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Chapter 1

Viriditas: Claiming New Body Stories

This is your body, your greatest gift, pregnant with wisdom you do not hear, grief you thought was forgotten, and joy you have never known.

—Marion Woodman, *Coming Home to Myself*

Like many of you reading, I have spent much of my lifetime struggling with my body in a variety of ways. I remember using food to fill the pain of addicted parents from as early as the age of eight; I used it even more when my mother died suddenly in my early thirties. I was diagnosed with a serious autoimmune illness at the age of twenty-one, the same one that had devastated my mother's body, and I spent a year in my midtwenties on disability. I have carried self-loathing and self-consciousness, ambivalence, and a sense of betrayal for too many years.

I share these things because I want you to know that this pilgrimage into the sometimes beautiful and often terrifying world of our bodies is a journey and a process. I want you to know that I walk alongside you in seeking a deeper, more compassionate, and wiser relationship to the tremendous grace that is my body. I want you to know that the person guiding you in this process has really wrestled with many of the same things you have.

I still wrestle at times. But I have also found, through the contemplative path, an enormous gift in my body, even when I don't feel great. I have come to love and cherish my body's wisdom in its many dimensions, and I continue to practice listening, learning, and loving. I have come to such tenderness and appreciation for the ways my body is companion and guide. I have also had experiences of profound beauty and grace in my body while holding a pose in yoga and feeling my strength and flexibility, surrendering to the dance and shedding my self-consciousness, making love to my beloved husband, eating a gorgeous meal with friends, and walking by the edge of the sea and feeling wind and water revitalize me.

Each of you, too, has stories such as these: stories of suffering, stories of delight. I want you to know I am with you. Your story will be different, yet some elements will feel familiar. I encourage you to honor the full spectrum of the story with your body but to also lay aside old stories that keep you mired in old ways of thinking, that limit your freedom and movement. Although grief is welcome and there is a chapter dedicated to welcoming in those feelings, this journey isn't about dwelling in your wounded places. When you notice yourself thinking as you read this book something such as *I don't do that* or *my body doesn't move that way*, be honoring of your limits while also gently challenging the voices that show up to see if they are telling the truth. So often they are not.

We may also encounter ambivalence around the Christian story. For those of us rooted in the Christian tradition, we are likely familiar with all the ways our religion and its traditions teach us mixed messages about our bodies at best and outright disdain for our physical selves at worst. Even if we don't locate ourselves in the Christian tradition, the legacy is there in the culture, voices of shame, and rampant marketing designed to feed our insecurities and sense of dissatisfaction.

And yet this journey is not about telling those old stories, continuing to get stuck in them.

I could spend these pages and many more diving into the deep roots of our body wounding through religion, culture, and family. But my inclination is that a more helpful and transformative place to spend our time is in the invitation into presence and in learning ways to really listen

to what our bodies are saying rather than getting stuck in the thoughts and judgments we have about our bodies. We will explore ways to work with thoughts in chapter 5.

Together we are invited to create something new. We are drawing from the deep well of contemplative wisdom and practices to weave together a new vision, one that honors the profundity of incarnation, of God become flesh. The enormity of that claim for our relationship to our physical selves and the material world is profound.

Viriditas as a Discernment Principle

I am the living breath in a human being placed in a tabernacle of marrow, veins, bones, and flesh, giving it vitality and supporting its every movement.

—St. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* I 4:4

Hildegard of Bingen was a twelfth-century Benedictine abbess known for being a theologian, visionary, musical composer, spiritual director, preacher, and healer. For centuries monasteries have been centers of healing and herbal medicine. Monks would grow the herbs and learn their applications so that people would come for both spiritual and physical healing.

We are losing this connection between spiritual and physical healing as medicine takes place in the efficient and sterile halls of hospitals. Please don't misunderstand me: I am profoundly grateful for the gifts of modern medicine and rely on it to some degree to maintain my own quality of life. Yet we have lost so much in this shift from the model of slow medicine and healing to the pursuit of quick cures. We compartmentalize ourselves, seeking the fix for the headache or the stomach trouble without considering the whole of our bodies and our lives. We become impatient when illness descends rather than yielding to the body's needs and desires.

