

Flesh and Blood Spirituality: Honoring the Body as Spiritual Practice¹

*Ruth Haley Barton, founder and chief executive officer,
Transforming Center*

I am writing as a spiritual seeker and as a spiritual director, someone who has been on a journey of connecting the dots between life in the body and my own spirituality for many years. Now I am intent on bringing that integration to my work with others in spiritual direction and in the Transforming Center.² I am always working toward integrating life in the body with my spirituality, because whatever we are doing or not doing in our own lives is what we will bring to those to whom we minister. If we do not have an integrated view of life in the body ourselves, it will be very hard to bring a positive spiritual perspective to others as we care for them in their bodies.

The Spiritual Journey and Life in a Body

Unfortunately, when it comes to life in a body we Christians have inherited what Stephanie Paulsell calls “an ambiguous legacy.”³ Knowing

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² The Transforming Center exists to create space for God to strengthen leaders and transform communities. We serve leaders and influencers of purposeful communities—churches, nonprofits, and businesses—who long for new rhythms that allow them to flourish in their life and leadership. We walk with pastors and leaders, helping them distinguish God’s voice beyond all the noise so they can lead from that place. For more information, see <https://transformingcenter.org>.

³ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 5.

this is an important first step in understanding the lack of integration many of us experience. But after we understand this ambiguous legacy and how it developed, our task is to move beyond the ambiguity, first by engaging the biblical witness—ascertaining what Scripture has to say about our bodies—and then by exploring spiritual practices that help us receive life in a body as a gift, which is the first step toward learning how to honor God in our bodies.

It was in the process of trying to stay faithful to my spiritual journey that I first began to face my own profound ambivalence toward life in a body. At the ripe old age of thirty, I could no longer ignore the fact that I was tired, lethargic, and somewhat depressed. Thinking that my lethargy and lack of enthusiasm for life were psychological in nature, I went to a psychologist who was also a spiritual director. To my surprise, some of our initial conversations dealt with my physical condition: my eating patterns, how much sleep I was getting, whether I was getting enough exercise and drinking enough water. I learned that the human body is 60 to 65 percent water and that I was dehydrated much of the time, a problem exacerbated by the fact that I was relying on caffeine for energy. My director also inquired into whether I was paying attention to my overall health.

In all of this, I realized that even though I had been a Christian all my life, here I was in my early thirties never having paid attention to my body. Even though I had been raised in the church as a pastor's kid, nobody at church or home had ever helped me pay attention to life in my body as a part of my spiritual life. So it was astonishing to me that a spiritual director would start her work with me by helping me pay attention to life in my body.

During that time, I was also reflecting on the story of Elijah and his journey into the presence of God in 1 Kings 19. I was struck by the attention God gave to Elijah's body at the very beginning of that journey. He helped Elijah give attention to his physical condition, even going so far as to send an angel to Elijah in the wilderness with a jar of water and "angel food cakes" (cakes baked by angels on a hot stone in the wilderness!). The angel told Elijah, in his depleted state, that the first thing he needed was to eat; "otherwise, the journey will be too much for you" (1 Kings 19:7). In other words, "if you don't strengthen yourself physically, you will not be able to take the spiritual journey."

I was comforted to find Elijah in the wilderness, slumped down under the solitary broom tree, needing an angel to tell him how to care for his

body, because I resonated with this experience. I realized that I, too, needed to pay attention to my body and to care for it. Thank God for a good spiritual director who could say, “You know what, Ruth, you have *got* to connect the dots between your spirituality and your life in your body.” I had to admit that I had the same blind spot as Elijah. I began acknowledging that I had become so run down that I could no longer be present to the journey to which God was calling me.

