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UP FRONT AND PHYSICAL: JESUIT EDUCATION AND THE BODY

Self-hate or self-care?

By Colleen M. Griffith

As our campus fills up, swelling with activity and the usual autumn excitement, I experience the unexpected grace of renewal that comes from being in a place of promise and feeling caught up in the spirit of it. As I look around at the faces of new and returning students, a familiar line from the late and venerable Dr. Seuss comes to mind: "You're off to great places!" The journey of a new year holds this kind of potential for all "upstarts" with "heads full of brains" and "shoes full of feet." But how much reflection on those "heads" and "feet" will make it into this semester's learning and formation? Does Jesuit education speak to the bodiliness of these "upstarts," whose physicality energizes our campuses, bringing us all to life, and whose way of agency in the world is blessedly incarnate? What pride of place does the body hold for our students?

The Body on Campus

Heightened body consciousness seems apparent at our colleges and universities. Rec-plexes are full of undergraduates working out; cafeterias are hosts to scores of students making healthier, more nutritious food choices. There is increased interest in fitness, nutrition and health.

Closer examination of this phenomenon as documented, however, reveals that students today, engaging in what appear to be positive bodily practices, do so frequently out of self-hate rather than self-care. There are high levels of over concern with body image on our campuses, leading to low body esteem. Media advertising, the strong arm of a consumerist culture, communicates a body ideal and seeks to convince persons that this ideal can be attained with the help of practices aimed at correcting one's body and products that aid

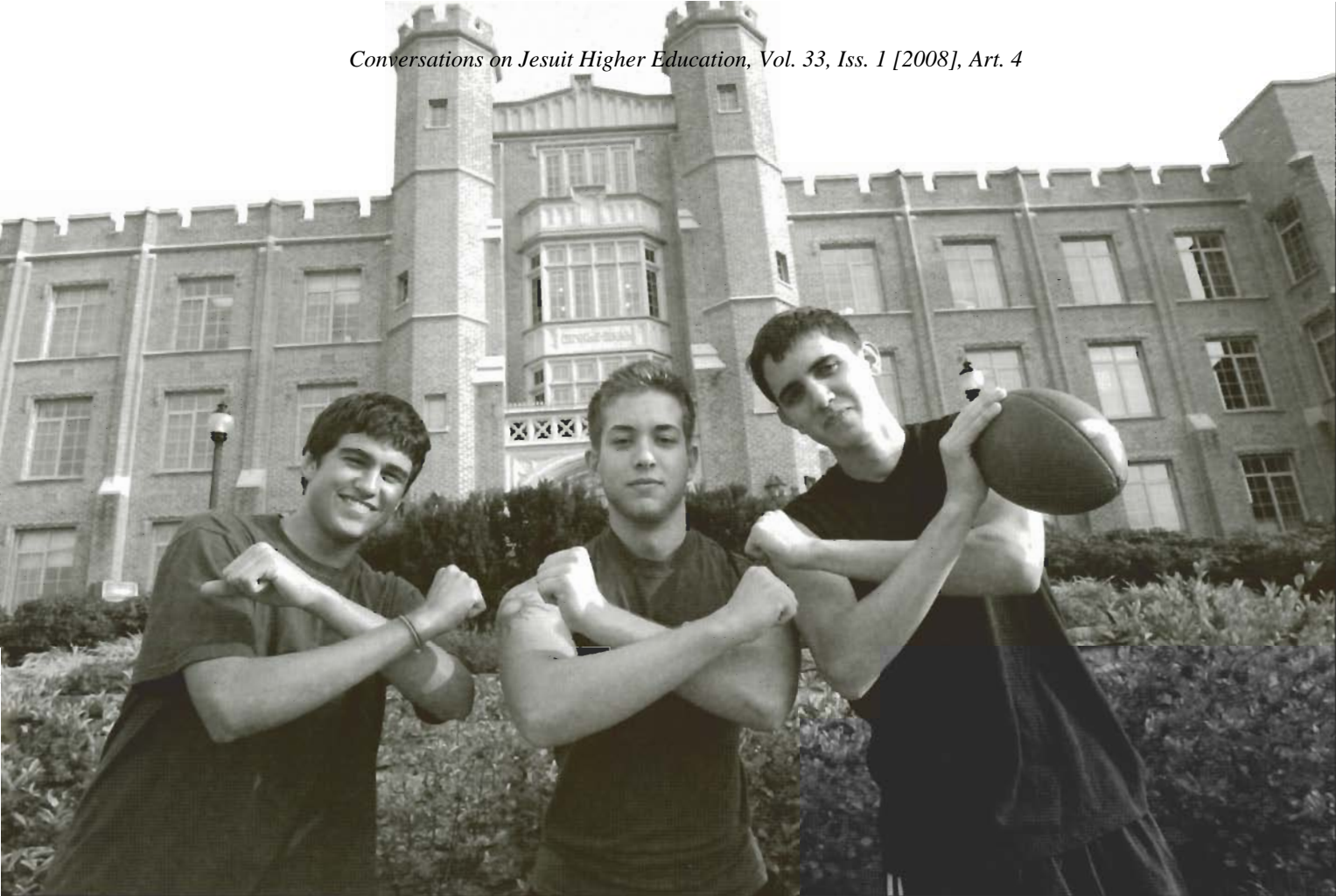
one's reconstructive efforts. Clearly the attention to bodiliness found at our colleges and universities is more complex and ambiguous than it looks at first blush. Bodiliness, in all of its fullness, too often gets reduced to a very limited, skewed perception of body-image.

