family and I feeling meditative, speaking often of what my cousin will be in the 'next life.' We cling to a hope of a world without mental illness and addiction, with clear vision, and with more direct access to the soul through a perfect body.

Lounging in a lake or contemplating the painfully polished shine of a casket are celebrations of the same song, a song the world remembers only through the cerebral curtain of innate memory. Our spirit-hearts and soul-hearts reside in the same cavity, stitching themselves onto one another with recognition of the self, of the soul, of the transcendent *yes* that is summer mornings and the aching leg muscles and the tickle of sweat on the lips. In that conviction, I stand that the resurrection day will not just be about having a body again, but it will be an explosion of recollection and reunion, a shout, a soar, a golden leap, a thousand hugs, and wet—gloriously wet—tears, fist pumps, deep kisses, handsprings, and finally, not a single self-conscious girl.