

# Radix

McGill's multi-faith newsletter

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## Perspectives on Body

### Running for Glory

I can remember being quite active in high school sports; I went outdoors often enough, and I rode my bike most places I went. When I first came to McGill I did stay somewhat active, but this past semester it seemed that all physically active parts of my life came to a halt. Indeed, I was very busy last semester, but I'm sure I could have taken the initiative to do something active during my days.

At times I did recall the importance of my body, as reflected in St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19). And I did try to apply it, going up the stairs instead of the elevators, running to class and to appointments, but that was it. A pretty weak attempt at glorifying God in my body, if you ask me.

Neglecting the gift of my body—my temple of the Holy Spirit—is not a light sin, and it happened that such neglect indirectly affected my spiritual and emotional life. When I suffered through spiritual and emotional struggles, I forgot that physical activity could be an outlet for my stress. And those times that I remembered that I should relax and go shoot some hoops, I excused myself saying that I did not have time.

This semester will be different. I played a game of basketball just last weekend, and I ran home (as much as it hurt) with my roommate. At one point, I even told

my roommate that it was too much, that I could not run any longer. Then, he told me: "Thomas, just think of it as a mortification—offer it up." So I did, and I made it home, and I'm still alive. I have plans to exercise at the gym two mornings each week, to eat more healthy foods, and to get a good sleep each night, which are in effect my plans to glorify God in my body.

I have been purchased at a price; it is my duty to keep my parts working. In fulfilling this duty, I shall be glorifying God in my body.

—Thomas Bouchard  
*Thomas is active at Newman Centre at McGill*



### Seeking Beauty

Often, the word "body" evokes an image of a nice pair of shoulders, a beautiful, tight frame, and a face that inflicts synaesthesia by making music to the ears, yet through vision. Is it an innate obsession we have—driven by the need to procreate and shaped by our upbringing—to obsess over sex and looks?

From a Sikh point of view, physical aesthetics serve a futile purpose in our lives. We are here, as children of destiny, in a cycle of life and death. The body plays the role of host to our souls, which are forever returning to this worldliness to do God's work.

Being brought into existence is the product of a symbiotic relationship between sperm and egg, man and woman. No matter what faith, this process is almost always considered a spiritual happening. It occurs by the grace of God; therefore, birth is a blessing from God.

For Sikhs, the way we look when untouched is the Godliest thing we can hold on to...

—continued on page 3



**Prince Wen Hui's cook** was cutting up an ox.  
Out went a hand,  
Down went a shoulder,  
He planted a foot,  
He pressed with a knee,  
The ox fell apart  
With a whisper,  
The bright cleaver murmured  
Like a gentle wind,  
Rhythm! Timing!  
Like a sacred dance,  
Like "The Mulberring Grove,"  
Like ancient harmonies!  
"Good work!"  
The Prince exclaimed,  
"Your method is faultless!"  
"Method?" said the cook  
Laying aside his cleaver,  
"What I follow is Tao  
Beyond all methods!  
"When I first began  
To cut up oxen  
I would see before me  
The whole ox

All in one mass,  
After three years  
I no longer saw this mass  
I saw the distinctions.  
"But now I see nothing  
With the eye.  
My whole being  
Apprehends.  
My senses are idle.  
The spirit  
Free to work without plan  
Follows its own instinct  
Guided by natural line,  
By the secret opening,  
the hidden space,  
My cleaver finds its own way,  
I cut through no joint,  
chop no bone. ...  
"There are spaces in the joints;  
The blade is thin and keen:  
When this thinness  
Finds that space  
There is all the room you need!  
It goes like a breeze!  
Hence I have this cleaver

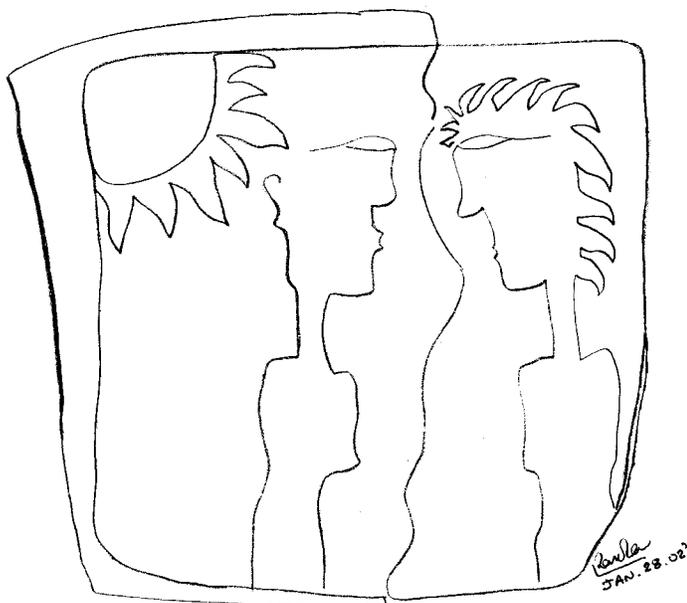
nineteen years  
As if newly sharpened!  
"True, there are sometimes  
Tough joints. I feel them coming,  
I slow down, I watch closely,  
Hold back, barely move the blade,  
And whump! the part falls away  
Landing like a clod of earth.  
"Then I withdraw the blade,  
I stand still  
And let the joy of the work  
Sink in.  
I clean the blade  
And put it away."  
Prince Wen Hui said,  
"This is it! My cook has shown me  
How I ought to live  
My own life!"

