

A Vision of Embodied Christian Spirituality

"I have been witnessing the body as a vessel in which healing occurs, a vessel in which direct experience of the divine is known" —Janet Adler, *Offering from the Conscious Body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement*.

During the summer of 2004, we were honored to receive funds from the Luther College Honors Program for collaborative student/faculty research. We enthusiastically and perhaps naively proposed a research project on the topic of Embodied Theology. Having both grown up within Christian environments, we chose to limit our exploration to a Christian context. It was not so long into the project, however, that we realized our curiosity was not engaged within the *study* of Christian practice—the theology, but within the *experience* of Christian practice—the spirituality.

In two years of ongoing formal and informal collaboration, we now articulate a distinction between theology and spirituality. From an embodied perspective, curiosity lives in *experience*. Theology is a place of words and ideas, spirituality a place of mystery and practice. For the longest time we avoided the word *spirituality*, fearing it to be fluffy or vacuous; however, now we desire to reclaim the power in spirituality, the power of living knowledge and personal truth that only emerges from *experiencing* that which is divine. Spirituality is an embodied perspective rooted in the truth of human wholeness.

Honoring human wholeness in a Christian academic environment, however, initiates a cultural dilemma. Spirituality

Shannon Bierly offered one of the thirty-two breakout seminars on the second day (March 11) of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum and while not a transcript of what she said there, this essay develops similar themes and ideas. Shannon, an assistant professor of Theater/Dance at Luther since 2003, worked with senior art major Sonya Luse on a student/faculty collaborative research project in summer 2004, supported by funds from the Luther Honors Advisory Committee. In addition to writing this essay, Shannon and Sasha worked together in the 2004 Lutherfest and later in class-related projects in sacred dance and other presentations (including the NPPF). Shannon has studied contemporary dance, contact improvisation, and somatic practices, graduating from the Tisch School of the Arts and from the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies.

by
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Shannon Bierly in the Black Earth Collaborative production titled "The Ovarian Seed Project" directed by Jane Hawley, Summer 2004

wants to emerge as an integrated experience through practices that affirm the notion that humans are *whole*. Yet, while asserting that humans are unified in body, spirit, and mind, we dysfunctionally inhabit a culture in which these aspects of self are understood to be separate. We are continually mystified in witnessing the segregated environment of learning and the superior honor granted to one singular means of composing and comprehending experience—*thinking*. Why separate Body to time in fitness, Mind to time in lecture, and Spirit to time in chapel? Why not pray while jogging by the Upper

PHOTO BY WILLIAM GENTRY

Iowa River? Why not feel our bodies when learning about physics? Why not consider, reflect, and question while receiving communion? Our suggestion is that we do. In our lives, we practice integrated awareness. The bigger question, however, is why in a college of the church, do educators not facilitate, model, and practice integrated awareness in preparing students for challenging and complex life responsibilities?

Listening to the body makes available insight that is complex and multi-dimensional, shades of many colors, and perceptions of many qualities. We believe that truths, particularly spiritual truths, live in varied shades and colors and often live within the expression of paradox. We learn this by listening to the body. The body is a complex system operating at its most functional state when it is dynamic and adaptive. The body is constantly engaged in modes of change adapting to a multitude of chemical messages. From a physiological perspective, human truth is in constant flux. Thinking is a process that likes to attach to fixed notions of truth. When spiritual practice is lived out in thinking, there are inherent limits to the evolution of spiritual ideas and experience. It seems that we get into trouble when we identify self with the enculturated thinking mind—trained in externally fixed notions of right and wrong, good and bad. Greater truth is to be found by dropping deep into the bodymind through experience—becoming a compassionate and curious witness to perception, response, and *change*.

We propose that a pedagogic transformation will occur when, as a Christian academic culture, we come to honor and explore the whole of our body-mind potential. We offer here an opportunity to experience embodied practice . . .

As you continue reading, shift part of your attention to the sensations in your body. Begin with the sensation of your weight. Allow your weight to release and become supported by the surfaces under your body. Notice the sensations of contact with these support structures—chair, floor, desk, etc. Sensations of support provide the common ground of human development. Acknowledging support affirms qualities of trust, comfort, confidence, ease, etc. Shift your attention to the movement of your breathing. Can you allow your breath to come and go on its own without direction, manipulation or judgment? Allow your breath to come and go tracking the sensations of breath movement in your body. Where do you feel the breath move? How does it change? Can you still feel the sensations of contact with support? Bring attention to any sensations that you notice—the contact of your clothing, sounds in the room, temperature of the air. You might wish to pause a moment and simply pay attention to the richness of what your bodymind is experiencing every moment of the day. Notice the changes that are taking place in the space of peaceful receptivity. What would it be like to communicate from this place, to teach from the place of open, receptive awareness, to share intimacy from the place of alive and compassionate connection? These are important questions to consider given the wealth of blessings we have been gifted in this embodied life.

