

## Embodying our faith

### Lessons from the early church, neuroscience, and congregational life

Rebecca Slough

**C**andidates for baptism in my congregation give testimonies of faith as part of our baptismal services. Most of these candidates are youth navigating the transition between high school and college or young adults moving from college to new employment. They talk about wrestling with faith intellectually, and they say they are unsure about whether they believe all that the Mennonite tradition teaches. They describe resolving enough of their uncertainty to move ahead. Some candidates hurdle the “believing” quandary by resting in their “belonging” in our church family. They name people who have been there for them as mentors or youth sponsors.

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I have never heard a baptismal candidate explicitly claim a faith that has arisen from our congregation’s gathered worship, the fervency of our prayer, or our significant celebrations and rites. Congregational singing

does occasionally rate as a faith-forming influence. But I puzzle about why our other practices aren’t named. Aren’t these rituals—worshiping, eating together, praying, commissioning people of all ages for service—compelling enough to anchor a life of faith?

Of all the questions provided for the rite of baptism in the current Mennonite minister’s manual, only one explicitly asks baptismal candidates whether they are willing to adopt a Christian way of life.<sup>1</sup> The majority of questions focus on candidates’ beliefs. My question is, how do Christian believers embody a holistic faith that integrates what their minds know with what their bodies, hearts, and spirits know?

I want to explore this question from three angles: by drawing on a new book by Alan Kreider on practices that formed patience in the lives of early church Christians, by considering three

insights from emerging research on embodied cognition and how our bodies affect what we know, and by drawing some examples from my beloved congregation, College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana.

### **Early Christian formation in patience**

In *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, church historian Alan Kreider masterfully analyzes how early Christian communities pursued mission and incorporated new members into their congregations by focusing on the qualities of their gathered life.<sup>2</sup> He draws on the writings of Cyprian, Tertullian, and other church leaders in the early centuries CE to describe how congregational practices cultivated patience as a Christian virtue through relationships developed among believers. These practices oriented Christians into the way of Jesus, and in turn their testimony of lived patience changed their neighbors and business associates. Improbably, the church grew in North Africa, Syria, and Rome, because Christians' behavior set them apart and enticed curious outsiders to come and see.

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Kreider calls the multidimensional web of congregational relationships a *habitus*.<sup>3</sup> A habitus takes shape in an environment structured by patterns of social interaction that are relational and dynamic. Rational and

nonrational dimensions of knowing are at work within a habitus, and both dimensions must be developed if a fully embodied Christian life is to emerge. Worship—Eucharist and prayer—was the animating center of these early Christian communities; it provided the context for the variety of physical movements and postures that helped form and express caring, love, and commitment.

### **Learning from neuroscience**

Emerging scientific evidence seems to indicate that the early church had it right. Faith depends on knowledge gained through our bodies and our brains. Growth in faith requires that our minds and hearts be physically and actively engaged.

Scientists, philosophers and theologians are reconsidering the nature of our embodied mental life in light of neuroscientific evidence that directly challenges our Western mind-body dualism.<sup>4</sup> The notion of embodied cognition rests on the claim that “our cognitive processes are, at their core, *sensorimotor*, *situated*, and *action-relevant*.” Our mind “is formed by the nature of the body and its interactions with the world.”<sup>5</sup> These findings upend assumptions inherited from Gnostic and Enlightenment thought, which separate the workings of the mind from the physicality of the body and then privilege the mind over the body.

**Cognitive processes are sensorimotor.** In modal systems located throughout our brains our sensorimotor systems are continuously recording and organizing the physical stimuli that we experience and our responses to those stimuli.<sup>6</sup> Our minds draw on these unconscious systems to interpret the meaning of situa-

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tions in which we find ourselves and to create fitting—often habituated—responses. To our physical experiences our bodies produce emotional reactions such as fear, calm, attraction, disgust, or pleasure, usually before we are conscious of doing so. Our brains and bodies are open systems that continually take in new experiences, connecting them with earlier ones, and we respond in adaptive ways and create new meaning.<sup>7</sup>

When we are in environments different from those we have experienced before, we have no organized sense—no sounds, images, smells, tastes, or tactile sensations—to help us interpret what is happening. We may feel lost and even terrified. In such circumstances, we cannot think our way to reasonable interpretations.

In Kreider’s account of early church practices, new believers were catechized in—habituated to—the previously unfamiliar ways of the Christian congregation. This process happened over a period of years, in part because it took time to gather enough sensory data to make sense of the new way of life that Christianity presented. For example, in a Christian context the postures, sounds, and emotions of prayer were a radical departure from the

pagan practices many people new to Christian faith had known.<sup>8</sup> These catechumens had to keep embodying practices of prayer; they learned to pray by observing other believers, imitating them, and eventually creating prayers of their own.

