**What the dying really regret**

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There are many regrets and unfulfilled wishes that patients [have shared with me](http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/28/my-faith-what-people-talk-about-before-they-die/) in the months before they die. But the stories about the time they waste hating their bodies, abusing it or letting it be abused -- the years people spend not appreciating their body until they are close to leaving it -- are some of the saddest.

Because unlike the foolish or best-intentioned mishaps, the terrible accidents, the slip-ups that irrevocably change a life, this regret is not a tragic mistake. It's intentional. It's something other people teach them to feel about their bodies; it's something other people want them to believe.

Sometimes, it's based on their allegedly unattractive physical features. They might be ashamed of their weight, their body hair, their thin lips or droopy eyes.

But this body hatred can also come from a religious belief about the sinfulness of their bodies. It isn't always the media and peer pressure that create this shame; sometimes it comes from a pastor or Sunday school teacher, or lessons at home that begin at birth and seep in along with mother's milk. Some women grow up thinking that their very existence in a body that might be sexually attractive to someone else is cause for shame -- that their bodies make bad things happen just by existing.

Either way, the result of the messages is the same: They lived their lives thinking their bodies were something to tolerate at best, something to criticize, to despise, at worst -- a problem they could never correct.

Too often, it's only as a patient realizes that he or she will lose their body that they finally appreciate how truly wonderful it is.

"I am going to miss this body so much," a patient, many decades younger, told me.

She held her hands up in the dim light that seeped through the sunshade on the window. She stared at them as though she had never seen them before.

"I'd never admit it to my husband and kids, but more than anything else, it's my own body I'll miss most of all. This body that danced and ate and swam and had sex and made babies. It's amazing to think about it. This body actually made my children. It carried me through this world."

She put her hands down.

"And I'm going to have to leave it. I don't have a choice. And to think I spent all those years criticizing how it looked and never noticing how good it felt -- until now when it never feels good."

It isn't just health that they wish they had appreciated. It's the very experience of being in a body, something you likely take for granted until faced with the reality that you won't have a body soon. No matter what you believe happens after death, be it an afterlife, reincarnation or nothing at all, the fact remains: You will no longer be able to experience this world in this body, ever again.

People who are dying face that reality every day.

So they talk about their favorite memories of their bodies. About how the apples they stole from the orchard on the way home from school tasted, and how their legs and lungs burned as they ran away. The feel of the water the first time they went skinny-dipping. The smell of their babies' heads. The breeze on their skin the first time they made love outside.

And dancing. I've heard so many stories about dancing: USO dances during World War II; shagging at South Carolina beach houses; long, exuberant nights dancing at roadhouses and discos and barns. I can't count the number of times people -- more men than women -- have closed their eyes and said, "If I had only known, I would have danced more."

While these wishes and regrets are sad for each individual, they raise questions about how we all live our lives.

What does it mean that so many voices out there insist that the body is something to despise because it is too fat, sinful, ugly, sexual, old or brown? That we teach each other, in thousands of blatant and quiet ways, to think we are shameful? That our bodies are something to be overcome, beaten into submission or to be despised?

How do these voices telling us that we are supposed to hate our bodies affect our notions of how we care for the sick, disabled, elderly, children, mothers, soldiers, workers, immigrants, men and women? What we believe about our bodies affects how we treat other bodies, and how we treat each other's bodies is how we treat each other.

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