

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

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KNITTING TOGETHER MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT

The Experience of Contemporary Christian Women

Recent feminist writing has consistently claimed a distinctive role of the body in the construction of knowledge. Audre Lorde writes:

Out of my flesh that hungers
and my mouth that knows
comes the shape I am seeking
for reason¹.

Several theoretical perspectives are required to illuminate the experience of women in and through their bodies in their mystical experience: analyses of gendered experience of historical mystics, the role of the body in the history of Christian mysticism, and theories of bodily knowing.

I HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

1. Caroline Bynum in her careful studies of medieval women mystics and the role of the body proposes that in these texts, the sexual and gendered body in question is *not a raw biological fact, but a cultural construct*². She further claims that culturally medieval women were identified with and often limited to being physical bodies. These women turned this denigration and denial of their personhood into a paradoxical recognition that their gendered body was itself the place where they could encounter and join with the humanity of Christ which was also both a physical and resurrected body. This encounter and passionate union with Christ often took place through images of the human body of Christ joining with the mystic's female body in an amazing array of bodily images of union, both maternal and erotic, and of empathically shared pain. For these women, they and their gendered

1 In: J.G. Milhaven, *Hadewijch and her Sisters: Other Ways of Knowing and Loving*, Albany: Suny, 1993, 113.

2 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Bodily Miracles in the High Middle Ages*, in: T. Keselman, *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, 68.

bodies symbolically represented the humanity of Christ. They understood as well that through their humanity and Christ's their souls participated in Divinity³.

2. The role of the body in the history of Christian mysticism has long been both ambiguous and ambivalent. Margaret Miles identifies three distinct roles the body has played in Christian spirituality: the body as foil, the body as obstacle, and the body as ally in the mystical quest⁴. If the body is an obstacle, the seat of sin and disorder, it must be tamed, punished, disciplined, and controlled. If the body is foil, its role is minimized and neglected. If it is ally, it becomes a gateway for the sacred⁵, the vehicle of prayer⁶ and of *summoning grace in the senses*⁷, a sacrament of our self-presence⁸, and partner in grace. Human person is now more clearly understood to be embodied spirit. That embodiment is physically of two sexes, and culturally two gendered. Sin is a disorder of the whole person, mind and body, not simply rooted in the body alone⁹. Mind, body, and psyche form one whole in grace or sin in interpersonal relationships as well as in our social and ecological reality.

II BODILY KNOWING

1. Giles Milhaven asserts that the male philosophical tradition failed to recognize adequately the interpersonal knowing of Christ that women mystics commonly claimed because it was too physical in seven respects to be considered entirely 'rational'. These seven features he claims together form a single concept of bodily knowing¹⁰ which constitutes an alternative form of knowing to disembodied intellect.

3 Caroline Walker Bynum, chapter 10 of *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987 and: *...And Woman His Humanity: Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages*, 151ff, in: *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York: Zone, 1991.

4 Margaret M. Miles, *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981.

5 Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred in Women* (chapter 4: The Ten Thousand Gates), New York: Bantam, 1991.

6 Ibid, 129.

7 Johann Baptist Metz, *Toward the Second Reformation*, in: P. Mann, trans., *The Emergent Church*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 48-66. See also my essay: *You Fill Up My Senses: God and the Senses*, in: *The Way* 35 (1995), 101-110.

8 The body is expression, symbol, incarnation, essential medium of man [sic]. In the body the whole man is 'there', that is why the body can be practically understood as man's 'being there' and his presence. Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, New York: Paulist, 1977, 201.

9 Charles Davis, *Body As Spirit: The Nature of Religious Feeling*, New York: Seabury, 1975.

10 Susan A. Ross emphasizes 'embodied thinking' - as rooted in concrete circumstances and oriented toward practical results - may enable human beings to come to more balanced understandings of God, the world, human relationships, and themselves. Further, she describes the

1. In such knowing a woman knew only an individual person in a single moment and place.
2. She knew a person in actively affecting another, often as the other person affected her.
3. Physical touching pervaded the knowing.
4. The knowing arose in bodily need or desire.
5. The knowing was had often in pleasures peculiar to family life.
6. The knowing was had often in bodily pain.
7. The knowing often included bodily identification with another.

'Not only by reason but also in and through their bodies do human beings know other human beings in their humanness, their personalness. Not only by reason but also in and through their bodies do human beings know much that is intrinsically precious in human life'¹¹.

2. Milhaven describes in this analysis the kind of knowing that empathy and compassion disclose. This kind of knowing is related to the knowing of the poet, the artist, the person who discovers that one can truly know another through identification, concrete engagement, loving connection, in the particular instance in an entirely different way than one knows by abstraction, distance, and objectivity. Further Milhaven suggests that women's cultural and physical experience of familial intimacy continues to cultivate this kind of embodied knowing which is complementary to abstract rationality. Caroline Bynum supports this view in her prior discovery that medieval women's mystical experience seemed to be in continuity with their familial and social experience rather than in discontinuity as the men seemed to claim about theirs¹².

