

Body Awareness

Allowing our bodies to lead us in prayer

by

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INTRODUCTION

I have chosen to research body awareness and prayer as a result of a personal journey of discovery over the last two years. Having developed and lived with a chronic illness during this time, my journey has also been one of moving from disability and despair to love and acceptance of how I feel about my body.

I would like to share a recent spiritual encounter, which I had with my body that left me longing to explore the area of body prayer in much more depth and to share the meditations that I practice when entering into a time of listening to my body.

Whilst reading Flora Wuellner's 'Prayer and our Bodies'¹, I was struck by a question that she felt God encouraging her to ask her body, 'Who are you?' The answer she received from her body was even more profound. What struck me about this question was that it was indicating that our bodies have their own 'persona'. This was a fresh concept for me about how to approach my body, as an entity in itself, and I felt God asking me to draw closer. So in that moment, sat alone in a café, I felt the presence of God inviting me into a similar (but written) conversation with my own body, and this is how it went:

Emma: 'Who are you?'

Body: 'I am someone you have shamed and ignored,

I am someone who loves you deeply,

I am someone you are just beginning to listen to,

I am someone who carries your pain,

I am someone who longs to embrace you,

I am someone who has been abused,

I am someone who you think is never good enough,

I am someone who has carried illness and been punished for it,

I am someone who wants to be loved and accepted,

I am someone who wants to be looked upon with loving eyes, the way your daughter and husband do.'

As truth was revealed to me, and as I felt the impact of the words I was writing, guilt weighed on my heart and for the first time I fully repented of my lack of love, kindness and compassion for this 'person', my body.

Emma: 'I'm sorry Body, I'm sorry for ignoring you, for punishing you when you are ill. For abusing you and bad mouthing you. Please forgive me. I promise to love you, to look after you when you are sick, to cherish you, to hold you. I promise to put you first, to listen to you, to comfort you, to help you. I want to get to know you, my constant partner, the one who knows what I journey through. My closest companion. I'm sorry you have been so lonely.'

¹ Wuellner, Slosson Flora, 'Prayer and Our Bodies', The Upper Room, 1908 Grand Avenue, P.O. Box 189, Nashville, Tennessee 37202, 1987

What happened after this encounter was delightful. I felt as if my ears had been opened and I listened to my body's desires to pray, to feel, to touch, to move and I followed its lead.

EMBRACING THE 'EMBODIED LIFE'

From this experience I have developed a new awareness of the three 'personae' of myself: my body, my mind and my spirit, each one needing to be cared for, listened to and allowed to pray. If one part is neglected the others suffer; but if all three parts of ourselves are encouraged to pray, mind, spirit and body are at peace with one another, and able to work together. As God speaks to us through thoughts in our minds, so this is able to transform our spirit and body. When God speaks into our heart and spirit, it can alter our mind, our thinking and release our body. Likewise, when God brings awareness of our body and what it needs, relief can be given to our mind and spirit through this.

When interviewed by Gary. W. Moon, David G. Benner says;

'...in order for us to live the life of the spirit, we must fully live the life of the soul (which I understand in terms to be the reflective space between us and the events of our lives), and in order for us to live fully the life of the soul, we must fully live the life of the mind, and- yes, you anticipated this- in order, for us to live fully the life of the mind, we must fully live *our embodied life.*' (emphasis added)

In this study I have looked in more depth at some of my own body prayer practices, which I feel help to embrace the 'embodied life' in prayer. I will share three guided meditations which can be used alone or in a guided setting. One is written for initial body awareness and prayer, the second for an outdoor setting and the third for use as a guided visualising meditation, in which the body is invited to enter into prayer through the imagination. As Moon and Benner explain further:

'G.W.M: If being fully alive, fully awake, and fully human are far from normal or automatic occurrences, what are some of the ways a spiritual director/ guide might help someone become more fully human?

D.G.B: It starts by helping people awaken and realise our tendency to go through life as sleepwalkers...Those who help us awaken and stay awake also help us embrace and fully live within the realities of our life. They also help us attend to where God is in those present realities and in the ebb and flow of ordinary life...they also help us recover our easily lost capacity for wonder.'²

² Benner, David G, in conversation with Moon, Gary W, '*Becoming Fully Alive*'p18, Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation: Spirituality and The Body, Vol 9.1 Spring/Summer 2011, A publication of Richmond University.

It is my prayer is that the meditations in this assignment will give spiritual directors some tools to help people recover some of their 'lost capacity for wonder' as their body is set free to pray as it desires.