**Cognitive processes are situated.** Our thought processes are an embodied reality, and our bodies are always situated in specific places and among particular people. Our mental systems are built through real-time experiences.

We know that humans learn by doing what we see others do, but the discovery of the brain's mirror neuron capacity gives new meaning to imitation. Imaging studies show that parts of our brains that would be active if we were doing an activity ourselves become actively engaged when we watch someone else doing that activity. We feel the action with the other person to such an extent that we mirror their doing in our brains. Empathy may prove to be a response that springs from this mirror neuron capacity.<sup>9</sup>

By intentionally practicing postures of sitting, standing, making the sign of the cross, laying on hands, eating together, exchanging the kiss of peace, and praying as they stood with open eyes and arms wide, new believers learned to live out their Christian faith. These practices oriented them toward God and gave definition to relationships with brothers and sisters in the community as all

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grew together into the way of Jesus. Jesus's character took shape within them as they gained the embodied knowledge needed to belong, behave, and believe within this new community. And these practices reoriented their attention toward marginalized people of the larger society who were now part of Christ's body and whom they had formerly disregarded.

Stories play a powerful role in integrating bodily experiences that include our emotions, our sense of action moving through time, and

the connections we make between causes and effects. Our experiences draw simultaneously on our brain's capacities for mirroring and memory. Stories invest places and people with significance and orient a community to a way of life that is worth living and dying for.

In the early church, as in our time, biblical stories and teaching helped believers renarrate their lives. Teaching played a significant role in the conversion to a new worldview; it was grounded in explicit actions of the congregation's gathered life.

**Cognitive processes are action relevant.** Humans are creatures of action. Developmentally, we act before we have the capacity to think. Our bodies learn how to respond to life through activities that coordinate muscles, set rhythms, and show us how to mesh our actions with others. We respond almost automatically to situations that unfold throughout the day, using cognitive patterns and routines formed through the variety of sensory motor experiences. We simply cannot think through all the demands we face daily. Yet we adapt quickly, if not easily, to the inevitable surprises and aggravations that arise. We often act our way toward thought.

Kreider examines the account of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas at the Carthaginian games. Although these women were sisters in Christ, they were of different social classes: Perpetua was of the lower upper class and Felicitas was a slave. They faced humiliation and death standing side by side with other wounded Christians. Their final act, which would have shocked the crowd, was an exchange of the kiss of peace.<sup>10</sup>

Kreider offers several conjectures about how these two women developed a capacity to meet martyrdom with courage and suffering with joy. "The worship of the Christian community, repeated week by week, shaped the worshipers' habitus by giving them kinesthetic as well as verbal habits."<sup>11</sup> At the end of these women's lives, their embodied practices of love may have taken over when their capacity for conscious thought diminished through exhaustion.

New believers in the early church learned the teachings of Jesus and the witness of the apostles (orthodoxy—right belief), and this learning replaced their prior religious thoughts. Through bodily experiences they developed new emotions that were consistent with the character of Christ (orthopathy—right passion or feeling). And they brought orthodoxy and orthopathy together through orthopraxy (right practice): by learning the choreography of prayer, laying on of hands, exchanging the kiss of peace, making the sign of the cross, eating bread and drinking the cup

together, in exorcisms, and through all the other practices that formed them in the pattern of Jesus, as members of the body of Christ.

### **A congregation's embodiment of faith**

I have been musing about how my beloved congregation and I are being formed in orthodoxy, orthopathy, and orthopraxy.

We are a congregation that meets on a college campus. Rational thought and careful reflection come naturally to many of us. We value teaching and asking questions. Emotional expressiveness especially in worship tends to be more difficult. Congregational singing expresses heartfelt praise and prayer. We have aversions to repetition and anything that feels "too liturgical." We are committed to service to others. Our members routinely volunteer for Mennonite Disaster Service and contribute to Mennonite Central Committee projects. We support a local deaf ministry. We care for those who are sick and dying in our congregation. These forms of faith embodiment are deep.

Through our actions over time, what knowledge comes to be embodied deep in our corporate body? How do we embody thanksgiving and gratitude? Patience? Love for those with whom we disagree? Resting in the certainty that God is reconciling all things to Godself?

This past Sunday the children of the congregation blessed our youth, who were leaving for a trip to the Mexican border. The young children gathered around the "big kids" and laid their hands on them. The rest of us sang and extended our hands in blessing and hope. I trust that beneath wordy explanations something deeper started to be formed in these children through their blessing of friends and strangers older than they are. They offered these youth something biblically grounded, tactile, and emotionally compelling. Who knew? We need to do this again and again, so that blessing others becomes a deep and habitual part of these children, forming in them a faith that is worth giving their lives to.