Going Beyond Body Image

One might expect a thorough-going consideration of the body to be part of a Jesuit education. Such reflection is not only warranted but entirely in keeping with the incarnational vision and apostolic priorities of Ignatian spirituality. So why hasn't the body received more emphasis and attention? Mark Johnson offers an important observation: "The crucial role of human embodiment in all our experiences, conceptual structure, and reasoning has only recently been rediscovered, after decades of almost total neglect by Anglo-American analytic philosophy" (Johnson, "Embodied Reason" in *Perspectives on Embodiment: Intersections of Nature and Culture*, Weiss, 83). Analytic philosophy assumed that concepts, logic and basic forms of thought had nothing to do with the body. And theology sidelined the body by focusing its attention on the soul, considering the body only insofar as it related to the soul. The hierarchically ordered presentation of personhood that ensued established a place for the body as an appendage to the soul/mind; body was something to be "ruled" and "ordered."

People today find themselves living in the ruins of a lot of previous thinking about the body. Having rubble around can be sobering and instructive, but we don't

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Xavier University, men with muscles

have to live in it. The choice to know our bodiliness in more depth, to make peace with it, and to cherish our physicality is ours to make. It is something entirely consistent with the central mysteries of Christian faith and something to which we educators can invite our students.

Offering Reason for the Body

Three of the central symbolic constructions that ground the Christian tradition are *Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection of the Body*. Each of these creedal pillars is clear in its positive comment on human bodiliness. The mythic story of Creation includes strong affirmation of physicality, while Incarnation furnishes unmistakable tribute to the value of it. Resurrection of the Body attests to the body being integral to eternal life. The regard for the sacredness of the body reflected in these doctrines warrants intentional appropriation at the level of bodily practice. The task for our educational leaders is to foster the strong valuation of the body that is found at the heart of Christian tradition and to ask what life choices and actions are in keeping with it.

In a recent issue of *Conversations*, Steve Kuder, S.J., writes: "We are educators; this is what we do. And in Jesuit schools we have both a particular mission and a

particular process, an Ignatian way of proceeding" (*Conversations*, 31, 2007)). An Ignatian way of proceeding in this case requires increased awareness of both the contextual factors that influence students' sense of their bodily selves and the bodily experiences of students, particularly those experiences that have provided glimpses into the sacredness of human physicality.

Some of the contextual factors influencing students' interpretation of their bodily selves pose real challenges. The consumeristic culture that is a significant part of our North American context, for example, advances an understanding of the body as commodity, something to be considered as having "use value" and "exchange value." The technocentric context in which students find themselves encourages a transcendence of the body, one resulting in the disembodiment of social relations through the promotion of virtual bodies and communities that promise to be more gratifying while involving less contact and commitment.

