

Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

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Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

Fretting about our bodies is hardly a new phenomenon. Is there any culture anytime, anywhere, that has not struggled with human physicality? Most of us worry about our bodies. We try to change our bodies. We betray and feel betrayed by our bodies. We tend to think that our bodies are not quite good enough. Whole industries are founded on these worries and dissatisfactions. While these preoccupations may be exaggerated in the luxury economies of North America, there is evidence that concerns about bodies transcend time and geography.

The authors in this issue of *Vision* all took up my challenge to them to give us new ways to think about and better value our human being, the bodies we not only inhabit but *are*.

These fears and distortions seem antithetical to Christian faith. A central truth of our existence as believers is that we only learn to know and love God—and each other—

through our bodies. Until we are born into the human family and take our place as embodied beings, we do not know or trust God. We are created in the image of God only as we become creatures of flesh and blood. What a gift this life is!

At the other end of the spectrum of human existence, Christian faith assures us of abundant, eternal life. In faith we die to our fear of dying, as the writer of Hebrews puts it so well. Because relinquishing our bodies does not mean relinquishing our hope, we inhabit these bodies that will die, even as we let go of the fears that confronting our mortality can provoke. As Paul at the end of his own life reminded the believers in Rome, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”

The authors in this issue of *Vision* all took up my challenge to them to give us new ways to think about and better value our human being, the bodies we not only inhabit but *are*.

Laura Brenneman and Rebecca Slough lead off with foundational articles offering biblical, historical, and scientific perspectives. Brenneman works with the strong images and metaphors of the body in Paul's letters to the early church. She notes the distinctions Paul makes between flesh and body, arguing that we have likely seen Paul as too negative toward the body because we have overlooked these distinctions. She makes a case that Paul helps us toward a more robust and richer view of our bodies. Slough draws on some of the practices of the early church as well as some important insights from neuroscience. She uses Alan Kreider's new book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, to consider how faith emerges from embodied habits. She then explores notions of embodied cognition to show how faith grows from knowledge we gain through our bodies and our brains. Finally, she offers examples of how her congregation nurtures this embodied faith.

The next group of articles and an earthy poem by Ann Hostetler take as a starting point particular embodiments—our relationship to soil, our embeddedness in culture, and our social locations. Iris de Leon–Hartshorn, Susanne Guenther Loewen, and Illya Nimoy Johnson bring crucial perspectives to our attention. De Leon–Hartshorn took the intriguing step of having her DNA analyzed, which has led her to reflect on her Indigenous worldview and how it contributes to her Christian faith. Guenther Loewen begins with her experience of mothering and explores the impetus it provides for moving into embodied peacemaking. Using the biblical example of Mary of Nazareth—who said yes to God and no to oppression—and drawing on the work of several women theologians, Guenther Loewen develops a view of nonviolent peacemaking characterized by strength, courage, and even ferocity. Johnson explores the theme of embodiment by considering what it means that God has created humanity with great diversity, including sexual diversity, while we share a common identity as bearers of God's image. He moves from reflecting on God's creation of this variety and commonality to a consideration of what it says about God and what it means for how we might better understand each other.

The authors of the last group of articles—and Gayle Gerber Koontz in her wonderful poems about transitions—reflect on and

raise questions about how to understand our bodies through the experiences life brings us. Chris Marchand works with insights about bodies gained through his years of work in youth ministry. In adolescence we are acutely sensitive about the changes in our bodies and about others' perceptions of our bodies. How can the church help teens develop healthy bodies and healthy spirits during this time of life especially critical to physical and spiritual formation? How do we integrate the two in ways that lead to compassion toward ourselves and others? Allan Rudy-Froese deals with that common and uncomfortable ordeal known as stage fright. What can we do when both our bodies and our minds seem to betray us and render us fearful fools—and especially, what can we do when it happens as we lead in our congregation's worship? Overcoming stage fright, he suggests, is partly a matter of moving more fully and mercifully into our embodiment. Don Yost and friends at Maple City Health Care Center write about what it means to care for patients as enspirited bodies and embodied spirits. This health center has a long history of collaborating with its neighbors to enhance their health and the health of their ethnically and socioeconomically diverse neighborhood. These stories of healing emphasize the relational nature of holistic health care and have significance for both church and world. In "Embodied to our end," Beth Landis reflects on how, at the end of life, we relinquish our bodies and enter into death. She provides practical suggestions and theological insights about how we, as believers and faith communities, can find better ways of making that journey. The conversations she advocates are not easy, but undertaking them is some of the most important work we do in life, for ourselves and for those we leave behind.

As I finish working with these writers and these essays, the word that comes to my mind is *compassion*. It is not a word that appears often in these pages, yet I think it is at the heart of every writer's work here. Moving more fully and gracefully into our embodied life is a work of mercy—toward ourselves, first of all. As Chris Marchand puts it, self-love and not self-loathing is the path to greater wholeness, and it also moves us in gratitude toward the One who has made us and in compassion toward one another.

Embodiment in Paul

Making Christ visible

Laura L. Brenneman

In my grandmother's Bible I recently found a picture that I drew when I was seven. It was tucked in at 1 Thessalonians 4, the passage that was my inspiration: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thess. 4:16–17).¹ In the drawing, Jesus at the front was guiding my family and the whole church through the solar system toward heaven, which was

positioned above the sun and the planets (nine, as I had learned in school).

Paul has quite a bit to say about bodies: Christ's body, the believers' bodies, and his own body. The body, the primary site of God's saving action in Jesus Christ, is also the primary site of Christian response and subsequent demonstration of belief.

My fascination with the bodily resurrection is one of the reasons why I connected with this scene. Resurrection in the body still intrigues me. It—the believers' as well as Jesus's bodily resurrection—is integral to Paul's gospel. Bodies, for Paul, are key to how believers are believers, especially because our bodies show how belief and action are connected.

Paul has quite a bit to say about bodies: Christ's² body, the believers' bodies, and his own body. The body, the primary site of God's saving action in Jesus Christ, is also the

primary site of Christian response and subsequent demonstration of belief. Paul refers to the body in both metaphorical and non-metaphorical ways—as actual, tangible bodies and as analogies to other concepts. In this essay, I will examine nonmetaphorical occurrences of "body" in Paul to consider what they offer for our questions about embodied life. We find that redeemed bodies are

good in their potential to show glory to God and participate in Jesus's death and resurrection.

Paul's body

The word "body" (*sōma*) appears in the Pauline corpus ninety-two times. Of these, forty-three references (47 percent of the total) are nonmetaphorical.³ Many are found in 1 Corinthians and Romans (sixteen and nine, respectively), with most of the focus being on the believers' bodies—namely, on how believers do or will act in body. Second Corinthians ranks just higher than Romans, with ten occurrences, most of which (nine) refer to Paul's own body.

The other forty-nine occurrences (53 percent) of the word *sōma* in letters attributed to Paul are metaphorical. Again, 1 and 2 Corin-

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thians are responsible for many, with thirteen and eight respectively; Romans drops to four, and Ephesians and Colossians surge with eight and six.⁴ The majority of these metaphorical uses are about the body of Christ, with emphasis either on Christ's body as made up of the church, or on individual believers as members of Christ's body. For our purposes, I will focus on the nonmetaphorical occurrences, because they are most useful for understanding how Paul thought about *bodies*—the physical aspect of our lives. The

metaphorical uses give more insight into how he thought about the church and about Christ.

An examination of Paul's nonmetaphorical references to body reveals that his use of the term *sōma* ranges from neutral to positive. For example, Paul makes several references to being absent in body or to not knowing whether he was absent in body (see 1 Cor. 5:3; 2 Cor. 12:2–3). Paul is referring to his body with neither positive nor negative attributes; it simply exists, whether he is "in" it or "in spirit." Although in 2 Corinthians 12:7 Paul talks about a thorn in the flesh that he petitioned the Lord to take away, he turns this weakness into a positive—that is, a way for God's power to be made perfect (12:9). Paul uses "flesh," not "body," in verse 7 (we will return to this below), and the nature of his affliction is unknown. Even if he is referring to a physical

ailment, he does not blame the body; it is what mediates Paul's experience and display of God's power.

A positive example of Paul's nonmetaphorical use of "body" is set in a negative context: Paul's strong reprimand to the Corinthians for inappropriate uses of their bodies. In 1 Corinthians 6:13–20, "body" is used eight times. It is because Paul considers believers' bodies to be united with the Lord, holy, and existing for the purpose of glorifying God, that he is so angry that some are using their bodies to have sex with prostitutes, a type of sex he calls immoral (*porneia*). Believers' physical bodies have been redeemed (literally, "bought with a price," 6:20) for glory⁵—a positive purpose—but with this conviction comes a strong warning: how the body is used can also sever relationship with God.

New Testament scholars Rudolph Bultmann and James Dunn conclude that *sōma* has a mostly neutral connotation in the Pauline corpus. Dunn's analysis is that *sōma* designates the "embodiment" of a person and "in this sense *sōma* is a relational concept. It denotes the person embodied in a particular environment. It is the means by which the person relates to that environment, and vice versa. It is the means of living in, of experiencing the environment."⁶ Bultmann similarly observes that "the fact that [a person] is *sōma* is itself neither good nor bad. But only because [one] is *sōma* does the possibility exist . . . to be good or evil—to have a relationship for or against God."⁷ The substance itself is neutral. It is use that determines a body's orientation to God and thus also defines its goodness or badness.

The next step is to focus on how Paul talks about his own body, since he views himself as a model disciple. His body is where he sees the evidence of Christ's power. He declares in Philippians (written while he was a prisoner, probably near the end of his life) that "Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death" (1:20). In a letter written earlier, Paul closely identifies with the bodily experience of Jesus: "I carry the marks [*stigmata*] of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal. 6:17). *Stigma* can mean "mark" or "scar" or even a brand that an owner puts on a slave; however, *stigmata* also took on specific overtones in Christian tradition as referring to the wounds on Jesus's crucified body. Paul may not mean to signal this nuance in Galatians, but in other places he connects his own bodily experi-

ences with Jesus's: we are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:10).⁸ In the rest of this passage, Paul incorporates some other language for his body—"outer nature," "earthly tent," clothing—but the thought is the same: Paul's present body bears suffering, and he expects future life in Christ (2 Cor. 4:16–5:10).

In addition, what happens in the body will be judged, and each will "receive recompense" (2 Cor. 5:10; see also 1 Cor. 3:11–15). Again Paul's position is that what believers do in their bodies matters. It matters eschatologically for judgment and it matters because it shows their underlying belief and identity. Here Pauline theology and ethics meet. In many cases, Paul points to himself—how he lives in his own body—as an example for believers to imitate. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul calls on the Corinthian believers to imitate him as he imitates Christ, and in Philippians 3:17, he asks the Philippians to become "co-imitators" of him—this, at a time when he was "in chains for Christ" (1:13). In a real sense, this imitation is a call to put one's body on the line. Although Paul never refers to discipleship as such in his letters, these calls to imitation certainly provide models of radical discipleship.⁹ We see that Paul believes it is possible to use our bodies correctly—as he uses his body correctly—in service to God; thus the body can be good.

So far, I've made the case for taking Paul's references to the body as mostly neutral or positive, especially as it enables believers to embody the way of Jesus Christ. However, the many references to "flesh" in Paul that have a negative tone may make it difficult to see Paul's view of the body as neutral or positive. Additionally, "flesh" (*sarx*) sometimes seems to refer to the physical body (*sōma*), which may lead to seeing *sarx* as nearly synonymous with *sōma* and, further, to casting a negative light on *sōma*. In fact, in my *sōma* search, I found that the NRSV translates *sarx* as "body" in some instances (e.g., 2 Cor 7.1, 5), which obscures the nuance in the way Paul uses these words.

Sarx is used a hundred times in the Pauline corpus, slightly more often than *sōma* (ninety-two).¹⁰ These occurrences range in connotation from neutral to negative. The meaning of *sarx* is neutral when Paul is referring to humanity as a group (for ex-

ample, in Rom. 3:20; 1 Cor. 1:29; Gal. 2:16) and to individual bodies (for example, 2 Cor. 7:5; Gal. 1:16). Other times, the connotation is clearly negative, as in flesh-spirit (*pneuma*) antitheses (for example, Gal. 5:13–24). Dunn characterizes *sarx* as “the continuum of human morality, the person characterized and conditioned by human frailty. . . . The spectrum runs from human

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relationships and needs, through human weakness and desires, through human imperfection and corruption, to the fully deprecatory and condemnatory tone of the *sarx-pneuma* antithesis.”¹¹ John Barclay contends that “while the flesh can be manifested as human weakness (Gal. 4:13–14), or self-centered behaviour (5:15), neither of these is itself the heart of Paul’s understanding of the term: the looser definition—‘what is merely human’ (1 Cor 3:4)—fits his various uses more comfortably.”¹²

By examining nonmetaphorical occurrences of *sōma*, we see that for Paul bodies are not negative as such. They are neutral sub-

stances that are meant for positive purposes. Further, Paul uses *sarx* and *sōma* differently. While “flesh” can be neutral when its meaning is akin to “body,” it is often used to show negative aspects of being “merely human,” especially weakness in relation to sin. Translators and interpreters must be careful not to conflate *sarx* and *sōma*, thereby giving the impression that the body in Paul is seen as negative.

Our bodies

How can Paul breathe some fresh air into our conversation about bodies? This is the question Mary Schertz asked when inviting me to write this article. If space allowed, it would be interesting to scroll through the history of the church’s understandings of the body and its use of Pauline writings on the subject. For now, here’s what I take away from the study shown above.

I am a woman who grew up in the Mennonite church. Some of my earliest memories are of my grandmother in a cape dress and bonnet. The cape dress hid her figure, the bonnet hid her hair,

and the plainness of her entire garb kept her from attracting notice—at least in some settings. In my comparatively worldly upbringing, my father did not allow my sister and me to pierce our ears, although he eventually relented in his ban on contact lenses, make-up, jewelry, and (regrettably) perms. When I asked his rationale for these prohibitions, he responded by citing a Pauline passage: “Women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes” (1 Tim. 2:9).¹³ I don’t think my father’s views on appropriate attire and grooming for women were formed just from reading Paul, absent other influences. But I did grow up feeling self-conscious about my body and thinking that the Bible—the apostle Paul himself—had strong opinions about how I looked.

Later on, I encountered other people who talked about their (individual) bodies as being temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Especially for some of the student athletes I taught, this conviction was cited as a reason for eating healthy food, getting physical exercise, not smoking, and (for some) not having sex

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before marriage. Their motivation for fitness was bolstered by this passage. It was part of their inspiration to maintain physical health and strive for greatness in their sport. They also sometimes saw lesser degrees of fitness as moral blemishes and evidence of poor spiritual health.

These passages can help Christians shape important aspects of our views of the body, but using them without reference to their context is problematic. The passage from 1 Timothy left me with a sense of body

negativity and a feeling that it was my responsibility to manage the ways other people thought of my body. I thought I should not draw attention to myself, think of myself as attractive, or want others to find me attractive. Use of 1 Corinthians 6:19 to motivate personal improvement seems to me to be a bit too body-positive, or at least too body-attentive and certainly too individualistic, with the potential pitfall that we equate physical with spiritual health. It takes part of the verse out of context—

namely, that Paul's point (conveyed in the same verse) is "Do you not know . . . that you are not your own body?" The concepts in these passages are far richer than their use as slogans would indicate.

We can do better when it comes to seeing what Paul may teach us about our bodies today. First, it is important to declare that Paul's take on bodies is not negative. In fact, he tends to write about them neutrally or positively.¹⁴ Although he doesn't appeal to the creation account to say that bodies were created good, he does talk about the redemption of bodies (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 6:19–20; 7:23). Pointing to this redemption, Paul calls for believers to glorify and worship God in their bodies (1 Cor. 6:20; Rom. 12:1).