III THE GENDERED EXPERIENCE OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN

Among the contemporary women I interviewed in my research about their mediated experiences of grace, many of the themes briefly sketched above, although nuanced by a different cultural context, played a dominant role in their experience. In a previous report, I described in a summary fashion the way bodily experience

seemed to relate to experiencing the presence of God¹³. All of the women in the study reported sensuous experiences in nature and visual, tactile or imaginative involvement with symbols as a significant feature of their religious experience. All but one of nineteen women reported singing or listening to music as another important opening to the sacred. A significant number also reported religious experiences occurring through relationships with persons or as part of complex life events. More than half of the women described other clear somatic elements: use of rhythmic activity in prayer, use of positions or postures in prayer, descriptions of physical changes which either registered their openness to God or their sense of the presence of God. One third of the women reported physical illness as significant in their spiritual journeys. For those who were married, maternal experience (pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, parenting) was more closely connected to religious experience than experiences of genital sexuality. Two or three of the women reported spontaneous genital experiences as an overflow of their religious experience but it was not dominant in the group. For only one of the women did her partnered sexual loving coincide with her mystical experience.

The ways somatic experiences figured in these interviews was both complex and varied. In the remainder of this essay, four informants exemplify experiences with illness, somatic experiences in prayer and spiritual dimensions of touch. Two women were mothers and were divorced at the time of the interview. Two women were celibate religious who had never been married. One of the mothers and one of the sisters exemplify experiences with illnesses. One of the mothers and one of the sisters were masseuses and particularly conscious of their somatic experiences in prayer as well as of the spiritual dimensions of their massage ministry. The analyses which follow present rich, *thick descriptions* from interviewees which illustrate particularly well key themes found in the data as a whole. The researcher's analyses in this type of qualitative interview methodology is restricted to material discovered within the interviews themselves¹⁴ although relationships are made between the data in the interviews and theoretical frames of reference which enhance an understanding of the interview data.

shift since Vatican II in the role of the body in spirituality: From an object of discipline and control, the body has come to be seen as the basis for human thought and action, as symbolic of the human connection with the natural world, as intimately involved in the development of an adequate liturgical and prayer life. The sharp distinction formerly drawn between soul and body has given way to a conception of the person as embodied spirit. 'Body' in: *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey, Collegeville: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1993, 98-99.

¹¹ Milhaven, 119.

¹² Bynum, *Women's Symbols*, in: *Holy Feast*, 288ff..

¹³ Janet K. Ruffing, *The World Transfigured: Kataphatic Religious Experience Explored through Qualitative Research Methodology*, in: *Studies in Spirituality* 5 (1995), 232-259.

¹⁴ Matthew B. Miles, and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984, 15. Qualitative data are attractive. They are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in local contexts. ...Words, especially when they are organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often proves far more convincing to a reader - another researcher, a policy-maker, a practitioner - than pages of numbers. Ibid.

1 Illness and Suffering

Illness continues to be a fact of life for contemporary people despite advances in medicine which treat, cure, or manage many illnesses. The diseased or painful body remains an aspect of human experience which limits, which reminds people of their mortality and fragility, and which can either be an obstacle to spiritual development or an important element in the process of mystical transformation.

Sister Agnes

Sister Agnes was fifty-two at the time of the interview. She had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for thirty years, and had recently become a fund-raiser for a peace and justice office and the social justice coordinator for her province after having been an elementary school teacher and administrator. She suffered from a negative self-image, the result of her father's resentment of the care she and her other siblings required from their mother. She had had several years of psychotherapy in which she dealt with these familial patterns of wounding. In the process of several profound retreat experiences in which her prayer consisted of multi-sensory, interior imaging of Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit, she understood this childhood wounding to be sufficiently healed so as to no longer be an obstacle in her life. Her experiences in prayer at the time of the interview were multi-sensory as well. She primarily wrote dialogues between herself and the persons of the Trinity as if she were taking dictation. She characterized these interchanges as having no secrets among us; nothing was withheld in the conversation. She felt herself to be in a *partnership* with the persons of the Trinity. She was trusted by them to do their work in the world and in turn, they cared for her and sustained her activity. She heard and sang songs which emerged spontaneously in prayer, sometimes experienced herself as dancing in kinesthetic interior imagery, drew images of particular significance when they emerged, enjoyed experiences in nature, and would sometimes move from photographs or paintings into prayer.

This is how she described her relationship to her chronic illness:

[It] was part of my anger that I had to work out in counseling sessions. When you have [some] thing like rheumatoid arthritis it's always with you. So there are layers and levels of acceptance. I know that I've gone through a lot of levels of acceptance. [At first,] I was very, very angry. The years have shown me that it doesn't make any difference how I look to God, that God will love me just the same. For many years when I first became ill, I was praying for a miracle. It became clearer to me that God said that I'm going to heal you from the inside out and not from the outside in. Once I believed that and I was experiencing it, that helped.

In the interview, she was more interested in describing key experiences of profound psychological healing in visionary prayer than in talking about her illness. On the

other hand, her daily prayer and activities were conditioned by her illness. She found herself unable to pray on a daily basis because of her work and need for rest. She continued to feel emotional pain when faced with her physical limitations. Yet she also exuded a deep peace and an appreciation that important spiritual and psychological events happened precisely through her illness. Like many people with chronic illness, she had learned to focus her attention on something other than her pain and limitation. Yet she drew on spiritual resources to find a way of living with her illness instead of getting rid of it through a miracle. She settled for the interior healing of her psychological wounds through prayer, her intimacy with God, and therapy. She volunteered that her physical suffering saved her from becoming a social activist and contributed to her development in prayer.

