



CONVERSations



volume

9.1

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION SPRING | SUMMER 2011

SPIRITUALITY



BODY

and the

CONVERsations

A FORUM FOR *Authentic* TRANSFORMATION



**This article originally appeared in
Spring/Summer 2011, Issue 9.1: Spirituality and the Body
issue of *Conversations: A Forum for Authentic
Transformation*.**

**Additional articles, back issues and subscriptions
are available on our website at
<http://www.conversationsjournal.com>.**

**We invite you to join the conversation on our website forum
<http://www.conversationsjournal.com/forum>,**

**or our Facebook page
<http://www.facebook.com/conversationsjournal>.**

**Customer Service/Subscriber Inquiries
Conversations
PO Box 292378 ♦ Kettering, OH ♦ 45429
800-607-4410
service@conversationsjournal**

**Comments & Questions:
Conversations ♦ McCarty Building
2055 Mount Paran Road ♦ Atlanta, Georgia 30327
800-607-4410
conversations@richmont.edu**

FLESH & BLOOD SPIRITUALITY

“The Christian practice of honoring the body is born of the confidence that our bodies are made in the image of God’s own goodness. As the place where the divine presence dwells, our bodies are worthy of care and blessing.... It is through our bodies that we participate in God’s activity in the world.” —STEPHANIE PAULSELL

angel food cake, I presume!) and a jar of water. Elijah followed the angel’s simple instructions for strengthening his body and then fell into such an exhausted sleep that he almost slept through the

Surprisingly enough, it was in the process of staying faithful to my spiritual journey that I first began to face my profound ambivalence about 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 or spiritual in nature, I went to a psychologist who was also a spiritual director. To my surprise, some of our initial conversations had to do with my physical condition: eating patterns, water intake, how much sleep I was getting, whether I was getting any exercise, and general attention to health issues. Even though I had been paying attention to the condition of my spiritual life for years, no one had ever called any serious attention to the connection between my physical well-being and my life in Christ. This was something of a revelation!

During that time I was reflecting on the story of Elijah’s journey into God’s presence in 1 Kings 19, and I was struck by the attention God gave to Elijah’s physical condition, going so far as to send an angel to guide him in caring for his body. I was comforted to find that even though Elijah was a great prophet, he had the same blind spot I seemed to have: he had let himself become so run down physically that God literally had to send an angel to strengthen his body before they could deal with anything else. The angel got very specific with Elijah, providing him with a cake baked on hot stones (the first

next meal. The angel came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat; otherwise, the journey will be too much for you.”

“What journey?” Elijah might have asked. After all, he had left his life as a prophet in Israel; he had slumped down under a solitary broom tree and told God in no uncertain terms that he was done. But the angel knew better. He knew that Elijah was on a deeply spiritual journey—the journey into the presence of God. And that journey requires strength of both body and soul.

THE GIFT OF LIFE IN A BODY

That season of spiritual journeying brought me to this startling realization: I had never thought of my body as a gift from God, and I certainly had not cared for it as such. Rather than taking care of it as I would any other highly valued gift, I had been using (and misusing it) for my own ends, to the point that it was now protesting. I hadn’t been paying attention to what I ate, so there was far too much sugar and junk food in my diet. Rather than getting enough rest, I had become dependent on caffeine for additional energy. I had never considered the importance of drinking enough water, so I was clearly dehydrated. And as a busy parent juggling the demands of home and family, plus church and vocational ministry, I *thought* I didn’t have enough time or energy to exercise or engage in physical activity. I, too, needed guidance in caring for my body as a spiritual practice that would strengthen me for the spiritual journey to which I was being invited.



My early lessons in flesh-and-blood spirituality began with growing in my understanding that the physical and the spiritual were not as opposed to each other as I had thought. I am not merely a soul and spirit; I am an embodied human being, and my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. In some unexplainable way God inhabits our bodies, making them a place where we can meet and know him. The Scripture also seems to indicate that it is possible to *glorify God in our bodies* rather than merely glorifying the body (the focus of the surrounding culture) or ignoring the body (the focus of the religious subculture). As I grew more and more curious about what it might look like to glorify God in my body, I was pretty sure that walking around tired, overweight, and stimulated by sugar and caffeine was not it!

AN AMBIGUOUS LEGACY

Life in the body is a varied and wide-ranging experience, and there is no doubt that some experiences are better than others. As I look at my life now from a midlife vantage point, I can recall moments of gratitude for the particular body that was given to me, and moments when I have wished mightily for a different one; moments when touch was shared in loving ways, and moments when touch was not so loving; moments of keeping my body to myself, and moments of deep sharing. There have been moments of strength and physical accomplishment as well as moments of physical weakness and vulnerability. Sometimes I do very well at honoring the limits of life in a physical body at whatever life stage I happen to be in, but at other times I push myself mercilessly and pay dearly for such foolishness.