ALLOWING OUR BODIES TO PRAY

Prayer is often a time of listening rather than speaking. When we listen we tune out of our own agendas and thought patterns into God's presence and are open and receptive to communication. By listening in a similar way to our body, fully in the presence of God, we can begin to hear how the body wishes to pray.

Allowing our bodies to pray may be as small a movement as reading or speaking out loud, allowing our hands to move, or simply breathing in God's presence. As R. Deleon notes:

'Don't go beyond what you are comfortably capable of doing... Don't worry if you are getting the gestures "right". As long as you are moving in prayer, with the intention to be with the Divine, you are doing it "right". Sometimes slowing it down, as if you are moving in slow motion, begins to transport you to a sacred space that seems to whisper, you are on holy ground.'³

However your body wants to respond don't try and analyse what is happening, just 'welcome it'⁴, as Bourgeault says. Follow where the body's energy is going, but do so slowly, with movement, fully engaging with what the present moment has to offer.

When you are praying using these meditations read the words slowly, and take time to pause after each line for as long as you need to. Each time you use the meditations feel confident to slow them down more and more. In doing this it becomes less about reading and more about listening and responding.

MEDITATION 1: Initial body awareness prayer:

Start to become aware of your breath...

Are your breaths shallow or deep?...

Take the next breath deep into the bottom of your lungs, and relax your shoulders as you breathe out...

With each breath, imagine God is breathing His presence into you...

Start to relax, don't try to control your breathing, just let it do as it wishes...

Become aware of what is happening to your body, as you continue to breathe...

Feel the cool air enter your body...

And feel the sensations as you draw breath...

Feel your lungs filling with air, gently expanding your ribcage...

Exhale, and give your shoulders permission to release more tension...

³ Deleon, R. *Praying with the body: Bringing the psalms to life*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, (2009)

⁴ Bourgeault, Cynthia, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, Cowley Publications (2004),

As you exhale, notice the warm air leaving your body...
Move your focus to the movement of your stomach rising and falling...
Now back to the sound of the air entering and leaving through your nose or mouth...
In Genesis 2 it is written 'Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground. He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living person.'⁵
Visualise God's presence in the breath that you breathe in...
Become aware of your heart beating...
Picture the oxygen in your blood being pumped around your body and being distributed to the many organs and systems there...
Now, very slowly drop your head towards your left shoulder and allow your head to roll down onto your chest...
up towards your right shoulder...
and back again...
If you feel 'in tune' with your body, ask it: 'how do you want to pray?'..
Listen for a response...
this may come in many ways, perhaps as:
a glow or flutter of energy or excitement...
a sudden desire to stretch or move a limb...
you may develop a picture in your mind of yourself in a posture...
You may feel a surge of emotion that your body wants to release to God...
Or your body may say something else...
Welcome what your body is saying and follow it's lead...
(pause for 5 minutes)
If you feel your thoughts drift, notice the thought and gently become aware of your body again...
It may be that your body has prayed enough and needs to rest...
Listen, ask your body 'what do you want to do?'
If your body wants to rest, allow it to guide you...
Take time to listen and slowly respond...form a posture, curl up, or lie down...
(pause for 1 minute)
Allow God to hold you as you continue to breathe.

MEDITATION 2: Body awareness and prayer for an outdoor setting

As the relationship with your body grows, you may begin to feel comfortable listening and responding to your body's prayer in other settings.

Close your eyes and take in a deep breath...
Invite God's presence with each breath and ask him to speak to you during this prayer time...
Exhale, continue to stay present to each breath, welcoming God...

⁵ Genesis 2:7 'New Living Translation, Life Application Study Bible', Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, Carol Stream, Illinois (2004)

Stay present to your breath for as long as your body wants...
Now turn your awareness to the air on your skin and in your hair...
The temperature, the movement...
Listen to your body, and feel free to stay focused on your breath or air movement as long as your body wants to...
Open your ears and notice all of the different sounds you can hear...
What sound does your body want to focus on?...
Open your eyes...
Slowly and carefully, look around until you notice yourself drawn towards something you see...
Listen to your body, walk slowly towards it...
As you walk notice the sound of your feet touching the ground...
Listen to your body's desires to reach out and touch textures or pick up objects...
Heighten your sensory awareness...
Give your body permission to 'go with the flow'...
Continue to walk slowly and mindfully...
Welcome your body to speak...
Welcome every action...
Keep listening to what your body desires...
You may feel drawn to lie down, stretch, run, skip, jump...
Notice where the life is and follow it...
Invite God to speak to you through your body...

If you feel your prayer time is coming to a close...
Ask your body: 'Do you want to do or say anything else?'...
Follow it's lead...
Thank God for this time of prayer.

