

This Is My Body by Natalie Collins

I recently met up with some old college friends that I hadn't seen for over eight years. We all have children and partners and lives that have stretched out before us since the last time we saw one another. I bumped into one of them when visiting my home-town a couple of months ago and we chatted about the eight years that had passed while her children made it clear that they didn't want to stand around waiting for us to reminisce, so we agreed to meet next time I was visiting.

They say that time heals. I'm not sure it does. But time creates a distance from hurts that allows us to recalibrate ourselves. We don't have to be in denial about what was done to us in order to distance ourselves from it. It's been over eleven years since I left my ex-husband and I am far enough along the journey of healing that his impact on my life has become a distant memory and an occasional PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) episode rather than daily torture. I'm no longer the person he moulded me into.

Bodies are often ignored in the healing process.¹ We focus on emotional turmoil or psychological affliction. In therapy we talk about how we feel. In understanding what has been done to us, we make cognitive shifts from one level of awareness to another. Yet, all that is done to us is done while we exist within the same body we take forward throughout life. Time and therapy can transform our minds and hearts, but our bodies remain the same. We can't download ourselves into another physical body. We're stuck with this one.

I met my ex-husband when I was 17 and at college. The friends I met up with recently included the woman who introduced me to him. She sat with us both when I found out I was pregnant. After being released from hospital following a suicide attempt, it was her who I spent the evening with. Another of the friends I met up with had seen razor cuts on my stomach when I stretched while wearing a short t-shirt at college. The shame I felt when she confronted me. Not being able to explain that he had done that to me. Cut me with a razor.

While travelling to and from meeting with these friends, I was reading *Getting Off* by Robert Jensen, an excellent book about pornography and masculinity. Throughout the book it describes in detail the forms of sexualised violence that exist within pornography.

I have been married to Mr GLW for nine years and free from my ex-husband for eleven years. In that time, I have done a whole lot of healing and have discovered that sex can be awesome and life giving. However, the same body that I inhabit now is the body I had when my ex-husband sexually violated me, and previous to that it is the same body I grew into whilst being sexually abused by a neighbour.

¹ This is changing within PTSD treatment, with practices like Somatic Experiencing.

Reading Robert Jensen's book, I was reminded of the many ways my body was violated. Of how my ex-husband used pornography to normalise that violation. And how well that tactic worked. I was convinced I should want all the degrading things that he forced upon me.

I read an article once where the author explained that the body takes seven years to completely renew all its cells. She was counting down the years, months, days until that meant the man who raped her had never touched any of the cells in her body.

Christian culture loves the redemption narrative. It loves the bad person who turns good, and the broken person who becomes healed. Stories of women and girls "rescued" from human traffickers abound. Stories about how many of those women and girls re-enter the sex industry, there's not many of those being told. We are sold the lie of full freedom this side of eternity. Especially when there is no physical barrier to healing. If someone has no legs, mostly (though not always) Christians will accept that there are challenges that person will face throughout their life. With so called "emotional issues" rarely is this partiality of healing acknowledged.

Being raped happens to an actual physical body. No amount of healing is going to undo what men did to me. All abuse and trauma happens to us in an embodied way and Christian theology (with our Saviour who was born, lived, died and rose again in a physical body) should be much more aware of this than it is.

This body that I walk through life in has been raped. It was degraded for a number of years and has survived my own attempts to kill and cut it. I may be living in a place of great freedom, no longer constantly dragged down emotionally or psychologically by what was inflicted on me. Yet, this body is the same body. I type with the same hands. I talk with the same mouth. I walk with the same feet. This is my body.

I don't have some big revelation to conclude this with. I felt compelled to write about this because I know that I am not the only one who is on this journey. And if you're reading this and are walking a similar path, please know that it is okay to never fully recover. Living a wonderful life is not dependent on "getting over" the past. Our bodies stay with us throughout all that we endure and (thankfully) all that we celebrate. No matter how much physical distance or passing of time there is or renewal of cells our body goes through, we can't leave it behind, for our body stays with us. And though the pain and horror is difficult to overcome, it can be okay. And we can be okay.

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