Maybe it saved me in some ways because I could have become such an activist that I wouldn't have taken the time [to pray]. ... this slowed me down and I wouldn't have reflected... I could very well be out of religious life now and yelling into microphones. I don't know if you can be grateful for an illness. I don't know if I actually accept it to the point of being grateful but... I can see some positive effects.

Twentieth-century Catholic culture does not value pain and suffering the same way the medieval culture of women mystics did. However, in a rather sober and understated way she realizes how different her life could have been and she recognizes some positive effects resulting from her struggle with chronic illness.

When questioned about the relationship between her considerable pain and her experience with God, she referred to a thirty-day Ignatian retreat which included a week of contemplating Christ's passion:

I never had the experience of the Passion that way and I think part of it was the experience of pain and the [sense of] being with Jesus right close. I mean accompanying [Jesus] the whole way. It became for me a way of participating in the mystery of salvation. A redemptive sharing in the passion. That was the big thing in the thirty day retreat experience. It has to do with being friends and sharing.

She contrasted this experience of sharing with Jesus and participating in redemption with her retreat experience as a novice in which she thought she wanted to take Jesus off the cross and put herself there. This latter experience, she said 'is not like I am a savior, not that type of thing, but co-redemption'. Her long-standing experience of physical pain helped her identify with the sufferings of Christ so that she could accompany him. Being friends and sharing Jesus' experience was the most important aspect of this experience. This is a knowing of Jesus, to refer to Milhaven's theory, that came through bodily pain, through the identification with Jesus' pain joined with the experience of her unique pain. This was a positive experience because of being friends and sharing, images of mutuality, and mutual relat-

edness, affecting another and being affected by another. These images of the passion experience were in harmony with some very tender images of care and mutual love which had occurred in retreat - an image after a cosmic scene of struggle in which she bathed Jesus after the combat and in which he reciprocated. Finally, she finds meaning in her suffering when it is accepted in this mutual relationship with Jesus. It is a way of participating in the mystery of salvation, a form of co-redemption.

Mrs. Smith

Mrs. Smith was fifty-four, and had been divorced a year, at the time of the interview. She had had surgery for breast cancer, detected in the earliest stages, and radiation about six months previously. Her first husband had died within a month of the conception of their last child. She subsequently married a man with children and raised seven children between hers and his. Her divorce from him was as traumatic to her as her recovery from surgery. She had had pneumonia twice the previous year. She was currently teaching elementary school and her children were grown. She had been praying with Scripture for about seven years, but her illness and divorce focused her spiritual process and experience on healing and on recovering both physically and psychologically. She had a sense of receiving constant guidance through events, and at times heard distinct voices. Her scriptural prayer was characterized by hearing the words rather than visualizing the scenes and she registered a felt sense in her body of the rightness of a particular passage. In her recovery from the cancer surgery, she was very frustrated at the slowness of her recovery, yet at the same time experienced Jesus and Mary as both healing and protective.

The most aggravating thing of the whole thing is regaining the use of my right arm. And I'm finding that's just driving me crazy! I've never really experienced my body not doing what I want it to do, and I'm so frustrated. This is so slow. It seems to go two steps forward and four backward, and I'm at a real point of frustration with it. And I'm working with someone who does do healing work, and I think she has a gift for healing. And I'm also trying to do all the, you know, the medical things as well, and I'm just frustrated. I was working with a massage therapist. She does acupressure, and acupuncture, and is a holistic practitioner. She was working with me on Thursday, on this shoulder, and she delineated a triangle, and told me to close my eyes, and to breathe deeply, and to breathe in light, and to put that light in my shoulder. I often have the experience of the presence of Jesus with her when she's working. At first I had the experience of Him behind her, and then it was as if His hand *became* her hand. And then - although her hand was more fingers, touching me - it was like His palm was on my shoulder, and the three nail holes in His hand were the three points of the triangle. I experienced a feeling, or... it wasn't a feeling really, an image I guess, of the triangle at first becoming very luminescent, and then that

light growing and spreading, almost as a flame. It was very strongly the feeling that that was coming from the nail holes in the hand. Experiences like that have happened a number of times, when I've been working with H.

After such a session she reported:

I feel very trusting. But I also get better. I want a miracle! Or I want to know that on January twelfth, this will be better. I want to know that I'm on the right path, and I'm doing the right things. There's a part of me that knows it isn't possible for me to probably *know* that either, and that I need to be patient, and I need to *accept* the healing, however it comes slowly, or quickly, or whatever. But I'm tired of lessons in patience, and I (laughs) would like a miracle! When I leave, I'm afraid to move my arm because if I don't move it, I don't feel the pain, and I can believe that it's all right. And I also don't want to be testing God by, you know, trying it out (laughs), and seeing how far it'll go. I do really trust in God's healing. I guess I'm just afraid that I'll get in the way, and I don't know how much to just do nothing, and let it happen, and which are steps that I need to be taking to follow along with the healing. So, confused as hell, you know! (laughs).

Despite these experiences, she was deeply aware of her human reactions to the whole situation. Her experience of pain and its relief was mixed. Sometimes she felt she got relief, at other times she wasn't sure.