As we abide more closely to the God who is the source of all creation, the God of the Incarnation, we begin to experience sexual energy in a new way, as a holy, inalienable generative force.

In addition to whatever ambivalence we might feel about experiences we have had in our bodies, dualisms that are embedded in our religious traditions have created a false dichotomy between the spiritual realm and the material world, leaving us “an ambiguous legacy” regarding the body. Even as I write this article, a prominent Christian leader has recently gone on record with this dichotomous view. In opposing Christians’ use of yoga, he says, “Yoga begins and ends with an understanding of

the body that is, to say the very least, at odds with Christian understanding. Christians are not called... to see the human body as a means of connecting to and coming to know the divine. Believers are called to meditate on the Word of God.”¹

On the other side of the equation, an excessive and misdirected focus on the “perfect” body in secular culture, along with disturbing levels of irreverence regarding human sexuality, has made it all the more difficult to know how to relate to the body in a spiritual way. These conflicting and ultimately unhelpful perspectives point to our need for learning how to honor our bodies as part of our spiritual practice.

FOLLOWING THE BIBLICAL THREAD

Beginning with the biblical account of creation, all the great themes of Scripture affirm the significance of the body as a place where the presence of God can be known and experienced. First God created the physical, material world and called it good. Then God created humankind in male and female bodies in order to more fully reveal diverse aspects of his own being and called it “very good.” No matter how far we might have drifted from God’s original intentions for humankind, the creation story alone points to the fact that *all* of human experience is somehow connected to who God is, and all of it holds the possibility for abundant living, the experience of grace and the imprint of the divine.

The goodness of God’s creation includes our creation as sexual beings. This, too, is an aspect of life in which we can meet and know God in unique ways. In the experience of our sexuality, we experience God as One in whom resides a powerful longing for union and oneness, and we are able to know ourselves more fully and celebrate the powerful drives within us as a created good. When we begin to awaken fully to the spiritual, social, and sexual dimensions of ourselves in God’s presence, we find that they are inseparably intertwined and not to be compartmentalized. In fact, many spiritually awake people have noticed that “our sexual feelings intensify as we are made whole. Many think that sexuality will go away or at least become more quiescent as we grow spiritually. On the contrary! As we abide more closely to the God who is the source of all creation, the God of the Incarnation, we begin to experience sexual energy in a new way, as a holy, inalienable generative force.”²

1 “Yoga is unchristian, says Baptist leader,” *Christian Century* (October 19, 2010), 17.

2 Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Prayer and Our Bodies*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1987, 71.

David, the great psalmist and the man after God's own heart, was mightily in touch with the goodness of life in a body. He celebrates the fact that his body and being are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14) and uses this awareness as an occasion for worship. And he describes his desire for God in very visceral terms—as hunger and thirst that he experiences in his body.

The Incarnation itself—Christ's choice to take on flesh and inhabit a human body—forever elevates the experience of being in a body to new heights of spiritual significance. Jesus, the supremely spiritual being, who has existed for all eternity far beyond the physical, material world as we know it, chose to take the journey into human flesh, to become limited as we are by space and time and to become vulnerable as all bodies are.

At the Last Supper Jesus did not give his disciples something to read or think about when he was gone. He gave them something specific to do in their bodies that would remind them of how they were to be together based on how Jesus had been among them. The central sacrament of our faith that was instituted that same night—the ritual and substance around which all Christians gather—is bread and wine that commemorate Jesus' life and death in a body made of flesh and blood. And the metaphor for the presence of the living Christ here on earth is, of all things, a body!

We also understand from Scripture that these bodies—these vessels that are beautiful and earthy, glorious and messy all at the same time—will be resurrected on the last day. We will not spend eternity as disembodied spirits, but as glorious embodied being, worshiping in God's presence. The resurrection of the body indicates that matter matters to God, as Barbara Brown Taylor so aptly puts it. And in the meantime, we carry the treasure of Christ's presence in these earthen vessels so that the life of Christ continues to be made visible in our everyday lives.

CARING FOR THE BODY

G

iven the consistent biblical affirmation of the significance of our bodies, part of our spiritual pilgrimage is to seek a sacramental approach to life in which the body is understood to be sacred because it is the place where God's Spirit has chosen to

dwell. We can begin by simply learning how to care for the body more intentionally. As Elijah's story demonstrates, there is a real connection between care for

the body and our ability to continue deepening our relationship with God and to carry out God's purposes for our life faithfully over the long haul.