Second, Paul describes his body as the site where Jesus's effect on his life is shown. Paul links the hardships he endures in the

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proclamation of the gospel with making Jesus's death and life visible in his body (2 Cor. 4:10). The hardship lists, which appear often in Paul (Rom. 8:35–39; 1 Cor. 4:9–13; 2 Cor. 4:8–12; 11:23–28; 12:10; Phil. 4:11–12), are a way of establishing his credentials (2 Cor. 6:4; 11:30; 12:5). These passages are not a glorification of suffering, and we should not use them to make the case either that suffering is redemptive in itself or that people should not seek or pray for an end to their suffering. To the first point, Paul is adamant that there is no other basis for

salvation than Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). As to the second, Paul himself appealed to the Lord to have his suffering (the "thorn in the flesh") alleviated (2 Cor. 12:8–9). Although he comes to accept his condition—even to say, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (12:9)—he does not see the suffering as good and he seeks to be free of it.

Finally, in holding himself up as an example to imitate, Paul expects believers to embody the life of Jesus, too. The imitation language that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Philippians 3:17 is his way of talking about discipleship. His life is an example, but ultimately it is Christ who is to be imitated. This makes sense to Paul, because believers "have been buried with him by baptism

into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). The pattern of life is similar to Christ’s, because the believers are to expect a resurrection like his (6:5; see also 1 Cor. 15:53–54).

Paul can help us have a more robust view of the body. It is not a negative or shameful thing; neither is it fully the believer’s own, for use solely for myself or for me to take credit for its strength, its beauty, or its weaknesses. Paul helps us see the body as a neutral substance with potential for good or bad, depending on its use. From Paul’s view, believers’ bodies are redeemed and thus have vast potential for good. They are united with Christ, and their redeemed purpose is to show God’s glory, even in their susceptibility to weakness (or “fleshliness”), and they will be resurrected in a resurrection like Christ’s. The body is our home and through it we show our allegiance, our worship, our identity, and our future.

Notes

¹ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

² In Paul’s writings, the title *Christ* occurs 380 times, 266 of these occurrences in the undisputed Pauline letters (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). *Christ* often appears alone, often along with the name *Jesus*, and sometimes in some configuration of *the Lord Jesus Christ*.

³ Some of the nonmetaphorical references to believers’ bodies seem quite close to metaphorical references about the believers as members of Christ’s body, so I’ve made a few judgment calls. In 1 Corinthians, for example, the believers are all members of one body, as in chapter 12 (where there are eighteen metaphorical occurrences; see Michelle Lee, *Paul, the Stoics, and the Body of Christ*, SNTS Monograph Series [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 1–7). However, chapter 6 portrays their actual bodies as part of Christ; there it seems best to see seven of the eight occurrences as nonmetaphorical.

⁴ Of the forty-three nonmetaphorical occurrences of “body” in Paul, thirty-eight are in the undisputed letters and five in the disputed letters (Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians—although there are no occurrences of “body” in 2 Thessalonians). Of the forty-nine metaphorical occurrences, thirty-five are found in the undisputed and fourteen in the disputed. While the nonmetaphorical and metaphorical uses of “body” are almost even in the seven undisputed letters of Paul, there is a nearly threefold jump in Ephesians and Colossians in the use of metaphorical language vs. nonmetaphorical. The Pastorals (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) do not use *sōma*.

⁵ This is a point also made in 1 Corinthians 15:35–58, although “body” there is largely metaphorical in nature.

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 56.

⁷ Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 1:198.

⁸ See Romans 6:1–11 for a similar sense of closeness between Jesus’s death and resurrection and the believer’s own (although Paul’s use of “body” is metaphorical in Romans 6:6).

⁹ See my “Imitation as Participation: Discipleship in Paul’s Letters,” in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 106–23, for more on this topic.

¹⁰ *Sarx* occurs eighty-four times in the undisputed Paulines (cf. seventy-three times for *sōma*), eighteen times in the disputed (cf. nineteen times), and one time in the Pastoral Epistles (cf. zero times).

¹¹ Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 66.

¹² John M. G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 209.

¹³ See the virtually synonymous phrasing in 1 Peter 3:3.

¹⁴ Although not studied here, Paul’s metaphorical uses of body are often positive (e.g., the body of Christ metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12).

About the author

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Embodying our faith

Lessons from the early church, neuroscience, and congregational life

Rebecca Slough

Candidates 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”

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in our church family. They name people who have been there for them as mentors or youth sponsors.

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.¹ 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.² 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.

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.

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Kreider calls the multidimensional web of congregational relationships a *habitus*.³ 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.⁴ 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.”⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹

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

In the early church, bodily practices oriented believers toward God and gave definition to relationships with brothers and sisters in the community as all grew together into the way of Jesus.

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.¹⁰

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."¹¹ 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.¹² 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 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.

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.

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

¹ 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.

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

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 833; italics added.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Krieder, *Patient Ferment*, 205, 207.

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

¹⁰ Krieder, *Patient Ferment*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

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

About the author

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Renewing body, soul, and mind Learning from Indigenous spirituality

Iris de Leon–Hartshorn

In recent years, I have been talking with church people about the effects of the Doctrine of Discovery, which European monarchies beginning in the mid-fifteenth century espoused in order to justify colonization and seizure of lands inhabited by Indigenous peoples. This concept in international law was expounded by the United States Supreme Court in a series of decisions, most notably by Chief Justice John Marshall in *Johnson v. M'Intosh* in 1823.

In my work with Mennonite churches I have been laying open the ways this policy and the worldview that produced and flowed from it brought grave harm to the bodies, souls, and minds of Native peoples, stripping them of identity, establishing the founda-

A recent revelation about my genetic makeup got me to thinking about my worldview, about how much affinity I feel for an Indigenous outlook and about how I have struggled with Western Christianity.

tion of the United States' racist sociopolitical system, and resulting in genocide. My hope is that one day our churches, our nations, and our globe will renounce this doctrine, and that my work in my corner of the church will contribute to that repudiation.

As I embarked on this work on the Doctrine of Discovery, I did some discovering of my own, and some reflecting on the impact of this doctrine on my life. Among other things, I had a DNA test done. I have always referred

to myself as a Mexic-Amerindian, on the assumption that, like most Hispanics, I am of mixed blood. To my surprise, the results indicate that I am 70 percent Dene from the Southwest—that is, Navajo or Apache. I assume Apache is the more likely, because that tribal group occupied areas around what is now the United States–Mexico border. Of the remaining 30 percent of my DNA, 15 percent is Indigenous from the Chiapas region in southern

Mexico and 15 percent is Arab, likely a strand that entered at the time of the Spanish conquest of North American territories.

This revelation about my genetic makeup got me to thinking about my worldview, about how much affinity I feel for an Indigenous outlook and about how I have struggled with Western Christianity. I experience effects of the conflict between the two in my mind, body, and soul, and I am moving toward embodiment of a spirituality that combines elements of Indigenous outlook with Christian faith.

Four elements of an Indigenous worldview

American Indian theologian and scholar George (Tink) Tinker has identified four elements that distinguish an American Indian worldview from that of the dominant culture.¹ These distinctive features are a communal worldview and social structuring, spatial orientation, an ideal of harmony and balance, and an understanding of the interrelationship and interconnectedness of all life.

Communal worldview and social structuring is the complete opposite of the individualism of Western society. For people shaped by Native spirituality, all is to be done for the good of the community. No one makes decisions affecting family, community, or nation apart from the group; decision making is communal.

Spatial orientation refers to the importance Indigenous peoples attach to space; in their spirituality place is more important than time. For example, a ceremony begins only when people have determined that the space is right and that the community is prepared to undertake it. Again the contrast with Western practice is sharp: in dominant culture, events start at an established time.

An ideal of harmony and balance points to the way all ceremonies and all social and political acts of the community and the person in community are oriented toward establishing or reestablishing harmony. The ideal of balance—personal, communal, and cosmic—is more central than the concept of liberation to Indian worldview.²

Interrelationship/interconnectedness is also a hard concept for those whose worldview is the dominant Western one. Mary E. Clark writes that “one of the basic images of reality on which the Western world view rests is that all entities in the universe are

isolated, discrete objects that have distinct boundaries, much like we imagine atoms to be.”³ In Indigenous worldview the opposite is true. Everything is connected and related. We are not separate from but part of all creation. In Indigenous life, people respect animals and plants and all that God has created. We are not beings isolated from the rest of creation. Mistreatment of the earth is mistreatment of ourselves, because we are all affected.

Western Christianity versus Indigenous worldview

The racist culture the Doctrine of Discovery grew out of and perpetuated has sought to eliminate Indigenous spirituality. Western colonizers did not understand or value an Indigenous worldview, and they tried to force assimilation into the dominant culture and conversion to its religion. Despite the resilience of Indigenous communities, this effort to eradicate an Indigenous

Western colonizers did not understand or value an Indigenous worldview, and they tried to force assimilation into the dominant culture and conversion to its religion. This effort has caused great harm.

way of seeing and living has caused great harm. Ever since 1492 the push for assimilation and conversion has been an ongoing assault on Indigenous peoples, conducted in the apparent absence of any desire to understand—much less appreciate—their worldview.

Sometimes I hear the comment that people of color in the church need to “get over it.” This comment reflects a failure by those with power and privilege to understand generational trauma. Trauma inhabits the bodies of groups of people, who experience it

so deeply that it has become part of their individual and collective DNA. For Indigenous people in the United States and Canada, the trauma in question reaches into their minds, bodies, and souls. When cultural practices that express and shape a community’s spirituality have been taken away or destroyed, the community is left without the glue that has kept it together, and people are deprived of purpose. They suffer in mind and body and spirit. Many Indigenous communities in North America are now trying to recover their culture and nurture the ceremonial practices that bound them to each other and gave their life meaning.

The harm that Indigenous people continue to experience today is sometimes the result of the actions of Christian people.

For example, many reservations are “dry”; sale of alcohol is prohibited. Yet just outside these reservations, near the entrances, you find small settlements in which people sell liquor from a tire shop, a restaurant, or a convenience store, exploiting the vulnerabilities of their Indigenous neighbors and contributing to the destruction of their bodies and spirits and the integrity of their communities. Many of the people running these shops will say they are Christian. In the summer you will also see busloads of church people who come to the reservations—patronizingly—to “help the Indians,” again without understanding or appreciation of their traditional culture and worldview.

Many Indigenous people in North America do not see a way of being Christian and reconciling that faith with their Indigenous spiritual values. Western Christianity is just too embedded with empire and a history of colonization and oppression. The history of the churches’ efforts to convert Indians is too enmeshed with governmental policy that has deprived Native peoples of their land, their children, their language and culture. I ask myself, what does it mean for me to say I am a Christian, when Indigenous parts of the church are continually under threat by the church itself?

A renewed Christian faith corrected by Indigenous spirituality

Lame Deer’s critique of Western Christianity is apt:

You’ve made a blondie out of Jesus. I don’t care for those blond, blue-eyed pictures of a sanitized, Cloroxed, Ajaxed Christ. Would you like it if I put braids on Jesus and stuck a feather in his hair? You’d call me a very crazy Indian, wouldn’t you? Jesus was a Jew. He wasn’t a yellow-haired Anglo. I’m sure he had black hair and a dark skin like an Indian. The white ranchers around here wouldn’t have let him step out with their daughters and wouldn’t have liked him having a drink in one of their saloons. His religion came out of the desert in which he lived, out of his kind of mountains, his kind of animals, his kind of plants. You’ve tried to make him into an Anglo-Saxon Fuller Brush salesman, a long-haired Billy Graham in a fancy night shirt, and that’s why he doesn’t work for you anymore. He was a good medicine man, I guess.⁴

Years of stress related to loss of cultural cohesion and a constant micro-aggression contribute to the prevalence of high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke among Indigenous people. Another contributing factor in these chronic conditions is change to a Western diet and loss of a traditional food culture. I am reminded of the woman who bled for many years (see Mark 5:25–34). She was beaten down after being sick for so long. And “she had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” But she had faith, and she reached out to touch Jesus, whose power—released by her faith—restored her to health.

In my work against racism and for intercultural competency, I hear the stories of many people of color who stay faithful to Jesus, despite—rather than because of—their experience in the body of the church. At times they feel they have tried, in every way they know how to, to speak to the racism in the church, but to no avail. Like that bleeding woman, deep down inside they know that the real Jesus—the one with black hair and a dark skin, not the sanitized, Cloroxed, Ajaxed Christ—is there to stand with

In my work against racism and for intercultural competency, I hear the stories of many people of color who stay faithful to Jesus, despite—rather than because of—their experience in the body of the church.

them. Somehow they know that when the churches deny space for them, Jesus will provide a way. It is that resiliency that keeps people of color at the table.

In my body and mind and spirit, I experience the harmful effects of efforts to eradicate Indigenous worldview and practices. I have personal struggles around issues of identity, lack of self-care, isolation, disconnection from community and self, a devaluing of my own gifts, and a constant struggle to prove myself. Despite these negative effects, I have also experienced empowerment, found ways to

keep true to myself, and grown in my relationship with God. If my experience is a reliable indicator, Indigenous ways of seeing and living can enrich and deepen—and yes, correct—the Western Christian tradition I have also been formed by. My journey of discovery has convinced me that fostering the four Indigenous spiritual values identified by George Tinker has potential to broaden our understanding of God, make us more faithful follow-

ers of Jesus, and contribute to our restoration in body, mind, and spirit.

Giving attention to communal and social structuring as a spiritual value would mean paying more attention to things done with and for the community and placing less value on ourselves as autonomous individuals. Now Anabaptist-Mennonite Christians talk a lot about community. We like to say we interpret scripture in community. But voices outside our faith community often influence us far more than do the voices within it. And our actual communities are often narrow, consisting of people who think more or less as we do. How do we authentically embody community in an individualistic and deeply polarized society? I believe that fostering an inclusive community can moderate our societally

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induced individualism and help us become more whole people who are better followers of Jesus.

Spatial orientation is about being rooted profoundly in place rather than being driven by the clock. In traditional Indigenous cultures how a ceremony is laid out and where it is located are far more important than what time it starts. Shifting our values in this direction would be a countercultural move for those of us whose worldview is that of the dominant culture. What if worship started only when we sense that everyone is spiritually ready to begin? What if we met outside instead of inside, so that we could be more attuned to the natural world? An orientation to space could help us center ourselves in readiness to encounter God and engage redemptively with God's creation.

In traditional Indigenous culture, all ceremonies and sociopolitical acts of the community and the person in community are oriented toward establishing or reestablishing harmony. Harmony and balance are valued in self and community and world and cosmos, and in the interaction of all these realities. Valuing harmony and balance would lead us toward lending our energies to the mending of God's creation, from a personal to a cosmic level. Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition rarely gives attention to the cosmic, but considering God's work at this grand level can

give us perspective on our own lives and activities. We occupy a modest place, not that of God or even as superior beings in God's ordering of things. We are creatures, called to embody humility in our relationship with God and God's other creatures. We are not above that creation but are embedded in it. When we center our lives and our activities around harmony and balance, we are joining God in the work God is doing in restoring creation.

This value reminds me of the theology articulated by the writer of the letter to the Colossians: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven" (Col. 1:19–20, NIV). God is bringing everything into balance and harmony—but Western Christianity has often limited reconciliation to the human-divine axis and to interpersonal or intragroup dynamics, forgetting that God is reconciling all creation. As long as we understand Christianity only through a Western lens, we will fail to experience the fullness of God's intention for all creation. A Christian-

ity informed by an Indigenous worldview invites this fuller sense of God's salvation as a matter of bringing harmony and balance to our lives, which find their rightful place in the cosmos.