At its worst, when I first started to work with her, in January, I was in constant pain when I went to her. And immediately, I had relief from that grinding pain. I have no idea what makes it better and what makes it worse at this point. The last couple of weeks it seemed worse after therapy. I don't actually feel worse when I'm actually leaving there, but sometimes later that night, or by the next morning. And then there are other times where I've felt it's really getting better, I really can move, I'm not in pain. I've had several weeks when I could see real improvement.

The kind of visualization she described above, was not typical for her. She could remember only three other similar occasions. One occurred before her divorce, and was a tactile image similar to the one above - a moment of loving consolation from God in the midst of her marital desolation.

When I was feeling really desolate over my marriage, as I was falling asleep one night, it's a feeling I've never experienced before or since - I would *love* to be able to go back to that feeling- but it's not something that I can recreate. (laughs) I really almost physically *felt* the arms of God around me, and I was feeling very forlorn, and very abandoned within this relationship, and it was the

most incredibly love-filled, satisfying experience that I can ever remember having. I'd love to go back to it! (laughs).

Something similar occurred in the operating room in the midst of her surgery. 'I really felt held. I felt the presence of the Lord behind me, on the operating table. I was very conscious throughout the whole thing, of being in prayer'. She described how consciously she placed herself in God's presence, but that she did not choose an image on which to focus: 'I make a conscious choice to be *in* the presence of God, usually in those situations... And to be open'. The image that came was often a surprise.

Jesus' hands aren't something that I go around thinking about. Sometimes, it seems that He more enters H, and reaches me through her. This time it was more direct. I also had a sense this time of Mary. She was a very, very strong presence for me as a child! I thought Mary could do anything, and if you just asked her, you got it. I *did* ask, and I got what I asked her for. The other day in therapy, I felt her mantle being laid across me. And that is *definitely* not an image I would conjure up on my own because I have moved away from that.

The cultural elements in these profound experiences of loving consolation are rather interesting. Mrs. Smith's psyche tends to produce images from Catholic tradition, Mary's mantle and Jesus' hands imprinted with nails. But the three nail-holes match the shoulder points the therapist is working on. There is a clear sense that Jesus acts through the healing agency of the massage therapist¹⁵. The woman feels the therapist's hands on the purely sensory level. But she also senses Jesus working through her. At other times, as in the descriptions above, she feels the presence and activity of Jesus or Mary more directly. She is surprised at the Marian imagery since she thought she'd 'grown beyond that'. The experience of treatment is holistic in her consciousness, physical and spiritual at the same time. She has spiritual experiences of healing or love which resemble the familial intimacy of touch, holding and being held, touching and being touched. Her experience of the healing Jesus is rooted in her bodily knowing of human intimacy and comfort. Some of these are feminine, and others feel more masculine to her.

In contrast to medieval women, this woman was not seeking pain or suffering as a way to be with or in order to experience Christ. She, instead, is intent on seeking and cooperating with the healing she believes Jesus is offering her. Her primary image of Jesus is not as the suffering one, but as the risen healer. She experiences and expresses considerable emotional ambivalence and a full range of feelings in relationship to her physical limitations. Her experience of her illness is at once an experience of body as limitation and of body as occasion of grace and encounter

15 This woman clearly sees her massage therapist *in persona Christi*. Within her Christian experience the Risen-healing Christ easily touches her through her female therapist. She commented that of all the doctors who touched her in her illness, only one had *healing hands*.

with Jesus. The emotional and physical suffering that are a part of her life become occasions for profound experiences of God. Her response to her visions and the protective, consoling, or healing experiences of Jesus is gratitude and love. In the interview she described returning love to Jesus both in the love she showed her own family and to the children she taught.

She cited another important example of touch which she interpreted as gift or grace. Her last child was born eight months after her husband's death. She considered that baby to be very special for her. She remarked that her other children were older and she needed to let them be independent of her. In her grief, she said, 'I had this baby whom I could hold as much as I wanted'. Holding her baby was a comfort to her and she was grateful to God for it just at this time when they hadn't expected or planned to have another child at all. She was keenly aware of the mutuality of maternal embrace¹⁶ and the connection this baby made for her with the husband she could no longer touch. This was an experience she described in a way that was similar to God's working through the therapist rather than the *more direct* experience of God's presence. This woman's maternal and marital experiences of touch as well as her own tactile experiences as a child wove through her most intense experiences of Divine Presence and consolation in the face of desolation and grief in relationship to her husbands, and in her present need for physical healing with which she was cooperating in every way she could.

Mrs. Smith seemed to have a heightened tactile sense, a way of feeling into situations. She also described a real connection through nature which was tactile, visual, and cognitive.