For me, caring for the body began with slowly shifting my living patterns—eating better, drinking more water, getting more rest rather than resorting to the short-lived benefits of caffeine, working my way slowly into a more active lifestyle that included walking, running, and biking—some amazing changes

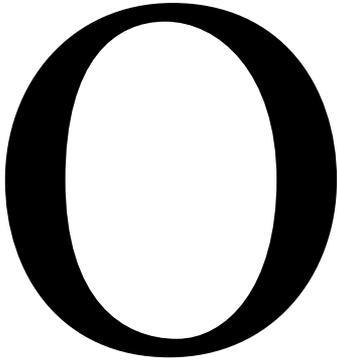
What we need to know about how to be well and how to choose life is already there for us in our bodily knowing if we will just pay attention.

started to take place. First of all, I began to have more energy and experienced a real lift in my spirits. I experienced one of God's gifts to us in the body—the endorphins that are soothing to the emotions, that ease pain and elevate our moods. Because I exercised outdoors, I began to experience those moments as times of significant connection with God through the expansiveness of the creation, the beauty of nature, and my gratitude for the opportunity to enjoy life in a healthier body.

I discovered that some of my spiritual practices began to coincide quite naturally with my physical disciplines. Times of running and walking became moments of turning my heart toward God. Because evening has been the best and most consistent time for me to walk and jog, I found myself naturally using those times to engage in the examen. While my body was occupied with physical activity, my heart and mind were freed up to reflect on my day and invite God to help me notice those times when the Spirit was at work guiding, protecting, comforting me. Somehow the privacy afforded by the waning light and the expansiveness of the night sky created a setting that was quiet and safe enough for me to allow God to help me see those times when I had fallen short of love that day, to confess sin, to release the day's burdens, and to look toward a new day with hope and fresh resolve.

Interestingly enough, even secular medical research indicates that exercise and spirituality go hand in hand. We now know that exercise brings mental and physiological changes, including the flood of body-made opiates that induce what we call the "runner's high." This physiological dynamic can create a change in consciousness, a kind of expansiveness in which the runner feels more integrated with his or her surroundings and the Creator himself.

LISTENING TO THE BODY



Our bodies have much to tell us if we can only figure out how to listen. In fact, oftentimes God speaks to us through our bodies. Most times, the body is the first to know if we are over committed, stressed, uneasy, or joyful and when we need to attend to something that is causing us pain or disease. Elouise Renich Fraser, in her book *Confessions of a Beginning Theologian*, writes about the significant role that listening to her body has played in her personal and theological journey.

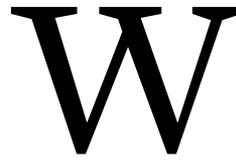
“My body, once ignored and despised, has become an ally in the reorientation of my internal and external life. It lets me know when I’m running away, avoiding yet another of God’s invitations to look into my past and the way it binds me as a theologian. I can’t trust my mind as often as I trust my body. My mind tries to talk me into business as usual, but my body isn’t fooled. Insomnia, intestinal pain and diarrhea let me know there’s work to be done.”³

Paying attention to what we are experiencing in our bodies can open up windows of insight that might otherwise remain closed to us. For instance, the experience of consolation and desolation as it relates to discernment is, in many ways, a bodily experience. The flow of life-giving energy through our bodies or a sense of life draining away from us is experienced *in the body* if we are in touch with it. God’s assurance to the people of Israel is that the ability to choose life and follow God was not to be found in some faraway place, but rather in the intimacy and immediacy of paying attention to our bodies. “No, the Word [of God] is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (Deuteronomy 30:14, NRSV). What we need to know about how to be well and how to choose life is already there for us in our bodily knowing if we will just pay attention.

Paying attention to what gives our bodies and our spirits a sense of life or drains life from us can help us stay connected with God’s guiding presence. When I honor my body by “listening” to tension, discomfort, lightness, or joy and wonder, and ask, *Now what is that about?* often God speaks into that awareness with truth and insight that proves very helpful over the long haul.

3 Elouise Renich Fraser, *Confessions of a Beginning Theologian*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 31.

PRAYING IN THE BODY



While we might think of prayer as an activity that engages us primarily on a soul level, the Scripture tells us plainly that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and a temple, after all, is a place of prayer and worship. Prayer is primarily about deepening our intimacy with God, and intimacy develops as we bring more and more of ourselves into God’s presence—including our bodies.