We rarely have a relationship with our doctors, spending only minutes with them each visit, whereas Hildegard, and other monastics like

her, would have known her patients. She would have seen the profound connection between body and soul. She would have practiced slow medicine. She was an immensely practical woman who also saw the life of the body and soul as intimately intertwined. In an age when many distanced themselves from the body's needs, she embraced the body as an essential portal to our experience of the Divine through the gift of our senses.

One of the fundamental principles of Hildegard's worldview is *viriditas*, which means the "greening power of God." Even more than that, it refers to a lushness and fecundity in the world, a greening life force we can witness in forests, gardens, and farmland. Hildegard, who lived in the valley around the river Rhine in Germany, was profoundly impacted by her witness to the profusion of greenness and how this green life energy was a sign of abundance and life. It is what sustains and animates us.

Greenness is not just a physical reality but a spiritual one as well. Hildegard believed that *viriditas* was something to be cultivated in both body and soul. Her language is filled with metaphors for seeking out the moistness and fruitfulness of the soul. The sign of our aliveness is this participation in the life force of the Creator. Anything that blocks this flow through us contributes to both physical disease and spiritual unrest. For Hildegard, *viriditas* was always experienced in tension with *ariditas*, which is the opposite experience of dryness, barrenness, and shriveling up. She would keep asking how to bring the flow of greening life energy back in fullness to a person.

Victoria Sweet, a medical doctor in San Francisco and researcher in medieval history, wrote a wonderful book called *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine* in which she explored Hildegard's principles of greening in her own medical practice. Dr. Sweet worked in a long-term care facility and began to ask what was blocking a patient's access to this life-giving greening energy; shifting her perspective enabled her to find healing paths that were previously unseen. She also discovered that simply being in relationship with her patients over time allowed her to see patterns and behaviors that revealed far more into their care than a quick visit could ever do. Her experience shows

what slow medicine might look like in our increasingly fragmented and rushed world.

Seeking Nourishment

Nothing will ever dazzle you
like the dreams of your body.

—Mary Oliver, “Humpbacks”

This poem is a beautiful place to begin this journey because it offers us a concrete image to hold as we move through the time and questions ahead: How do I welcome all that is most nourishing and fruitful into my body and soul? What are the habits and beliefs that rob me of this fertile moistness in my body and soul?

There is a story from the Desert Fathers where an Abba says to a seeker, “Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart.”¹ This can be easier said than done since we are inclined to so many comforts that only serve to numb and distract us from life. How often do we try to satisfy ourselves with that which depletes us?

In the book of Deuteronomy we hear a similar invitation: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Dt 30:19). Choose what is life-giving and what makes you flourish.

What if your fundamental commitment as you begin this journey is to only offer your body and soul that which is nourishing, to listen to what depletes you and say no to those things? I invite you to hold the following question as you move forward: Does this nourish me or does this deplete me?

I find some of the contemporary materials on intuitive eating very inspiring and sound. And yet, for some of us, if we have engaged in disordered eating of any kind, tuning back into that intuition can be challenging. The contemplative path is about deepening our capacity for intuitive connection to our body wisdom so we begin to hear our bodies’ voices.

Sometimes we will only discover in retrospect whether something was nourishing or not. Keep returning to those questions of nourishment and depletion and notice what is true for you in this moment, not what was true some time ago or what you long for in the future. The body grounds us here and now.

Is this truly nourishing? If not, can I change what I am doing? If I can't change what I am doing, can I shift my perspective? Can I pay attention to how my body feels in this experience and make room for whatever that might be? Can I offer a prayer on behalf of someone in need? Can I commit to myself that I will do something nourishing when this necessary task is completed?

Our work with this process—and it is a lifetime process—is simply about presence and awareness rather than judgment. Through presence we practice a radical hospitality to our own experience. If I eat too much or spend hours in front of the television mindlessly, can I welcome in my disappointment with myself? Can I welcome in the grief I am trying to avoid feeling?

Accept that there will be times when you do something that doesn't feel especially good for your body or soul. Then go back to my invitation to be ever so gentle with yourself. When we experience resistance and then we refuse to embrace the resistance, we further our own wounding. One of the most healing practices I have found is this simple act of kindness and deep care for our well-being.