When I'm working in the yard, my arm doesn't hurt! Which is amazing! I can rake, I can do all kinds of things. I get so involved in the task it's almost self-hypnotic. I can be outside, and not have my arm hurt, and yet, to brush my hair this morning, I had to go like this, to get this arm up. It's just an entirely different experience being outside. I feel very energized. I am very aware of colors and textures and the variety - endless variety, which is one of the things that I

16 Elizabeth Johnson describes some of these aspects of mothering: Taking the best of this experience from the child's perspective, mothering is associated with primordial experiences of comfort, play, discovering, nurture, love and compassion, security in being held and sheltered, and basic trust in being taught, disciplined, and led forth. From the woman's perspective, mothering involves the creative activity of beginning life, giving birth, and providing for the child's growth, food first of all and then emotional and intellectual nourishment. This is an active experience of involvement in the flourishing of another, potentially, 'one of the most ecstatic and humanly rewarding experiences there is'. There is power in the delivery of new life, warmth and strength in freely given love that bears responsibility to rear what one has created, and vulnerability in the ways a woman can be hurt by what damages her child. For both mother and child in different ways the relationship connotes interdependence and mutuality of life at the deepest level, a quality of intimacy and familiarity that is genuinely person creating' (*She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse*, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 178).

often find myself thinking about when I'm outside. It really makes me aware of the fact that God is not limited in the way that we are limited, the infiniteness of God, nature seems so infinite to me. I could never sit down and come up with that many designs if I spent a lifetime doing it. And... I feel very connected in that way, and I feel... well, I feel very grateful. I find I say a lot of prayers of gratitude, for the way my life has evolved.

Experiences in nature, such as these, preceded her illness. Before her surgery she feared losing this access to the divine and the kind of self-transcendence and appreciative absorption with creativity into which her gardening lead her. In her full range of bodily experiences, her body is both challenge or obstacle which invites her to go beyond the physical dimension alone and body as ally or partner in her healing and in her particular forms of opening to the sacred. Her gardening opens her, indeed, to a sacred garden. Her illness elicits her consciousness and energy toward both healing and God's presence. Her familial bodily experiences make her receptive to particular forms of grace which resemble her familiar experiences of intimacy.

2 *Expressive and Interactive Relationship with the Divine*

There are two primary kataphatic¹⁷ paths of meditation and consequently of meditations of the sacred. Naranjo describes these as the way of forms and the expressive way. The way of forms is outer-directed, a focusing of attention and awareness on an outer symbol of the sacred and confines the internal processes of imagining, feeling, identifying with, and projecting to the terrain connected to the particular symbol chosen for meditative focus. The expressive way of meditation is inner-directed in that the meditator focuses on the contents and impulses which arise in spontaneity from the self. When these become transparent, a new form emerges that is often a mirror image of symbols used in the way of forms. To go through formlessness is to discover an internal organization or archetypes that are shared by all. Christian prayer has primarily emphasized the way of forms and often neglected the expressive way. Christian prayer has also often favored the third way, the negative way, a way without forms. The meditator does not identify with any form or feeling or content of consciousness. This way neither reaches out nor in but empties. In this emptying the very ground of all reality may be disclosed¹⁸.

It is not uncommon for people who pray to use more than one of these ways in the course of their lives. Classical Christian sources often suggest that one goes from the way of forms to the way of negation as a logical progression from lower to

17 The term 'kataphatic' literally means with or through images. It is usually contrasted with apophatic meditation which rejects all images and forms.

18 Claudio Naranjo and Robert Ornstein, *On the Psychology of Meditation*, New York: Viking, 1971, 15-18.

higher, from tangible reality to the intangible. Many people, but more often women, do not appear to proceed from the way of forms to the way of negation. Rather they tend to oscillate back and forth between the expressive way and the way of forms. The two women's descriptions which follow represent such a process. Both had prayed for many years in the way of forms and continued to use that process from time to time.

Sister Frances

Sister Frances had been in a transition for five years from a way of forms to an expressive way which included dreamwork, dance, drawing with pastels, music both chosen and heard interiorly, and a spontaneous expression of feeling, improvising in response to her own internally generated content.

At the time of the interview she was thirty-seven and working as a pastoral minister in a large parish with responsibility for the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults program. She found group faith-sharing opportunities important and liked being in a group for self-exploration and mutual encouragement. Her discovery of an expressive form of meditation occurred after ten years of working with Scripture passages:

One day, out of desperation to convey what was going on inside, I remember putting music on and just got up and moved with it. Since then I have seen movement as a powerful way of communicating and expressing, or even being attentive to receive whatever is coming through the movement. For me it's so many deeper levels of prayer - I'm not even aware that they're taking place; I don't program it or control it. I find that the most natural way of praying for me. I guess it was because I was tired of groping for words or trying to find some way of expressing what was going on inside - the anxiety, the darkness or whatever. So I remember being there and this music just took me. I went beyond the words [of the music] - at that time there were whole periods of darkness and confusion and anger. And my body carried all of that. Through my movement I began to cry out to Jesus - 'Get me out of this darkness - break through this!'. That's how all this happened... I have so much inside to pray with and pray about - This is my own journey; and with my God, I can cry out in my words rather than in someone else's words. I could break through those boundaries and those restrictions in the movement.

Prior to this breakthrough into expressive movement, she had written about her feelings in a journal, but at this time they were too complex for writing alone to be expressive enough. Even more remarkable was the way she experienced God in this movement prayer.

It was a more real God - the Lord of the Dance - it was both of us co-creating, doing and becoming rather than me [alone] talking to [God] out of the stillness. [There is] mutuality - a whole source of energy back and forth. I become a

co-creator. I take part in this; I am responsible; I'm also part of the doing and the shaping, and the moving - I take a more active role physically. I was no longer speaking to a tabernacle. As a younger sister, my novice director would say go and talk to the tabernacle. I would say, *It's a tabernacle; it never speaks back to me!* In the moving and in the doing, I was no longer focusing to a particular point where Jesus would be present, but Jesus was with me, active and participating.

