



THE EPISCOPAL CENTER FOR EMBODIED FAITH
PRESENTS
Theological Reflections on Embodied Faith: Body Talk

Thinking with Our Bodies

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“One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.” – *Mark 12: 28-31*

Thinking with our Bodies

We think we can understand our actions, ourselves, just by thinking about them. Perhaps you can. For my part, it takes practice. It takes paying close attention to the effects of my actions and discussing them with others. It takes demonstration and experimentation and, hardest of all, making mistakes over and over again in a controlled setting where I can learn from them. Even if you know something intellectually, that does not mean you’ve integrated it fully. In seminary, we called it the two-foot drop, from brain to heart. (In truth, it’s less than 18 inches for most of us).

What does it take to know something, rather than just know about it? What does it take to live a belief, and not just confess it? It takes practice. It takes living into it. The peace of God is something we cannot understand without participation. We must learn to feel the breath and energy within us, attend to the flow as it moves in and out, and think about how we shape the process.

With that in mind, I’d encourage you to take a moment and try something out. Pick a prayer that you know well, perhaps the “Our Father” and say it twice. First, say the prayer in the traditional prayer posture. Bow your head and press your hands together over your heart. Take a minute to reflect on how you feel praying and how your body participates in the prayer. Second, say the prayer in the “orans” posture. Form a W with your arms, palms faced up and tilt your head back. Prayer leaders often take this position when speaking on behalf of the community. Take a minute to think about how this second prayer was the same as the first, and how it was different. What do you notice?

(No, really, stop and try this out. I’ll wait.)

Most people have quite different experiences. The traditional prayer position invokes of a sense of separation from the world. That’s neither good nor bad. Some people say it feels closed off or isolated, while others feel safe and protected. In either case, the position of the body can make us less aware and less connected to the outside world. The orans position has the opposite effect. The body posture is open and encourages greater connection with your surroundings. You are more likely to have

your eyes open and take deeper breaths. [Note for advanced breathers, try breathing into the back in the traditional posture.] Sometimes we close ourselves off from others in order to better open our hearts to God. And sometimes we love God better through attending to our neighbor. One is not better than the other, but awareness and intention can make us better at both.

If you're looking for other examples, I highly recommend the smiling exercise. A smile, even forced, will change your attitude for the better. You can even hold a pencil in your teeth and make your face muscles take on the smiling position. (It works best if it's far enough back to lift your cheeks). Try it out the next time you're sad or distracted. It should take less than 30 seconds. If that doesn't work, watch someone else do it. We are, after all, social creatures. Our bodies and our environments affect us, at every level.

Nor is this awareness foreign to the Christian tradition. In the *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis suggests that whatever our bodies do affects our minds. He also says we become what we pretend to be. This does not mean we should fake virtue. Rather, he is saying that we must act, with our bodies, in ways that condition our bodies, minds, and souls for the virtues we aspire to.

Love is not something known, but something acted out. And I truly believe we cannot understand it, unless we are doing it. Body and mind go hand in hand, and spiritual growth will always manifest in both. For this reason, we have physical practices that aid us in conforming our hearts and minds to Christ. This ranges from pew aerobics to the physicality of the sacraments to disciplines like fasting and tithing that involve both mind and body. They are ways to be mindfully embodied.

Reflection Questions

- 1) When you read about Jesus praying in the Bible, what do you imagine him doing with his body?
- 2) What actions accompany your prayer?
- 3) What common actions do you find prayerful? What activities are good for helping you find a prayerful mood? Examples might be walking in the woods, gardening, making soup, or sweeping.

For Further Exploration

- 1) *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence
(<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5657>)
- 2) Body Prayer demonstrated by Marcus Borg
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNzwJZoeTI8>)
- 3) Acts of Devotion, a brief intro to liturgical movements
(<http://www.goodshepherdcolumbia.org/anglo-catholic-worship/acts-of-devotion/>)

About the Author: Lucas John Mix is an Episcopal priest with a doctorate in evolutionary biology and 6th degree black belt in the Korean Martial art of Hapkido. He has been teaching martial arts for 30 years and currently serves in a Seattle area parish. You can find out more about his research into theological biology at his website (<https://dcalu.wordpress.com/>). His work in martial arts has been with Enso Center for International Arts in Redmond, WA (<http://ensocenter.org/>).