

THE BODY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PRAYER

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“When I love God, I love the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the embraces, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all this protean creation. When I love you, my God, I want to embrace it all, for I love you with all my senses in the creations of your love. In all the things that encounter me, you are waiting for me.” (Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 1985, pg. 331)

Can the body be an instrument of prayer? The traditional definition of prayer that most of us can recite from memory is, “prayer is lifting the mind and heart to God.” The more recent Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.” There is little reference to the body in these definitions of prayer.

Perhaps this is because of the long standing ambivalence that Christianity has had toward the human body, and the general disparagement of embodiment since the time of the Reformation. This tension has been famously depicted in Pieter Bruegel's "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent."

Bruegel's painting depicts a busy town square where on the left side we see Mardi Gras revelers and on the right side, penitential Christians observing the strict fast of Lent. According to historian Peter Burke, (Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe, 1978) the joust between a portly reveler and a gaunt penitent which occupies the foreground of the painting represents the opposition between the sacred and the secular and the bodily and the spiritual that characterized Reformation and Post-Reformation spirituality. He reminds us that early and medieval Christianity had a more holistic spirituality, one that much more unabashedly incorporated the material and bodily into religious ritual without clear oppositions between spirit and body. Although it is not clear who won the conflict between Carnival and Lent in Bruegel's painting, it would seem that Christian spirituality and ritual have largely neglected or, at least, marginalized the role of the material and bodily dimensions of prayer. A renewed appreciation of these dimensions and ways of incorporating them into prayer could certainly help retrieve a lost dimension of Christian spirituality and also expand the myriad of ways that one can encounter, worship and praise the living God.

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BODY AT PRAYER IN VARIOUS TRADITIONS

The recognition of the place of the body in prayer is by no means restricted to early and medieval Christian practices. One can find it present in many religious traditions. For example, in Hinduism, yoga has since its inception been seen as a spiritual practice that incorporates mindful breathing and posture. It developed as a way of satisfying the human desire to connect with the divine. Indeed, the Sanskrit word yoga means to yoke, join, or connect. Though the authentic spiritual dimension of yoga is not often realized by those who see it as false worship nor those who flock to health clubs to practice it for its physical benefits, the yogis who practiced understood well the connection between the body and the spirit. As Thomas Ryan points out in his book, *Reclaiming the Body in Christian Spirituality*:

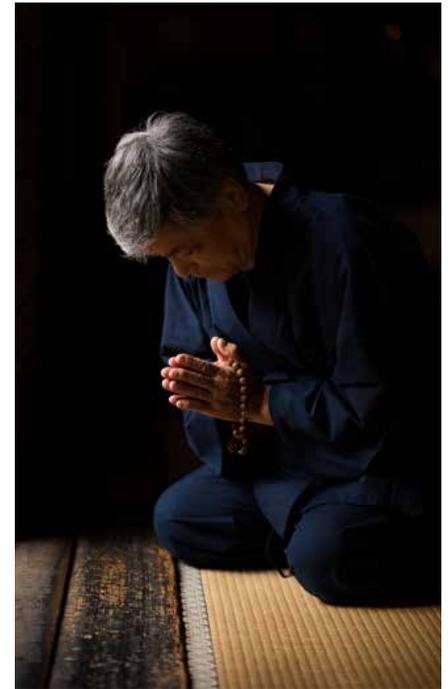
I propose that yoga is the one place in the culture where the natural, human thirst for contact with God is being satisfied, even if such participants would never use such language. And it is happening there because it is in the body, first and foremost, that God comes.

A recent conversation with a colleague about the impact of a yoga class in which she had participated reminded me of exactly this connection. She related how the yoga instructor invited the class to be mindful of the various poses they were practicing, e.g., Crow Pose, Downward Facing Dog, Eagle Pose,

Child Pose, and while in the poses to experience their oneness with the subject of the pose. The instructor pointed out that as one does these poses, the practitioner is actually recognizing their connection with all living things. While some might dismiss this as yet one more example of a misguided New Age pantheism, the instructor was tapping into an ancient wisdom about the body as a locus for spiritual experience, in a way that seems very consistent with Christian belief in the Word that became flesh.

The significance of breath and breathing to the practice of yoga is significant. Breathing is essential to the postures and also to meditation. In Sanskrit the word is pranayama, prana being the word for breath or life force. In Patanjali's famous Yoga Sutras, it is the fourth of the eight limbs of yoga. It is hardly a coincidence that in Hebrew the word for breath is ruah and it is the same word for spirit, the word used in Genesis 1 for the "spirit" that hovered over the chaos. Breath is at once something physical and also non-material. As such it can be a reminder of the importance of not creating a binary opposition between the material and the spiritual when we pray. Can we imagine breathing itself as a prayer? Richard Rohr reminds us that the name "Yahweh" was not spoken but rather breathed, a beautiful example of how in our very act of breathing, we are indeed praying.