[This presence] was from inside of me... I realized that the anger was from within and had to be dealt with from within. God became more real and tangible than in the tabernacle because [God] was within me and through me.

She described this experience as a partnership, God doing this with her. She felt it was a 'very active together thing - not totally passive'. She asserted: 'This allowed a lot of spontaneity, a lot of feelings and movements that express themselves over which I have no control. I become prayer'. She associated the Presence of God she felt in this prayer with Spirit:

I call it energy; Spirit energy, life-giving; my whole body and my whole being is part of this. It receives that source of life and energy. Prayer for me at this time is really communion or an encounter with God. In an encounter there are many different levels. I find that prayer is everything that I am. It's a harmonious thing from the minute I get up until the moment I go to bed. But I extend it even in my sleep. Through my dreams and everything. It's more a way of being.

This new intimacy and partnership with the Divine experienced in her spontaneity was beginning to overflow and connect her with a new awareness of God in nature. She reported:

I find myself taking a walk every day. I am beginning to be aware that everything is part of creation and part of the creator. [I am] beginning to be more gentle with a flower or just become absorbed in or marveling at a sunset. [I am] beginning to see that God is in all of this. If I miss this, I miss God. It's a totally new way for me. I've been a doer - so taking contemplative time to appreciate is new - sensing that God is here in all these ways.

Her newly recovered appreciation of sensuous experience as an opening to the sacred for her also led her to yoga and to become a certified massage therapist. Her massage work was another way she found she was experiencing God.

Sometimes I can be doing someone and I get the image of the potter and the clay. I am doing what I need to do, but it's this whole beautiful sense of creating. That in many ways is a powerful and unique experience of developing who I am. This person becomes the instrument. The texture and the feeling, the ex-

perience of touching was a new dimension of being made new. I remember coming home from the massage class one day and saying to myself, 'This is the holistic approach. This is blending and knitting together the mind and the body, and the spirit'. It's not one more than the other.

Everything began to take on a sacramental significance for her as she allowed herself to follow a path of expression, of spontaneity and freedom in her prayer.

Symbols have become another avenue of expression through liturgy. I've been involved in planning [liturgy]. In my own prayer, I have a prayer corner. As the seasons change, I change the colors and the things. Last year, from the retreat with the image of the rock, I purposely brought a rock home that looked like my image. I have things that I change, candles, or a pot of clay I'd made for my profession. Twigs, things that I arrange with flowers. Environment is very conducive to helping me in my own room or in the space that I have.

This report claims the body and its senses as an ally, a partner, and a gateway to the sacred. The body itself is the primary vehicle for prayer; its spontaneous rhythms and movements connect this woman to her interior imagery, clarifying and giving expression to her feelings, enabling her to participate in co-creativity with God. In this active and dynamic prayer experience she finds God within her, an exchange of energy and a powerful experience of mutuality with God. At the same time, her personal feelings and experiences connect her and, in fact, mirror the great liturgical seasons and sacraments of the Church. She feels more connected to and participative in nature and she finds herself becoming an embodiment of the beatitudes in her pastoral life of active ministry. She finds herself *knitting together body, and mind, and spirit*. Her sense of union with one another is not according to a hierarchical ranking of one being more important than the other. She values this mutuality with God. In her experience, a connection with Spirit-energy came to her through bodily dance and movement, not through ignoring, denying or denigrating her body in favor of mind or spirit. Yet she also finds her body an important source of knowledge. Her body knows what she is feeling. Her body helps her recognize and respond to the Divine and its grace for her.

Mrs. Furrey

Mrs. Furrey, thirty-eight, and divorced at the time of the interview, reported she had several years of intense, ecstatic experiences of God. These included prolonged periods of intimacy with God in which she wrote extensive dialogues and journal reflections within her prayer. At the time of the interview, she was a full-time massage therapist and in a training program for spiritual directors. She was active in a music ministry in her parish. Her experience of God in prayer was frustrating and unsatisfying to her after the frequent and intense experiences of the earlier period.

... there is something about the smallness of the details that has been speaking to me. Simplicity, smallness, insignificance, dearness. It's not like seeing a homeless person on the street and crying. It's more elemental than that. Like ducks in the pond. It's just something that is of its own self and takes you to the heart of reality [in some] tiny manifestation. I would interpret that according to [a] Sufi who says, 'When you want God that badly you will find God in the least envelope of time'. It's a very tight bud of experience. And it unpetals. Its bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

During the period in which the long intimate dialogues went on, she described moving in and out of silent prayer in between the writing and listening. She also received sensory clues in her body which registered something of her experience with God.

[There was] another kind of experience all together. It was almost a gathering. God was already present and then something would begin to intensify. I could feel it in my body; I could feel it in the room. It's like some energy starting to gather. ... I could draw where it was or I could feel something intensifying like the way sound [does] when it comes from a distance. There would be such a presentiment of God's presence that would be more ecstatic. I'd be so overwhelmed by God's presence, like impending union that was both wonderful and scary. I know I would sometimes feel so overwhelmed that I would kneel. Sometimes I'd just throw myself on the floor. I didn't know what else to do. It was the only thing that made any sense, to be face down to express in the body some inner posture of the surrender [I was] trying to get to. Being terrified, overwhelmed, thrilled, loved, at peace, all that at once. And wanting all I could possibly take in. And feeling I would burst.

