

## In praise of mindless activity

*So which came first— thought or action? It is your body that gets you through the day, says Gitanjali Kolanad.*

"I think, therefore I am." Descartes got it not only backwards, but just plain wrong. Surely the "I am" comes first and the "therefore" comes thereafter? It could be anything: "I am, therefore I eat chocolate" or "need a holiday in Bali" or "can't stand people who say 'ciao'."

It would be best to just say "I am", and leave out "think" aspect altogether. The mind is a vastly over-rated element of the human apparatus. I can manage quite well without it, at least until about noon. I can brush my teeth, get the kid off to school, fulfil most of my pleasanter marital duties, and even read the newspaper, all without engaging my mind at all.

Yet I can't even get out of bed without my body. In trying to describe the body, people have likened it to a book, a temple, a watch, a car, a computer; but always an object of some kind, that gets more and more complicated, like the machines around us. Nowadays, the "body as machine" analogy has advanced to something like the Starship Enterprise, with the brain, like Captain Picard, on the holodeck giving orders. The ancient Indians described the body as a chariot drawn by unruly horses controlled by the charioteer, the mind. But even this analogy, which at least gives the body a little more independence, does not do justice to the reality.

For me, it is my mind that is unruly; my body is generally very well-behaved.

It seldom complains, even though I sit too long at the computer when it would rather be moving around, or stay up late reading when it would rather sleep. When I walk in high-heeled shoes, it doesn't retaliate by dishing out the back-ache I deserve. That is what I like about being a dancer — the body is so much more congenial to work with than the mind. I prefer knee problems to writer's block any day.

The body is so exactly what it is that it can't be described in

any other way. Yet the mind can't encompass even the simplest of its movements. If you don't believe me, let your mind try walking your body: "Shift weight to the ball of left foot, raise the right foot, move it forward, place the right heel down and shift weight to the ball of right foot and raise left foot..." That's if you leave out the arms moving in opposition. If a mosquito bit you while crossing the street you'd get hit by a car while your mind tried to figure out what to tell your body to do.

I don't let my mind anywhere near a dance sequence. The dance has to become automatic, like tying my shoelaces. That's how it works: you may battle to remember the name of your boss's new girlfriend, but you'll never forget how to ride a bicycle. I need my body too much to abuse it, so I eat well and exercise. Dino, my aerobics instructor, is not like the guys in the ads who promise miracles in three pleasant minutes a day — he believes in pain as a necessary corollary to gain. After one hour of sit-ups, leg raises, squats and jumping jacks, Dino invariably says: "No stamina, you girls."

The next day, I can feel every muscle as I move: my quadriceps when I walk down the stairs, the abdominals when I sit down or stand up, the biceps and the deltoids and even the gastrocnemius. I like this kind of pain: my muscles are talking to me. But unless our bodies are sending us pain signals, we can pretty much ignore them. The body just goes about its business without getting moody. The heart pumps 10,000 to 15,000 litres of blood a day. The lungs take in 10 to the power of 22 atoms with every breath. The cells make a new liver every six weeks, and new skeleton every three months.

Of course, a dancer without a body would be an anomaly, but it's not just me. Society depends on the body. Without hormones, pop music would not exist.

Where would the economy of developed nations be without hair and nails? All those people who think up new names for lipstick would be unemployed if we didn't have lips. Even high culture would suffer without the inspiration of the human form: how many painters would we have there were no nude models for life. We should remember that it was not the brain that made the evolutionary leap from ape to man; it was the body. It was not language, or the use of tools, or any complicated thought

process that made us human. That came later.

The big breakthrough took muscular control and strength. The first step toward humanity was taken by an ancestral ape who was more Baryshnikov than Kasparov, who started walking on two legs. Suddenly, we stopped sniffing each others' backsides and started looking each other in the eye. This led to kissing and sweet-talking, frontal sex and the female orgasm, which caused the development of new neurological pathways and the frontal lobe.

Civilisation can be directly traced back to that. I don't think we have to worry too much about artificial intelligence, even if Deep Blue did beat Kasparov at chess. Human beings are not a machine-like body with a mind at the controls.

The ability to play chess is only one small aspect of our intelligence. Maybe when a computer starts to play tennis, I'll worry.

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