An emphasis on the interrelationship and interconnectedness of our lives with all creation has been important in my life as I seek to embody its meaning in my interactions. Lakota prayers conclude with prayer "for all my relations." These words point not just to the circle of one's kin but are inclusive of all creation. All created things are related to each other, because they have all been brought into being by the Creator. Our mistreatment of the earth arises from our mistaken notion that other living things are objects and are separate from us, to be exploited by us. Our inability to see ourselves rightly as part of and connected to all creation has led to our destruction of the earth. We desperately need to recover Indigenous ways of seeing and living, so we can begin to find sustainable ways of living on earth.

We are not above creation but are embedded in it. When we center our lives and our activities around harmony and balance, we are joining God in the work God is doing in restoring creation.

Conclusion

My work in antiracism and intercultural competency within the church is challenging, and it sometimes takes a toll on my mind, body, and soul. But it has also allowed me to broaden my understanding of God through the gifts that have come to me from outside dominant Western culture. It has provided a rootedness in my life that I lacked and needed.

Many of my fellow believers—those who are Swiss, German, and Russian Mennonites—know their ancestry; much of it is well documented. For those of us indigenous to North America, much of our heritage has been taken from us and our rootedness disrupted or even destroyed, with devastating effects on our bodies, souls, and minds—and our communities. Gaining an understanding of the spiritual values of Indigenous culture has helped me experience God more deeply, and through that understanding I have joined a journey my ancestors were already on. Theologically the Anabaptist tradition is my home, but how it is interpreted and embodied in my life must take into account the insights of my Indigenous ancestors, even as I open myself to hearing the wisdom of other people groups.

Notes

¹ George (Tink) Tinker, “American Indian Theology,” in *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 172–75.

² *Ibid.*, 171. Tinker points out that “Indian people only became cognizant of a need for ‘liberation’ after the brutal tragedy of the European invasion and conquest generated the radical imbalance of the subjugation and genocide of the aboriginal owners of the land.”

³ Mary E. Clark, *In Search of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

⁴ John (Fire) Lane Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), 168.

About the author

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“We are all meant to be mothers of God” Mothering as embodied peacemaking

Susanne Guenther Loewen

*Did the woman say,
When she held him for the first time in the dark of a stable,
After the pain and the bleeding and the crying,
“This is my body, this is my blood”?*

*Did the woman say,
When she held him for the last time in the dark rain on a hilltop,
After the pain and the bleeding and the dying,
“This is my body, this is my blood”?¹*

I have lived with this poem by Frances Croake Frank for the past several years as I have become a mother and begun to reflect theologically on that experience. Speaking about Mary of Nazareth, the poet articulates the covenants a mother makes in her body and blood with the God of Life. Connecting childbirth with the cross, it speaks of the costly vulnerability and profound strength that mothering entails as a theological symbol and an embodied, ethical, nonviolent act. Depicting Mary as speaking Jesus’s Communion-instituting words—words forbidden to women in most Christian worship services—it poignantly knits together mothering and discipleship.

Of course, such connections are not without their dangers. Motherhood is all too easily idealized and imposed on women as a self-abnegating, mandatory role relegating them to the private realm of the home. According to the book *Mothering Mennonite*, this view of motherhood has until recently been characteristic of Mennonite tradition, in which mothers are simultaneously vitally important within the family (which historian Marlene Epp terms “a ‘near-sacred’ institution for Mennonites”) and excluded from positions of community and church authority. Their voices and experiences have thus “been woefully ignored by Mennonite scholars,”² including theologians.³

Differentiating their view from the patriarchal, idealized understanding of motherhood, feminist scholars use the term *mothering* to denote “female-defined and potentially empowering experiences.”⁴ This term recognizes mothering as an active role, something women are or are not willing or able to undertake for various reasons, not a role toward which all women are naturally predisposed by virtue of inhabiting a female body. Anglican theologian Emma Percy proposes that “mothering should not be understood as an instinctual reaction but as an active commitment to a relationship”—a relationship, furthermore, involving “anxiety, ambivalence, and difficulties.”⁵

Given these ambiguities and idealized distortions of mothering, why should it be connected to discipleship? Why can it not simply

As a theologian and a mother, I feel compelled to articulate theologically the sacredness of my own mothering as a deeply embodied experience of God in the midst of the ordinariness, frustrations, pain, and joy of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and raising my child.

remain “near-sacred” or quasi-theological? As a theologian and a mother, I feel compelled to articulate theologically the sacredness of my own mothering as a deeply embodied experience of God in the midst of the ordinariness, frustrations, pain, and joy of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and raising my child. While this experience is by no means universal to women, we can affirm and draw on this particularly female experience in order to bring to light the profoundly embodied, life-giving, and peacemaking aspects of our common call as Christians to discipleship in the way of Jesus—as Frances Croake Frank’s poem above exemplifies. In what follows, I offer some reflections from a Men-

nonite-feminist perspective on mothering as both a literal, bodily experience and an evocative symbolic-theological image.

Maternal images of God

Though it might seem strange to focus on birth and mothering in light of the overwhelming emphasis on God’s masculinity as Father and Son, this is not a novel image. There is a strong—if neglected—thread of birth and mothering imagery running through the Christian tradition. In the Bible, we find God described as giving birth to the people of Israel (Deut. 32:18, Isa.

42:14–16), as a comforting and nurturing mother (Isa. 66:13; Hosea 11:4), and as a fiercely protective mother bear (Hosea 13:8).⁶ This is the God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28): our mothering God, God as womb.⁷ The Apostle Paul also speaks of himself as a mother suffering birth pangs (Gal. 4) or nursing the infant churches with milk (1 Cor. 3:1–2), and of all creation groaning in travail (Rom. 8) as God’s reign and the new creation are birthed. In a similar vein, Jesus compares the struggle and joy of childbirth to the coming of the kin(g)dom of God (John 16:21–22)⁸ and in his well-known lament over Jerusalem even speaks of himself as a mother hen: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37, NRSV).

Among medieval mystics, we find poignant examples of the long tradition of relating to the Divine as a mother. “What does God do all day long?” asks thirteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart. “God gives birth.”⁹ For Eckhart, we are made in the image of this mothering God, for “We are all meant to be mothers of God,” bringing God to birth in the world.¹⁰ Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century mystic, famously describes Christ as “our precious mother Jesu,” who feeds us with his milk of Communion.¹¹ The alternative interpretation of Christ on the cross as giving birth to the church in the water and blood from his wounded side¹² leads twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen to declare the cross God’s nonviolent victory through birth (“without even using a warrior!”)¹³ and Anselm of Canterbury to proclaim,

*And Thou, Jesus, sweet Lord, art Thou not also a mother?
Truly Thou art a mother, the mother of all mothers
Who tasted death, in Thy desire to give life to Thy children.*¹⁴

Mary as mother

Finally, there is the central female figure of the Christian tradition whose significance Mennonites have arguably overlooked: Mary of Nazareth.¹⁵ With Mary, the symbolics of mothering slips into the embodied, as she is both literally/historically *and* symbolically/theologically a mother. Medieval depictions of Mary celebrated her embodied mothering, particularly in the proliferation of

images of Mary breastfeeding the infant Jesus. This Mary reminded Christians that “at the centre of the incarnation is a female body,” of “the necessity of the female body for the human Jesus to be born.” These are therefore simultaneously images of “Mary breastfeeding God” and of Mary’s mothering power as God’s life-giving power, since “we see the God of life in Mary—as the source and giver of life.”¹⁶ To me, this Mary speaks to the holiness of every child, to the sense of incarnation, of the enfleshment and embodiment of the image of God in every human being.

But Mary’s role as a mother—and other biblical and historical images of birth and God as mother—has not always reflected favourably on ordinary mothers. This is especially clear in the history of Marian theology: Mary’s virgin-motherhood has functioned within official Catholic doctrine to denigrate ordinary women’s experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering.

Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson observes a pattern

In Catholic devotion, there remains a subversive sense that ordinary mothers are affirmed in Mary, since her prominent image conveys that mothering “is a divine and holy thing, worthy of adoration.”

“which exalts the symbol of the spiritual feminine but denigrates the sexual, maternal, carnal reality of actual women in the concrete.”¹⁷

Still, within popular Catholic devotion, there remains a subversive sense that ordinary mothers are affirmed in Mary, since her prominent image conveys that mothering “is a divine and holy thing, worthy of adoration”—a notion lacking in Reformation traditions.¹⁸ On this basis, I want to suggest two ways the sacredness of mothering and its particular imaging of God can be recovered,

without losing sight of the ambiguity that marks women’s actual experiences of mothering or suggesting that mothering is a mandatory role for women. One concerns what we can learn from the bodies of mothers, and the other—relatedly—envisions literal and/or symbolic mothering as one way of participating in our call to embody peace in a violent world.

Learning from our mothers’ bodies

In pregnancy and those overwhelmed early months of caring for a newborn, I felt strangely as though I were following my body’s

lead, taking cues from its generous hospitality, its patient, painful creation, birth, and sustenance of my infant son. I had a sense of this time being as sacred as it was difficult, yet I found few theological sources that articulate the significance of this experience, especially the experience of childbirth, in which one paradoxically touches death in order to give life. In retrospect, I have increasingly come to think of my body as a source for theological

Against interpretations that reify the violence of the cross or render it a symbol of masochistic submission to suffering, some theologians build on the tradition of viewing the cross as a moment of birth.

reflection, as I have been learning from my mothering body how to image God the Mother, the God of Life.

Several contemporary feminist theologians have reflected in similar ways on what mothering bodies have to teach us, especially about suffering, redemption, and life-giving power. Against interpretations that reify the violence of the cross or render it a symbol of masochistic submission to suffering, some build on the tradition of viewing the cross as a moment of birth. For British theologian

Mary Grey, this image acknowledges that labour and childbirth are “painful, messy, and hard work.” At the same time, the image affirms women’s experiences of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth as embodying life-giving love and struggle, of “co-creating” new life with God. She calls birth

*a letting-go of self—in pain and struggle—for the creation of new being. . . . We are in the dark, alone, in that primeval womb of chaos from which all life emerged. And yet, in that very darkness we can meet God as creative center. We are held by that nurturing center: from this being-torn-apart, this sense of loss, together You and I wordlessly create new life.*¹⁹

Seen in this way, birth is the very opposite of violence and unjust death, reflecting a redemptive “*passion to make and make again / where such un-making reigns.*”²⁰ Grey explains,

This is far from being a call for women to have more children to save the world. Nor is it a glorification of motherhood at the expense of fatherhood. What I am arguing is that as Christianity has now had two thousand

*years of death symbolism, it is at least possible that the slaughter perpetrated in the name of Christendom is related to its symbols of death, blood-guilt, and sacrifice, and that an alternative way of encapsulating the redemptive events might stimulate more compassionate life-styles.*²¹

In other words, images of redemption as birth instead of death and self-destructive sacrifice may lead to lives of compassion and peace instead of violence.

In much the same way, theologian Dorothee Soelle speaks of the pain of birth as unlike any other form of suffering. She rejects the idea that God is impassible or unable to suffer, explaining that

*pain is a part of life because pain is a part of love. I do not wish to have a God free of pain, for I could not trust such a God. . . . The culture I seek is not one of domination and of having to win; it is one of compassion. The Christian religion could help people get ready for such a culture, because it derives its intensity from pain. It has interpreted the deepest pain as a pain of birth.*²²

Using Paul's labour imagery in Romans and Galatians, Soelle speaks of the pain of labour and birth as "pain on behalf of life." She interprets his language of groaning pain as pointing specifically to "the last stage of giving birth," here understood as the final part of the struggle to see the coming of the Messiah. Soelle differentiates this kind of hopeful, life-giving struggle—which she terms "the pain of God"—from senseless, destructive, or masochistic suffering. Along these lines, she wonders,

*How do we approach our pains so that they do not torment us like pointless kidney stones but, as pains of labor, prepare the new being? . . . How does our pain become the pain of God? How do we become part of the messianic pain of liberation, part of the groaning of a creation that is in travail? How do we come to suffer so that our suffering becomes the pain of birth?*²³

For Mennonite feminist theologian Malinda Berry, Mary is a central example of how a woman's body makes possible the redemptive embodiment of God in history. In her view, Mary is

“the original embodiment of the *in utero* incarnate God,” by which Berry means that that incarnate “embodiment has taken place in a woman’s body as well as a man’s.” Berry clarifies, “I am not romanticizing pregnancy, nor am I saying being pregnant is the only way women have participated in God’s self-disclosure!” Rather, Mary’s pregnancy and participation in “the struggle of God’s self-disclosure being birthed in this world—new life and new meaning when so much militates against it”—reveal “that God’s revelation is inclusive of, and relies on, women.”²⁴ Though we have not all experienced mothering ourselves, we can agree that “every person born into the world has known the hospitality of a woman’s body.”²⁵ These theologians invite us to see God in the generous, hospitable, strong, and labouring bodies of our mothers—and, following Eckhart, also to ponder the ways we “are all meant to be mothers of God.”

Mothering as embodying peace

As Grey, Soelle, and Berry suggest, mothering can disclose to us a form of power different from that of violence and domination: the power of vulnerable, life-giving love. Though it is a nonviolent

Mothering can disclose to us a form of power different from that of violence and domination: the power of vulnerable, life-giving love. Though it is a nonviolent power, it nevertheless requires great courage and strength, even ferocity.

power, it nevertheless requires great courage and strength, even ferocity, as seen in the biblical image of God as mother bear. Bearing and/or raising a child in the way of peace is an act of faith.

But we are not accustomed to thinking about this work as an aspect of our discipleship. We look to the story in Luke where a woman calls out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” And Jesus responds, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Luke 11:27–28). We think of this exchange as displaying a contrast between mothering (body) and discipleship

(spirit), but Elizabeth Johnson argues that they are two sides of the same coin, since Elizabeth also greets Mary with the words, “Blessed is she who believed”—a reference to Mary’s yes to God’s plan for her to mother the Messiah.²⁶ Focusing on Mary’s subse-

quent *Magnificat*, her prophetic hymn of liberation for the lowly (Luke 1:46–55), Johnson asserts, “Mary’s no to oppression completes her earlier yes to solidarity with the project of the reign of God.” She continues,

*Here is a rare glimpse of female reproductive power as both physically nurturing and politically revolutionary. . . . A pregnant woman is not the usual image that comes to mind when one thinks of a prophet, yet here are two such spirit-filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warning, and hope for the future. Clearly this is a picture of Mary that is the complete opposite of the passive, humble handmaid of the patriarchal imagination.*²⁷

Mary’s experience of mothering—beginning already in her pregnancy—led her to a commitment not only to the life growing inside her but to the very God of Life and to God’s coming reign of justice and peace.

Mary is not alone in experiencing mothering as an act of faith that prompts acts of peacemaking and social justice. Dorothee Soelle tells of how in the era of the Vietnam War, her identity as a mother turned her attention to sociopolitical advocacy in behalf of children who were suffering. She writes, “I realized that ‘motherliness’ is indivisible; one cannot be a mother to one or two or three children and that’s it. . . . One cannot care for a few children while supporting a policy that incinerates so many children, that lets them starve or rot in camps.”²⁸

Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song likewise speaks of the sacred life-giving power uniquely associated with mothers and which constitutes God’s response to violence. He writes that pregnancy is “much, much more than a mere biological process. A life growing in the mother’s womb is a matter of the spirit, an event of faith, an act of religion.” Of Mary’s pregnancy, Song writes,

Is this conception of life, this growth of life, this birth of life in the mother’s womb not itself God’s saving activity? One has only to recall that famous prophecy of Isaiah when the armies of the Syro-Ephraimite alliance were marching on Jerusalem. . . . “A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and will call him Emmanuel” (7:14). In that critical time of the nation,

Isaiah did not point to the fortification, to the armaments, to the troops, but to a pregnant woman (or pregnant women) as the sign of God's deliverance.