She was able to describe a physical shift in her body that signaled such impending experiences:

It would be a recognition. The same way I can tell when someone else is in the room. There is just a body faculty for knowing. It's like when you play blind man's bluff and you can tell you're coming to an object but you don't know how. My experience with God matched that except there was nothing to see and nothing to hear. But I registered it that way as some kind of animation in my own body. It's extremely subtle. Any word I use in the next couple of sentences tones it way down from what you would normally understand. It would be like an intense alertness on a cellular level. It would be like - I call it carbonation. ... I think that's how we often register a human presence. The energy somehow connects. In its most extreme form your hair stands on end. But when it's not frightening it doesn't have that hyper alert quality to it. I sense [a] rising alertness, intensification in the trunk, I can't say what, I just feel gathered. There's a fizziness and I have that sense of something like a base string vibrating near the

heart. It could be anywhere. It could be from all the way from the clavicle right down to the pubis. The vibration is centered here but I can feel it everywhere. And I've had it so much that I uncontrollably shook. There is something very like a gravitational pull of attraction that is palpable.

And she recalled one instance in which she experienced her body as possibly preventing or impeding the experience of union with God she longed for.

I'm thinking of one instance, where the body [w]as a nuisance. [I was] aware of the body as limit, like a wall I wanted to get on the other side of. It was not fun to be in my body then. It was registering all these things I've described. It was like I could be pulled right through the molecules. The real me could go through these molecules like something through a sieve and I longed for it, felt anguish because I couldn't make it. And I knew that he knew.

She reported other experiences in which she felt God was clearly present and touching her, a sense of being caressed physically. At another time she was physically drawn into prayer:

I felt a super gravity pulling me to my knees. I could not have, well I could have resisted - it would have been hard. And when that part of the prayer [which went on for a long time] and the experience of God was over the same gravity pulled me up.

She reported a kinesthetic and visual visionary experience that seemed to take place outside her although most of her experiences were felt interiorly.

That most amazing one was seeing. Seeing God as white light and watching everything in the environment orient to that presence. Seeing what looked like electron particles or stuff. It was in my kitchen in New York and watching the energy from everything flow toward - I felt it in my body like prickling. I remember thinking my hair must be standing on end and I looked to my arm and it wasn't doing anything. It was almost like the fluid in my body all moved to that side. So that, you know to me, that was outside of me.

She experienced some events of clairvoyance when she was doing her body work:

Sometimes in body work - that's spiritual work for me - I have had images. My hands are on it and all of sudden I have the image and check it out with the person. I'll be describing that person as she was at three years old. Or I have a sense of an event that happened. [Another time,] I didn't see anything but was working on a man and just stopped and said who hit you? I knew he had been beaten.

The *least envelopes* of her current experience of God could be intense and evocative, but were more frequently brief and she was still longing for the experiences of the past. However, in these present experiences which seemed more like absence to her, God would manifest through some tiny detail of sensory experience in which she would recognize a trace of God disclosed yet also hidden.

There are times when I know I'm so grateful to have an experience of God. Some can be joyous like driving through the park. ... The light falls on the waters there and ... sometimes I get the scent of fresh cut grass along that area. I will go immediately from the body experience of seeing, smelling. When the tears come it's not 'I love your ducks, I love your grass; (it's) I love the way you smell'. And I do treasure those experiences. I'm just spoiled and impatient. I much prefer the other.

These more subtle experiences did not have the same effect on her as the more intense ecstatic ones:

When I will have an experience of God in that little shock of the concrete, it's wonderful but it comes more like consolation to me just in the moment. I pray intensely then... because I know that half an hour from now this will all be gone. ... But it doesn't have staying power.

In contrast, the earlier more intense experiences seemed to have positive, long-lasting effects. She found she was more able to accept the world and things in it as they were. Once ecstatic experiences were over she did not find normal life intolerable, but exactly the opposite.

What stays with me paradoxically is much deeper, ongoing, daily reconciliation to the world as it is. One would think that such a powerful experience would make ordinary existence intolerable. But I've had just the other experience. Just a much deeper sense that what is is good. I would notice that all my movements would be very gentle in whatever the environment was. Slowed down, appreciative. There is a kind of tenderness in my eye toward everything. I wouldn't feel anything shift in me in an angry way or in a dissatisfied way. There was some broader willingness in me to accept everything exactly the way it is.

She found she was more unconditionally accepting and loving of her daughters and more objective and available in her massage work:

I have two daughters. When things are in turmoil for them, I have to be present in that. I just stay much more centered. I don't get as emotionally reactive. I'm able to stay more focused ... so that the love I give is very warm, may even be physical especially if one of them has had her feelings hurt. I feel very present

to them, and there's a way in which I register that they are utterly separate from me... It just feels more truly loving.

And in my body work, that to me is like meditation time, it's really good unconditional love. There's nothing I need from them. [I am] totally non-critical. They're worried about their bottoms being flabby but I'm not worried about any of that. That to me is the total acceptance. ... My focus is there is one whole person on the table and I relate to that overriding truth even though I have to work part by part. It's one whole person. So I feel extremely loving and giving and I'm very gentle ... with my hands and very separate in a way. I'm listening for God all the time. I'm more detached and somehow more present.

