



**ALICE MILLER**

AUTHOR OF THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD



**THE BODY NEVER LIES**

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THE LINGERING EFFECTS OF  
HURTFUL PARENTING



TRANSLATED BY ANDREW JENKINS

## **Praise for Alice Miller and *The Body Never Lies***

“Alice Miller’s arguments are lucid, closely reasoned, and utterly convincing.”

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**ALICE MILLER**

**The Body Never Lies**

*The Lingering Effects of Hurtful Parenting*

*Translated from the German by Andrew Jenkins*



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Emotions are not a luxury,  
they are a complex aid  
in the fight for existence.

—ANTONIO R. DAMASIO

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## Preface

**THE CENTRAL ISSUE** in all my books is the denial of the sufferings we have undergone in childhood. Each of these books revolves around a particular aspect of this phenomenon and emphasizes one theme more strongly than another. In *For Your Own Good* and *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, for example, I concentrate on the causes and consequences of this denial. In later works I have explored its impact on the lives of adults and on society (with special reference to art and philosophy in *The Untouched Key*, and to politics and psychiatry in *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*). As these different aspects cannot be examined in complete isolation, there is invariably a small degree of overlap and repetition. But the attentive reader will readily appreciate that recurring topics appear in a different light depending on the context in which they are addressed and the vantage point from which they are viewed.

One thing that has nothing to do with context, however, is the way in which I employ certain concepts. For example, I use the word “unconscious” exclusively to refer to repressed, denied, or disassociated content (memories, emotions, needs). For me, a person’s unconscious is nothing other than his/her biography, a life story that, although stored in the body in its entirety, is accessible to our consciousness only in a highly fragmentary form. Accordingly, I never use the word “truth” in a metaphysical sense. The meaning I give it is invariably that of a subjective entity, related to the actual life of the individual concerned. This is why I frequently speak of “his” or “her” truth, meaning the true story of the person in question, as evidenced by and reflected in his/her emotions (see p. 38 and pp. 125 and 174). In my terminology, emotion is a more or less unconscious, but at the same time vitally important physical response to internal or external events—such things as fear of thunderstorms, rage at having been deceived, or the pleasure that results from a present we really desire. By contrast, the word “feeling” designates a *conscious* perception of an emotion. Emotional blindness, then, is usually a (self-) destructive luxury that we indulge in at our cost.

MY MAIN CONCERN in this present book is with the effects the denial of our true and strong emotions have on our bodies. Such denial is demanded of us not least by morality and religion. On the basis of what I know about psychotherapy, both from personal experience and from accounts I have been given by very many people, I have come to the conclusion that individuals abused in childhood can attempt to obey the Fourth Commandment\* only by recourse to a massive repression and detachment of their true emotions. They cannot love and honor their parents because unconsciously they still fear them. However much they may want to, they cannot build up a relaxed and trusting relationship.

Instead, what usually materializes is a pathological attachment, a mixture of fear and dutiful obedience that hardly deserves the name of love in the genuine sense of the word. I call this a sham, a façade. In addition, people abused in childhood frequently hope all their lives that someday they will experience the love they have been denied. These expectations reinforce their attachment to their parents, an attachment that religious creeds refer to as love and praise as a virtue. Unfortunately, the same thing happens in most therapies, as most people are still dominated by traditional morality. There is a price to be paid for this morality, a price paid by the body.

Individuals who believe that they feel what they ought to feel and constantly do their best not to feel what they forbid themselves to feel will ultimately fall ill—unless, that is, they leave it to their children to pick up the check by projecting onto them the emotions they cannot admit to themselves.

This book reveals a psychobiological law that has been concealed for a very long time by the claims of religion and morality.

Its first part demonstrates how this law affected the lives and careers of a number of writers and other famous personalities. Subsequent sections provide ways for achieving genuine communication, which can break the vicious circle of self-deception and often lead to liberation from physical symptoms.

## **The Body Never Lies**

# Introduction

## Morality and the Body

**FREQUENTLY, PHYSICAL ILLNESSES** are the body's response to permanent disregard of its vital functions. One of our most vital functions is an ability to listen to the true story of our own lives. Accordingly, the central issue in this book is the conflict between the things we feel—the things our bodies register—and the things we think we *ought* to feel so as to comply with moral norms and standards we have internalized at a very early age. It is my firm and considered opinion that one specific and extremely well-established behavior norm—the Fourth Commandment—frequently prevents us from admitting to our true feelings, and that we pay for this compromise with various forms of physical illness. *The Body Never Lies* contains many examples that substantiate this theory. My focus, however, is not on entire biographies, but rather on the relationship between individuals and the parents who were responsible for the kind of cruelty and abuse outlined.