This is where we begin research—through our bodily experience. We ask three primary questions. How can we connect to the Divine through the body? How can we include the awareness of body in a Christian worship experience? How do we support the cultivation of an embodied Christian

Spirituality? The curiosity for embodied spirituality is rooted in our practice of somatic study exemplified by the Movement Fundamentals curriculum in the Theatre/Dance Department established by Jane Hawley, Assistant Professor of Dance. *Somatic* refers to understanding from integrated body-mind awareness. *Somatic practice* emphasizes perceptual exploration in movement and stillness—learning by paying attention to our changing organismic experience. Emphasis is placed on awareness of breath, relationship to gravity (weight sensing, equilibrium responses), developmental movement patterns, and reflex responses. Attention is ideally given to integrating all means available for receiving and making sense of experience including: sensation, kinesthesia, proprioception, intuition, and of course, cognition—the whole business of human experience made conscious. We call this conscious integrated experience *embodiment*.

The use of the term embodiment usually refers to the representation of an idea in human action or human form—concept in flesh. In the context of somatic theory, however, embodiment is not a vehicle for the conceptual.

Embodiment is a place of balanced inner and outer awareness—conscious experience through the whole of the body. We identified early on in our research that in this academic environment, the use of the term *embodiment* usually refers to the representation of an idea in human action or human form—concept in flesh. In the context of somatic theory, however, embodiment is not a vehicle for the conceptual. Embodiment is the *state* of integrated consciousness—awareness witnessed through bodily experience (since of course there are no other means).

Embodiment is the ironic state of profound human simplicity—attention to the whole present moment truth. In our experience from practice when we are embodied, the ego place of ideas loses its power in the hierarchy of understanding. We are *in* connection rather than thinking *about* connection. There is a wide gulf separating these distinct activities. Consider the example of parenting. When spending time with a newborn child, what is more important—feeling and adapting to the sensations in this newly-formed and vulnerable body, or attending to thoughts about how best to raise her? Thinking will not nourish a child in the moment of connection. Present moment awareness provides the most insightful intelligence and the richest nourishment available.

Sasha and I share the spiritual perspective of desiring divine connection more than divine concept. In seeking an embodied spiritual connection, we ask questions such as: Can the awareness of my breath bring me closer to God? How will scripture resonate with me when I am fully aware of my body? Can I feel God? If so, how and when? We established a studio practice of sacred reading and somatic movement practice, collaborating to ask questions, discuss, and move.

We brought our questions to members of the Luther faculty, local clergy, and former Luther students who generously offered their time for documented interviews. Discussion began with definitions of embodiment and theology. We inquired about personal perspectives on how the body is addressed within Christian worship and encouraged the envisioning of integrated worship possibilities. We invited personal stories of embodied spiritual experiences. Moving stories were shared regarding moments of intimacy, birth, and death. How perfectly affirming that our bodily experience of God is realized in the cycle of human development. We felt honored and invigorated to receive shared visions for the potential of an embodied Christian spirituality.

To honor the more traditional notion of academic research, we committed to collecting information. We recorded and transcribed the interviews referred to previously. We compiled a long but certainly not exhaustive list of resources considering relationships between (Christian) theology, (Christian) spirituality, and the body. Texts purchased with research funds are available in the Theatre/Dance department and currently housed in Shannon's office. Sasha diligently identified and collected Biblical references for words identifying embodiment including: body, flesh, breath, and touch. These resource listings are available by directing requests to Shannon Bierly.

Perfectly timed in conjunction with our research project was the opportunity to facilitate a Lutherlag workshop we titled "Embodied Scripture." The workshop allowed us to engage with an objective and curious audience—open-minded Christians familiar with traditional protestant liturgy and worship. We initiated the four-day workshop with awareness practice and open discussion of our research questions regarding embodiment, theology, and Christian worship. Subsequent days included awareness and movement practice, Bible reading, and discussion. Awareness practice included weight sensing and breath awareness, which unfolded into intrinsic movement exploration. Personal insights from embodied exploration were documented through drawing and writing. We played with creating movement scores composed by embodying specific

scriptural verses related to breath and body. After reading chosen verses, movers found stillness listening for movement impulses. These impulses became the movement language for sacred movement compositions. In closure, participants created and shared sacred movement offerings in groups of three and four. The result was completely inspiring and initiated curiosity about the possibility of divine translations from God to Word to our body/being—a creative and radical potential for embodied spiritual education and worship.

From a spiritual perspective, we know that the divine gift of life is experienced through the *body*. To honor the gift of life is to honor the intelligence of the body. From an educational perspective we know that developing intelligent and conscious bodies develops intelligent and conscious beings. When we evolve bodily consciousness, we evolve the whole body-mind-spirit consciousness. The Body is an infinitely dynamic resource for insight, guidance and connection. When we act through God as whole humans, integrating awareness of Body, Mind, and Spirit, we actively transform our communities, our environment, and ourselves. It is this exciting potential of wholeness and integration that inspired the desire to experiment and envision a transformed contemporary Christian culture. We offer our supreme gratitude for the opportunity to plant some radical spiritual seeds in this fertile Iowa soil. *Agora*

You called and cried aloud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours. —Augustine of Hippo, The Confessions



PHOTO BY AIMEE RINGLE

Sasha Luse in the Luther dance studio