This experience was eye-opening. It forced me to face the fact that rather than caring for my body as I would any other highly valued gift, I had been driving my body like a truck. I had been using it for my own ends to the point that it was now protesting and trying to get a bit of attention. As I paid attention, I discovered that my diet included far too much sugar and junk food. Rather than getting enough rest, I was caffeinating for additional energy. I had never considered the importance of drinking enough water. I hadn’t realized that sometimes feelings of tiredness were indications that my body was dehydrated. As a busy parent of three young children juggling the demands of home and family and vocation, I thought I didn’t have time for exercise or other physical activities I enjoyed.

The other sad truth is that I was routinely pushing my body beyond its human limits—in God’s service, of course. I was a good Christian and already on staff at a church I loved, but I was not treating my body as the gift God intended it to be. Up to that point I had been quite out of touch with any sense that life in my body had anything to do with my spirituality. Intent on trying to be spiritual, I had relegated life in my body to a lesser category that warranted very little attention. I figured that as long as the warning lights weren’t going on, I could ignore my body in favor of more “spiritual” activities such as solitude and silence, Scripture reflection and prayer.

It didn’t help that my surrounding culture idolized perfect bodies, valuing people on the basis of their physical appearance and sexual appeal. As a serious Christian young woman, that made me all the more hesitant to pay attention to my body. I for one did not want to fall into the excesses of a culture that placed an inordinate value on physical features rather than the beauty and dignity of the human soul reaching toward God.

Yet even though I was nervous and afraid, that early journey of trying to get healthy helped me begin to confront the reality that the physical and the spiritual are not as opposed as I had imagined. I started to become aware that I am not merely a soul or a spirit; I am an embodied

human being, and my body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Whereas in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit came and went until eventually it found a dwelling place in a tabernacle constructed by human hands, God has chosen in these days to dwell permanently in the body of redeemed persons and in the body of Christ as it gathers.

As I began to grapple with the truth that in some unexplainable way God inhabits our bodies, making them places where we can meet and know him, I took a fresh look at a familiar Scripture passage and noticed that 1 Corinthians 6:20 indicates it is possible for us to “glorify God in our bodies”—not glorify the body, but glorify God in our bodies. I grew more and more curious about what it might look like to glorify God in my body, and I was pretty sure that walking around tired, overweight, and over-stimulated by sugar and caffeine was not it!

I began to be curious: why did God create bodies? Several answers came to me directly from Scripture. The first is that God is creative. Going all the way back to Genesis 1, we see a God who is creative. It is amazing to look at our world and see that every body, each and every one, is different. God could have made a bunch of clones. Instead, no two people are even remotely the same unless they are twins, and even twins have their distinctions. And God just keeps on creating: in our bodies, *we* are an expression of God’s ongoing creativity. How wonderful to think that each of us is a part of God’s ongoing creative work, just by being in the bodies we are in.

Second, Scripture is clear that God created bodies so that we could glorify God in our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20). In fact, a body that is simply being the body it was created to be—in whatever capacity God has given it on any given day—is glorifying God. Being the best body we can be glorifies God. It is important to note that I am not talking about the perfect body that has become the obsession of our culture; I am talking about being the most God-honoring body we can be at each stage of life. It is the best body we can be *right now*, which will be different depending on whether we are nineteen, thirty, or sixty. An important aspect of glorifying God in our bodies is accepting where we are now and living in that stage with dignity. To accept that this is what my body can do now and to be all that I can be here and now, this is glorifying God in my body today.

Third, God created bodies so that the power of God can be seen in these earthen vessels. That’s hard to fathom, isn’t it? These bodies that are so unpredictable—sometimes messy, sometimes beautiful, all the time

vulnerable—can be vessels through which God’s power can be seen in unique ways. And the way we carry around the gospel and our ministry in these earthen vessels can show forth God’s glory and power. While this may be counterintuitive, this is another way we can glorify God.

Knowing that God has chosen to make our bodies his dwelling place opens the door to remarkable opportunities for heightening our awareness of God’s presence with us. And isn’t that what the spiritual journey is all about, heightening our awareness of God’s presence with us and becoming more faithful in responding to God’s presence and activity in our lives? So to recognize our bodies as a place of encounter with God is to embrace the body as a locus of spiritual experience.