The practice is exactly that, a practice. We get to show up again and again.

Bring this question to everything: to eating, to work, to playing, and to movement. Sometimes we are required to perform tasks for work that aren't nourishing, and that is okay. But bringing our awareness to the moment can help to wake us to new possibilities.

Then notice the patterns. So much of what we describe as nourishing are things to be enjoyed slowly and are rooted in the experience of the body: nourishing food, good conversation, time spent in nature, and rest. In contrast, what depletes us are often things such as worry, anxiety, control, conflict, and rushing, many things that reside in our

mind and thoughts. Notice what is true for you. How do you define true nourishment?

The body loves slowness. Slowness creates more space for greening to enter our being, allowing us to experience the lushness of the body. Of course, the contemplative loves slowness as well. For me, the heart of the contemplative path is slowing down and paying attention, becoming fully present.

When we get anxious we become disconnected from ourselves; our thoughts start to race and grasp. When we are always running from one thing to another, we lose ourselves and a fundamental connection to the body.

Ally on the Journey: Hildegard of Bingen

O Eternal God, now may it please you
to burn in love
so that we become the limbs
fashioned in the love you felt
when you begot your Son
at the first dawn
before all creation.

—Hildegard of Bingen, *O eterne deus*

In each chapter I will invite you to call in the presence of a woman mystic or a woman from the scriptures who can act as an ally on this healing journey. These holy women can offer us support and guidance across the ages.

Hildegard of Bingen was an amazing and powerful woman who also struggled greatly with physical ailments throughout her life. She was an herbal healer and wrote a book of plant medicine. People came to her for healing of both body and soul.

Imagine that Hildegard is here with you as you embark on this willing descent into the wilderness of your body. Imagine what she would have to say to you. Imagine you can tell her anything about your body,

and listen for what guidance she offers. Ask her to show you the places where your body hungers for more greenness, more nourishment.

What would it be like to move through the day with a sense of having enough—enough love, enough time, enough food, or enough money? So much of our depletion comes from a sense of scarcity, and yet if we just look at the world of herbs, we discover God’s generous abundance in plants that heal, offer fragrant delight, and give us pleasure in eating. Can we remember these things as very good? Can we celebrate that there is more than enough? Viriditas reminds us again and again that there is no lack. It is offered to us so freely.

Practice: Stability and Staying with Our Experience

In the Benedictine tradition, monks would take three vows: stability, conversion, and obedience. Stability on one level is a commitment to staying with the same community and monastery for their entire lives. But on another level it is about not running away from things. The call of the monk is to stay in the “cell”—one’s own experience—and to stay fully present. The cell for monks was the cave of the heart, that deeply interior place where we encounter the divine spark within us. The inner cell is the place where we show up to do our inner work.

We have so many ways to distract ourselves. Rushing and anxiety make us feel depleted and also pull us right out of our embodied experience. As we make the descent into the wilderness of the body, we will likely find two experiences: a sense of enlivening as we make a deeper connection to our physical selves and start to draw from that wisdom, and a sense of being overwhelmed, grieved, or agitated at beginning to drop down into our embodied experience. We resist our bodies because we are afraid of what we will encounter there. We may find that we want to run very far away.

The vow of stability calls us to stay present, which means staying in this moment: not rushing to the next thing and not allowing anxiety to draw our energy out into worries of the future or to a more comfortable

distraction but staying present to what is actually true right in this moment.

The body speaks truth if we would only learn how to listen. When we drop down out of the spinning voices of the mind, telling their tales of anxiety and calling us back into the past or out into the future, the body calls us to be fully present here and now. The only moment for the body is right now.

Perhaps the truth is that I am feeling grief and sadness well up, yet I don't know why. Stability calls us to stay with those emotions, to let them have room to move through us. We don't run away, whether in our thoughts or in our physical being. When we block the flow of our emotional life, we also block the flow of greening in ourselves. Opening on one level creates opening on other levels as well.

When we stay with our experience, we discover that it changes all the time. The grief that felt overwhelming has room for expression and then subsides. As we practice radical hospitality to ourselves in all forms, we begin to draw together those broken pieces and return to wholeness.