Experience has taught me that my own body is the source of all the vital information that has enabled me to achieve greater autonomy and self-confidence. Only when I allowed myself to feel the emotions pent up for so long inside me did I start extricating myself from my own past. Genuine feelings are never the product of conscious effort. They are quite simply there, and they are there for a very good reason, even if that reason is not always apparent. I cannot force myself to love or honor my parents if my body rebels against such an endeavor for reasons that are well-known to it. But if I still attempt to obey the Fourth Commandment, then the upshot will be the kind of stress that is invariably involved when I demand the impossible of myself. This kind of stress has accompanied me almost all my life. Anxious to stay in line with the system of moral values I had accepted, I did my best to imagine good feelings I did not possess while ignoring the bad

feelings I did have. My aim was to be loved as a daughter. But the effort was all in vain. In the end I had to realize that I cannot force love to come if it is not there in the first place. On the other hand, I learned that a feeling of love will establish itself automatically (for example, love for my children or love for my friends) once I stop demanding that I feel such love and stop obeying the moral injunctions imposed on me. But such a sensation can happen only when I feel free and remain open and receptive to all my feelings, including the negative ones.

The realization that I cannot manipulate my feelings, that I can delude neither myself nor others, brought me immense relief and liberation. Only then was I fully struck by the large number of people who (like myself) literally almost kill themselves in the attempt to obey the Fourth Commandment, without any consideration of the price this exacts both from their own bodies and from their children. As long as the children allow themselves to be used in this way, it is entirely possible to live to be one hundred without any awareness of one's own personal truth and without any illness ensuing from this protracted form of self-deception.

A mother who is forced to realize that the deprivations imposed on her in her youth make it impossible for her to love a child of her own, however hard she may try, can certainly expect to be accused of immorality if she has the courage to put that truth into words. But I believe that it is precisely this explicit acceptance of her true feelings, independent of the claims of morality, that will enable her to give both herself and her children the honest and sincere kind of support they need most, and at the same time will allow her to free herself from the shackles of self-deception.

When children are born, what they need most from their parents is love, by which I mean affection, attention, care, protection, kindness, and the willingness to communicate. If these needs are gratified, the bodies of those children will retain the good memory of such caring affection all their lives, and later, as adults, they will be able to pass on the same kind of love to their children. But if this is not the case, the children will be left with a lifelong yearning for the fulfillment of their initial (and vital) needs. In later life, this yearning will be directed at other people. In comparison, the more implacably children have been deprived of love and negated or maltreated in the name of "upbringing," the more those children, on reaching adulthood, will look to their parents (or other people substituting for them) to supply all the things that those same parents failed to provide when they were needed most. This

is a normal response on the part of the body. It knows precisely what it needs, it cannot forget the deprivations. The deprivation or hole is there, waiting to be filled.

The older we get, the more difficult it is to find other people who can give us the love our parents denied us. But the body's expectations do not slacken with age—quite the contrary! They are merely directed at others, usually our own children and grandchildren. The only way out of this dilemma is to become aware of these mechanisms and to identify the reality of our own childhood by counteracting the processes of repression and denial. In this way we can create in our own selves a person who can satisfy at least some of the needs that have been waiting for fulfillment since birth, if not earlier. Then we can give ourselves the attention, the respect, the understanding for our emotions, the sorely needed protection, and the unconditional love that our parents withheld from us.

To make this happen, we need one special experience: the experience of love for the child we once were. Without it, we have no way of knowing what love consists of. If we want to achieve this experience with the help of therapy, then we need assistance from a therapist who can accept us for what we are, who can give us the protection, respect, sympathy, and understanding we need in order to realize how we have become what we are. This is the fundamental experience that enables us to adopt the role of parents for the wronged children we once were. What we do *not* need is an educator, someone who “has plans” for us, nor a psychoanalyst who has learned that in the face of childhood traumas the main thing is to remain neutral and interpret the analysand's reports as fantasies. No, we need precisely the opposite: a *partial* companion, someone who can share with us the horror and indignation that is bound to arise when our emotions gradually reveal to her, and to us, how the little child suffered, what it went through all alone when body and soul were fighting for years on end to preserve a life threatened by constant danger. We need such a companion—what I have called an “enlightened witness”—if we ourselves are to act as companions for the child within, if we are to understand its “body language,” to engage with its needs instead of ignoring them in the same way that our parents once did.

What I am describing here is entirely realistic. It is possible to find out one's own truth in the partial, *non-neutral* company of such a (therapeutic) companion. In that process one can shed one's symptoms, free oneself of depression, regain joy in life, break out of the state of constant exhaustion,

and experience a resurgence of energy, once that energy is no longer required for the repression of one's own truth. The point is that the fatigue characteristic of such depression reasserts itself every time we repress strong emotions, play down the memories stored in the body, and refuse them the attention they clamor for.