Overcoming Challenges

A Varied and Wide-Ranging Experience. But there are challenges. Life in the body is, after all, a varied and wide-ranging experience, and there is no doubt that some experiences are better than others. As I look at life in my body from a mid-life perspective, I can recall both moments of great gratitude for the body I have been given as well as moments I have wished mightily for a different one. There have been moments when touch was shared in loving ways and moments when touch was not so loving. There have been moments of keeping my body to myself and moments of deep sharing. There have been moments of strength and physical accomplishment in my body and moments of physical weakness and vulnerability. Sometimes I do very well at living within the limits of life in a body and the bodily changes that accompany each season of my life. Other times I really resist these limits and say, “God, why? Why can’t I do more? Why am so limited?” Sometimes I accept myself as God’s created me, and sometimes I fight with God and wish I could do more and be more in this body.

This fact of varied experiences of embodiment is the first challenge to experiencing life in the body as a gift. Some of us have had very positive relationships in our bodies; others of us are still grappling with negative experiences we have had in our bodies. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements are bringing women into contact and into memory with some of the negative experiences they have had in their bodies—with how this has affected them, how they may have hidden it, and how it shapes who they are today. These are important areas of awareness. If we do not allow ourselves to be aware, we cannot invite God into these experiences. In a sinful and fallen world, some of our experiences are not so positive.

An Ambiguous Legacy. I named above a second challenge to experiencing life in the body as a gift: as Christians living in a fallen world, we have inherited “an ambiguous legacy regarding the body.”⁴ At best, many of us experience ambivalence about the body. We may try to ignore it unless something breaks or acts up. Or we try to control it, to manage its urges. At worst, some experience thinly veiled disgust or even a hatred of their bodies. This may be related to families of origin and how our bodies were treated as we grew and developed. There may have been early experiences that convinced us that the body is shameful, dirty, or ugly. Many of us are still marked (and marred) by these early experiences in terms of how we view the body, and we have never been invited to reflect on them and bring them into the light. We have never had the opportunity to say out loud to anyone, “This is what happened to me, and this is how it has shaped me,” and then bring a God-breathed perspective to early experiences that have remained outside our consciousness.

At the very least, many of us are profoundly disconnected from our bodies, especially if we were shaped by a very conservative religious upbringing that was informed by dualisms created by a sacred-secular split. So on the one hand we have the excessive, misguided glorification of the body in the secular world, but on the other hand we have the denigration of the body or the dismissal of the body as being less than life in the spirit in many religious circles. We are going to have to shatter dualisms to get where we need to go.

Beyond Dualism. Dualism is the division of the human person into two elements, material and immaterial, that are at war with each other rather than being inter-related and inter-connected. At times, these two aspects may exist in an uneasy truce, but we experience an underlying hostility and discomfort between the two. Often we elevate one and denigrate the other. This is exactly what many Christians have done with life in the body and life in the spirit. We’ve divided these two aspects of human existence and made one good (life of the spirit) and one bad (life in the body). Alienation from the body—seeing it as separate from the spirit—is a profound and destructive dualism. It separates one aspect of myself from another aspect of myself, making me a fragmented person rather than an integrated whole.

Moving beyond dualism requires a shift in our thinking. We must

⁴ Ibid.

recognize that that these two elements, while distinguishable from each other, can belong together and actually do belong together in the way that God created us. We must see the life of the body and the life of the spirit as belonging *together* in a creative tension as we learn how to live them together.

As we live with ourselves and minister to others, we must ask, “How do I view these aspects of myself, and is there anything that needs to be redeemed in my own experience of life in a body?” We must also consider how we can help others redeem their sense of themselves as a body. Even in those moments when they are going through the hardest things—the moments when they are deathly ill, the moments when they are going into a surgery, the moments when they are facing news of a terminal illness. How do we continue to hold this tension: that the body is still a gift and that every experience in the body is infused with the presence of God? This is our work, and it is spiritual work. No matter whatever else we’re doing with people and their bodies, this is our spiritual work: to help them integrate and find the goodness of God in their experiences in their bodies, just as we have found it in our own.