Meditation: Greening Power of God

This meditation is a reflection on your experience of the day and can be done either in the evening or the following morning. It is an invitation to pay attention to the patterns of greening and depletion in your life, bringing in an awareness of Hildegard's viriditas through an adapted form of the examen prayer created by Spanish mystic Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century.

Allow yourself five minutes each day to pause and listen for the presence or absence of viriditas in your body and soul. Breathe slowly and deeply. Let yourself soften into this moment. Once you feel yourself resting into the stillness, bring your awareness to your heart center, that place of intuitive knowing. Just notice what you feel, and be with whatever comes up without trying to change it.

Breathe into your heart center, welcoming in this infinite source of compassion. From this perspective of love and grace toward yourself, review the past day in your mind. Ask yourself the following: Where

in the last several hours have I experienced the lush greenness and life force in my body and soul? Where did I encounter a sense of vitality, of creativity, of energy, and of being well nourished?

Savor and bring a heart of gratitude for this gift, even if it was the briefest moment. Then shift your awareness, look back on the day again, and ask yourself these questions: In the last several hours, where have I experienced dryness and aridity in my body and soul? Where did I encounter a sense of feeling stretched, overwhelmed, or depleted?

Bring gentleness to yourself and your experience; see if you might offer forgiveness to yourself for any choices you made or to your body for any ways it experienced limitations. Then bring your awareness back to your heart and your breath, and gently return to the room. Allow a few minutes to journal what you noticed. Try this practice over several days and notice any patterns.

Creative Exploration: Mandala Making

Mandalas are circles, which are a universal symbol for wholeness. Many of Hildegard of Bingen's visions appeared to her in mandala form and express the wholeness of the cosmos. All you need is a piece of blank paper and some colored pencils, markers, pens, or crayons. You can do this in your journal. You can use whatever writing implements you have at hand. Notice if you create excuses for yourself about why you can't get to this exploration.

Begin with some centering; this might involve moving into silence, paying attention to your breath, becoming present to your body, and calling your awareness to the sacred presence already with you.

Awaken your energy through gentle movement. Choose a favorite piece of music. Allow a few minutes to let your body move as it longs to, something we rarely do. This is a time to really notice what would feel good and nourishing. Movement will help move your awareness down into your body so you can release your thinking mind. Free movement can take on a variety of forms. Perhaps you simply move a hand in response to music today, or maybe you dance in your imagination. Be gentle with yourself.

Sit down to your art journal or sheet of blank paper.

Decide whether music would support your drawing process or if silence works better. Part of what we're doing here is setting up conditions for you to notice how to trust and support yourself.

Draw a circle on the page either with a compass or with the bottom of a jar. As you draw this circle, let it be an act of prayer. You are creating a mandala or sacred container for your art-making. Placing the circle on the page is an act of commitment to yourself, to creating this space within where you can let whatever is moving through you come forth. You are creating the container—or tabernacle—for this time.

Connect again to your breath, and invite the Holy Spirit to be active in this process. Call on the wisdom of Hildegard of Bingen. Ask yourself: How can I best support my body's nourishment? Hold this question lightly.

Begin to explore images and symbols through color and shape. Using markers, colored pencils, or crayons, notice which colors are drawing you to them at this time without judgment or expectation. Thoughts such as *I always pick that color* or *I never pick that color* may come to mind; just be with them and see if you can focus on your breath and let them go, returning only to the process. Draw images or symbols or simply express something through coloring; it doesn't have to look like anything in particular.

Be fully aware of the process. Notice what thoughts or feelings arise. This is art as meditation, so we are cultivating our inner witness through this process. The witness is that calm, compassionate, curious, and infinitely wise part of ourselves that can observe what is happening internally without getting hooked by it. Remember that this isn't about making beautiful art but about being true to what is happening inside of you. We are cultivating the habit of not censoring ourselves and of noticing what is arising and letting it have space.

Once you come to a place of completion with your piece, let yourself have a few moments to sit in stillness. Let go of all thoughts and awareness for a brief time, and just rest into a space of being rather than doing.

Then move into a time of brief journaling and reflection. Spend a few minutes writing about what you noticed in this experience: What inner