For years College Mennonite Church has practiced Communion in a manner that Ulrich Zwingli would have approved of. Trays of bread and small cups of grape juice are passed through rows of pews by deacons, to the accompaniment of music that induces meditation. (Zwingli would not have approved of music;

he would have had scripture read during the distribution of the elements.) Each believer takes a piece of bread, holds it until everyone is served, and then all eat at the same time. Sharing the cup follows the same procedure. We eat and drink in silence, our attention drawn inward, and we reflect silently on these gifts as reminders of grace.<sup>12</sup> The one sound that signals that we are a body sharing the Lord's Supper is the clink of several hundred Communion cups as they are set in the holders on the pews. We eat in silent gratitude, passively, remembering Christ's death.

Over the last five years we have expanded our Communion practice. We come by rows to brothers and sisters who serve the gifts of bread and cup with words of acclamation: "This is the bread of life. This is the cup of salvation." Sometimes we are called by name. It took nearly a year to get the logistics worked out—our worship space is not the most conducive for this mass movement. Ushers tell us when it is our turn. They also look for the people in their sections who are not able to move through the lines. Servers come to these dear ones.

Our Communion services are noisier; there is a lot more commotion. Those who wish for a blessing from one of the pastors

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can receive one less conspicuously. Our songs are lively. We have to coordinate our movements intentionally and watch for those who need more time to walk. We must forebear with one another in the chaotic choreography as our lines meander. The bread and cup are gifts that we are invited to claim with our whole being.

These two forms of Communion—we still practice both—involve our bodies differently. Each sets us in motion as a congregation. Our movements create in us nonrational dispositions about what it means to belong to these people, to behave as they behave, to believe

as they believe. Our bodies grow to know these things deeply and intuitively, and our Christian identity gains depth and maturity.

Neither of these practices is an end in itself; each sows seeds of possibilities in us for compassionately, prayerfully, and adaptively being with people in other situations. Each practice has its own

rhythm and pace, and when we are at our best, the constraints of time do not matter. We have time to move, feel, think, and be in the moment with those we love—whether we agree or disagree on other matters—to receive the gift of communion with God and fellowship with each other. This is how a way of life becomes embodied and carried into the world. Our theological reflections on Communion must take into account the physical movement of our taking bread and then blessing, breaking, and sharing it together. Ethical imperatives and doctrinal teaching have their place, but it is through the patient practice of a congregational body moving together that the presence of Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit create a common life.

A full-bodied response to God requires the knowledge of hearts, minds, spirits, and bodies—each with its unique capacity for knowing that is integrated into our one whole being. I'm deeply grateful for Alan Kreider's book because it demonstrates how Christian faith is formed through the actions of our bodies that in turn give rise to emotions for and thoughts about God, our brothers and sisters, and ourselves. My beloved congregation and I need to reconsider how we—all of us—are being formed in an embodied faith that balances our intellectual assent with embodied dispositions of gratitude, blessing, patience, and love.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The question asks, "Are you willing to accept the way of life set forth in our confession of faith?" The previous question in this set implies a way of life as it relates to following Jesus, loving enemies, and suffering wrong. See John Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.)

<sup>3</sup> In the last thirty years of his life, social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu refined the concept of *habitus*. His last definition characterized a *habitus* as a system of durable structures, actions, and dispositions that generate and organize social practices that demonstrate mastery of the operations needed to perform the practices without significant conscious thought or predetermining a specific outcome. This summary comes from the definition found in Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53; cited in Omar Lizardo, "The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu's *Habitus*," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 34, no. 4 (2004): 378.

<sup>4</sup> Some discussions between scientists and religionists have limited the concept of embodiment to the physical nature of human being, denying the realities of the soul or mind. Other theologians recognize that, while being fully physical, humans also have "nonreducible, emergent, high-level cognitive and social properties . . . that are



agentive.” This understanding is often called nonreductive physicalism or emergent monism. See Warren S. Brown and Kevin S. Reimer, “Embodied Cognition, Character Formation, and Virtue,” *Zygon* 48, no. 3 (September 2013): 832–33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 833; italics added.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence W. Barsalou, Aron K. Barbey, W. Kyle Simmons, and Ara Santos, “Embodiment in Religious Knowledge,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 5, no. 1–2 (2004): 32.

<sup>7</sup> Warren Brown and Brad Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 77–78, 111–13.

<sup>8</sup> Krieder, *Patient Ferment*, 205, 207.

<sup>9</sup> Empathy may be a positive result of mirror neuron activity. Mob violence is a far less attractive result of this activity.

<sup>10</sup> Krieder, *Patient Ferment*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961), 143.

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