There is a discipline within academia called body theology. Body theology attempts to do away with this dualism and to reflect on the bodily experience as a place of revelation from God and about God. So if we believe, as Genesis 1 and 2 teach, that our bodies are made in God’s image—created male and female in God’s image—then it follows that we can learn about God from how he created our bodies. The body can actually become a primary source of theological reflection, not a secondary one. This makes it so exciting to be in a body because it means I can learn from God here.

Body theology, the understanding that the body is place of a revelation about who God is, affirms our non-dualistic, Hebraic, incarnational Christian roots. The Hebraic tradition understood that we do not just *have* bodies but that we *are* bodies. In Hebrew, there is no word for separating the body from the person. For the Hebrews, the body was the person, and they did not differentiate between the physical and other aspects of being. A person was thought of as a whole, a totality. The Hebrew word *nephes*, often translated as “soul,” actually referred to the inner aspect of the body. All of it together was the person.

Similarly, in the Old Testament there was only one word for knowing, and it expressed full, experiential knowing between a subject and an object. There was no language to speak only of cognitive knowing.

When Scripture says that Adam “knew his wife” (e.g., Genesis 4:1), it does not mean that he had information about her. It means that he knew her physically. They had come together in full, experiential oneness; they knew one another on every level. The idea that we might separate cognitive knowing from other kinds of knowing is not a part of Scripture until we get to Paul and the Greeks. Even so, when Paul refers to the body, he uses the Greek word *soma*, an all-encompassing category that points to integrated body-selves.

Body theology attempts to shatter a dualism that has a long pedigree in our catholic Christian tradition. Among other things, this dualism has created a false dichotomy between the physical world, in which we exist as embodied beings, and the spiritual world—a contradictory and unhelpful perspective that points to our need to learn how to receive the goodness of the body as part of our life in God that God has pronounced very good. We need an approach to life in which the body is understood to be sacred. What do I mean by sacred? Set apart for a holy purpose. And what is that holy purpose? To know and experience God. Our bodies are temples, and what is a temple after all? It is a set-apart place for encounter with God, for prayer. Sometimes I wonder if we fully understand the implications of this biblical truth.

We often take out of context the verses about our bodies being temples, using them, for example, to talk about sexual abstinence with the youth group. But do we talk about the other functions of a temple? Do we talk about prayer as part of what happens in the temple? Where in our Sunday-school curriculum or preaching schedules do we teach that our bodies are a place set apart for encounter with God? I did not hear this in all my years being raised in a pastor’s family and have not heard it since. All I heard were messages about how to be sexually pure; I never heard a message about the body as a place of prayer and encounter with God. What about you? This is one thing the church can start doing right away: preach and teach a more fully orbed understanding of life in our bodies as it relates to our spirituality.

Supporting the Journey with Good Hermeneutics

If you believe, as I do, in a hermeneutical approach that identifies the major themes of Scripture, and then looks at lesser themes within that framework, there is no doubt that honoring the body is central to the Christian faith. Let’s walk through Scripture and see how it helps us move from dualism to wholeness as it relates to our life in the body. All the

major themes of Scripture affirm the spiritual significance of the body.

At creation God created human beings in bodies and declared these bodies very good. Not sort of good, not just good, but very good. Your body. My body. Very good. God could have created us as disembodied spirits, but he did not. He created us in these bodies. In Deuteronomy 30, speaking through his servant Moses, God affirms to his people the need to discern what is life for us from what is death so that we can choose life. He says, “I have set before you life and death, now choose life so that your descendants might live” (v. 19). This is a visceral, in-the-body knowing: “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?’ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (vv. 12–14). In other words, our bodies are tools for discernment, helping us discern between what is life-giving and what is life-draining.