As a massage therapist, she approached her work as meditation, as a spiritual and physical process. Her own experience when receiving massage often included experiences of 'leaving her body' to engage in interior imaging that was so intense she lost all awareness of her body; on occasion, these images could evolve into mystical encounter with Jesus.

I have awakened, it's like the body will leave, and I'll doze or whatever and when I awaken I have no idea where I am. So I and my body sense I've gone somewhere else. ... I had one very remarkable time during a body work session. I had a vision of Jesus. It wasn't entirely coextensive with the session but happened in the deep part of the session. Coming out of it, [it] was very clear to me that I had seen him. So that will be one way when I'm deeply relaxed and all my energies are flowing.

She went on to comment on the integrating and ecstatic effect sexual expression could have on her. The previous experience was triggered by a state of total relaxation; the excited state of sexuality could also be evocative.

Sexuality, good sex, to me is like high mass. I mean that to me can bring an integration of all of me that nothing else can and is fantastic. That's part of why I'm so lonely. I have no partners right now and I feel cut off from part of my experience of God.

She recalled a time when the sexual and the spiritual experience were simultaneous, and another when her mystical experience with Jesus was erotic without a physical partner. But she also said the sexual experience with a partner had to be quite extraordinary to register as spiritual for her. Her partner had to be unafraid of entering a mystery beyond the two of them together for this to unfold on deeper levels.

With only one man the sense of union between him and me was so profound that at the peak of sexual climax [I] was very aware of being with him and with myself. But the inner voice is *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus* and to me it was all of that. It

was like having an orgasm while you go to communion. ... I've also had deep meditation vision experience of being sexual with Jesus. The first time that happened I was absolutely in shock and I didn't tell anyone.

There were other experiences of intimacy with Jesus which seemed to resemble erotic experience but which were not identical:

I went to the floor at the sense of his presence. The physical sensation, like surrendering into his presence, was not erotic but at some level I know that erotic energy was... there. Sometimes [when I] desire God - I start feeling it. The mode is different or the object or the frame of reference is different but it's a lot like sexual longing.

Mrs. Furrey's descriptions illustrate a number of related themes. Her sensitivity to her bodily knowing is so keen that subtle and not so subtle changes in her body help her recognize and interpret her religious experience. Her bodily responses provide a symbolic code or language for her experience of spiritual intimacy with the Divine. At the same time there is no confusion of spiritual and physical experience, but a clear relationship between the two. She knows when her perceptions are *extra-sensory* and when they are clearly sensory. She claims the expressive, symbolic language of gesture and posture, prostrating herself to encourage and support the deeper surrender of her ego to the inflow of God into her. Her body is a means for expressing her ecstasy - the spontaneous trembling that is often identified as *the kundalini experience* in tantric yoga, orgasmic releases in her unitive experiences, and a trance-like state described in classical mystical texts as a normal feature of ecstasy. Her ecstatic experiences are so intense that she sometimes felt her body impeded the mystical union for which she longed. I am reminded of similar descriptions in *near-death* experiences when the person has begun to separate from the physical body and was moving toward transcendence and then found themselves back in their bodies and the present dimension of life.

Like Sister Frances, Mrs. Furrey's descriptions of her massage work are also significant. She consciously chooses not to reduce the person she is working on part by part to body alone or to any of its parts. Body remains related to psyche and to spirit. It is the whole person she is working with through the medium of the body. Through her bodily knowing of that person, she also receives a clairvoyant knowing not entirely dependent on the body. Her whole person is communicating with the whole person with whom she is working. As with Mrs. Smith, God or Jesus is present and acting through this interpersonal communication whose medium is human touch.

IV CONCLUSION

These assumptions and associations about bodily reality are entirely holistic. Body is clearly a partner and ally in healing and in grace. As I reflect on the testimony of these women, I am conscious of how clearly they all feel they as women participate in some form of bodily grace. They all identify themselves with Christ and experience themselves in loving communion with him. Their associations with the Christ-presence are often pneumatic and fluid in gender identification. Jesus or God can touch them through any other human person. God or Jesus touches others through their womanly persons - as sister, as mother, as healer, as lover. There is continuity between their gendered experience as women, as mothers, as wives and their religious experience. The bodily knowing from mothering or other experiences of touch appears to be a channel for experiences with God or Jesus. When they experience deprivation on the human level, God often comforts them or holds them as the best of human lovers or mothers might. But their experience is not always in contrast to lack of human connection: it is often an extension of their intimate familiar experiences or of their simple female embodiment in movement, touch, dance, relatedness with the world. There is an implicit awareness that the Jesus they encounter in either their bodily knowing or in their images is the Risen Christ, hence there is less focus on imitating the passion the way medieval women did, although contemporary women are passionate in their responses to Jesus and achieve acceptance of their pain and illnesses through a relationship of mutuality. All of these women experience themselves as active participants, not merely passive recipients of God's activity on them, in a dynamic relationship of co-creativity and communion. All of these women minister with and on behalf of others. They are acutely aware of the world's suffering, of the pain and of the promise of all human life. All participate in some larger parish or religious community which connects their personal religious experiences to the great liturgical cycle of celebration and sacrament. They extend their care and compassion to those around them. For them bodily experience is fully sacramental. All of them seek integration rather than fragmentation. All of them appear to be *knitting together the mind, and the body, and the Spirit*.