Song concludes that the redemptive hope and power that new life brings allow us to “believe in the victory of love over hate, life over death.”²⁹ In depicting life itself as an act of faith and redemption, Song suggests that the life-giving power of mothers is more powerful than violence and death.

In my view, one of the most significant examples of this kind of nonviolent power which stems from mothers' (and others') commitment to life comes from Argentina, where a group of mothers courageously resisted the violence of the dictatorship in their country, protesting their children's “disappearances” at the hands of the secret police in the 1970s and '80s. Gathering in the city square, the group became known as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Brazilian theologian Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer describes them:

They were only a group of women, mothers and grandmothers, who, in Buenos Aires, during the bloody years of military dictatorship, advocated for their lost children and grandchildren who had “disappeared” into the abyss of torture and death. Claiming something which belongs essentially to the private sphere, and brandishing in the face of the dictator nothing less and nothing more than the violated right of their motherhood, they created a political force with major repercussions. It was perhaps, the most eloquent and the best understood outcry against those terrible, dark years in their country and continent. . . . [Thus,] the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo emerged politically with new goals and challenges, giving birth to redemption for their whole people, born from the personal, inconsolable pain of losing their children.³⁰

Armed with nothing but their identities as mothers—givers of life—these women stood up to a military dictator, to a regime of unspeakable torture and violence. They stood as witnesses to the God of Life, confronting those who would presume to do away with the lives and bodies they had co-created with God. This

perspective on the power of mothering not only takes it out into the public square but also makes it a courageous act of nonviolence, revealing that the children in our lives can inspire our unswerving commitment to life, to work for the future of God's peace. Bingemer concludes that the ongoing witness of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo is eucharistic, reflecting that their female bodies, "consecrated by the miracle of life," became redemptive for many³¹ as they insisted, "This is my body, this is my blood." Following their example, we too can be images of our mothering God and know that, literally and/or symbolically, "we are all meant to be mothers of God."

Notes

¹ Frances Croake Frank, quoted in *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Gynocentric Reconfiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Luce Irigaray*, by Tina Beattie (Bristol, UK: Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender, 1999), 148.

² Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fast, eds., "Introduction: *Mothering Mennonite* and Mennonite Mothering," in *Mothering Mennonite* (Bradford, ON: Demeter, 2013), 2–3.

³ Cf. Malinda E. Berry, "Needles Not Nails: Marginal Methodologies and Mennonite Theology," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008), 272–73; Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority*, Studies in Women and Religion Series (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1998), 10–11; and Carol J. Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence against Women" (PhD diss., University of St. Michael's College, 1999), 14, 180, 3.

⁴ Epp Buller and Fast, "Introduction: *Mothering Mennonite* and Mennonite Mothering," 8.

⁵ Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry*, Ashgate Contemporary Ecclesiology Series (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 61–62.

⁶ See Joanna Harader, "Mothering, God," *Open Book with Joanna Harader* (blog), Brain Mill Press, May 8, 2016; <http://www.brainmillpress.com/joannaharader/voices/open-book-with-joanna-harader/mothering-god/>.

⁷ Doris Jean Dyke, *Crucified Woman* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991), 58.

⁸ Some feminist theologians prefer the term "kindom of God" because it replaces the hierarchical and patriarchal connotations of the term "kingdom" with familial language. See Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 166n9. I want to retain the political implications of the term "kingdom," however, so I have combined the two terms.

⁹ Eckhart, quoted in Mary Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1990), 177.

¹⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, ed. and trans. Matthew Fox (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1983), 74, 71. Cf. 79, 88.

¹¹ Julian of Norwich, excerpts from “A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., edited by M. H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 281. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 110.

¹² Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 140.

¹³ Hildegard of Bingen, quoted in Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition*, 185.

¹⁴ Quoted in Chung Hyun Kyung, “Who Is Jesus for Asian Women?” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 235. Anselm is better known for his “satisfaction” explanation of the atonement.

¹⁵ For a more thorough discussion of Mary, see my article, “Re-baptizing Mary: Toward a Mennonite-Feminist Re(dis)covery of the Mother of Jesus,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 257–74.

¹⁶ Elina Vuola, “(The) Breastfeeding God,” *Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (March 2013): 99–100.

¹⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 23–25.

¹⁸ Frances Power Cobbe, quoted in Sally Cunneen, “Breaking Mary’s Silence: A Feminist Reflection on Marian Piety,” *Theology Today* 56, no. 3 (October 1999): 333. Cf. Vuola, “(The) Breastfeeding God,” 101.

¹⁹ Grey, *Feminism, Redemption, and the Christian Tradition*, 177, 180, 185–86.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 180, 1; Grey’s italics. The lines of poetry she quotes are from “Natural Resources,” by Adrienne Rich (see her *Collected Poems, 1950–2012* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1977]).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 175. Cf. Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate*, 196, who writes: “For women, blood has much more complex significance than for men. The male body only bleeds when it is wounded, but the bleeding female body is more likely to be communicating messages associated with fertility than with aggressive violence. This is not to deny that women’s fertility can be a source of pain and violence, but a woman’s blood can also be a positive sign of a healthy, properly functioning body, as well as communicating the awesome regenerative power of life.”

²² Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 77.

²³ *Ibid.*, 78. Cf. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 94–95.

²⁴ Malinda E. Berry, “A Theology of Wonder,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 20–21.

²⁵ Dyke, *Crucified Woman*, 62.

²⁶ Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 247–48. A similar contrast between birth and “new birth” in Jesus’s encounter with Nicodemus (John 3:3–6) is thoughtfully challenged in Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “The Agony and Ecstasy of Baptism,” *Sojourners*, January 28, 2016; <https://sojo.net/biography/natalie-wigg-stevenson>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁸ Soelle, *Against the Wind*, 45–46.

²⁹ C. S. Song, “Oh, Jesus, Here with Us,” in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, edited by Sugirtharajah, 134–35.

³⁰ Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, “The Eucharist and the Feminine Body: Real Presence, Transubstantiation, and Communion,” *Modern Theology* 30, no. 2 (April 2014): 376–77. Italics added.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 377.

About the author

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A new breed of Gentiles?

Reflections on spiritual beings who inhabit contested spaces

Illya Nimoy Johnson

An article on issues of body and embodiment that concern the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual (LGBTQIA) and same-gender-loving (SGL)¹ community and its relationship with the church could address a wide range of issues, including the church's perception of same-gender-loving and gender-variant people, same-gender love as an expression of the ambiguity of God, and the church's focus on sexual behavior rather than spiritual intimacy.

This brief article cannot address these issues thoroughly; that would require volumes. Instead, I will focus on experiential

My goal is to explore God's merciful love and use it as a guide to shape our thinking and behaviors toward those on the margins whose sexual expressions are unconventional.

evidence and theological perspectives on the subject of spiritual beings who inhabit contested spaces. Those spaces include our own bodies. I will also give attention to the church's traditional representation of "normative" human sexuality in its interpretation of scripture. Then I will offer my perspectives on what it means to be created in God's image and explore implications of notions of human transcendence. I will recount something of my evolving self-awareness and consider a

related notion of the progressive revelation of the Divine. Finally, I will suggest that seeing people who are part of the sexually variant community as a new breed of Gentiles could help Christians find a way forward together.

I hope my reflections can help enlarge the comprehension of human sexuality, gender roles, expressions, and identity. My hope is that readers will be willing to consider other perspectives. My goal is to explore God's merciful love and use it as a guide to shape our thinking and behaviors toward those on the margins whose sexual expressions are unconventional.

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.—Micah 6:8, NIV*

The divine image

*Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image,
after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea
and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the
earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth.”
God created humankind in his own image, in the image of
God he created them, male and female he created
them.—Genesis 1:26–27, NET*

I am a believer in the divine presence and a follower of Jesus the Christ, and I believe that all human beings are embodiments of God’s image and likeness. I wonder what it means to be an image bearer, to manifest the essence of God our creator, and to experience other human beings as manifesting this same inherent nature.

If human beings are the reflection of God, won’t our actions and behaviors toward each other reflect back on us?

Don’t be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others—ignoring God!—harvests a crop of weeds. All he’ll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God’s Spirit do the growth work in them, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life.—Galatians 6:7–8, The Message

Scripture never specifies that only Christians can be image bearers, and Jesus says there is no higher command than to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor without distinction (Mark 12:30–31; see Luke 10:25–28). This is a sensitive and heart-wrenching topic for many of us in the SGL/LGBTQIA community. Many of us often feel that religious and societal assumptions about what it means to bear God’s image lead others to see us as not being fully in the image of God. Especially hurtful are discussions of “gender complementarity”:

according to some, what it means to be in the image of God is that male and female in complementary relationship complete each other. The argument then is that this complementarity can only exist in opposite-sex unions.

In the biblical creation story as it is traditionally told, Adam was God's first human creation. In some rabbinical traditions, *Adam* is rendered "earthling" or "human being" and is understood either to have no gender or to possess both male and female

Scripture never specifies that only Christians can be image bearers, and Jesus says there is no higher command than to love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor without distinction.

characteristics. In this theological interpretation, complementarity has to do not with opposite sexes but with the oneness of the Divine within each individual. Masculine and feminine traits exist in each individual, a fact that science confirms. Male and female hormones exist in each human being. In the early stages of development, human fetuses display no distinction of genital structure. And some people are born with intersex ambiguity, chromosomal and/or genital. In light of all this, I believe that the Genesis story explains the true meaning of comple-

mentarity, with human beings *Adam* and *Eve* each created as full reflections of the image of God. As human beings we are drawn together not only because we see our humanity reflected in others but because we recognize that they share in our embodiment of the Divine: we are all bearers of the divine image.

Transcendence

All religions believe that there is something eternal about the human condition and that stamped within our DNA—our evolutionary process—is this absolute conviction that I am more than just my body, that there is something else within me that is eternal, that continues, that connects to the thing that is eternal in everything else.—Reza Aslan²

A unique quality of divine mystery has been given only to the transgender community. This community reminds humanity that we are more than just our bodies. We are eternal beings who can

defy our habitation in the earthly houses in which our spirit person dwells. Not only can we be transformed inwardly, but we can also transcend our physical bodies.

Christians claim to be people of the spirit, but people who make up the trans community can challenge the consistency with which we live out that conviction. Gospel music artist Donald Lawrence wrote a song called “Spiritual.” He sings: “You’re not a natural being / Having a spiritual experience / But you’re a spiritual being / Living this natural experience.” Transgender people have taught us that we are more than flesh and blood; we are spiritual beings living in houses that can either be inhabited as they are or renovated and reconstructed to become what we know in our souls they ought to be. A theological understanding of our human being as transcendent and eternal can make space for the recasting of bodies to correspond to an identity the spirit knows to be true.

As a gay man who believes in God, believes in the truth of Christ, and is part of the fellowship of believers, I have found it most difficult to convey this understanding of my present reality to those whose way of thinking is traditional and tends to be exclusionary. Why is it that we who call ourselves people of the

Though Christians speak of transformation of the heart, of the mind, and of the soul, we seem in fact to focus mainly on behaviors and actions related to what we do with our bodies.

Spirit and followers of Jesus put more emphasis on the physical and the material than on the spiritual? Though Christians speak of transformation of the heart, of the mind, and of the soul, we seem in fact to focus mainly on behaviors and actions related to what we do with our bodies. Our focus should be on the spirit of a person and that person’s relationship with God and others.

We in the sexually variant community often find ourselves treated as castaways and generational curse bearers not only by mainstream society but even more by Christians, those who are supposed to represent the merciful love of God. I have not found my sexual orientation a hindrance in my ever-evolving relationship with Christ, but others have internalized as self-hatred the attitudes perpetuated through religious institutions’ misuse of scriptural references dealing with human sexuality and gender roles and gender identity.

Dear friend, when you extend hospitality to Christian brothers and sisters, even when they are strangers, you make the faith visible. They've made a full report back to the church here, a message about your love. It's good work you're doing, helping these travelers on their way, hospitality worthy of God himself! They set out under the banner of the Name, and get no help from unbelievers. So they deserve any support we can give them. In providing meals and a bed, we become their companions in spreading the Truth.—3 John 1:5–8, The Message

Evolving self-awareness

Don't surrender all your joy for an idea you used to have about yourself that isn't true anymore.—Cheryl Strayed³

I don't have a personal story of a dramatic spiritual transformation of the kind often referred to as a salvation story or a Damascus road experience. For as long as I can remember I have had an awareness of the presence of God in my life. I was five years old the first time I publically voiced the conviction that Jesus was the incarnation of God.

As a child I had vivid dreams and clear premonitions. One particular dream stands out. In this dream I had died and gone to heaven. I saw the great white throne of God. I was unable to see God's face, and I saw no defining visual image of God—certainly not a white man. The only visible object was an enormous throne and an incomprehensible light that illuminated everything. There was only a sense of the presence of God, and peace consumed me. Not only did I feel God's presence but I also heard the voice of God. This audible voice said to me: "It is not your time; I have a great work for you to do on earth, and I am sending you to the world to tell my message of good news to all who will hear."

I was only five years old, and I didn't understand the meaning of this dream. I still do not completely understand the fullness of God's message of good news. Most of my life I have been part of a church, and I have committed myself to practices of prayer, fasting, and meditation. I know nothing else. My connection to the presence of God is all that I have ever known.

But yes, there was a turning point in my life, one I did not see coming. There was a period in my life when I experienced greater enlightenment. It was not a matter of drawing closer to God. I already had a strong relationship with God. *It was a time of deeper revelation of who I am and who I was created to become.* When the revelation came that I had homosexual desires, I was twenty years old, three years into being licensed into the gospel ministry. During this discovery, a number of things happened. I had my first sexual encounter, and it was with a man. My mother confronted me after eavesdropping on a phone conversation. I stepped down from ministry and I began to separate myself from the church, the so-called representation of God on earth. But I never separated myself from God.

I share this story to convey the message that we must be careful about how we perceive others. Some of us have transitioned from one sex to another. That physical experience is a transformation that is in some ways similar to a spiritual transformation. My personal transformation wasn't physical in the sense of involving a physiological change. It was a revelation to me of my sexual orientation and a spiritual enlightenment in which I developed a new awareness of my evolving soul.

An evolving understanding of God

My sense of myself as an evolving soul connects to an understanding of the nature of God. Consider the story of Moses's initial encounter with the God of Israel (Gen. 3–4). Moses was in the desert, and the Lord appeared to him in a blazing bush. In this encounter Moses received the eternal divine name of God: "I AM WHO I AM." Some rabbinic studies say this name reveals that our experience of God is eternally evolving. In God's essence God does not change, so we say that God is the same yesterday, today and forever. But these Jewish scholars suggest that the relationship that God has with humankind is organically evolving and metamorphosing throughout time.

This explanation clarifies scriptural accounts of humankind's encounter with God through the ages. The theological concept of progressive revelation refers to the process of God's continuing self-revelation to humanity in history through nature, preservation of the universe, miracles, direct communication, Jesus Christ, and

scripture. This idea enables us to say more definitively that just as languages, cultures, scientific understanding, and humankind's conception of truth develop through time, relationships, and experiences, so humanity's dealings with God also evolve through time.