The psalmist talks about his desire for God as something he experiences in his flesh. “My flesh faints for you; my flesh thirsts for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1). He goes on to affirm his body and soul together as part of God’s created goodness when he says, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made; that I know very well” (Psalm 139:14). When was the last time you looked at your body and celebrated it? When was the last time you felt so much joy about being in your body that you said to God, “Thank you for all these things that I can do in my body. Thank you for the running and the dancing and the exercising and the sleeping and the showers and the love-making and the eating. Thank you for life in my body. Thank you that I am upright today. I *am* fearfully and wonderfully made, and that I know very well.”

What about the incarnation, the Word become flesh? Jesus, the supremely spiritual being, who existed far beyond the material world as we know it, who existed eternally as the Word, became flesh. As Teilhard de Chardin said, “We are not human beings trying to become spiritual; we are spiritual beings trying to become human.” Before God brought us forth as fully formed fleshly beings here on this earth, he knew our “unformed substance,” as the psalmist describes it in Psalm 139:16.

Then, when Jesus was getting ready to leave his followers, he did not simply leave them with something to study or to think about, but he instituted the embodied practice of foot washing. He gave his disciples a

specific way of ministering to each other in their bodies and remembering his example when he said, “When you forget what you’re about here, when you forget how you’re supposed to be relating to each other, remember this foot washing. Remember that I, your teacher, got down on the floor and washed your feet. Remember that this is who you are” (paraphrasing John 13:12–15). Jesus did not merely leave his disciples with a theological thought to think. He left them with a physical, embodied act to remind them who they were to each other and who he was to them.

That same night Jesus introduced what would become the central sacrament of the Christian faith: the eucharistic bread and wine, symbolizing flesh and blood. This is the ritual and substance around which all Christians gather. In the most climactic moment of the worship service, the body—in all its beauty and its earthiness, its messiness and its vulnerability—is held high. “The gifts of God for the people of God!” the minister proclaims. And what are those gifts? Flesh and blood. In the highest moment of our life together as the people of God, our bodies are affirmed. Every time this happens it is Jesus’s flesh and blood, and it is flesh and blood itself that is elevated.

And of course now that Jesus is no longer physically present with us, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). How wonderful to know that when we don’t have a physical temple to go to we can turn inward and meet God right in our bodies. And amazingly enough, our bodies know how to pray. If you pay attention, you might notice that your body wants to dance or sway just a little. If you were to listen to your body, you might want to kneel or lie prostrate on the floor before God. You might want to raise your hands or simply open them on your lap. If you listen to your body, your body can tell you how to pray, because that’s what it was created for.

Second Corinthians 4 tells us that whatever ministry we have been given—including the ministry of the gospel—is carried in our bodies. Once your body goes away, your ministry cannot go on as it is right now. There will be other things God has for our resurrected bodies, but this is a unique moment when we get to be on *this* planet, in *this* physical body, carrying the ministry that God has given to us. And beyond our individual bodies, the church itself is the body of Christ (cf. Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27)! When inspiring the writers of Scripture, the Holy Spirit could have used any metaphor to describe the presence of Christ on the earth today. How interesting that he chose to use this picture of a physical body.

A major biblical teaching about the body of Christ emerges from this metaphor. No matter how we feel about the church on any given day, no matter what conflicts are taking place among us, no matter if the church is a wreck and a mess—this is how Jesus has chosen to be present here. In the words of a poem attributed to Teresa of Avila, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours. No hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people.”

Then finally, we consider the resurrection of the body. Scripture tells us that we will spend eternity not as disembodied spirits, but as glorious embodied beings (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:35–44). While we do not know everything about what that’s going to look like or how its going to happen, what we do know is that God does not give up on bodies. He’s going to resurrect our bodies in the last day. And until then, every day—*this very day*—we have the opportunity to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, to offer ourselves to God in our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, which is our spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).

