

I Can't Get My Head Around That

Brian Morris

'Whitefellas are too keen to disown the wisdom of the body, mistaking our loss of receptivity for maturity' – Tim Winton, with reference to the observations of aboriginal philosophers David Mowaljarlai and Bill Neidjie

Until recently I never knew that the body is important for life. I don't mean physical life. I mean relational and spiritual life. I am on a journey now of connecting with my body. But this journey began half a lifetime ago.

I liked preaching...or so I thought. What I actually liked was the sense of power and influence it gave, and the accolades and approval that came after I preached. Accolades and approval were signs that I had done a good job. They helped establish my identity as being someone worthwhile by doing something that is regarded as worthwhile.

I was in my third pastorate, at a church in regional Victoria. About one year into this pastorate, I conducted a series of sermons preached over three Sundays. I had not prepared the final sermon as well as I would have liked. As I approached the pulpit to preach, I got the usual adrenalin rush of stepping into a place of influence and power. There was something else going on in my body too. I ignored it.

Halfway through the sermon, I couldn't recall points I had committed to memory. I scrambled to find a place in my notes where I could go to bring the sermon back on track. I couldn't find a place quick enough. The feeling I had ignored in my body was increasing, a rising foreboding, wraithlike, warning me of something. My head thought, *I don't know what I am doing here or where this sermon is going.*

I managed to close off the sermon quickly and end the worship service. I headed for the exit where I said goodbye to the people who attended. I wanted redemptive accolades and approval of the sermon. None came. Just the neutral 'goodbyes' and 'thank yous' that are etched into people's habits of politeness. My head interpreted this lack of approving response as *I have failed. While being nice and polite when leaving, the people are really taken aback by the sermon's failure. I have made a fool of myself.*

The feeling of wraithlike foreboding in my body was changing shape. It had turned into a two-sided feeling. One part was protective: *you need to go and hide now.* I couldn't get home quick enough to do just that – to a safe place. The other part of the feeling had more intensity.

Which is strange, because this part of the feeling felt like I was gutted, emptied of any sense of self. If nothingness can be felt, then that is what I was feeling. Maybe that is the beginning of bodily awareness, to notice such a disembodied state. I was an empty shell, a haunted house where people do not live, as the ghosts of the past may terrify and destroy. Such a vulnerable state.

This feeling in my body was overpowering; it could not be ignored. My head said the feeling was about me being a failure, a fool in front of all those people. My body did not offer any interpretation. It just felt. Only in retrospect have I understood something of what was happening. My body was gutting me of an identity which had been built on getting accolades and approval for doing things regarded as worthwhile, which then made me someone worthwhile.

The building of a different identity was soon to begin. An identity not based in the so-called importance of one's work and the performance of such, or in other people's opinions. An identity embedded in a bodily received knowledge of grace. My head did not have a clue about this bodily knowledge.

The Wednesday night after the Sunday, my wife and I went out for dinner with a couple, Paul and Sue, who were friends. They were safe enough for me not to hide. If I needed to hide, I could put on a cheery face, and not let them see this strange feeling in my body, or so I thought. A few minutes into the evening Paul casually said, 'Thanks, Brian, for your sermon last Sunday, I appreciated your thoughts.'

I was stuck in no man's land. It was too late for my need for accolades and approval to be satisfied, and I knew darn well that the sermon was crap. *What should I say?* My face grimaced as it went red, and I fumbled around in my head for a response. Before I could say anything, Paul, being an intuitive man, must have picked up on my hesitation to respond and my facial expression, and said, 'I am flying down to Apollo Bay on Saturday to get my hours up. Do you want to come along?' That helped. Being a person who loved aeroplanes, I didn't hesitate to reply in the affirmative.

Apollo Bay is about an hour's flying time south of where we lived. We intended to fly down, walk the two kilometres into the town from the airstrip, have lunch and return by late afternoon. However, on the day, the plane was not available until after lunch. We could still get down to Apollo Bay, get a quick coffee, and return home in time.

As we took off and headed to Apollo Bay, my body was registering something other than emptiness. I was beginning to notice 'stuff' happening in my body that I had not recognised before. There was a light-heartedness that so often comes with play for the sake of

play. For most of my life, play was serious, about competing and winning. The bodily feeling I had on the way to Apollo Bay was a playful, buoyant feeling, without being adrenaline-charged.

We landed in Apollo Bay and walked into town, enjoying the stunning scenery of that place, chatting about aeroplanes, football, and other nicely neutral things. Not church, sermons, or work. We forgot about time.

Halfway through the coffee I looked at my watch and asked, ‘What time do we have to be back home?’

Paul looked at his watch and, with a panic-ridden stare in his eyes, said, ‘Oh no!’ (and a few other choice words). ‘We have to be off the ground in twenty minutes otherwise we won’t be back before last light, and we’ll be staying here tonight. I don’t have a night licence.’

Not that I minded the prospect of staying in Apollo Bay for the night; and the next day was Sunday. I was happy to skip Sundays now.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘What is the problem? Is there something you have to get back for? We can ring and let them know we are coming back tomorrow.’

‘Well, that would be nice,’ Paul said. ‘But we don’t know what the weather is going to be like tomorrow.’ (It was the south coast of Victoria, after all.) ‘And I have only got the plane for today.’

‘Stuff it. We are in trouble then. We’d better run.’

And run we did. All the way back to the airstrip. Something else was happening amidst the rush to return to the plane. We both began to laugh at the crazy predicament we had got ourselves into. These were ‘belly’ laughs. Not laughs that come because our mind appreciates a funny joke. There was a visceral connection between Paul and myself. If I was on my own, I would have been in my head, thinking about time, worrying, and getting angry for being so forgetful. Instead, because we were together, we laughed – no head logic; just ran, and laughed at this situation we were in. We laughed and puffed our way back to the plane. We took off from Apollo Bay in time to beat the last light of the day home.

Seated beside my friend as he flew the plane, I began to get further strange feelings inside my body. There was a tenderness toward him. A vulnerable feeling of powerless gratitude and affection. These vulnerable bodily feelings can be disturbing for a man who has been enculturated into manhood as having to live from his head. They are a threat to his identity as a man. But my body did not know about that threat.

Somewhere in the day with Paul, my body had registered, like it never had before, that this man was doing something caring for me without any conditions attached. The balmy

warmth of affection that comes from being with someone who just likes being with you. I had not recognised this feeling before in my life. The psychic, spiritual rupture between my head and body had been cavernous. My head had deceived me into thinking, and believing, that to know something in my head was all there is to knowledge and maturing as a person. My body was beginning to lead me to a more abundant, grace-experienced life as an embodied human being. Something I still struggle to get my head around.