—Chuang Tzu

# Body Rights

In the search to understand the human body from a solely scientific perspective, there are various important questions that will be left unaddressed. A fundamental question we ask in Islam is, what rights do our bodies have over us, if any?

Upon careful reflection, we come to understand that our bodies don't quite belong to us. Allah (God) states in the Noble Qur'an that "To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth: and He is Most High, Most Great. All Praise belongs to Allah to whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth..." (42:4 ). He also tells us in another verse that He had offered the heavens and the earth the responsibility to care for some of God's creation but that they refused it fearing they may



do injustice. Humans, however, agreed to take this on. These two verses remind us that we have been entrusted with the stewardship of what Allah has provided for us here on Earth, and this includes our bodies. As such, we should keep that trust, and honour the favour Allah has given us through the loan of our bodies.

We should also be aware that our body will be one of the greatest witnesses on the day of judgement. Allah states in the Holy Qur'an, that "... their ears and their eyes and their skins shall bear witness against them as to what they did. And they shall say to their skins: Why have you borne witness against us? They shall say: Allah Who makes everything speak has made us speak, and He created you at first, and to Him you shall be brought back" (41:20-21). Just as we will have to account for the way in which we spent the time and wealth given to us by God, our body will account for the way that we used it.

Cleanliness is one of a number of the rights due to our body, and there are a number of etiquettes for keeping oneself clean that have been prescribed by the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him). For instance, before each of the five daily prayers, Muslims must perform ablutions by washing their hands, face, arms and feet with water in order to purify themselves spiritually and physically. Another duty is to eat wholesome *halal* (permitted) foods that are a gift and nourishment provided by God, and to avoid *haram* (forbidden) foods such as pork and alcohol. It is also forbidden in Islam to harm one's body unnecessarily or to try to end one's life. The body has the right to continue living until its only Master (Allah) decides to reclaim it, for "To Him belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: It is He Who gives Life and Death; and He has Power over all

Now I see light, I see freedom, I see joy.  
 These are things I yearn to know from  
 following in hollow footsteps.  
 And places I want to see, to know.  
 No more lonely nights, no more yearning.  
 Mine own footsteps hold the power of  
 God in all his glory.  
 He is within me.  
 He is the taker and giver of most  
 bountiful things.  
 He is the giver of life and the creator of  
 all things good and right.  
 I am his chalice, if only to love in his way  
 and service his right.  
 I am the bringer of goods,  
 the chalice of hope.  
 I am care and right and good.  
 I am the swallow that flies in May  
 with trails of summer.  
 I am the dove with wings of peace.  
 I am the hollow in your footstep Lord.  
 I am the imprint of your divine  
 and blessed with such right  
 to love your people.

—Jen Fernandes



*Jen is completing her degree in Latin American Studies this semester.*

things" (57:2).

It is often said: show me your friends and I will tell you who you are. I believe also, that the body I wear reflects my fulfillment of the trust I hold from God. By taking care of my body I am meeting my obligations to myself as well as to God, and the condition of my body shows how well I have been able to achieve this. If I look at myself in the mirror, what does the reflection really show? Am I truly carrying out the covenant as I should? I always hope for a resounding yes, from my mind and my body.

—Amina Swaleh

*Amina is a U3 McGill student*



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## Illustrations:

### seeking beauty, cont'd from pg 1

The mind is easily influenced and swayed; personality is shaped and influenced at a young age. But although the innocence of a mind can be involuntarily tainted, looks and appearances *can* be kept as God intended. Sikhism professes that for women, the decoration of the body is a futile action because women are beautiful for the simple fact that they are women

Here is a quote, especially for the men, taken from Guru Nanak Dev Ji, one of our ten pious priests.