A new breed of Gentiles

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name." Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol him." And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.—Romans 15:7–13, NIV

In the New Testament the term *Gentile* refers to uncircumcised Greeks. In line with the concept of progressive revelation, in making reference to Gentiles today we expand that understanding to include all who are not Jewish, but mainly Christians. I would contend that those in sexually variant communities, especially those who consider themselves believers—Christians—should be eligible to receive the Gentile classification. The term *Gentile* makes no distinction with respect to gender roles, sexual orientation, or ethnic or gender identity. Perhaps mainstream Christianity may find it more acceptable to refer to the community of misfits that live on the margins of society as a new breed of *Gentile*.

I'm not trying to convince anyone to subscribe to my way of thinking or adhere to my belief system. Nor am I trying to prolong the debate around sexuality, sexual expression, and behavior. My purpose is only to shed light on a relevant viewpoint, to open up

dialogue for those who may feel that their voices have been silenced, and to remind the church of its original and intended mission. In an effort to exemplify the merciful love of God manifested through Christ and his representatives (those who are the incarnation of the living Christ), I have sought in this article to address issues of perception—one's own perception of oneself and the churches' perception of others, mainly those of the sexually variant community.

Christians have become distracted and preoccupied with being a bounded group with a strict set of rules and regulations that all

The term Gentile makes no distinction with respect to gender roles, sexual orientation, or ethnic or gender identity. Perhaps mainstream Christianity may find it more acceptable to refer to the community of misfits that live on the margins of society as “a new breed of Gentile.”

must follow who want to be members of their exclusive society. Christ died so that pharisaic practices would not continue to divide people and render them powerless and hopeless. But in my investigation of scripture I see God's undeniable, merciful love manifested and dispersed to all humankind regardless of social status; socioeconomic situation; sexual orientation; gender, ethnic, and cultural perspective; or gender role and identity. The merciful love of God is available to all human beings. If it were not, then many biblical heroes would not have that status in the scriptural record.

I invite you to consider the possibility that sexually variant people could find their place in the progressive revelation of God in our time. If Rahab the prostitute, David and Solomon (whoremongers and womanizers), Peter the liar, Judas the betrayer, Paul the religious zealot and persecutor of Christ followers—and many more who could be mentioned who were outcasts and misfits of their society—could be conduits of God's mercy and grace, then why not homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and asexual people who also find hope in the merciful love of God? My plea is that we explore this possibility instead of blindly rejecting a community of people who may be conduits of God's merciful love being manifested in our world.

The path to God is an internal path, not an external one.—Reza Aslan

Notes

¹ *Same-gender loving* (SGL) is a term invented in the early 1990s by activist Cleo Manago as a description for homosexual and bisexual people, particularly in the African American community. Manago sought to culturally affirm African American homosexual identity.

² Reza Aslan, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey on SuperSoul Sunday, April 17, 2016; <http://www.supersoul.tv/supersoul-sunday/oprah-sits-down-with-religious-scholar-reza-aslan>.

³ Cheryl Strayed, *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 287.

About the author

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Embodied faith

A peacemaking approach to youth ministry

Chris Marchand

It's not unusual to spot a bear in the outback of Alberta's foothills. I suppose that's why I looked behind me as quickly as I did. The circle of concerned junior high girls had been staring down the trail, a few pointing in my direction. Serious faces told me that I might be in danger. Turning to protect myself from impending assault, I saw nothing but cedars. Continuing on my way, as I drew closer to the circle of doom, it became painfully obvious that in the girls' eyes *I* was the scary thing on the trail.

As the camp pastor for the week, I was eager to help kids grow in their relationship with Jesus. It was only my second night at chapel, but clearly I'd already given offense. As I invited myself into their circle, the group became solemn and quiet. I felt like I

Some teens are preoccupied with how their own and others' bodies are perceived. As we seek to help teens grow spiritually, we need to give thought to how this increase in body awareness might interact with spiritual formation.

was back in eighth grade, but instead of bolting for the boy's bathroom I asked, "What seems to be the problem?" Most of the girls stared at the dirt, though a few of the more brazen ones in the crowd rolled their eyes, giving me the impression that I should know better. There was a long pause, as though they were collectively willing me to solve the riddle without having to be told.

As I looked around the circle, it struck me that the girls were dressed almost identically. Same kind of shorts, shirts, threaded bracelets, and . . . Aha! The feet. Their sock-free feet all wore the same kind of leather sandals. I, having pragmatically considered the cool evening air, was wearing socks with my sandals. Dark socks. Oh the horror of this fashion faux pas! I now stood on the very brink of an adolescent shunning. They shook their heads in pity, waiting for me to slink away in shame.

Instead, I reached down and pulled my drooping socks up to my knees. Looking up, I noticed that a few of them had begun to smirk—and then we all erupted in laughter, and they proceeded to do their best to educate me on the finer points of summer footwear fashion. The next night, as I got up to speak, I noted that the entire front row of girls was decked out in smiles, sandals—and socks pulled up to their knees! You gotta love teenagers.

Jesus once said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; *or about your body*, what you will wear” (Matt. 6:25). These are compelling words, but some teens—like the girls I met at camp—are hypersensitive to bodies around them and preoccupied with how their own bodies are perceived. As we seek to help teens grow spiritually, it seems wise to give some thought to how this increase in body awareness might interact with spiritual formation.

We might consider questions such as these: How do we help teenagers grow in their relationship with Jesus, when image can distract them from loving their neighbour? How do we help them learn compassion in a world that treats bodies like things to be consumed? How do we help them engage in a spiritual formation that is an embodied faith, without advocating self-hatred on the one hand or the idolatry of bodies on the other? Are we to communicate that the body is the enemy of faith?

The Apostle Paul once wrote, “I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor. 9:27, NIV). Have we ever considered how a young person living with an eating disorder or a history of self-harm might hear these words? Is there a way that Anabaptist Christians might apply what we value about peacemaking to our language about the role of the body in spiritual formation?

These are just a few of the questions we might consider, as we think about helping teens grow closer to Jesus.

Full-bodied commitment

In Deuteronomy we read, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5). We might be tempted to parse a few of these words, encouraging

followers of Jesus to love with emotions, thoughts, and physical bodies, but this would be a mistake. The author enjoins love with heart and soul and strength, using these words to describe not separate faculties but a full-person commitment to God. In the ancient mind, one could not be emotionally attached to God while somehow being physically or cognitively detached. God was inviting the Hebrews to be a people wholly belonging to Yahweh, a “treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6), holistically engaged in the relationship.

Diane Chandler reminds us that the physical body, not just the soul, has been made in the image of God, and its primary purpose is to bring glory to God.¹ Although God’s glory can be seen in all people (Ps. 139:14), as followers of Jesus our goal is to consciously live a life worthy of the calling we have received (Eph. 4:1)—to glorify the God who has lavished grace on us (Eph. 1:7–8).

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Our bodies were created to bring glory to God, fully engaging in a committed relationship with God and the faith community. Furthermore, we’ve been given bodies in order to be stewards. In the opening chapters of Genesis, it’s clear that God has given humans the task of caregiving, as God reigns over all that God has made. We love God with our entire being, and as we do, we glorify

and honour God not only with our spiritual selves but even with the physical bodies we use to engage in the stewardship of the resources God has placed in our care.

The body ally

“For usual human beings in the usual circumstances, their body runs their life.”² When we’re talking about a person moving through adolescence, my hunch is that that dynamic is even more exaggerated. Think for a moment about what life was like for you

in grade nine. What did you think about your developing body? How much time did you spend preparing your body before going out? How sensitive were you to comments about your body? Did you find that you were more aware of other bodies than you had been before adolescence?

With all this awareness in mind, ask yourself: how did your body help you or hinder you in your ability to worship, to glorify God, and to be a steward of all that God had placed in your care? The physical realities we live with are inseparable from our

Our bodies provide the context not only for pain but also for hope, restoration, reconciliation, and healing. The body is the place where we meet with God, and it must come to serve as our ally in our transformation into Christlikeness.

spiritual selves. I recall some of my encounters over the years, with a teen who lost his brother to cancer, a young woman with an addiction to alcohol, a young guy who constantly cut himself, a girl who suffered haunting nightmares after a sexual assault. All these experiences were physical, and all created a context for conversations about faith in Jesus. In many instances the body seems like the enemy. Disease, desire, dysfunction, and trauma may make faith seem elusive, and yet our bodies provide the context not only for pain but also for hope,

restoration, reconciliation, and healing. The body is the place where we meet with God, and it must come to serve as a primary ally in our transformation into Christlikeness.³

When I was serving as youth pastor in South Dakota, I sometimes drove with teens in my little Toyota. I'd purchased the car in Canada, so the speedometer units were kilometers per hour. On several occasions, as kids noticed the needle on the gauge at 100, they would frantically instruct me to slow down. They thought I was going 100 *miles* an hour! Young drivers tend to be hypersensitive to adult driving practices including speed, (rolling) stops, turns, and hands on the wheel. *We can tell* young drivers what to do at a stop sign, but the real teacher is *what we do* at a stop sign.

As I walk or drive along the roads of life, not only do young people notice how I drive, they also observe how I treat my body. I can teach them with my words that their body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), but what tends to have a greater

impact is how I treat my own body. As we share life together, they notice how I interact with God with my entire person. They hear how I speak about my body. They see how I feed it, how I use it, how I treat it, how I dress it, whether I pierce or tattoo it, how I use it to build friendships or make enemies, and how I submit it to God. Teens will hear how I use my tongue to form words and my hands to help, heal, or hurt. All this bodily engagement becomes both the subject and the object of the discipling relationship.

Richard Dunn picks up on this idea of our lives as subject and object in our engagement with teens. He writes, “I have to learn to walk in rhythm with God *and* with the rhythm of an adolescent’s life. In doing so I recognize that I am both subject and object in the incredible mystery of God’s redemptive work in those to whom I provide spiritual care.”⁴ I’ve heard it said that ministry flows out of who you are, but I’ve come to understand that this statement is incomplete, for ministry also flows out of *how* you are. We are subjects of the unfolding work of God’s redemptive love in us. We are also objects: teachers, mentors, disciple-makers—living lives of worship, glorifying God with our entire being, and learning to be wise stewards of all that God has placed in our care.

We do all these things, sometimes well and at other times poorly, as we live our lives together with those whom God has called us to serve. The Apostle Paul captures this personal sentiment of discipleship when he writes, “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thess. 2:8). As adults, many of us are carrying baggage of our own related to our bodies, and yet we find ourselves with opportunities to help shape young lives. How can we help young people engage in a fully embodied faith, when the body has often seemed the very opposite of an ally in our own transformation into Christlikeness?

Peacemaking for an embodied faith

I came to faith in Christ after wasting my teen years on substance abuse, criminal activity, and reckless living. In my early years of faith, I was taught to reject the person I’d been (Rom. 6:6) and to grow into the new creation I was becoming (2 Cor. 5:17). As a young youth pastor, I occasionally set aside time to sit with a

counselor. On one occasion, I told him the details of a recurring dream. In the dream I am walking on a sidewalk, as my current self. I am a pastor, dressed in a suit and on my way to church. I hear a noise and turn to see my teenage self, foul and intoxicated. That self is screaming at the pastor, “Why do you hate me?” And the dream ends. When I awaken, I always feel the same: sad and confused. As I sat with my counselor, he had me close my eyes and put myself back into the dream. He had me ask my teenage self what he was angry about. He answered: “You left me behind.” It was as though Christian faith had split me into two parts, the part God loved and the part God hated. I held out my arms and pulled the teenager toward me and held him. Tears were flowing down my cheeks, as I told him I was sorry and that I loved him.

This experience has shaped me profoundly. In embracing my wayward youthful self, I began to discover that self-love and not self-loathing is the path to integration and wellness, and also to a kind of embodied faith that I would never have discovered as long I was stuck in sanctified self-hatred. We must help young

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people understand that although they have a sinful nature, they are not a sinful nature. The physical body creates complications for faith formation, but the rejection of our physical selves is no fast track to spiritual enlightenment. On the contrary, we may find that “dying to self,” if misunderstood, becomes a deceptive pathway to self-hatred and to the kinds of destructive behaviours we pray teens will reject. Brennan Manning elaborates on this very thing when he describes self-hatred as the dominant sickness crippling Christians and stifling their growth in the Holy Spirit.⁵

The problem here is one of a balancing spirituality. How do we hold to the truths of

God’s word about the dangers of the “flesh” while engaging in peacemaking with our bodies? Here are a few ways for us to envision embodied peacemaking, while engaging in adolescent spiritual formation. Paul writes, “Each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable” (1 Thess. 4:4). Self-control also appears as one fruit of God’s

Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Lent is a great time to participate with teens in the spiritual practice of self-control, as we take the radical step of denying our body a few small pleasures. In this practice, we learn that people don't live by bread alone (Matt. 4:4) but by the word of God. As we practice self-control and self-denial, we become even more aware of our body's incessant demands, and we learn that we can say no, not in self-hatred, but as an act of worship. In this gentle approach to embodied spirituality, we come to see that the body best serves as an ally in faith formation when it is brought under the lordship of Christ.

An embodied peacemaking might also include offering grace and forgiveness to ourselves, especially when we fail. How do we speak about ourselves in front of teens when we've made a mistake? It is a powerful experience for a teenager to watch an adult experience remorse for wrongdoing, followed by honest confession, making amends, showing grace to self, and making a change

Words can cause bruises that take a lifetime to heal. If we are to be wise in modeling peacemaking in youth discipleship, we will pay close attention to the way we use words.

in behaviour. If we dare to share our lives with teens as both subject and object of the discipling relationship, there will come a time when God will use us as the actual, physical object lesson. It's no fun, but these experiences can be life-shaping for teenagers as they observe our faith in action.

As I've spent time in conversation with teens, one of the most compelling indications of an authentic encounter with Christ is change in the way they use words. In James 3

we're warned about the tongue, the body part that can bring as much damage as a spark in a forest. An embodied peacemaker understands the power of words. Words can cause bruises that take a lifetime to heal. If we are to be wise in modeling peacemaking in youth discipleship, we will pay close attention to the way we use words.

We might commend ourselves for the gracious way we speak to teens, but what about the verbal warfare we wage against ourselves as they listen? Comments about our intelligence, our weight, our stupidity, making the same mistake *again*—it's the lesson after the lesson. Our teaching on self-esteem might have been fantastic, but the class after the class convenes when you start to demonstrate

what self-esteem actually looks like in your own life, while you're cleaning up afterward with the youth. Ministry flows out of who we are, but it also flows out of *how* we are.

Before you despair and toss youth ministry out the window, remember that kids are incredibly resilient. They can laugh and forgive, and some of them will even wear dark socks with their sandals just to make you feel better about your odd fashion choices. We're walking together and learning together about this God who is calling us to be a chosen people. The great surprise in ministry to teens is this: God is interested in what the Spirit is doing through you, yes, but God is just as interested in what the Spirit is doing in you.

Notes

¹ Diane J. Chandler in *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wellness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 181.

² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 168.

³ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴ Richard R. Dunn, *Shaping the Spiritual Lives of Students: A Guide for Youth Workers, Pastors, Teachers and Campus Ministers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2001), 89.

⁵ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2015), 7.