Despite the impact of these negative contextual factors (and others like sexism, racism, ageism, homophobia), our students, in the course of their college years, have many opportunities to experience the *more* in being bodily. Some will have powerfully formative religious experiences through exposure to practices of bod-

ily prayer. Others will witness the importance of attending to the bodily well being of others as spiritual practice, as a result of immersion trips or service projects. Many will have access to holistically minded student health services, and a great majority will come into contact with teachers using participative pedagogies that honor the bodily context of the knower and highlight the importance of incarnate wisdom in the appropriation of new learning.

Can educators help students to recognize what serves to objectify the body and what leads to greater cherishing of it? We certainly can and must, through a consideration of the contextual factors influencing our perceptions of the body and a drawing upon those bodily experiences that highlight the sacredness of physicality. In addition, I wish to suggest three simple practices inspired by dynamics in the Ignatian Examen.

The Examen, when seen in relationship to discernment of spirits, is a daily practice of renewal that holds the possibility of growth in religious identity. Key components of the Examen include gratitude and thanksgiving, attentiveness and observation, and commitment to deepening life. When one brings a body hermeneutic to these components, it becomes possible to envision bodily existence lived with greater insight and truth. Three practices that correspond with the Examen identified above are:

A Practice of Intentional Reflection Upon and Giving Thanks for the Body

"Finding God in all things" certainly is inclusive of bodily life, but the body has not received the kind of intentional reflection that it deserves. Contemplation of human bodiliness highlights the body as our home base and standpoint in the world. Bodiliness is what makes it possible for us to come to know, feel, and love "in marrow bone"(Yeats). Thanksgiving for the gift of bodily selves begins with greater awareness of all that bodies make possible and a fuller recognition of the connectedness they herald. Reflection on body-selves points us ever more consciously in the direction of the larger created order of which we are a part. In major systems and functions of the body (respiratory system, circulatory system, metabolism, etc.) one finds powerful metaphors for the interdependence of all life and a reminder that the human body, at a level that goes even deeper than consciousness, is already open to and in dialogical exchange with a vast world.

A Practice of Discerning the Body as Socio-Culturally Inscribed

Bodies are agents of culture and constructs

of it as well. The central values, hierarchies and commitments of a society become inscribed on persons' ways of being bodily in the world. Society's norms and ideals, if they effectively attract people at the level of desire, become incarnate. Human bodies, therefore, serve to manifest and sustain central values of a culture.

The noblest of society's hopes and its best knowledge become actualized in bodies. Its worst nexuses of knowledge and power, large systemic "isms" that render us less human, do as well. How are our bodies and our bodily ways of being in the world influenced for good or ill by the values and ideals of present society and culture? How does ageism affect the way that we look upon and treat older bodies? Does society's measure of what constitutes "normal embodiment" affect our interactions with persons with disabilities? How does a "hook up" culture influence our decisions regarding our sexuality? How does sexism influence the ways in which we look upon women's bodies and men's bodies? Attentiveness to the socio-cultural inscription of bodies in our present time and culture is needed. Resistance to ways that bodies are being inscribed is very possible, but only if we have established a practice of discernment that enables us to look carefully at ways in which bodies are targeted by society and culture and to what end.

A Practice of Hallowing the Body

Living our bodiliness with insight, integrity and truth becomes all the more possible with renewed commitment to hallow the body. We humans enact our bodily selves; we can choose or not choose to reverence the body. Refusal to objectify our own body or the body of another is a conscious choice, as is the decision to reject any separation between the body and the rest of self.

Hallowing the body has practical ramifications. These include making good nutrition a priority, getting sufficient rest, being attentive to bodily messages of stress, and interpreting bodily experiences, rhythms and cycles in meaningful ways that serve to orient our lives. Honoring the body necessarily points us in the direction of others as well. It means affirming the dignity of bodies different from our own, caring mightily about the bodily well being of others, protesting acts of violence, and deepening in sensitivity to the vulnerability of finite bodily life.

It is time to put the soul of Ignatian spirituality back in the body. ■