

ALL THINGS BOTH TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL

Mauri Pollard Johnson

For by the power of my Spirit created I them; yea, all things both spiritual and temporal.

—*Doctrine & Covenants 29:31*

The therapist I had been seeing for my eating disorder had me take two pieces of paper and lay them on the ground, the space between them meant to represent how wide I viewed my waist. After I had laid the paper down, she had me lie between them, on my side, while she moved the two pieces to reflect the apparently objective reality of my torso wideness. When I stood up and looked at the carpeted void between the two white sheets, I didn't believe it. I was convinced that I had moved them closer in the process of standing up. Or perhaps my therapist had moved them in the brief moment when I wasn't looking. She pulled out the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and read to me the section on Body Dysmorphic Disorder. I answered yes to each of the criteria she read to me, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from the stark pieces of paper, which seemed to be pulling themselves further and further away from each other: seeing a very different reality than what my therapist was seeing.

The word *dysmorphia* has roots in ancient Greek, meaning misshapeness or ugliness. I take these words and wear them like a cloak. I absorb them. And although I have realized the extent to which I have embodied them, I wonder how deep they have truly sunk.

For those who deal with it, body dysmorphia is a state of existence. It is like water: you are numb to it when you are surrounded by it. It is

the conflation of truth and the utter distrust of what you see or feel in front of you juxtaposed to what others tell you. I fit into a size-two pant from Old Navy while shopping for new clothes as a self-initiation into grad school. And yet I take it as a mistake, a fluke, a one-time thing. I am too afraid to take them out of my closet, convinced they won't fit. It is a confusion of truth. My therapists tell me I have a disorder—that my dysmorphia literally morphs the way I see myself into something opposite to reality. But that doesn't make it any less painful when I look in the mirror and my reality is my dysmorphia. My husband tells me my body is beautiful, neighbors and family members and even strangers tell me I am “a tiny thing,” I live my life with the truth of thin privilege handed to me by the outside world. These are the truths outside of me. And yet, my truth is the distortions that my body dysmorphia presents to me. What is truth, then, if it is not subjective?

One of the many truths I hold within my religion is that my body and my spirit are stitched together with a divine thread—that “the spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15). To me, this truth argues the idea that if I were to peel my spirit away from my body—separate my soul for a brief moment to examine it under a microscope—they would appear identical. This theology also would argue that there is an inherent, eternal, celestial connection between my body and my spirit—a sharedness of things, a type of telepathy, a relationship so deep that only death could force them apart. If my spirit is connected to my body in such an intricate way—connected neuro-nally, systematically, emotionally, viscerally—does this mean that my body, then, has passed my dysmorphia on like a contagious virus or disease? Has my spirit, by unfortunate birthright, consequently inherited this disorder?

The distress that comes from my body dysmorphia brings me to compulsions: placing my hands on my hips to measure the width of my waist; touching my stomach over and over and over again to see how far it sticks out, to try and push it back in; obsessively trying on

tight dresses, skirts, shirts, underwear, anything to verify if they still fit, concretely convinced that they won't; staring at my body in mirrors and windows, turning from side to side, sucking in, pulling and pinching and pushing the parts that fill me with such self-loathing. If I do these just right, I can glimpse for a brief moment the perfection I have the potential to be, if only I had more willpower.

In the spiritual practice of fasting, we are told that our spirit becomes the master of our body. That forcing our body through spiritual starvation puts it into submission to our spirit. Giving into hunger means we are weak, means we are carnal, means we are damned. I was told that I am no longer allowed to fast. That starvation, for me, is no longer a spiritual practice. There are many first-Sunday church meetings—when those around me are engaging in our traditional, monthly fast—when I attend dripping with guilt and self-loathing. Thinking that, if only I could fast, starve, restrict for just a little bit, perhaps I could look a little more perfect, a little more beautiful, a little more obedient, a little more like Christ. Perhaps a twenty-four-hour starvation would be the thing to save me in all spheres.