About the author

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From stage fright to confident embodiment of the gospel

Allan Rudy-Froese

I want to explore with you the often-ignored experience of stage fright in leading Sunday morning worship. If you are a worship leader, preacher, scripture reader, song leader, choir member—anyone called on to speak up or sing out in worship—I hope you will benefit from the insights, exercises, and practices offered here. In the interests of integrating our minds, hearts, and bodies for the sake of worship, I invite you to view these pages as a kind of workbook. In each section I list questions and physical exercises. You may want to ponder these questions and do these exercises by yourself or with others—your worship committee or worship team, for example. Warning: We are focusing on the human body here. This gets physical and personal. But we need to go here to

Performances are simply embodied ways of acting and being in the world. Here we will deal with preaching, leading worship, storytelling, and other actions we do in worship as performances.

face stage fright and move to confident embodiment in Christian worship. You'll want to wear loose-fitting clothing!

Throughout this exploration we will be focusing on the body. I will refer to our bodies in performance. I use the word *performance* as a positive and general term that describes conscious and unconscious actions and habits of the body. This usage contrasts with a negative use of the word, which has the connotation of being showy or fake.

Performance as a positive and general term captures everything from shaking hands or waving to a friend to doing surgery or ballet. Performances are simply embodied ways of acting and being in the world. In this sense we are performing all day: our bodies are in motion, performing habitual, conscious, and unconscious tasks. In the context of this article, we will deal with preaching, leading worship, storytelling, and other actions that we deliberately do in worship as performances.

The body culture of your church

Every congregation has its own body culture. As faith communities worship, we position our bodies and move in certain ways, yet we seldom ponder these movements. Picture your congregation in worship for a moment. Observe the bodies. In worship you are bodies in motion, in song, and in speech in service to God. You are not just talking and singing heads communicating with each other and with God on Sunday morning. You are bodies in communication. Some bodies are at the front leading, while the bodies in the congregation are sitting, standing, listening, singing. Which bodies are doing what? How are the bodies moving? How comfortable are those bodies in the worship space? Noticing bodies—including your own body—in worship will be your first step in understanding stage fright.

What is the body culture of your church? Don't be too analytical; just observe without judgment. In the church where I worshiped as a boy, the congregation sat most of the time, and once in a while we stood and held a hymn book. There were times when I used my hands to pass the offering plate. Also, we would walk forward for the children's story. Those were the four most common bodily movements in our worship service: sitting, standing, passing the offering plate, and walking to the front. The leaders of worship, mostly men, would sit facing the congregation and then walk to the pulpit and speak or lead singing there. Once in a while the preacher, my dad, would tell a story or recite a poem from beside the pulpit. Even as a child I noted that people walked to the pulpit in a way different from the way they normally walked. They moved formally, taking deliberate, dignified steps.

Recall and write down the bodily movements common in your worship setting, both those of the congregation and those of the leaders. Now perform these movements in your worship space. Sit, stand with a hymn book, walk to the pulpit, etc. Take it slow, so you can notice what your body is doing. Try this exercise on your own or do it with others.

After you perform these actions, ask yourself: What do you notice? Which of these movements do you appreciate? Which ones make you uneasy? Speculate about where some of these movements came from historically. Can you think of an instance when someone tried to do body movements that are not usually

done at your church? For example, if raising your arms in praise is not a part of your congregation's body culture, what happens when someone does this? What does your church's body culture say about your congregation?

A next step might be to compare your body culture to the body culture of another church you have experienced. If you are doing this exercise in a group, try a show-and-tell approach. Imagine my surprise when I attended a Jamaican Pentecostal church. People stood a lot more, and they swayed to the music.

Observe the bodily movements common in your worship setting, both those of the congregation and those of the leaders. Now perform these movements in your worship space. What do you notice?

Hands were lifted high in praise. Many people spoke back to the preacher as he preached. There were many times when we all went to the front for prayer. Those who have attended Catholic or Orthodox services may want to show and tell the movements of those body cultures. Speculate about why certain movements or body positions are important for your tradition or for another tradition.

An optional exercise might include noting other body cultures in our society. What is the body culture of fans at a basketball or

hockey game? What is the body culture of your school or place of work? How do these other body cultures differ from that of your congregation's worship? What might account for those differences?

You don't need to arrive at any grand conclusions, make any decisions, or theologize deeply here. Simply observe your church's body movements, try them out, try out some others—and take some time to ponder and discuss what you have noted.

What's with the butterflies?

When faced with the task of public speaking, people commonly speak of having butterflies in their stomach. This experience of butterflies is different for different people. Your experience of butterflies might be a matter of a few of them fluttering gently when you are in the public eye. For someone else, it might feel as though a hundred large, angry butterflies are colliding when she merely considers the prospect of public speaking.

It is not surprising that stomachs show up when we talk of stage fright. The enteric nervous system with its 100 million neurons is

sometimes referred to as a second brain, connected to our other brain by the vagus nerve. Most of its fibers carry information from the gut to the brain, rather than the other way around. Our stomachs tell us when we are hungry and sometimes even what we need to eat. But our stomachs' communication is not just about food. When we hear bad news, we may feel as though we got kicked in the gut. We say that hard experiences are gut wrenching. In a situation of unease, grief, or pain, we may physically shield our stomach, folding ourselves in, as though in protecting our belly we protect our very self. If we are going to deal with stage fright, we need to talk about our guts.

When we need to perform in public, some of us experience not just butterflies but stomach-ache, vomiting, and loss of appetite. What is happening in our bodies in the case of stage fright is a fight-or-flight response. When we face a threat—an attacking animal or the prospect of public speaking, for example—our adrenal system shifts blood flow from our stomach and other systems to our muscles, heart, and brain, preparing us to fight or flee. Our stomach becomes distressed as a result. For those who are often anxious or nervous, these stress responses can cause chronic problems such as ulcers and diarrhea or constipation.¹

For our purposes here, having a few butterflies is natural and good. Slight stress motivates us to prepare and then releases the adrenaline we need in order to perform in a given moment. In this case, our body is actually helping us do what we need to do. The body is putting out more energy for our public performance, which is just what we need. But for some of us, our bodies seem to work against us, protesting our public actions. Our bodies would have us flee the scene rather than stand in that place and preach the sermon or sing the song. We may stay there and do the thing we need to do, but underneath it all, the butterflies are warring.

Stage fright affects other systems in our body. In anticipation of or in the midst of public performance, we may experience shortness of breath, sweating, sleeplessness, dry mouth, a racing heart, and tense shoulders or jaw.

Again, the questions and exercises offered here are meant to help you notice without judgment. What bodily symptoms do you feel at the prospect of performing? Do you get nervous in a different way for different kinds of public performance? It may be

helpful here to take notes for a week or two and observe when and about what you feel anxious and where you are feeling that anxiety in your body.

A good exercise to do regularly, but especially on the morning of a performance, is this one: Lie on your back, take a few cleansing breaths, and spend a few minutes doing an inventory of your body. Where do you feel the stress? Breathing slowly, let your awareness move from your toes to your head. Be aware of your toes and your feet and your legs, moving up to your stomach, torso, arms, neck, and then head. Where are you tense? Try to release the tension you feel and just breathe. Now slowly let your awareness go the other way, from your head to your toes. Relax those parts of the body as you notice tension in them.

A good exercise to do alone or in a group is to stand and let your tummy go. Relax those muscles. Don't push your tummy out aggressively, just let it go. What does this feel like? Walk around like this for a few minutes and speak or sing, if you like. In our society we unconsciously keep those muscles really tight. But we don't need to, and if we just let those muscles go we have more energy for the performance at hand.

Slight stress motivates us to prepare and then releases the adrenaline we need in order to perform in a given moment. In this case, our body is actually helping us do what we need to do.

A longer-term way to become more aware of your body in connection with stage fright would be to enroll in an acting or improv class. Most acting or improv classes are safe spaces where you can push yourself to explore

your body and voice. The goal here is not to become an "actor" in worship or in the pulpit but to face your fears in a safe place and to further integrate your body, voice, and intentions.

How our communities can help: The art of rehearsal

Here we take another angle on stage fright and the possibilities of becoming a confident performer. Before we get to the crucial practice of rehearsal, we visit a theological and communal perspective on why we get so nervous in front of our people.

Stephen Webb's chapter "Stage Fright and the Origins of Christian Proclamation," in *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound*, gets to the root of the fears we

experience in congregational performance. Webb is following Paul Tillich, who in the middle of the last century made significant contributions to our understanding of anxiety. Webb notes that it is not surprising that we feel vulnerable and anxious when speaking in front of our beloved community. Speech is a strong expression of identity. My voice is me, and I identify my voice with my deepest self. But my identity and voice are also inseparable from my community. With my voice, identity, body, and community in such close relationship, I fear that if I misspeak, am at a loss for words, or simply blow a performance, my identity and my place in the community will be jeopardized. Fear of embarrass-

With my voice, identity, body, and community in close relationship, I fear that if I am at a loss for words or blow a performance, my identity and my place in the community will be jeopardized.

ment and even public humiliation are close at hand here. In the worst-case scenario I might see my identity, my coexistence in community, and my cherished faith threatened by public performance. No wonder that some find speaking publicly, especially in their beloved church community, a terrifying venture.²

How sad that in our church communities we may feel more trepidation than in other places at the prospect of public performance. I have met many articulate people who refuse

to read scripture or preach in worship, even though they provide similar kinds of leadership in their daily work or in their school context. Another kind of story I hear from some is that they will not lead worship or accompany hymns because they have heard too many critiques, muted or overt, when a performance is less than perfect. While we likely do not intend to make our worship services places for flawless performance, we may send critical signals, giving people pause when it comes to accepting invitations to perform. Our trust in each other has eroded, and we wonder, can I blow it on Sunday morning and still belong as part of the community?

The other side of this coin is that in community we have incredible resources to help each other lead worship on Sunday morning. We can rehearse and help each other to rehearse. Rehearsing or practicing is one of the surest ways to reduce stage fright and become able to confidently communicate in worship.

Questions to ponder on your own or with others are these: How does it feel to perform in church vs. other places such as school or work? What elements of worship do you lead with more confidence and which ones with less? In your church, who rehearses and who does not? Why? What are your congregation's unwritten expectations around performance?

One of the surest ways to deal with stage fright is to rehearse. When we know our stuff backward and forward, we feel more confident and our body is more inclined to get just the right amount of adrenaline. We get our body working for us, not against us.

Practice aloud on your own. Whether you are preaching, storytelling, or reading scripture, prepare and practice out loud

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and in the position and place where you will be performing. If the goal is public performance, we do well to start using our voices and bodies early on in preparation, so we can get our bodies into the game. When preparing a sermon, I find that it helps to read the scripture text out loud and often during the week, so I get used to the sound and vibration of the words.

Another practice to consider is rehearsing with others. In the same way that the worship band meets to practice, so the scripture readers, preacher, worship leader, and storyteller can meet to rehearse. This takes time, but it is helpful on a number of levels. Before Sunday we can get insight into how we are communicating. We become more comfortable in the space with our bodies, and we develop a community of worship leaders who can support each other on Sunday morning and beyond. It also makes sense for this small rehearsal community to gather and warm up together on Sunday morning before worship.³

In this little community that rehearses together, it is important to surround anxious people with love and support. Those of us who suffer from stage fright may need someone to talk to during the week. The night before or the hour before we preach or lead worship or tell a story, it may be important for another to pray with us, tell us that we are loved unconditionally, and remind us

that we have prepared well. Many of us who suffer from stage fright have voices in our heads that tell us we will fail. We need to hear voices that challenge these demons.

As noted above, constructive critique following Sunday worship is best done by those who have rehearsed together, because they have already built a relationship. Even here, it is best to have a good plan for how to debrief. I recommend Liz Lerman's critical response process.⁴ It assumes an invested community and openness to speaking honestly to each other so that we can all get back to work and improve whatever it is that we are doing. Dancers, writers, actors, scientists, and many others have successfully used this method of conversation. A few of us have been using this process at the seminary where I work, when we give each other feedback on sermons, worship, and writing.

How God makes us confident

Our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we do well to notice and befriend our bodies. These bodies can be avenues of God's grace. Some of our bodies are prone to great fear, yet there are paths that we can take to reduce that fear and allow our bodies to do what they need to do when they need to do it.

Our Sunday morning performance is an offering to God and to each other. That is all. What I offer is a fragile offering, for I am a human being. While I am invested in what I have practiced and performed, it is what I offer today. In this sermon I preach today, I am not carrying the truth with a capital T. I am carrying what I have found in my week of prayer and study and reflection and practice, and I offer it to God and to the community. I do not know all that this scripture text means, and I cannot capture all of it in my reading, but I do love this text, and this interpretation is what I offer on this day. I know there are many ways to tell this story, but today I offer this way of telling it. What we are doing on Sunday morning is offering the best we can do on that day to God and to each other. That is all, and together with the Spirit moving with and around our bodies in this space, that is enough.

A hymn I have come to love in connection with my own stage fright is "I will come to you in the silence," by David Haas. In the words of the chorus:

“Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you each by name.
Come and follow me,
I will bring you home;
I love you and you are mine.”⁵

Often in our hymns we are singing to God or to each other. In this one, the congregation sings the words of Jesus directed to me and you. I need to hear these words before, during, and after my performance. Whatever happens, I need to hold fast to this great love that casts out fear.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Benjamin Rudy-Froese and James Nelson Gingerich, MD, for helping me understand the enteric nervous system.

² Steven H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 74–76.

³ Thanks to Talashia Keim Yoder, family minister at College Mennonite Church and director of theater at Bethany Christian Schools (Goshen, IN), for invaluable insights on the art and benefits of rehearsal.

⁴ Liz Lerman and John Borstel, *Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process: A Method for Getting Useful Feedback on Anything You Make, from Dance to Dessert* (Takoma Park, MD: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, 2003).

⁵ Text and music © 1991 GIA Publications, Inc.

About the author

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Caring for enspirited bodies/embodied spirits

Don Yost and the staff of Maple City Health Care Center

If zombies showed up for dinner, most of us would count it as a not-so-good day. This image of soul-less bodies reminds us that disintegration is the stuff of nightmares. Conversely, biblical images of the reign of God connect powerfully with our human longing for (re)integration—of our bodies and spirits, of ourselves within the larger body of a healthy community in which all care for the well-being of others. No wonder, then, that we here at

Biblical images of the reign of God connect powerfully with our human longing for (re)integration—of our bodies and spirits, of ourselves within the larger body of a healthy community.

Maple City Health Care Center see integration as a key to accomplishing our mission of fostering community health.

Maple City Health Care Center is a twenty-seven-year-old experiment in community health. Our community is a stressed but resilient neighborhood on the north side of Goshen Indiana. Many people in the neighborhood work in recreational vehicle factories. Many speak Spanish. About a third of the families in the community are unable to obtain insurance. About a third live on incomes below poverty. Primary health care is the setting for the center's efforts to foster community health. The center hires doctors, nurses, and support staff to create a medical home and to offer affordable health care for people in the community. In the context of providing health care, we foster healthy community.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul uses the image of a body to talk about the unity of the church. In the same way that arms, legs, and a head are integrated into one body, separate individuals are unified into the body of Christ. Here at Maple City Health Care Center we have learned that the health of our bodies is related to our being integrated into the community: studies clearly show that loneliness and social isolation are risk factors as strongly associ-

ated with illness and premature death as smoking, obesity, elevated blood pressure, and high cholesterol. Strong relationships within a healthy community are as valuable as penicillin or flu shots in maintaining the health of individuals.

In what follows, we offer three stories about integration—stories about the integration of mind/spirit/body in individuals and stories about individuals becoming integrated into a community.

Bad milk

When Maple City Health Care Center started in 1989, most of the people in our community were immigrants from Appalachia. Over time, however, people from Central and South America moved into the low-cost rental houses in our neighborhood.

