



THE EPISCOPAL CENTER FOR EMBODIED FAITH
PRESENTS
Theological Reflections on Embodied Faith

Embodied Mindfulness
The Rev. Dr. Lucas John Mix

“Mindfulness” has become terribly popular, but its meaning remains somewhat obscure. Counterintuitively, it has everything to do with being embodied. Modern culture – along with millennia of culture – falls into the trap of thinking that mind and body are distinct entities that fight with one another, but Christians know better. Christians affirm that we are, at the most fundamental level, souls. We are made in the image and likeness of God. Body and mind are key to who we are, but neither alone defines us. Rather body and mind are both manifestations – outward and visible signs, if you will – of God’s grace.

But, you say, doesn’t Paul claim an opposition between body and spirit? (e.g. Gal 5:16-21) And, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41). Perhaps. For my part, I would distinguish between spirit (*pneuma*) and soul (*psyche*), just as I would distinguish between flesh (*sarx*) and body (*soma*), but that is a subject for another day. For now, let me say this. We can agree that the body is not the whole of the self. Nor is the mind the whole self. Why worship in part, when we can worship with the whole?

I want to explore what it means to be embodied – mindfully. How can we bring the fullness of ourselves – body, mind, and soul – to the worship of God, to mission, and to community? How can we be whole and integrated, as we were made to be? This integration, this harmony of parts, has been key to Christianity from its earliest days. We are the embarrassingly incarnate faith. We are the fools – to Greek thinking – who found God in water, bread and wine, and fallible human bodies. This wisdom was present in the early church. It was manifest most clearly in the desert mothers and fathers, but it permeates the church through the rituals of food, forgiveness, and fellowship. This same wisdom came to be known in the institutions of Middle Ages – both the formalized sacraments and the growing role of monasticism. In the Renaissance, too, there was an embodied mindfulness visible in the writings of Theresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola. And yet, we’ve become very heady in the past few centuries.

We moved away from the physical practices which make our mental observance concrete. Christians distanced themselves from embodied practice during the Enlightenment, as European and North American culture embraced the dualism of thinkers like Rene Descartes. We began to speak of mind and body as though they existed independent of one another. We began to think of psychology and theology as somehow independent of physics and chemistry. And so, Christianity increasingly constrained to the former. It was an idea for minds, but not a matter for bodies.

I turn to Buddhist and Taoist tools for mindfulness. Strangely, their language and their disciplines are more familiar to modern Americans than are the observances

of early Christians. Still, I am confident that they reach for the same truth as the older, less familiar, tools. How can we better understand our relationships – with self, with neighbor, and with God – through physical practice? How can we use the body – and the mind – to improve ourselves, our very souls? And how can we apply spiritual wisdom – Christian wisdom – to the tangible world? For me, Asian martial arts have filled this role. They have helped me understand how I interact with others. And so, I would like to share with you the role that martial arts play in my life.

First, we must ask, “what are “martial arts?” Really, it’s a bit of a catch-all, much like “religion.” We call Anglican Christians religious, and Roman Catholics, Quakers, Mormons, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Taoists, Scientologists, Pagans, Neo-Pagans, and... You get the idea. We call them religious whatever their motivation: love, joy, fear, shame, opportunism, habit, or something else entirely. Martial Arts is also a catch-all.

When I say “martial arts,” I mean “the intentional study of conflict.” How do I deal productively with the energies that flow between us, and so often get caught up in unhealthy patterns? Martial arts is all about relationships. Others, of course, study conflict so that they can dominate. Just like religion, the term encompasses people, doing a variety of things for a variety of reasons, but I think it’s fair to say that martial arts deals with conflicts and relationships. And I think we might add something about physical practice. Martial arts is always applied in some way, tangibly.

I am an ardent pacifist. I believe God has called me to a perspective where I could never, mindfully, hurt another person. And yet, so often we hurt others mindlessly; we unknowingly sin; we trespass. In our blindness and ignorance, we end up hurting one another.

This is, perhaps, the core meaning of the “Fall” in Christian tradition. We may or may not agree with a particular doctrine of the Fall. Some feel the term is unhelpful in our context; I do some days. Nonetheless, we can agree that life is unsatisfactory, largely because we do not know how to be properly human to one another. We do not understand, either in our heads or in our hearts, what it means to love one another. That takes wisdom and work.

I began by saying that mindfulness is all about embodiedness. Let me add that mindfulness is also about the hard work and discipline necessary to manifest faith, hope, and love – not only with our lips, but in our lives. I study martial arts so that I may be a mindful pacifist, so that I will trespass less often, and so that I have options when faced with conflict, options that will bring the best outcome, not only for myself, but for my opponent as well.

There is something in martial arts which, at the more advanced levels, has led me to stop thinking of opposition at all. Rather, I am in conversation with others. When they bring me their frustration, their pain and anger and difficulty, even when it seems directed at me – *even when it is directed at me* – I have tools to help them become the people I know they want to be.

Central to all the martial arts is a recognition that we are constantly interacting with others, using our energy. Force is neither more nor less than directed energy. We cannot avoid using force. We can choose whether we use it constructively or

destructively. We can choose whether we will use it violently to harm, or compassionately to aid.

Finally, and most wonderfully, martial arts provide discrete, physical practices that can aid in integrating body, mind, and spirit. Spiritual practices can seem remote and abstract. Physical practices allow us to see more clearly the way forces interact and how we can affect the outcome. They help us form a deeper understanding of what it means to be in harmony – or in discord – with our neighbors. They give us tools for embodied mindfulness.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you think of your body in relationship to mind and soul?
2. When your body and mind are not in harmony, what tools do you have for bringing them together?
3. What does it mean to you when Jesus says to love the Lord, your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mk 12:30)? How are they different or the same?

Resources

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center - <http://marc.ucla.edu/>

The Breakout Principle by Herbert Benson and William Proctor (Scribner, 2004) - <https://www.amazon.com/Breakout-Principle-Creativity-Performance-Productivity/dp/0743223985>

Biography

Lucas John Mix is an Episcopal priest with a doctorate in evolutionary biology and 6th degree black belt in the Korean Martial art of Hapkido. He has been teaching martial arts for 30 years and currently serves in a Seattle area parish. You can find out more about his research into theological biology at his website [here](#). His work in martial arts has been with [Enso Center for International Arts](#) in Redmond, WA.