Once, stopped at a red light on our way home from church, I asked my husband if I was a good person, choking through the tears hiding at the back of my throat. His reassuring words fell dead upon my lap.

I repeated the question a few weeks later, the asking now becoming a compulsion borne out of my obsession to know if I am okay, if I am good, if I can be saved.

I return to this asking again and again and again.

I wonder if my body and spirit, because of their connectedness, share experiences. Does my spirit encounter a similar type of dysmorphia that my body does? In reflection, this feels true to me. I had never wondered about the contorted form of my spirit before my body dysmorphia infected my body. I had always felt comfortable—confident, even—in my spiritual standing and appearance before myself, God, and

all those around me. But now I shrink—I hide behind metaphysical baggy sweaters and hate myself for not fitting.

Growing up, I was praised for being obedient, for being faithful, for following and not asking questions. I went to church every Sunday; I read my scriptures with our family and on my own, sitting under the covers in my bed as my parents would pass by to look in; I prayed every night and every morning before leaving for school; I prayed about every decision; I never broke the Word of Wisdom, the law of chastity, the law of the Sabbath day; I went on a mission when I received the revelation to go, despite the fact that I was seriously dating the person I wanted to marry and lacked any desire to serve; I accepted without question policies like church history like banning Black members from having the priesthood, polygamy, priesthood power and leadership positions given only to men, restrictions put upon LGBTQIA+ members and their family members, and so forth. I remember learning of the November 2015 policy preventing children of same-sex couples from being baptized and accepting it without flinching, wondering why people struggled with this, believing it made sense, pitying those who could not just “follow the prophet.” My spirit appeared flawless, but I was just going through the motions.

From age fifteen, when I first started dieting, until now, I have received praise for my willpower around food and my dedication to “healthy eating.” People tell me they want to be like me at potluck dinners and activities with free food. I hold my plate of salad or vegetables or heaping piles of fruit and let them adorn me with flattering words: *You eat so healthy! I wish I had your willpower! You're so good! You're so self-disciplined! I admire your self-control! I wish I was more like you!* At first, I would feel valued, loved, worthwhile. Now, I see how it slowly kills me. I usually stay silent, despite the tumult within me.

I was praised for this rigid obedience and faith, my staunch rule-following, just as I was with food and dieting and exercise. My religious observance was often as strict as my dieting-turned-eating-disorder:

never missing a day of seminary, even though the grade did not affect my GP; accepting policies that hurt others, never questioning the intent or impact; restraining from crossing any physical boundaries with my boyfriend of over six years, despite the fact that those around me, who seemed just as faithful and obedient as I was, were edging along the boundaries, stepping over lines to see what would happen. I had routines in place: read a page of scripture every night, say a prayer before bed, say a prayer before leaving in the morning, never miss church, wear dresses and skirts on Sundays, always say the most correct answer, the one the teacher was looking for, the one God was looking for, the safest response.

And yet, over the past few years, I have felt my faith maturing, expanding, growing out and up. This feels both freeing and terrifying. I have spent many of the weeks preceding multiple General Conference sessions begging God to help me know if my newfound empathy, compassion, and inner truths were sinful or wrong—to know if I was apostatizing myself. My family sees my expansion as separation—from the church, from the gospel, from God. They view my questions and confusions as disbelief. They see my frustrations as hatred. They see my striving for belonging and inclusion as mutilating the doctrine. From them, and many others who live within church orthodoxy, I must hide, shrink, compact my faith so I can fit within their mold of what a righteous person looks like.

When my body dysmorphia sets in, when my body feels expansive, I cope by shoving my body into compression workout shorts or yoga pants. The tight fabric squeezes my body closer to the shape I think it should be, although never quite enough.

I often shove my faith into a box, keeping it neat and tidy, closer to the shape that the people around me think it should be. When my spirit feels expansive, I see it as misshapen instead of miraculous. I force my beliefs, my emotion, my love to be small enough to stuff into the box.