Why are such positive developments the exception rather than the rule? Why do most people (including the "experts") greatly prefer to believe in the power of medication rather than let themselves be guided by the knowledge stored in their own bodies? Our bodies know exactly what we need, what we have been denied, what disagrees with us, what we are allergic to. But many people prefer to seek aid from medication, drugs, or alcohol, which can only block off the path to the understanding of the truth even more completely. Why? Because recognizing the truth is painful? This is certainly the case. But that pain is temporary. With the right kind of therapeutic care it can be endured. I believe that the main problem here is that there are not enough such professional companions to be had. Almost all the representatives of what I'll call the "caring professions" appear to be prevented by our morality system from siding with the children we once were and recognizing the consequences of the early injuries we have sustained. They are entirely under the influence of the Fourth Commandment, which tells us to honor our parents, "that thy days may be long upon the land the Lord thy God giveth thee."

It is patently obvious that this commandment is bound to thwart the healing of early injuries. It is equally obvious why this fact has never been publicly recognized and thought about. The scope and power of the commandment is immeasurable, since it is nurtured by the infant's natural attachment to its parents. The greatest philosophers and writers have shied away from attacking it. Even Friedrich Nietzsche, who was notable for his virulent attacks on Christian morality, never went so far as to extend that criticism to his own family. In every adult who has suffered abuse as a child lies dormant that small child's fear of punishment at the hands of the parents if he or she should dare to rebel against their behavior. But it will lie dormant only as long as that fear remains unconscious. Once consciously experienced, it will dissolve in the course of time.

The morality behind the Fourth Commandment, coupled with the expectations of the children we once were, creates a situation in which the large majority of therapists will offer patients precisely the same principles



they were confronted with during their upbringing. Many of these therapists are still bound up with their own parents by countless threads. They call this inextricable entanglement “love,” and offer this kind of love to others as a solution. They preach forgiveness as a path to recovery and appear not to know that this path is a trap by which they themselves are caught.

Forgiveness has never had a healing effect.<sup>1</sup>

It is highly significant, perplexing to say the least, that we have been bound for thousands of years to a commandment that hardly anyone has questioned, simply because it underscores the physical reality that all children, whether abused or not, always love their parents. Only as adults do we have a choice. But we often behave as if we were still children who never had the right to question the commandments laid down to them by their parents. As conscious adults we have the right to pose questions, even though we know how much those questions would have shocked our parents when we were children.

Moses, who imposed the Ten Commandments on his people in the name of God, was himself a child cast out by his parents. The situation that prompted them to do so is immaterial. Like most abandoned children, he hoped that one day he might regain his parents’ love by providing them with such things as understanding and respect. We are told that he was forsaken by his parents to save him from persecution. But the infant in the basket of bulrushes could hardly have understood that. The adult Moses may indeed have said, “My parents cast me adrift in order to protect me. I cannot hold that against them. They deserve my gratitude. They saved my life.” But what Moses the child actually felt might have been something very different: “Why have my parents cast me out? Why have they exposed me to the danger of drowning? Don’t they love me?” The authentic feelings stored up in the body of the little infant—despair and mortal fear—will have lived on in Moses and dictated his actions when he passed the Ten Commandments on to his people. Superficially, the Fourth Commandment can be regarded as a kind of life insurance for old people, which was perhaps necessary in biblical times but is certainly no longer required in this form. On closer inspection, however, we see that the Fourth Commandment contains a threat, a kind of moral blackmail that has lost none of its potency: If you want to live a long life, you have to honor your parents, even if they do not deserve it; otherwise you will die an early death.

Most people comply with this injunction, although it is both confusing

and frightening. My belief is that the time has come for us to take the injuries of childhood and their consequences seriously. We must free ourselves of this commandment. This does not mean that we have to repay our parents' cruelty in kind. It means that we must see them as they were, and recognize the way they treated us when we were small. Then we can spare ourselves and our children the repetition of such patterns of behavior. We need to free ourselves of the "internalized parents" carrying on their deadly work within us. This is the only way we can say yes to our own lives and learn to respect ourselves. It is not something we can learn from Moses. Moses became disloyal to the messages of his own body when he espoused the Fourth Commandment. He had no choice in the matter for he was not aware of these messages. But this is precisely the reason for not allowing this commandment to assert its power over us.

In all my books I have attempted to demonstrate, in different ways and in different contexts, how the effects of what I've called "poisonous pedagogy" that we experienced as children have stunted our vitality in later life and also substantially impaired, if not entirely killed off, the feeling for who we really are, what we feel, and what we need. The parenting approach known as "poisonous pedagogy" breeds overly well-adjusted individuals who can only trust the mask they have been forced to wear because as children they lived in constant fear of punishment. "I am bringing you up in the way that is best for you" is the supreme principle behind this approach. "If I beat you or use words to torment and humiliate you, it is all for your own good." <sup>2</sup>

In his famous novel *Fateless*, the Hungarian writer and Nobel laureate Imre Kertész describes his arrival at the Auschwitz concentration camp. He was fifteen years old at the time, and he tells us in great detail how he attempted to interpret the many grotesque and appalling things he encountered on his arrival there as something positive and favorable for him. Otherwise he would not have survived his own mortal fear.