“To pray with soul *and* body means,” says Jane Vennard, “praying with all of who we are: our physicality, our emotions, our intuitions, our imaginations, our minds and all of our 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, surrendering with all of who we are.”⁴

When we pray, our posture and our bodily position can be an important aspect of our communication with God. To settle into a relaxed and comfortable position, letting go, allowing a chair to fully support our bodies, breathing deeply in a way that releases tension, can be a very tangible way of telling God that we are bringing our whole self into his presence—body, mind and spirit. With our bodies we are telling God that we trust him and rest in him and are available to him.

Have you ever been in a worship service and noticed your body’s desire to kneel down? Have you ever felt so humbled in God’s presence that you wanted to lie flat on your face? Have you even longed to curl up and be held by God? Any of these sensations can be your body’s way of telling you how it wants or needs to pray and can serve as a guide for you in your praying.

Kneeling or even lying prostrate on the floor can give physical expression to the posture of our hearts or lead us into a more prayerful, humble stance before God. Praying with our palms up and hands open can be a way of expressing our openness to God and our willingness to receive whatever he wants to give. When words become inadequate to express our joy and praise, we pray with our bodies by lifting our hands or moving or dancing.

Walking meditation is also a powerful way of connecting with God. There are several ways to meditate while walking, but the simplest is to take a slow, “sensing” walk in which the express purpose is to be with God and consciously commune with him through the physical senses. I remember the first time I took a hike in the woods for the express purpose of paying attention to manifestations of God through nature. The warmth of the sun felt like God’s presence warming me. I noticed a whole world of bugs, plants, rocks, trees, streams, and

4 Jane Vennard, *Praying With Body and Soul*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1998, 5.



Receiving the loving touch of friends and family members can allow God to minister to our very human needs for love and meaningful connection. Giving ourselves wholeheartedly to the sexual experience with our spouse or learning how to embrace our sexuality in periods of singleness is a profound yes to God's call to live in this world as human beings created male and female.

animals that were blissfully unaware of the things that seemed so big in my life, and all of a sudden many things that had seemed all-important shrank to a more appropriate size in my heart. As I sat on a tree trunk that had fallen across a stream, I prayed and felt myself rejuvenated by the beauty and the silence. As I walked, I came upon a puddle in a dried tire rut that was teeming with hundreds of tadpoles, and it reminded me that life can spring up anywhere, even in the dry and rutted places of my own life. I paid attention to how good it felt to be in my body, climbed a hill until my heart beat fast, got sweaty and lay down exhausted when I got back—full of a sense of the immensity and yet the nearness of God.

If that's not prayer, I don't know what is!

THIS TENDER BODY



Life in these earthen vessels is an astonishing and glorious and tender thing. It is glorious when we consider the fact that our human beingness reflects and mirrors the image of God, speaking deeply about who God is. It is glorious when

we experience ourselves to be strong, beautiful, healthy and whole—awake to all God's good gifts to us in a body. But life in the body is also a tender thing because our bodies are vulnerable.

When we are sick in the body, when there is something wrong and we don't know what it is, when the only way to deal with what's going on in the body is to

go under the knife, when we remember early experiences in the body that we could not control, when we open ourselves sexually to another person and realize we have given that person the power to cause us great pleasure and great pain, when we experience aging and the loss of our physical strength and capacity, when men experience shame and confusion about the powerful drives within them, when women experience being excluded or having their gifts rejected because their souls are housed in a female body, when we see bodies crushed in an earthquake or swept away by a tsunami, or the bodies of children starving or forced into hard labor or sex trade, when we carry children in our hearts and bodies and they break our hearts—it is then that we feel the gift and the terror of life in our bodies. But it is also then that we wonder at the fact that God, our Creator, chose to crawl inside the human experience and participate not just in the glory of life in these bodies but also in the vulnerability.

Bodies can be hurt, violated, broken, and even killed—but God chose to partake of it all. It was in a body that he came to us. Even now, Jesus chooses not just to be present to us in spirit but also to be incarnated in another body—us, the Church! It, too, is glorious and strong and full of youthful vigor at times. Other times it is vulnerable and broken and aging. But all the time it is Christ's body, and it is the way he has chosen to be present to this world. *“Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world... Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”*⁵

Who knows but that the practice of honoring our physical bodies might also lead us to the practice of honoring and being Christ's body in the world?

⁵ These lines are taken from the poem “Christ Has No Body,” attributed to Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun who was known as a mystic, reformer, and writer who experienced divine visions.

