



Undressed

BY DANIEL J. BRESSLER, MD

Undressed

*Before you get into bed tonight
Take off all your clothes.
All of them.
Fold them neatly on the corner chair.
Next: remove your watch and rings
Your glasses and handsome silver chain
Lay those casually by the clock radio.
Now you are ready to begin.
Peel off your skin from crown to toes
The scars, wrinkles, and hair, distributed
Like continents and islands on an ocean of integument.
Hang this suit full length in the hallway closet
Like a high school prom dress or formal tuxedo.
But don't stop.
Now unlatch your organs from their skeletal hooks
Sort them into piles named after your physiology classes:
muscles, heart, lungs, digestive tract,
nervous system and endocrine organs
Arrange them neatly in that empty bottom dresser drawer.
Almost there.
Now shake down your bones like a wet dog fresh in from the rain.
Shiver off each knuckle and phalanx, every tubercle and vertebra
Shimmy loose the paired long bones of the legs and arms.
Gather them all into the rectangular FedEx box
You knew you were saving for something
And slide it back under the bed for safekeeping.
You're finally ready. Completely undressed.
Now slide your no-body between the covers.
You will find that with nothing to hold you back
The earth has become your pillow
And the universe your dream.*

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The so-called mind-body problem is a perennial of philosophical discussion. Is there an incorporeal entity — mind — that can exist independent from the body? While modern neuroscience seems to have answered this question in the negative by demonstrating through multiple experiments that consciousness is a “product” of the bits and parts of the brain, there remains the nagging question of whether we now or will ever know enough to put the question to rest. Science, at its best, stays humble in its conclusions. Scientifically, all we can allow is that, as of February 2013, there is no compelling experimental data to nullify the hypothesis that the mind and all its creations are manifestations of the brain.

Certainly, the world's religious and spiritual traditions are based, in part, on a very different interpretation of the problem. What, after all, are soul or spirit if not representations of the disembodied self, some mind without a brain giving rise to it. These traditions, besides drawing on the revelations of their founders, also tap into a deep and broadly shared intuitive sense that the spirit-self somehow inhabits a parallel plane of existence, that it mingles with the body but is not subsumed by it.

The following poem, *Undressed*, plays with the idea of what's left when we take away all the physical manifestations of the self. These physical parts make up the daily topics of a medical practice but don't touch on the deepest sense of the person that the parts belong to. What if, after undressing from all the parts, there really is someone still there? What if? **SDP**

Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988, is chair of the Biomedical Ethics Committee at Scripps Mercy Hospital and longtime contributing writer to San Diego Physician.



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