Probably every child who has suffered abuse must assume an attitude like this in order to survive. These children reinterpret their perceptions in a desperate attempt to see as good and beneficial things that outside observers would immediately classify as crimes. Children have no choice. They must repress their true feelings if they have no "helping witness" to turn to and are helplessly exposed to their persecutors. Later, as adults lucky enough to encounter "enlightened witnesses," they do have a choice. Then they can admit the truth, *their* truth; they can stop pitying and "understanding" their

persecutors, stop trying to feel their unsustainable, disassociated emotions, and roundly denounce the things that have been done to them. This step brings immense relief for the body. It no longer has to forcibly remind the adult self of the tragic history it went through as a child. Once the adult self has decided to find out the whole truth about itself, the body feels understood, respected, and protected.

I call the violent kind of “upbringing” abuse, not only because children are thus refused the right to dignity and respect as human beings but also because such an approach to parenting establishes a kind of totalitarian regime in which it is impossible for children to perceive the humiliations, indignities, and disrespect they have been subjected to, let alone to defend themselves against them. These patterns of childhood will inevitably then be adopted by their victims and used on their partners and their own children, at work, in politics, wherever the fear and anxiety of the profoundly insecure child can be fended off with the aid of external power. It is in this way that dictators are born; these are people with a deep-seated contempt for everyone else, people who were never respected as children and thus do their utmost to earn that respect at a later stage with the assistance of the gigantic power apparatus they have built up around them.

The sphere of politics is an excellent example of the way in which the hunger for power and recognition is never stilled. It is insatiable, it can never be entirely satisfied. The more power these people have, the more they are spurred on to actions that, in a process of compulsory repetition, restore the initial feelings of impotence they were trying to escape: Hitler in his bunker, Stalin in his paranoid fears, Mao in the final rejection by his people, Napoleon in exile, Milosevic in prison, Saddam Hussein in his mortifying fall from power. What impelled these men to abuse the power they had achieved to such a pitch that it ultimately plunged them into impotence and powerlessness? I believe it was their bodies. Their bodies sustained the knowledge of the impotence they felt in childhood; they stored such knowledge in their cells, and they set out to force their “owners” to face up to that knowledge. But the reality of their childhood instilled such fear in the hearts of these dictators that they preferred to wipe out whole peoples, to exterminate millions of human beings, rather than confront the truth—*their* truth.

In this book I shall not be enlarging on the motives of such dictators, although I find the study of their biographies highly illuminating. I shall

concentrate instead on people, who, though they too were subjected to poisonous pedagogy, did not feel the need to achieve limitless power or to become dictators. In contrast to those power-crazed individuals, they did not direct the suppressed feelings of anger and indignation against others, but against themselves. They fell ill and developed a variety of symptoms, and many of them died at an early age.

The more gifted of these individuals became writers or artists. Even though they were able to point to the truth in the literature and art they produced, it was invariably a truth split off from their own lives. The price for that maneuver was illness. The first part of the book is devoted to tragic biographies of this kind.

A RESEARCH TEAM in San Diego in the 1990s asked a total of 17,000 people, with an average age of fifty-seven, what their childhood was like and what illnesses they had suffered in the course of their lives. The study revealed that the incidence of severe illnesses was many times higher in people who had been abused in their childhood than in people who had grown up free of such abuse and had never been exposed to beatings meted out to them “for their own good.” The latter had had no illnesses to speak of in their later lives. The title of this brief article was “Turning Gold into Lead.”<sup>3</sup> The author, who sent me this article, commented that these findings are unambiguous and highly eloquent, but at the same time covert and hidden.

Why hidden? The reason is that they cannot be published without leveling accusations at the parents. And that is something that is still prohibited in our society, in fact to an increasing degree. In the meantime, more and more experts are of the opinion that the psychic sufferings of adults can be traced to genetic heredity, rather than to concrete injuries and parental deprivations in childhood. Also, the enlightening studies on the childhood of schizophrenics that were published in medical journals in the 1970s have never been made known to a wider public. The fundamentalist faith in genetics continues to triumph.

This state of affairs is the subject of the book *They F\*\*\* You Up* by Oliver James, a clinical psychologist with a major reputation in the United Kingdom. Although the impression left by the book, published in 2003, is ambivalent (because the author shies away from the consequences of his insights and expressly warns against assigning parents the responsibility for