MEDITATION 3: A guided visualising meditation set in a forest, in which the body is invited to enter into prayer through the imagination.

Meditation 3 is to be used as a led meditation, and may be helpful for people who are already familiar with listening to their bodies.

You are standing near the entrance to a forest...
Close your eyes gently...
Take a deep breath in, and release...
Relax your breathing, don't try to control it...
With each breath, invite God's presence to be with you...
As you continue to focus on your breathing... start to release any tension you may be aware of in your shoulders...
Listen to the sounds around you...
You can hear birds calling...
The breeze moving past your ears...
Leaves rustling high above you as the wind catches the tree tops...
What other sounds can you hear?...

You can feel the air moving over your skin...
How does it feel?...
You begin to walk...
Your steps are calm and evenly paced...
You decide to enter the forest...
There is a beautiful flowing river...
You watch the water and listen to the sounds it makes...
Along the river bank there are large smooth rocks...
You climb down to the water's edge...
You have time to spend at the river...
Ask your body: 'how do you want to pray by the river?'..
Listen to your own body's response...
Take some time to allow your body to guide you as it desires...
You may wish to move as you respond to your body praying...
(Pause for 5 minutes)
You feel it's time to make your way back to the path...
You begin to walk along the riverbank and look up...
You can see the sky through the tall trees...
What does it look like?...what colour is it...are there any clouds?...
You look up at the, slender, tall trees and see the light passing through the leaves...
The leaves are dancing and clapping together...
What do you notice?..
(Pause 1 minute)
Your eyes follow the tree trunk down to its roots...
You notice the texture of the bark and the formation of the tree roots...
You spend some time looking at the tree...
Ask your body: 'how would you like to respond to this tree?'...
Listen to your body's response...
You may wish to move as you follow your body's lead...
(Pause 5 minutes)
You close your eyes and breathe the air in deeply...
Allow more tension to be released as you exhale...
Thank God for what you are experiencing...
(Pause 1 minute)
Bring your awareness back to the air your skin and in your hair...
You begin to walk slowly back along the riverbank...
Your footsteps are light and calm...
You look at God's creation all around you...
You notice the leaves...
Their colour and shape...
You look at the river, the way the light falls on the water...
What else can you see?...
(Pause for 1 minute)
Listen to your body...
What do you notice?...

What do you feel drawn to?...
You see an inviting place to rest...
Make yourself comfortable...
Spend some time reflecting on your prayer walk...
You may want to record your reflections through drawing or writing...
Thank God for what you have experienced.

CONCLUSION

This was Rev Dr. Robert Corin Morris' experience of praying with his body in a posture of prostration.

'...What happened was a total surprise. As my torso bowed forward, head touching the ground, I felt surrounded by a great Vastness and deeply at peace. Stretching forward to lie prostrate, everything in me felt very safe in surrendering completely to God. Lying in this position, it seemed both easy and joyful to relax into grace. More than that, both the vastness and the grace seemed to penetrate my flesh and touch my heart, wooing me deeper into a relationship I both yearn for and resist mightily.'⁶

Since I have been listening to my body's needs and desires to pray, I have felt a huge sense of peace which I have previously not felt before. Ordinary life is full of up's and downs but the difference is that I am able to journey through all experiences *with* my body, my constant partner, attending to its needs. I hear when my body needs to rest and go to God, I celebrate with my body when it feels full of life and wants to give thanks. I talk to my body and check how it's feeling, what it needs. We have the opportunity to experience God's presence, mindfully, as we go about living every area of our life. As I eat, I become aware of the smell of the food before it enters my mouth, the temperature and texture on my tongue, and the flavour sensation on my taste buds, I am aware for my body's thankfulness. In a similar way, as we read;

'you engage your ears as well as your eyes. Your lips move and you can feel the words in your throat and on your tongue.'⁷

By bringing this bodily awareness of prayer into our ordinary life, by paying attention, noticing, and listening to what our body needs or desires we honour our bodies. When we choose to pray in this way it forces us to slow down and to live fully in the present moment.

'As you go about your daily business, every action, every movement you make becomes body prayer when you let God act and move with you, in you, and through you.'⁸

⁶ Morris, Robert, *'Reclaiming the body in prayer: How flesh speaks soul'*, Conversations: A Forum for Authentic Transformation: Spirituality and The Body, Vol 9.1 Spring/Summer 2011, A publication of Richmond University.

⁷ Deleon, R. *'Praying with the body: Bringing the psalms to life'*p18, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, (2009)

⁸ Deleon, R. *'Praying with the body: Bringing the psalms to life'*p18, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, (2009)

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