Today I can crawl up to the altar and surrender myself to God through concrete practices that take place in my body. I might not be in a church, but I can be worshiping right now by choosing to surrender myself to God in my body. These are beautiful and compelling truths that inspire us to wonder how worship ever got so disconnected from our everyday existence as bodies.

Practices for Honoring Bodies—Ours and Others’

The next question, then, is how do we open ourselves to experiencing the goodness of life in our body? How do we honor the spiritual significance of life in our bodies and the embodied lives of others as we care for them? Can we approach bodies with reverence, even when they’re broken? Even when they’re ill? Even when they’re facing their death because of terminal illness?

Even in these circumstances, bodies are still the beautiful temples God has chosen to inhabit, to enliven, and then to take when it is the time for that person to move to another state of being in God. David Benner makes the point that authentic spirituality must ground us in the God-ordained reality of our lives, including our gender, race, sexuality, and unique experiences in our bodies. Authentic spirituality must be lived in those realities, grounded in those realities; otherwise, it is not authentic

at all.⁵ What practices ground us in the God-ordained realities of our lives and help us open up to life in our bodies as a gift from God? How can we honor our bodies and other people's bodies as we are together?

Attentiveness and Breathing. You can start very simply by paying attention and noticing how things feel in your body. Notice how a warm bath feels. Notice the joy that comes from being physically active. Notice the difference between being hydrated and dehydrated. Be more attentive to different aspects of life in the body, and experience each sensation as the gift it is. Think about how you feel when you give someone a gift—a sweater, or a scarf, or a book you think they may enjoy. The next time you see them, you can't wait to see how they're wearing the sweater or the scarf. Or you can't wait to hear them say, "I started that book you gave me, and it's fantastic!" Don't you think that may be how God feels about our bodies? He says, "I've given you this gift! I want to see you use it and enjoy it. There is nothing that gives me more joy than to see you enjoy the gift I've given you—the gift of life in your body."

Pay attention to your breathing. Breathing is one of the simplest ways of getting in touch God's gift of life in your body. The practice of paying attention to your breath is not an eastern practice; it comes right out of Genesis. God breathed life into the first human (Genesis 2:7), and God continues to give us our breath each and every minute. With each breath, God is affirming our lives. And there are many other beautiful gifts God give us through our breathing. Breathing can help calm us in times of stress—think of the breathing techniques a woman uses when giving birth. Did you know that when you are stressed, often you are breathing shallowly rather than breathing all the way into the bottom of your diaphragm? So even simply taking a moment to stop and breathe deeply can help you to slow down and get in touch with the Spirit of God deep within.

In his book *Into the Silent Land*, Martin Laird suggests that shallow, short breathing often indicates resistance to deep, ungrasping stillness. Those who refuse to enter into non-grasping stillness are often the people who breathe shallowly because they are resisting an open, receptive posture before the Lord.⁶ Breathing can help us sit silently, openly, and receptively before God. So pay attention to life in your body, and start

⁵ David Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Deeply Alive and Fully Human* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 9–10.

⁶ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 42.

paying attention to things you've never noticed before.

Embracing Fundamental Experiences of Life in a Body. Paying attention also involves embracing the fundamental experiences of life in the body. To draw again from Benner, authentic spirituality must ground us in the God-ordained realities of our lives.⁷ That includes gender and sexuality, but this is a hard place of integration for many of us. The appreciation of life in the body includes embracing maleness and femaleness as well as embracing our sexuality, which is also a gift from God. None of us exists in this world apart from being gendered. In fact, male and female is the most complete way God has revealed the diversity of God's self. One gender or the other could never fully represent who God is.