*Of a woman are we conceived,  
Of a woman we are born,  
To a woman are we betrothed and married,  
It is a woman, who is friend and partner of life,  
It is woman, which keeps the race going,  
Another companion is sought when the life-partner dies  
Through women are established social ties.  
Why should we consider woman cursed and condemned  
When from woman are born leaders and rulers.  
From woman alone is born a woman,  
Without woman there can be no human birth.  
Without woman, O Nanak, Only the True One exists.  
Be it men or be it woman,  
Only those who sing His glory  
Are blessed and radiant with His beauty,  
In His Presence and with His grace  
They appear with a radiant face.*

— Sri Guru Nanak Dev, Asa Di Var

So the body is already perfect the way it is. By altering our appearance, it's as though we are saying to God "you didn't do a good enough job, let me".

As Sikh men, we keep our facial hair and also keep our hair long because it is of no interest to us to alter anything about our bodies. We are God's children, and whatever body we get, is good enough for us. A Uni-brow? So what. Almost femininely hairless? Big deal. Or maybe the opposite?

The truth is, beauty is the easiest thing to find in anyone. The axiom is as follows (pay attention, it's complicated): you are beautiful because...you are you. By God's grace you are here, in the body he gave you. It does what it is supposed to, which is to carry you through this life.

—Kanwar Anit Singh Saini

*Anit studies Computer Engineering at McGill*



## It's a **Radix** CONTEST!!!

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS EMAIL US,  
and we'll enter your name into a draw for  
a beautiful 2002 multi-faith calendar!

Send us a comment or question,  
an interesting quote, some artwork, writing,  
or poetry, and your name will be entered.  
Draw date: February 22nd 2002

## Let Your Voice be Heard!

The **Radix** is looking for submissions  
by McGill students for future issues.

Upcoming themes include:

**Spiritual Teachers**—Print date: Feb 25

**Art and Music**—Print date: March 25

If you would like to contribute an article, story,  
book review, poem or artwork, contact the Radix editor at  
**radix@yours.com** or call **398-4104**

## A Most Powerful Instrument

**W**hy must we exist in a corporeal figure? Wouldn't it seem more G-dly to exist as pure floating spirits?

There is a phrase in the Talmud that teaches us that man is a microcosm of the universe, and that the universe in its entirety is a macrocosm of man. Therefore, if we seek purpose in life, and wish to understand the mysteries of the universe, we can begin by studying our own bodies and uncovering the myriad of secrets that lie within every muscle, bone, artery, and every other aspect of our complex make-up.

There is a common misconception that the main focus of Judaism is to elevate the soul through withstanding the temptation of physicality; in reality, the Torah teaches us how to form a true union between the body and the soul, thus elevating the body *as well as* the soul. This is a profound theme that underlies every G-dly act we perform. Possessing a body is an extremely lofty responsibility. The body can be compared to a finely tuned instrument that is capable of producing infinite variations of sound when in the hands of a skilled artist. The melody that is released by the instrument is analogous to the soul. Without the hunk of metal or wood, which alone is useless, the melody could never be manifest in the world. Knowing the tremendous powers of the instrument, any musician is likely to guard his creative piece with great diligence and care.

In Judaism, we can see the sanctity of the physical body by noting that every single *mitzvah* (commandment) can only be carried out through the use of at least one body part. When the soul leaves the body and decomposition takes place, it becomes impossible to serve G-d in the way the Torah instructs. This is why Judaism views life as being so holy, to the point that any Torah law, with the exception of

three\*, may be transgressed in order to save a human life. On a practical level, living a healthy lifestyle is one of the preliminary steps to receiving and integrating G-d's light into the world. Maimonides, a renowned physician and philosopher, as well as an erudite Torah sage, understood that physical health and spiritual perfection are inseparable themes—an imperfect vessel cannot contain a perfect light.

In these modern times we, unlike our ancestors, are confronted with millions of different forms of processed foods every day. In addition, most of the Western world enjoys a sedentary lifestyle, where technology introduces yet new ways for us to move less. Considering these trying conditions, it is clear that true health can only be attained through conscious determination and strong will power.

But in a sincere attempt to understand the details of a healthy lifestyle, one need not look very far. G-d created each of us with a very powerful source of intuition. If we are careful not to cover it in layers of "junk food", making the right decisions in every aspect of life should come naturally. The present is the only place to start. May you be blessed with the ability to connect with the silent voice within, which will direct you on your own true path.

—Sarah Foxman

*Sarah is a U2 Psychology student*

\*The three laws that forbid murder, adultery and idol worship may not be transgressed



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