It is not only Hinduism that offers us an example of the integral connection between body and spirit. Posture and bodily movement are central to Jewish prayer, especially the Eighteen Blessings known as Amidah, which is the word for "standing." The prayers involve a series of movements that include stepping forward and backward, bowing and sometimes rocking back and forth. The rocking movement is known as schuckling, from the Yiddish verb, shokel, meaning to sway. There are several interpretations of the precise meaning of this practice, but perhaps most interesting is the one that comes from the tradition of the Kabbalah, where the human body has certain energy centers much like



the chakras in the Hindu tradition. Different parts of the body correspond to different spiritual qualities. (J. Philip Newell, *Echo of the Soul: The Sacredness of the Human Body*, 2000). This use of the body in prayer is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures where we find passages, like "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord" (Ps. 34:8); "O clap your hands, all peoples; shout to God with the voice of joy" (ps. 47:1); "Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre" (Ps. 149:3). In 2 Samuel 6:6, we find David "leaping and dancing before the Lord." In these examples, and others, we see clearly the important role that the body plays in the experience of authentic prayer. Undoubtedly based on the same recognition of the relationship between the body and prayer, we find a similar approach in Islamic prayer.

For Muslims, the practice of praying five times daily is an obligation of their faith. Salat (salah) is the Arabic word for prayer. It is derived from the word selah, which is the word for relationship, and it is the word for the prayer times that correspond to



include circumambulating the Kabah seven times, a ritual gathering of pebbles and stoning of three pillars representing the devil, and the cutting of one's hair. Thus in many ways, Islamic prayer and ritual incorporates bodily movement and gives recognition to the important role of the body in prayer.

Something similar can be observed in the Orthodox practice of bowing, where there exist a number of different kinds of prescribed bows. Poyasny is a waist bow and zemnoy poklo is a full prostration and there are strict rules about which bows are to be used on specific occasions. Another common Orthodox practice that accompanies prayer is metania which involves bowing toward the floor and extending one's right hand open and touching the ground. This gesture is performed when venerating an icon along with the act of kissing the icon and lighting a candle before it. The very act of creating an icon is itself an act of prayer. And so in the Orthodox tradition, we find yet another example of how integral bodily action is to prayer. This relationship was not lost on St. Ignatius of Loyola for whom the five senses were a very important part of the Spiritual Exercises.

IGNATIAN APPLICATION OF THE SENSES

In Week 2, Contemplation 5 of The Spiritual Exercises we find what is referred to in Ignatian spirituality as the "application of the senses." Ignatius instructs the retreatant as follows:

"It is helpful to pass the five senses of the imagination through . . . contemplation, in the following way: The first point is to see the persons with the sight of the imagination, meditating and contemplating in particular the details about them. . . . The second, to hear with the hearing what they are, or might be, talking about. . . . The third [and fourth], to smell and to taste. . . . The [fifth], to touch with the touch, as for instance . . . the places where such persons put their feet and sit, always seeing to my drawing profit from it." (Spiritual Exercises, 121)

Joseph Tetlow, S.J., in commenting on this section observes that "Ignatian contemplation is never an

out of body experience" (ignatianspirituality.com) In section 124, the retreatant is invited to "smell the infinite fragrance and taste the infinite sweetness of the divinity." In this section of the Spiritual Exercises we are reminded that the five senses are a powerful way to encounter the living God. In her wonderful book about praying with the senses, Ginny Kubitz Moyer suggests very specific ways in which all of our senses can become involved in the experience of prayer. In one section she talks about how roses appeal to multiple senses and present themselves to us as "autographs from the hand of God." Incense, candle smoke, the "odor of the sheep," the smell of lavender, and the background noises that make up our day all present sacramental occasions through which we can encounter God. (Taste and See: Experiencing the Goodness of God Through Our Five Senses)

An insight of C.S. Lewis in The Screwtape Letters can also be instructive. In counseling his nephew Wormwood on how to draw his "patient" away from the "enemy," Uncle Screwtape offers the following advice:

At the very least, they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls. (Screwtape Letters, Macmillan, pg. 20)

"Whatever their bodies do affects their souls." What a marvelous insight Lewis offers us here into the connection between the body and the soul! It is no accident that Lewis was himself a medievalist, and, as such, thoroughly acquainted with the spirituality of the Middle Ages where there existed a much more holistic sense of the importance of embodiment. Examples of this can be found in the writings and practices of Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, or St. Francis of Assisi.

PRAYING - LITERALLY - "ON THE RUN!"

These insights from Christianity, and other religious

traditions, can help expand our notion of prayer, making it more integrated with our whole self. The body can become a privileged place for experiencing the loving and healing presence of God. There is a line in the movie Chariots of Fire (1981) that illustrates quite effectively how the body can be an instrument of prayer. At one point Eric Liddel, an Olympic runner and a devout Christian, is being chastised by his sister for putting his devotion to running before his devotion to God. In a classic line from the movie, he replies to her, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." Liddel realizes that his running is in fact an act of devotion and prayer because he is doing what God created him to do, and in doing it he is in fact praising God.