As more and more Latinas who were pregnant sought obstetrical care at the health care center, we became increasingly aware that many of them felt isolated. These women came from cultures in which women experience pregnancy and birth surrounded by mothers and aunts and sisters and grandmothers. They found themselves thousands of miles from friends and family, in a foreign country, and at the mercy of a strange medical system. We began to see how social isolation contributed to anxiety during pregnancy and to postpartum depression. Poverty and other social stresses exacerbated the challenges these young families were facing.

In response, we began to explore an approach to prenatal care in a group context. The model, known as Centering Pregnancy, had been pioneered at Yale University's midwifery school. Centering Pregnancy integrates medical care, education, and support as women whose babies are due at about the same time meet together eight to ten times, throughout the course of their pregnancy. Each woman brings the gift of her life experience to the group. The result is that the women learn at least as much from one another as from the physician and nurse who are present.

As we began to explore this model for offering prenatal care, we realized that it entailed a paradigm shift. Medical professionals would need to move away from seeing their role as that of offering technical expertise and information. Instead, the role of medical staff would be to facilitate a group process that elicited the gifts of women who were unsure that they had anything to offer.

In the beginning, we intended to offer a Centering Pregnancy group for English-speaking women and a different group for Spanish-speaking women. But we were operating on a small scale and we didn't have enough women expecting babies at any one time to offer two groups, one in Spanish and another in English. We considered starting a bilingual group, but people who had experience with Centering Pregnancy were skeptical. They warned that the cross-cultural dynamics and language barriers would interfere with group dynamics.

Despite misgivings, we decided to try assembling a bilingual, cross-cultural group. At our first session, we began by acknowledging that these Anglo and Latina women probably did not have much contact with each other. But these women were forming a group in order to prepare to receive babies. Their babies would soon grow into children who would play together and go to school together and perhaps eventually make new families together. Part of our task would be to begin to form a healthy community where these children could flourish.

Our interpreter translated everyone's words. Surprisingly, we found that the translation put us all on equal footing as we all

In spite of our care in speaking and listening, it felt like language was failing us when some of the Latina women began talking about bad milk.

struggled to make sure that we spoke clearly and listened well. But in spite of our care in speaking and listening, it felt like language was failing us when some of the Latina women began talking about bad milk.

For years, Maple City Health Care Center physicians and nurses had promoted exclusive breast-feeding as the best way to provide newborn nutrition and encourage mother-

baby bonding. We repeatedly observed that Latina mothers wanted to mix bottle feeding with breastfeeding. Unlike their Anglo counterparts, however, the Latinas often succeeded in maintaining breastfeeding even though they mixed it with bottle feeding. None of the physicians or nurses understood why Latinas wanted to mix feeding styles or why they were successful at it.

During one Centering Pregnancy session, the group began a discussion of breastfeeding. Beth, our midwife at the time, and James, our physician, asked the expectant mothers why one might consider introducing bottle feeding. A woman from Mexico

responded, “So you have something to give the baby when your milk is bad.” Puzzled, Beth asked, “Why would your milk be bad?” The response was, “If a mother is angry or upset, her milk is bad, and she should discard it until she’s calm again.”

All the Latinas around the circle nodded in agreement with the explanation. All the Anglos looked puzzled. Yes, the Anglos could see an emotional link between an upset mother and an upset baby, but milk turning bad? The idea that milk was a substance that could transmit dis-ease to the baby seemed like folklore.

As the conversation continued, Beth and James began to realize that medical care providers tend to see breast milk as a nutritional commodity that offers calories, nutrients, and immunity to disease. The Latinas saw breastfeeding as an expression of the relationship between mother and baby, as participating in the dynamics of the relationship. When a mother is upset, continuing to nurse means risking conveying that turmoil to her infant. To nurture her child well requires waiting to nurse until her tranquility is restored.

Beth and James came away from that conversation with a new respect for the relationship breastfeeding fosters and expresses, a new sense of the way mother’s milk, such an ordinary substance, can be infused with extraordinary qualities in the context of a calm and nurturing interaction.

When we began our experiment with pregnancy groups, cultural diversity seemed like a barrier to prenatal care and a strain on our resources. Instead that diversity has become a vehicle for learning at a deeper level and for building a more integrated community. Our reluctant embrace of change has, through the faith of those who have participated so generously, made all of us more whole.

A place of belonging

Bert lives with obesity, hypertension (high blood pressure), and hyperlipidemia (too many lipids in the blood). As if these conditions weren’t enough, tests show that he is pre-diabetic.

Before 2016, Bert faced these problems on his own. On the day in March that Bert became a patient at Maple City Health Care Center, he became part of a team. Like every other Maple City

patient, Bert's patient care team included a physician, a nurse practitioner, a nurse health coach, a nurse care coordinator, a behavioral health provider, a dietitian, a social worker, medical assistants, and a health insurance navigator.

At Maple City Health Care Center, we have organized our care around patient care teams because we see our patients as a complex mix of physical, mental, and spiritual characteristics. Each patient needs the help of specialists in each area, but the specialists also need interaction with the other members of the team.

Bert's patient care team helped him with tests, medicine, and education. They helped him with coaching and encouragement.

Almost all people who make a big change in the way they live make that change with the help and support of other people.

But Bert's team got bigger than just his patient care team. It grew to include other patients.

Bert joined one of Maple City Health Care Center's healthy living groups. Members of the group faced problems like Bert's—obesity, hypertension, and diabetes. Members of the group all needed to make changes in the way

they lived. Ingrid, one of our dietitians, notes that almost all people who make a big change in the way they live make that change with the help and support of other people. The members of the healthy living group met for eight weeks. Members set goals, told stories, held each other accountable, and shared victories and frustrations.

At first, Bert dominated the group. The words seemed to pour out of his mouth—which was even more of a problem than usual because all of the rest of the members of the group spoke Spanish. An interpreter had to turn everything Bert said into Spanish.

Maybe it was because of the interpreting, which tends to require speakers to slow down and speak more carefully. Maybe it was because of a sense that people were listening and responding. Or maybe it was because the tangible support of the group diminished Bert's sense of loneliness. Whatever the reason, by the third group session Bert was speaking less and listening more. Bert engaged in conversation. He asked questions. He stuck to the topic at hand.

In remaining sessions, Bert offered stories and wisdom that came from his experience as a recovering alcoholic. He brought a

copy of the serenity prayer to share. His new Spanish-speaking friends asked to have the prayer translated. Bert set goals for himself, but he didn't feel judgment from the group when he occasionally missed a goal.

At the end of their time together, the members of the group celebrated what they had accomplished. Bert lost twenty pounds and lowered his blood pressure from a reading that was a cause for concern to a reading that was normal. His risk for diabetes diminished.

For Bert, a group of people from a different culture who spoke a different language became a place of belonging. In the midst of this small community, Bert not only found the physical, mental, and spiritual strength he needed, but he also assisted others in their struggles and found a way to contribute to the overall health of our community.

Breaking in

Although the health care center is located in a low-income community and we store lots of medications on site, we have

Just as our construction project reached completion, we arrived one morning to find a new—expensive—metal door ruined because someone had pried it open with a crowbar. We decided the time had come to put a stop to the break-ins.

never had much trouble with break-ins. But some years ago, when we were in the midst of a building expansion, someone broke in one night. The next morning we arrived to find dirt and glass shards on the carpet inside the back door.

Several nights later, a window was broken and a few dollars were stolen from the cash drawer. We notified the police, but the break-ins continued. The intruder toyed with our otoscopes (tools for ear exams), rummaged through our collection of books on pregnancy and childbirth, and played with our microscopes. We were unsettled and

wondered why this intruder was breaking into a community health center, of all places.

Then the break-ins stopped for several months. But just as our construction project reached completion, we arrived one morning to find a new—expensive—metal door ruined because someone had pried it open with a crowbar.

We decided the time had come to put a stop to the break-ins. We weren't inclined to barricade the place, but we did improvise a security system. We kept a telephone line open inside the back door so the health center director could use her home phone to listen to what was happening at the center during the night.

A couple of nights later, our director awoke to the screech of metal on metal. The sound was coming over her phone as our night visitor again used a crowbar on the center's metal door. We

Tony's break-ins eventually convinced us that we had not succeeded in addressing his need for a more complex kind of healing. Tony was on a quest and he kept intruding into our space to tell us so.

called the police and they apprehended Tony, a seventeen-year-old high school student who was one of our patients. Tony had significant hearing loss and was struggling socially and academically. His parents had been aware of his earlier nighttime roaming and had installed an alarm system at home to alert them when he tried to leave his room. After several months without problems, they had turned the alarm off. That was when our break-ins resumed.

Dan, one of our board members, often volunteered at the center. Dan had a son who had been in some trouble with the law as a teenager. Dan pled with us to refrain from just turning our intruder over to the legal system. With our blessing, Dan worked with the prosecutor. The court eventually sentenced Tony to two hours a week of community service—at the health care center. A sullen Tony showed up and half-heartedly did the tasks we assigned: cleaning gutters, picking up litter, pulling weeds, and doing yard work.

Because we knew that social isolation has been identified as a big risk factor associated with poor health and early death, we had been trying to address the isolation of some members of our community by identifying activities they enjoyed and inviting people (patients) who enjoy similar activities to do them together. We had identified several people who liked to cook and had invited their families to meet in the health center's kitchen/community room on Wednesday afternoons to take turns cooking for each other. Some people in the group spoke English and some spoke Spanish. Some were beginning to learn each other's language.

One week Tony showed up to do his community service on a Wednesday afternoon. A member of the cooking group noticed him and invited him to join them for their meal. Tony disappeared, but reappeared a few minutes later with some banana bread he had brought from home.

From then on, Tony did his community service on Wednesday afternoon, and he stayed for the shared meal. His disposition changed from sullen to sunny and he began to do his chores wholeheartedly. Before long, Tony had completed his required community service, but he kept coming each week to volunteer and to eat with the group. We were amused when he told us one day that he'd started to patrol the area at night with his dog so there wouldn't be any trouble with people breaking in.

One week Tony announced that he'd made the honor roll at school for the first time. We had a party to celebrate with him.

Tony finished high school on schedule and went on to study at a local community college. He now has a job in our community.

Our contributions to Tony's healing were not the result of our program as much as the fruit of impulses among people—mostly volunteers and patients—who came together to reach out and include one another.

As a staff, we started out by feeling resentment about the intrusion into our space and the messes we had to clean up. Now we rejoice in Tony's success and feel pride in him and have an investment in his future.

Although health care center staff had been providing standard medical care for Tony for years, his break-ins eventually convinced us that we had not succeeded in addressing his need for a more complex kind of healing.

Tony was on a quest and he kept intruding into our space to tell us so. We perceived his way of getting our attention as an offense, but Dan's compassion and Tony's response to what flowed from it gave us the opportunity to see Tony as someone in search of integration, connection, and community—the ingredients that got him through a rough patch in his young life.

Our contributions to his healing were not the result of our program as much as the fruit of impulses among people—mostly volunteers and patients—who came together to reach out and include one another. In the end, our staff simply watched as

patients and volunteers took Tony in and gave him a sense of belonging and purpose.

Our stories, your stories

We are determined to resist the temptation to extrapolate theories from these stories. Instead, we trust that the stories will offer you their wisdom and remind you of the stories you know—stories about people individually and collectively becoming more whole and sharing in the astonishing gift of a community of abundance, imagination, and shalom.

About the author

Don Yost is chief storyteller for Maple City Health Care Center and for Vista Community Health Center in Goshen, Indiana. Vista Community Health Center is Maple City's new sister site. You can read more stories at www.mchcc.org. Names have been changed to protect patient privacy.

Embodied to our end

Beth Landis

For the last several months of my father's life, his dementia had progressed enough that he did not recognize me, although he thought I looked familiar. Soon after he moved to a nursing home, he fell and broke his hip and then developed an infection.

I advise conversations about end-of-life issues at all ages, but I take it up a notch with friends and patients in their fifties. I caution them that if they don't discuss these issues in midlife, situations involving care for themselves or their parents can get complicated.

His quality of life had diminished, and he no longer roamed the halls, smiling and seeking conversation. He was confined to his bed, unable to understand his restrictions. His physician asked us whether we wanted to allow the infection to run its course and let Dad pass away.

Several years earlier, I had insisted that my parents answer a set of questions about how they wanted to spend their last days and what medical treatment they would want in a variety of circumstances. My parents weren't especially happy with my request for this conversation, but they cooperated. To several of the questions, my dad had responded, "I don't know if you should spend money for that. I would rather have it go toward missions."

When the doctor asked us for a decision, my mother and my siblings were aware of these answers, which we knew to be consistent with Dad's lifelong values. We agreed that it would have been fine with Dad for us to accept this illness as the occasion of his death.

Care of the body at the end of life is a broad topic, and many books have been written about many aspects of such care, including wills, legalities, hospice, funerals, and burials. Obviously one cannot expect to address the subject in depth in a single brief article. Here, with pastors and faith communities as a focus, I will

share from my experience in more than thirty years of work as a registered nurse and family nurse practitioner in dealing with people who are facing death.

Encouraging midlife conversation about death and dying

I advise conversations about end-of-life issues at all ages, but I take it up a notch with friends and patients in their fifties. I caution them that if they don't discuss these issues in midlife, situations involving care for themselves or their parents can get complicated. I encourage them to take up these conversations while the prospect of dying seems relatively remote, because I am aware that many people are not able to express their preferences as they approach their death. We spend a huge amount of time preparing for births and weddings and much less time preparing for death. In Idaho, where I live, a survey by the Boise State University Center for the Study of Aging found that "people in Idaho are comfortable talking about death but often they have not had key end-of-life conversations. . . . 4% talked to clergy/

As our urban congregation contemplated having end-of-life discussions, we realized that most of us do not have family nearby, that our church community knows us better than our families do.

spiritual leaders, but almost ¼ (24%) want clergy/spiritual leaders to initiate conversation."¹

For years, ethicists have emphasized the importance of end-of-life discussions in families. But as our urban congregation contemplated having such discussions, we realized that most of us do not have family within three hundred miles, that in fact our church community knows us better than our biological families do. We agreed that we needed to have these conversations with each other. Special circumstances gave us a sense of the timeliness of such conversation and the importance of doing it in the congregation. A widow remarked that after her husband died she wanted to review her choices, because her perspective had changed, as had her significant others. Single people among us also needed to be included in our end-of-life conversations.

Advanced directives

One of the things we needed to consider was advanced directives.

These are legal documents that provide instructions about life-sustaining treatments when a person is no longer able to speak on her own behalf. These end-of-life directions may be called a living will, Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (POLST), or Physician Orders for Scope of Treatment (POST); names and documents differ from state to state and province to province. The instructions found in such documents are usually specific for medical care and don't incorporate faith values. They tend to be geared toward chronic and terminal illness. For healthy people who don't know what crisis will arise, what they offer is limited. They are helpful as a baseline, but they may not provide much guidance for family and medical providers.

In 1995, the American Medical Association circulated "The Medical Directive," which included various scenarios.² Although it is an old tool, it does offer a range of options for several situations you may confront. That said, the situations it covers may well not include what will happen to you—but if you have talked about your preferences for the circumstances it does address, your family and friends will know something about the choices you would consider. I used this tool with my parents.

The "Five Wishes" booklet is popular; more than twenty-five million people around the world have completed it, and it does have some legal merit. A person using this resource indicates preferences for medical, legal, emotional, and spiritual care at the end of life.³ The Conversation Project, another excellent resource, provides an outline and words to get discussions going. It also includes guidelines for a situation in which one already has dementia.⁴

In 2014, *The Atlantic* published an influential article by Ezekiel Emanuel: "Why I Hope to Die at Age 75."⁵ In an interview, Emanuel says that the title given the article was not his choice and it shifts emphasis away from what he considers more important issues:⁶ giving primary attention to quality of life and normalizing saying no to medical care (curative or preventative) intended to prolong life in one's later years. He asks readers to consider how they wish to be remembered and whether they want to prolong their living or their dying. Although he doesn't explicitly address faith perspectives, religious convictions could easily be incorporated in the position he articulates. Discussion of this

article can bring into sharp focus one's views about quality of life and ethical considerations around medical technology and its costs at the end of life.