Another way we experience dualism is when we separate our spirituality from our sexuality. Such dualism cuts us off from knowing and experiencing God as one in whom there resides a powerful longing for union. Did you know that the reason we as human beings are driven to union is because God is seeking union and oneness with us? That longing for communion and union that sometimes feels so out of control is part of being created in God's image. Our spirituality is all about union and communion with God; our sexuality is all about union and communion with other people. In this way, sexuality and spirituality are tightly aligned within the human person, so ignoring our sexuality cuts us off from knowing important things about God, not to mention ourselves. When we fully comprehend that our sexuality represents something important about God that God has built into us, then we can actually embrace the powerful drives within us as a created good and bring this essential part of ourselves openly into our relationship with God. As we awaken fully to the spiritual, social, and sexual dimensions of ourselves in God's presence, we find that they are inseparably intertwined.

Race is also a very challenging experience in the body. To fully face whatever the experience of race has been for us—especially when that experience has included discrimination, oppression, and violence—and to open that up in God's presence is difficult. And yet God wants to meet us there. At some point we must seek redemption for this aspect of our bodily experiences as well, moving beyond the sin of racism that is so embedded in our world to internalize the fact that our existence in different races is also an expression of God's creativity. As something God built right into his creation of humanity, diversity is something to

⁷ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 9–10.

embrace as another aspect of the gift of life in a body, integrating this aspect of ourselves into our celebration of life in our bodies.

Physical challenges, including moments when we feel our body is betraying us—being born with a physical challenge of some sort, infertility, life-and-death battles with cancers and other serious and life-threatening illnesses—bring us face to face with a different set of questions. Can I find God here? How do I pray in this set of circumstances? Can I open this experience up to God and fight or rage with God? How do I make meaning of this? How do I experience God with me and for me in all this rather than feeling abandoned? All sorts of questions present themselves as we stay grounded in the true and fundamental experiences of whatever life in our body involves at a given time. To remain committed to the spiritual journey is to stay present to all of it in God's presence.

Caring for the Body. There is a very real connection between caring for the body and our ability to continue deepening our relationship with God and carrying out God's purposes for our lives over the long haul. To work our way into a more active and healthier lifestyle can be our answer to Jesus's question in John 5:6, "Do you want to be made well?" Moving far beyond our culture's focus on sex appeal, we can embrace a deep desire to live our lives well in God, to be the best body we can be in loving response to the One who created us. *That* is the motivation that will sustain us for the long haul. And we may discover that one of God's great gifts to us in the body is that exercise releases endorphins that are soothing to our emotions and ease pain and elevate our moods. Amazing!

There are so many ways of caring for our bodies that can become spiritual practices if we know to approach them that way: fueling our bodies with nutritious food, hydrating by drinking enough water, exercising, getting regular physicals and medical procedures, receiving a massage to bring relief to the tight sore places, focusing on breathing, and stretching our bodies through a good yoga practice. Really any kind of body work that helps us be attentive to our bodies and helps relieve stress and tension in our bodies can become a spiritual practice.

Other aspects of care for the body include paying attention to rest—getting enough sleep, practicing a weekly Sabbath, perhaps a quarterly retreat where we step back from all our cares, concerns, and work and give God the chance to minister to us. In these ways we live within the limits of life in the body, which is in itself glorifying to God. A good mantra for all of this might be "work hard, play hard, and rest well."

Living Sensually. And don't forget to enjoy life in your body, to live

sensually. We often think of sensuality and sexuality as being interchangeable words, but they are not. Sensuality has to do with our senses, and we can be intentional about incorporating into our lives an appreciation of all our senses. Make sure you really see and take in the beauty around you. Listen for and really hear beautiful sounds. (It might help to take your ear buds out!) Enjoy physical touch and sensation. That does not have to be sexual; a loving hug from a friend can be a sensual experience. Taking a hot shower and letting the water run over your body can be a sensual experience. Lying in bed and feeling how good it is to go prone after a long day and feeling the weight of the blankets around you is a sensual experience. And it goes without saying that love-making with the person to whom you are committed is also a sensual experience to be fully received and enjoyed when that is what God is giving you.