Liddel's response shows a very concrete way in which the body can give praise to God. Our bodies are the expressions of our souls and our senses can be instruments of prayer. Touch, for example, can be a powerful aid to prayer, but it need not be just the feel of rosary beads passing through our fingers, oil anointing our bodies or the water with which we bless ourselves. Feeling the air, the grass, or the sand as we walk, or a caring touch when done intentionally can also be ways of experiencing the presence of God.

"Finding God in all things" is the First Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises. Sensuality and sexuality as part of our experience of embodiment are therefore also aspects of our humanity through which and in which we encounter the living God. As Jane Vennard points out in Praying with Body and Soul, it is striking that words often used to describe sexual intimacy are also words used by many of the mystics. Words like ecstasy, surrender, vulnerability, joy, and union occur frequently in the writings of the mystics, and the Song of Songs, the book of the Bible about which more commentaries were written than any other book, contains similar language. The sense of touch in all its varied dimensions can be a powerful and beautiful form of prayer. Another important issue that emerges from this discussion

of the role of physicality in prayer is the place of the disfigured and suffering human body in prayer. To this issue we now turn our attention.

There is a story of a rather dramatic encounter that took place in November 2013 between Pope Francis and an Italian man Vinicio Riva who is severely disfigured by a disease known as neurofibromatosis. During a general audience Pope Francis embraced Vinicio in a way reminiscent of St. Francis kissing a leper. The action is typical of Pope Francis's direct reaching out to those who dwell on the peripheries of society. In a recent interview (Feb. 28, 2017) with a Milan magazine, Francis spoke of the importance of giving help to homeless panhandlers and also added, "The gesture is important, helping those who ask, looking them in the eyes and touching their hands (emphasis added). Tossing the money without looking in the eyes, that is not the gesture of a Christian. Teaching in charity is not about offloading one's own sense of guilt, but it is touching, looking at our inner poverty that the Lord understands and saves. Because we all have inner poverty." These words and gestures of Pope Francis remind us of the importance of doing the Corporal Works of Mercy as acts of prayer. Matthew 25 reminds us that we touch God when we touch the homeless, the hungry, the broken, and the disfigured. But it is not only in the disfigured bodies of others that we encounter the living God; we also encounter the Lord as we deal with our personal issues regarding our bodies.

THE PRAYER OF A BODY IN PAIN

The broken and disfigured body of Jesus on the cross with his arms outstretched reminds us that our bodies too in their brokenness and woundedness can also be a powerful but wordless offering to God. In a homily for the Second Sunday of Lent (March

12, 2017) Pope Francis spoke of the disfigured body of Christ between the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. "Between this beautiful transfiguration and that Resurrection there will be another face of Jesus. There will be a face that's not so beautiful. There will be an ugly face, disfigured, tortured, despised [and] bloodied. Jesus' entire body is like something to throw away." He added there are "two transfigurations, and in the middle is Jesus Crucified, the Cross." The tortured suffering body of Jesus reminds us that embracing the suffering and pain which our bodies experience can be an expression of a prayer and a self-offering.

In her book, *Becoming Wise – An Inquiry Into the Mystery and Art of Living* – Krista Tippett points out that for much of history, religion was a full body experience whereas Western culture today, for all its emphasis on sexuality, is deeply disembodied. We have become out of touch with our bodies. It is our bodies, she argues, that are "access points to mystery" and open to us deep truth about ourselves. Our bodies, even in their brokenness, tell us a truth that our minds can obscure. It is often our physical sufferings that open us to the deep truth of who we are before God. It is important to be able to listen to our bodies and inhabit them with all their flaws. It is a beautiful and liberating realization that comes from inhabiting and loving our own bodies and to know that they are more than mere ciphers for our souls. They are an inseparable part of who we are.

MARY OLIVER WRITES IN HER POEM, "THE FOURTH SIGN OF THE ZODIAC"

I know, you never intended to be in this world.
But you're in it all the same.
So why not get started immediately.
I mean, belonging to it.

There is so much to admire, to weep over.
And to write music or poems about.
Bless the feet that take you to and fro.
Bless the eyes and the listening ears.
Bless the tongue, the marvel of taste.
Bless touching.
You could live a hundred years, it's happened. Or not.

In a way characteristic of so many of her poems, she recognizes, as did early religion and early Christianity, the centrality of the body as an instrument of prayer. In modern times, due in large part to Descartes splitting of the mind and the body, the essential unit of the two has been lost. Re-engaging the senses in the act of praying can give us a whole new understanding of prayer and myriad new ways of encountering, experiencing, and praising the living God. In the words of Psalm 34: "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The following exercise is suggested by Jane E. Vennard in *Praying with Body and Soul*: Complete the following sentences.
 - I know God when I see _____
 - I know God when I hear _____
 - I know God when I touch _____
 - I know God when I taste _____
 - I know God when I smell _____
2. Think about times and ways actions and postures affect, even deepen your prayer. (Kneeling, prostration, sitting, walking, singing, etc.)
3. How can we be more open to our senses in a way that can enhance and expand our prayer?

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