Everence, a faith-based financial services organization, has resources on its website for individual and congregational use. One of my favorites is the *Personal Financial Affairs Directory*, a booklet that enables individuals to compile in one location information about their finances. For education, the Everence end-of-life curriculum guide provides excellent videos and materials for families, adult classes, and small groups.⁷

Another part of advanced directives is naming someone to make healthcare decisions if you are unable to do so. Again, states and provinces have different nomenclature; this person may be called your healthcare proxy or healthcare attorney. People often assume they should name their closest relative, their spouse, or one of their adult children, but I wonder whether a close friend would sometimes be a better decision-maker. A family member may know life history but be immobilized during a crisis. Some family members don't want the weight of a decision about end-of-life medical intervention to rest on them. Asking a close friend to be the designated person or to provide back-up support may be a good choice.

Many tools are available for advanced directive discussions.

And you may want to use your imagination to stipulate considerations outside the scope of what these generic tools offer. For instance, I remember reading about someone who did not want to be kept alive when she could no longer laugh.

Many folks want to die at home. If that works for caregivers, it is a good option. The general rule is that a person needs to move to another level of care when the caregiver can no longer handle the burden.

How do you want to be cared for at the end of life?

By your family. A century ago, many people died at home, because women were at home and available to care for dying family members. Now changes in external circumstances and income levels may make other options more advisable. One woman said to me, "I

wouldn't want my daughters—who live out of state—to feel they needed to stop their fulfilling careers to come to care for me for

weeks on end. As a society we haven't really figured out how to share the caring work that women traditionally were expected to do."⁸

Many folks want to die at home. If that works for caregivers, it is a good option. The general rule is that a person needs to move to another level of care when the caregiver or community can no longer provide care. The decision is not a matter of a certain diagnosis or disease. It is not about mobility or dementia or feeding oneself. Anything can be taken care of at home for a

Some folks would want regular pastor visits after a terminal diagnosis. Some would want scripture reading and prayer. What our pastor wants from each of us is a completed "Facing Death Planning Form" on file in the church office.

price. But when the caregiver can no longer handle the burden, for whatever reason, then it is time to make a change.

When our body fails and we can no longer be cared for at home, we may express anger. Although the frustration is directed outward, the real loss could be our awareness that our body is deteriorating. Who are we and what does it mean to think of our physical self as our body when it will no longer obey our commands? People who want to be cared for at home may feel that their bodies have betrayed them when death doesn't come as quickly as promised or when an illness doesn't

progress as expected or complications arise. Sometimes healthcare providers unwittingly set up unhelpful expectations about timing or a certain kind of death.

By your pastor. Our adult education class had a discussion with our pastor about care we want from him at the end of our lives. We concluded that if he brings Communion he should bring others from the congregation, because our theology says that the Lord's Supper is about relationships (among other things). Some folks would want regular pastor visits after a terminal diagnosis. Some would want pastoral visits to include reading scripture. Some would want prayer.

What our pastor told us he wants from each of us is a completed "Facing Death Planning Form" on file in the church office.

One pastor told me she likes to anoint dying parishioners with oil, as a preparation for burial. Sometimes she also leads a ritual in which the dying person anoints the rest of the group.⁹

By your church community. How do you want to be cared for by your church community at the end of life? Many people think

When her husband's illness worsened and he moved into a hospital bed in their living room, one member of our congregation set up a quilt frame there. Friends could come and quilt and be present with them.

first of music: they want people to sing outside their house, in the halls, or at their bedside. Food for family members is a common tangible expression of the congregation's care.

When her husband's illness worsened and he moved into a hospital bed in their living room, one member of our congregation set up a quilt frame there. Friends could come and quilt and be present with them.

Many congregations give prayer shawls or lap quilts as expressions of their desire to surround the dying person or their family members with warmth and comfort.

Dying

Preparation. Hospice care is now widely available in the United States and can be delivered in multiple settings, from home to a variety of institutional ones. Hospice nurses have become midwives in death. They are frequently the ones to explain to family members the particulars of the patient's medical situation and prepare them for the dying process. These nurses are present as the person passes away.

Palliative care is less well known but also valuable. The focus is on improving the quality of life that remains to the ailing person. This care may or may not include hospice and medical interventions.

Canadians tend to use the terms *palliative care* and *hospice care* interchangeably, with variation across the country in funding and settings of care. Both terms refer to end-of-life care that protects dignity and provides freedom from pain, surrounded by loved ones.

Preparation for death for people who are part of faith communities often involves reflections and final conversations with pastor, family, and community. When people know they are dying, they often want to share stories. Sometimes they talk for days and sometimes not until just before death. A variety of tools

for life review are available. The big themes that emerge in this process are love, reconciliation, and healing. Something about facing death often makes the person dying and those being left behind more willing to release resentments and open themselves to love.

Death. Dying is something nobody can do for another. In an ultimate sense, we walk that lonesome valley by ourselves. What happens during death? What is the thin space between heaven and earth? A traditional explanation is that the soul leaves the body. Physiologically, medical practitioners define death in terms of certain criteria that address our need for legal clarity, but some bodily functions stop before these criteria are met and some afterward. At the end of the process some people report seeing bright light, angels, music, beautiful colors, and family members who have gone before them in death.

Sometimes we are told that the body is only a receptacle for the soul, but our bodies are more than that. They allow us to be present to others, to serve others, to enter into a wide range of experiences, from the awful to the ecstatic. The relationship between body and soul or spirit is a mystery which theologians and poets are better equipped than I to address.

Some Veterans and Catholic hospitals have volunteers take shifts to sit at dying patients' bedsides so that nobody dies alone. Some people want permission to die, and when their children or spouse assure them that it is okay to go, they die. Contrary to common belief, some people prefer to die alone. After four days of hovering at death's door, one of my patients slipped away when his family members had all stepped into the kitchen.

It is also a myth that Christians have more peaceful deaths. A hospital chaplain told me that "peaceful deaths have more to do with whether people get to die the way they want to."¹⁰

After death

In some cultures loved ones bathe the body as part of a ritual of saying good-bye. An autopsy or organ donation may leave a body with cavities, and the family members who touch the corpse should be prepared for these hollow areas.

Our day shelter for people who have been homeless bears witness to their lives with a prayer service after death and in an

annual observance of National Homeless Person's Memorial Day, on December 21.

A corpse may be cremated, buried, or donated to science. A graveside service is the final act of care for the physical body in dominant North American culture. Memorial services to celebrate a life range in form from parties and picnics to church services and more.

Variations

Pastors get called when things don't go as planned in life and death.

Death early in life. With a miscarriage a dream, a future, and a fetal life inside a woman's body die. Churches traditionally have not done well at marking the grief that attends the loss of an unborn child. One friend told her congregation about her recent miscarriage. She was overwhelmed when so many women came to her afterward and told their stories. Miscarriage is more common than we acknowledge, and these women's wounds were raw. Their cumulative grief added to her pain. Another woman in a similar situation found it helpful to know that so many others had gone this way before her and understood how bereft she was. Young parents need pastoral conversation to help them figure out what kind of support and memorial will be helpful to them after such a loss. Planting a tree is a common ritual after miscarriage.

Stillbirths can be especially difficult for parents and for pastors. A good time to learn about the practices and policies of your local hospital and midwives surrounding stillbirth is now, not in crisis. One service available in the United States and Canada is offered by the nonprofit organization Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep, which provides the gift of remembrance photography for parents suffering the loss of a baby at birth.

The death of an older child is also deeply tragic, and a variety of books, websites, and support groups address the specialized needs of parents and children facing a child's death.

Traumatic injuries. Some medical technology enables practitioners to keep bodies alive but cannot restore people to their prior state of health. In the event of catastrophic injury, the injured person's family often faces questions about what should be done for their loved one. Families base such decisions on medical

advice about the person's condition and prospects, on the person they knew, and on their love for this body and soul—this person. The choice might be between allowing death to come on one hand, and using technology to maintain breathing and heartbeat on the other; bringing back the loved one they knew may not be a possibility. In this circumstance many practical, ethical, philosophical, and theological questions arise. With what assurance can a surgeon or emergency physician speak about the likelihood of any change in function in the near or more distant future? What do we owe our loved one who is unresponsive and likely to remain so? If the merest physical function is maintained by machines and medications, is the soul present? Traumatic brain injuries that affect behavior and personality raise a host of additional questions about the nature of human identity and will. Wise providers and pastors will offer support as loved ones wrestle with these deep questions.

Disabilities. People with disabilities and their families may have specific needs around death and dying. One resource in addressing this important question is Duane Ruth-Heffelbower's book *After We're Gone: A Christian Perspective on Estate and Life Planning for Families That Include a Dependent Member with a Disability*.¹¹

Toxic theology. Some stories about being present with the dying are filled with love and reconciliation and dignity. Other times, such crises bring a toxic theology to the fore. A family may fear that their loved one has gone to hell because he committed suicide. Parents may fear that their dying daughter will not be saved because she did not attend church. A dying parent may be concerned about her children and the condition of their souls. Or an elderly man may be fearful about what awaits him in the afterlife, despite a long and faithful life. Chaplaincy programs and classes in spiritual caregiving can help pastors provide sensitive support to such people, gently offering other perspectives on God's constant care for them.

Conclusion

It is no easy matter to begin to confront and talk about our mortality and to consider options and articulate preferences about the choices we and our loved ones may face as we come to die.

But the ancient Romans believed that remembering that we must die helps us gain perspective necessary to living well, and the psalmist asks God to help him number his days, so that he would gain a heart of wisdom. A recent book, *When Breath Becomes Air*, is a moving account of thirty-seven-year-old neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi's attempt to learn how to die and how to live in the face of death. He writes, "Before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn't know when. After the diagnosis, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn't know when. But now I knew it acutely. The problem wasn't really a scientific one. The fact of death is unsettling. Yet there is no other way to live."¹²

My hope is that our reflections and conversations about dying and death can help us, individually and as communities of faith, live and love better through all the stages of our living and dying. My prayer is that pastors will draw on wells of God-given grace as they accompany us in our walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Notes

¹ Boise State University Center for the Study of Aging, Idaho End of Life Survey, Fall 2006, 1; <http://hs.boisestate.edu/csa/files/2011/06/communicating-wishes-brief.pdf>.

² "My Medical Directive"; http://endlink.lurie.northwestern.edu/advance_care_planning/directive.pdf.

³ Aging with Dignity, "Five Wishes"; <https://www.agingwithdignity.org>. There is a charge to order or download the forms.

⁴ <http://theconversationproject.org/>.

⁵ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/10/why-i-hope-to-die-at-75/379329/>.

⁶ See James Hamblin's video interview with Ezekiel Emanuel, "How Long Do You Want to Live?" at <http://www.jameshamblin.com/how-long-do-you-want-to-live/>.

⁷ "End-of-Life Planning"; <http://www.everence.com/end-of-life-planning/>.

⁸ Anne Hausrath, interview by the author, February 28, 2016.

⁹ Dawn Yoder Harms, interview by the author, March 7, 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Duane Ruth-Heffelfower, *After We're Gone: A Christian Perspective on Estate and Life Planning for Families That Include a Dependent Member with a Disability*, 3rd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2011).

¹² Paul Kalanithi, *When Breath Becomes Air* (New York: Random House, 2016).

About the author

Beth Landis, RN, MSN, is a member of Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship in Boise, Idaho. She minored in gerontology and public health policy and has served on several ethics committees dealing with end-of-life issues. She welcomes your responses to this article; contact her at bethelandi@gmail.com.

Blessing

Gayle Gerber Koontz

Caregiver's hands
wide as the Montana sky
swaddle my mother's emaciated arms,
hand her weights—outrageous pink—
to strengthen hope,
drive her daily through the countryside
beyond her body.

Farmer's hands
strong with horses
gentle my mother,
skittish,
shrinking with loss,
into a smile, a stitch on a pineapple sampler.

Their four hands
giving and receiving blessing
that only those who know we are always dying
understand.

About the poet

Gayle Gerber Koontz is professor emerita of theology and ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. She is a lover of the power and music of words.

Napkins for a wedding

Gayle Gerber Koontz

Hemming is a comfort,
dusty blue, navy, purple, rose
colors of a prairie sky.
None of the uncertainty.
She folds the cloth once
twice
straight like a highway in Kansas.
“Will you marry me?” he asked long ago.
“Maybe.” She reminded him of the wind.
Where would the road lead?

The iron is so full of the past
steam burns her fingers
turning the hem for stitching.
She blows on them
shedding the small irritations
the arguments
misunderstandings
of forty years of marriage.
She leans on the hot fabric,
the authority of the iron
pressing her own faithlessness flat
forgiven
remembered.
Disorder constrains the soul as much as order
she thinks
and smiles.

She lets the machine needle the rows
faster than fingers
than her grandmother’s fingers

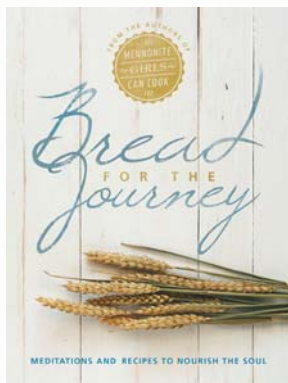
the grandmother who did not know
as her mother had not known
as she had not known
who they and the men whose hands they held
would become,
they whose faces they traced
imminent strangers
threaded so close
they could hear each other's thoughts.
Children would swell their bodies
so tight they could not bear the joy.

A piece finished, she stops to snip loose thread,
shakes cloth soft, holds it to her cheek.
Her son lanky with laughter
on his wedding day
napkins pushing up from the tables like rampant flowers
like flowers spilling from her new daughter's arms
like flowers arching in arbor
like flowers timid and wild
will take her
and she shaking red-gold hair at the evening sun
will set down her napkin
and rise to him
nodding yes
and yes.

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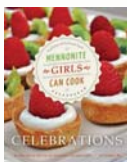


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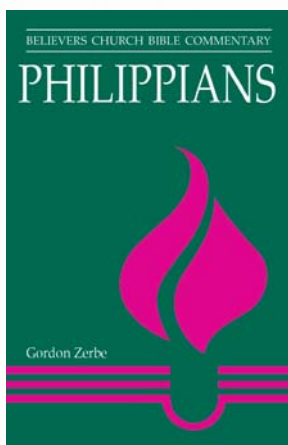
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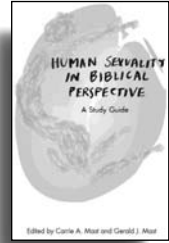
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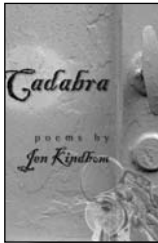
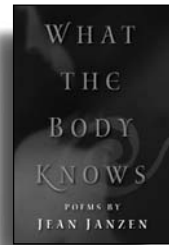
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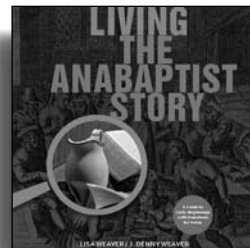
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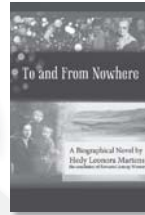
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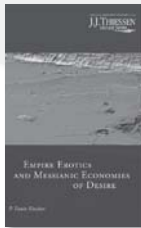
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