At mealtime, chew your food slowly and really taste it. Savor glass of wine (if that is something you enjoy) and linger, rather than rushing through every meal. Pay attention to scents. Our sense of smell is the strongest sense we have, so notice how different smells can actually shift your mood, bringing peace and a sense of physical well-being. Aromatherapy has emerged from the understanding that the right smells can actually be therapeutic and healing.

Listening in the Body. Our bodies have so much to tell us if we could only learn how to listen. Our bodies are the first to know that we are overcommitted, stressed, uneasy, or joyless. When we are able to attend to something that causes us pain or dis-ease in the body, we are alerted to the fact that something in our lives and needs our attention.

In her book *Confessions of a Beginning Theologian*, Elouise Renich Fraser writes about the significant role that listening to her body has played in her personal and theological journey.

My body, once ignored and despised, has become an ally in the reorientation of my internal and external life. It lets me know when I'm running away, avoiding yet another of God's invitations to look into my past and the way it binds me as a theologian. I can't trust my mind as often as I trust my body. My mind tries to talk me into business as usual, but my body isn't fooled. Insomnia, intestinal pain and diarrhea, let me know that there's work to be done.⁸

⁸ Elouise Renich Fraser, *Confessions of a Beginning Theologian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 31.

Learning to listen to our bodies can open windows of insight that might otherwise be closed to us. A flow of energy into us, a sense of energy draining from us, can be felt in the body. Discerning what is life-giving and what is life-draining is an in-the-body experience (Deuteronomy 30).

David Whyte, one of my favorite poets, writes, “What is precious inside us does not care to be known by the mind in ways that diminish its presence.”⁹ So often our mind dismisses what the body knows. There are things the mind does not want us to know, but our body knows and brings these to our awareness. There is a technique called focusing¹⁰ or bio-spiritual focusing¹¹ that helps us notice, care for, and welcome the body’s “felt sense” that something is not quite right, creating space for it to speak to us. That can be a powerful exercise that helps us pay attention to the wisdom the body has to offer us.

Praying in the Body. We often think of prayer as an activity that engages us primarily on a soul level. But since we know that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, we can intentionally cultivate a prayer life that incorporates the body. Human desire for God is experienced in the flesh as a visceral longing, and prayer is our response. Intimacy happens as we bring more and more of ourselves into God’s presence. To pray with body and soul means to pray with all of who we are, our physicality, emotion, intuition, imagination, mind, and all of our bodily experiences. Therefore, when we pray with body and soul, or love with body and soul, or belong with body and soul, we are believing, responding, and surrendering with all of who we are.¹²

Here is a simple practice you can incorporate easily right now: pay attention to your posture as you pray. Settle into a relaxed and comfortable position with your back straight and feet on the floor. Feel the chair supporting your body. Breathe deeply as a way of releasing tension. Open your hands in your lap as a way of saying, “God, I’m letting go of whatever I usually cling to, and I’m ready to receive whatever you want to give me.” The opening of my hands has become my favorite prayer

⁹ David Whyte, “The Winter of Listening,” in *The House of Belonging* (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 1997), 29.

¹⁰ Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1981).

¹¹ Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahon, *Bio-Spirituality: Focusing as a Way to Grow*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997).

¹² Jane Vennard, *Praying with Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy with God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1998), 5.

posture—so much so that I now assume this posture without even thinking. If I am really praying my hands are usually open as a way of saying to God *in my body* that I am letting go of what I usually cling to and that I'm open to receiving what God wants to give rather than trying to push-and-pull with my own agenda.

So stop reading and try that for a minute. Set aside what you are reading and just open your hands. See what difference that makes? It feels good and right to find a way to open to God that is beyond words.

There are so many ways to honor God and open to God in our bodies. I pray you will find them all. God created us for wholeness. When aspects of our selves that were always meant to exist together are integrated or re-integrated, the result is a spontaneous combustion of joy and vitality that goes far beyond the physical dimension. It is a spiritual vitality that speaks volumes about the abundance of our life in Christ—which is exactly what Jesus came to bring.

“The glory of God is humans fully alive!” (St. Irenaeus).