

# The case for the long body

Frank Forencich

A physician is obligated to consider more than a diseased organ, more than even the whole man—he must view the man in his world.

Harvey Williams Cushing  
American neurosurgeon  
1869 – 1939

It's one of the great paradoxes of modern times: We're surrounded by magical labor-saving technologies and powerful systems that should be making our lives easier and more enjoyable, but at the same time, many of us are feeling stressed, fearful, anxious and depressed. We're suffering from lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and neurological disorders. We wonder why our lives hurt so much. We wonder why our bodies and our spirits are in such pain.

To make matters worse, our wider world is in peril. Climate change, habitat destruction, economic injustice, mass migrations, terrorism and violence weigh on our minds and our bodies. We hear the warnings but find ourselves feeling overwhelmed. Even when we succeed at putting large-scale global events out of mind, we still feel the pain of the world. As one noted ecopsychologist put it, "The earth hurts and we hurt with it."<sup>i</sup>

We'd like to live healthier lives but the conventional formulas seem inadequate, even irrelevant. Everyone knows the importance of a good diet and regular exercise, but many of us have grown tired of lifestyle prescriptions that don't seem to connect with anything. We have a mountain of knowledge about the body at our fingertips, but most of it feels fragmented and even random: a treatment for this disease, a supplement for that condition, a test for this syndrome. Even when these methods

actually work, they still leave us feeling fragmented and divorced from larger meanings.

## Meet the Long Body

Our problem is that we're deceived by appearances and even by our personal experience. When we look in the mirror, we see a single person, an individual, stand-alone organism, a "short body." In fact, our bodies are much bigger than they look and bigger than they feel. Our physicality extends deep into history, the biosphere, society and culture. If we could see the continuities that unite our individual bodies with their life-supporting systems, we'd be able to see the full reach of our physicality and the depth of our relationship with the world. We'd be able to see the long body.

Let's be clear about our definitions: The *short body* is simply the isolated, individual organism. It ends at the outermost layer of skin and has minimal connection with the so-called outside world. In contrast, the *long body* is a far bigger organism. It's the totality of the short body plus its life supporting systems of habitat, tribe and culture. It includes the myriad plants, animals, people, microbes, memes, emotions and ideas that flow through the larger system.

## All Connected Now

As we've seen, the human body is not a stand-alone organism. It is deeply embedded in the world and radically interdependent with habitat, tribe and culture.

As living organisms, we all share a common ancestry. We are not arbitrary creatures or isolated creations. We have a history. Our bodies are baked in to the biological world. As Charles Darwin showed us so elegantly, all life on earth is related. Like it or not, we are part of a much bigger, living whole (Darwin, 1859; 1888). As individuals, we are simply the most recent leaves on an immense and ancient tree of life. That tree is our long body.

Not only are we continuous with our human and non-human ancestors, we also share a continuity between our bodies and habitat. The interdependence of body and habitat is so extensive that we may well begin to wonder where our bodies stop and habitat begins. We're also becoming increasingly aware of the vital "ecosystem services" that forests, oceans, rivers and grasslands provide to our bodies. In fact, these so-called "external" entities turn out to be just as vital to our survival as our so-called "vital" organs. Zen philosopher Alan Watts put it this way:

"...civilized human beings are alarmingly ignorant of the fact that they are continuous with their natural surroundings. It is as necessary to have air, water, plants, insects, birds, fish and mammals as it is to have brains, hearts, lungs and

stomachs. The former are our external organs in the same way the latter are our internal organs.”<sup>ii</sup>

Just as our bodies are woven into our natural habitat, they are also deeply intertwined with our tribes, communities, society and culture. Once again, the continuity runs deep. Our social nature is highly physical, etched into the very tissue of our bodies and brains. Our drive to associate with one another is many millions of years old, sculpted by countless generations of adversity in the wild outdoors.

As we begin to appreciate the full dimensions of the human body, we begin to see that even our minds are “long.” We are not the exclusive authors of our thoughts or our actions, nor do we think exclusively with our brains. We think with our bodies and our movements, a process called “embodied cognition” (Barsalou, 2008). We think with our habitat; the qualities of the natural and artificial world inevitably shape our ideas and our creations. And of course, we think with the people around us. Like it or not, our cognition is long.

## Implications and Consequences

The long body is an extremely disruptive meme, one that forces us to re-examine some of our most basic assumptions about who we are and what we’re doing in the world. By viewing the body in integration with the wider world, we break down the distinctions between internal and external, self and other, us and them.

We also begin to see that our actions are reflective. Whatever we do, we do to ourselves. Everything we do is relevant. Any time we act, we are acting on the whole.

In this light, we begin to see that habitat destruction is really a form of self-destructive behavior. To wound the earth is to wound ourselves; what we do to habitat, we do to our bodies. And of course, the inverse is also true. When we protect our habitats from destruction, we enhance the welfare and resilience of our bodies. In this sense, environmentalism is best described as a form of health care.

Likewise, we begin to see that “otherizing” is just another form of self-division and even self-destruction. Every time we make us-them, self-other distinctions, we create stress in the long body and in turn, subvert our own health. Likewise, anything that increases social justice and economic equality is a form of health care. Being good to the social body means being good to your own body.

## Long Body Activism: Living Long

The long body is a challenging and inconvenient meme, one that promises to disrupt many of our most cherished categories of thought and action. But it’s also positive, growth-oriented and inspiring. It threatens to rearrange many of our conventional

views of health, the body and the world, but it also offers a genuinely integrative vision of how our lives fit together. It's comforting to know that we're part of something larger. But how do we go forward with our long body orientation?

The place to begin is with the short body and short body health. There's no mystery here. Find a movement practice that turns you on and dive in. Sustain this effort over the course of years and your short body will become happy.

Next, turn your attention towards the long body. Start giving your health away to the long body. Obviously, anything that takes us towards wholeness and integration is appropriate and necessary. Environmental, social and health activism are fundamental. Education, especially education that points to big-picture systems of biology, natural history and the human experience, is vital.

The beauty of this approach is that it promises benefit at both ends. With a bit of luck and good judgment, your long body actions will also benefit your short body, producing a promising win-win. A mountain of research now shows that pro-social behaviors, such as altruism and caring for others, has measurable health benefits for the individual body.<sup>iii</sup>

Above all, practice long body behaviors. Go outside often, not just to escape the madness of the office, but as a deliberate act of integration and engagement with the source of life. Advocate for the long body whenever possible. Integrate the long body orientation into your health, medical or fitness profession.

Likewise, develop your long body awareness. Study the human predicament and make choices with the long body in mind. Choose real foods that have been part of human evolution throughout history. Choose possessions that do the least damage to the atmosphere and biosphere. And whatever you do, keep your eye on the whole.

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<sup>i</sup> "It may well be that more and more of what people bring before doctors and therapists for treatment - agonies of body and spirit - are symptoms of the biospheric emergency registering at the most intimate levels of life. The Earth hurts, and we hurt with it."

Roszak, Theodore  
*The Voice of the Earth*

<sup>ii</sup> Watts, Alan "Does It Matter? Essays on Man's Relation to Materiality."  
New World Library, California, 2007 p 36-37

Barsalou, Lawrence W. "Simulation, situated conceptualization, and prediction."  
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<sup>iii</sup>See *The Upside of Stress* by Kelly McGonigal p 143-152.

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