The convergence of my body dysmorphia and spirit dysmorphia results in an explosion of mistrust. *If train A approaches the station at x miles per hour and Train B approaches the same station at y miles per hour, how likely is it that the Sabbath day will end in a puddle of tears and self-loathing?* Instead of the sacrament cleansing my soul, it magnifies the dirt caked to my skin. I have trained myself to sit during the ten minutes of ceremonial passing of the bread and water to recount my mistakes, tally off my sins, berate myself for weaknesses, for being human, for existing. I was taught that this was to be a time of spiritual masochism: think about all of the ways you are imperfect—all of the ways you are momentarily damned. I sit, suffocating in pain and shame. As I bow my head and close my eyes, I stare into a metaphysical mirror at my spirit, and a misshapen ugliness is reflected back to me—unworthy, unrighteous, repulsively sinful. I allow my hair to cover my face, to shield the disfigurement of my spiritual self and the tears that I can't stop.

People—usually people who don't know me well—still tell me they admire my self-control and willpower to not eat certain foods or to go running every day. I alone know the excruciating shame and self-repulsion I feel when I miss a day of running or eat the dessert at a party or complimentary bread at a restaurant. And people still tell me how they revere my faith and obedience. I accept their compliments, despite the sickening feeling when I realize I have questions and waverings and struggle to accept policies and traditions and there are days and days and days that I miss my routines and feel condemned forever. These two sides of my self, disfigured and morphed from the reality that others see, are pieces of me I don't know how to release.

My mind is inscribed with years of feeling ugly, of feeling disformed, of feeling imperfect, feeling sinful. Just as it is difficult to feel beautiful when my mind distorts the bodily image I see in the mirror, so

it is difficult to feel worthy when my mind distorts the spiritual image I see upon internal reflection. And although the sacramental ordinance has caused me grief and pain for the past few years, lately I have been meditating on the symbolism of the bread as body and the water as blood or lifeblood or spirit: both my own body and spirit, and that of Christ.

As I remember the body of Christ, I remember that he embodied all mortal experiences. Meaning that Christ, in the process of the Atonement, housed my dysmorphia within his body. And, as I take the sacrament, I—even if only momentarily—embody Christ: perfection, divinity, beauty in lack of comeliness.

As I drink the blessed water, I embody the spirit of Christ—or perhaps am reminded of the part of His spirit which already lives within me: perfection, divinity, holiness, worthiness. As I focus on seeing Christ within my spirit, I can, for a moment, see myself as whole rather than deformed.

We read in 2 Corinthians that “when [we] are weak, then [we] are strong.” My dysmorphia, both in body and spirit, are what I perceive to be my greatest weakness, and it’s hard to know how, as Ether reminds us in the Book of Mormon, this weakness could ever become a strength. And yet, it is in our weaknesses that we are compelled to bring Christ into our being, let him fill our cracks, let him come unto us. When we are weak, then we are strong because when we are weak is when we let Christ fill us.

Although this does not feel like a cure to neither my body nor spiritual dysmorphia, it does feel like a balm; a momentary pain reliever; ibuprofen for my aching soul. This relief only lasts momentarily—returning again after meals or before getting into the shower or when I forget to pray or read scripture or struggle to accept certain words of church leaders. But I try to hold on to these fleeting moments, and glorify God in both my body and spirit, which I’m reminded are God’s,

which, to me, means that He is in me and through me and I am of Him, which makes me consider that, even if I can't see it myself, I am filled with some amount of grace and beauty and worthiness, and that that is enough.

Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit. (Ether 3:16)

MAURI POLLARD JOHNSON {mauripollard@gmail.com} is currently in the MFA program studying creative nonfiction at Brigham Young University. She enjoys running, browsing used bookstores, and anything birthday cake flavored. She lives with her husband and their cat in American Fork, Utah.