

With God in Your Skin

"One of the reasons I remain Christian is because of the seriousness with which Christian tradition honours flesh and blood...I am not sure when Christian tradition lost confidence in the body, but I have some guesses...the Greeks divided body and soul in ways that [Jesus] did not. Descartes [opposed] nature and reason...the protestant reformation with its deep suspicion of physical pleasure followed by Freud's dark insights into human sexuality. Add ...the modern scientific reduction of the body to biological matter overlaid by Victoria Secret ads and it is small wonder that so many of us are uncomfortable in our flesh."

Barbara Brown Taylor¹

One of the more profound discussions in Barbara Brown Taylor's book *An Altar in The World* is found in her chapter, *The Practice of Wearing Skin*. Consider some of the points she makes, listed here in random order. Mark the points that strike you the most and discuss them in a mentoring session. [If you want to read the entire chapter, the book is available in the public library.]

1. *I came late to the understanding that God loved all of me—not just my spirit, but also my flesh...I grew up with a lot of unanswered questions and unearned shame about my ripening body.*
2. *Our bodies have shaped our views of the world just as the world has shaped our views of our bodies*
3. *It is easier to lie with our lips than with our body*
4. *Here we sit, with our soul tucked away in this marvellous luggage, mostly insensible to the ways in which every spiritual practice begins with the body. Each of us has a unique body signature which consists not only of our distinctive physical characteristics but also our posture, our gait, our way of using our hands.*
5. *What we miss in our physical dis-ease is that our bodies remain God's best way of getting to us.*
6. *The daily practice of incarnation of being in the body with full confidence that God speaks the language of flesh is to discover a pedagogy that is as old as the gospels. Why else did Jesus spend his last night on earth teaching his disciples to wash feet and share supper...he did not give them something to think about together when they were gone—he gave them something to do—a specific way of being together in their bodies that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself. "Do this," he said not "believe this" but "do this in remembrance of me."*

¹ *An Altar in The World*; pp. 35-51. Taylor is adjunct professor of spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary.

7. *In the case of the meal there were things they could smell and taste and swallow. In the case of the feet he gave them things to wash so that they could not bend over without being drawn into one another's lives. Imagine—washing a foot and asking—how did you get that scar? Does it hurt when I touch it? Your feet have more miles on them than mine. Do you ever feel like you can't go any further?*
8. *My body is what connects me to others—when the temperature outside is zero I am cold and the person next to me is cold as well—wearing my skin is not a solitary practice but one that brings me into communion with all other embodied souls. It is what we have most in common with one another. In Christian teaching followers of Jesus are called to honour the bodies of our neighbours as we honour our own—leper bodies; possessed bodies; widow bodies; orphan bodies, foreign bodies and hostile bodies. Read from the perspective of the body Jesus' ministry was about encountering those whose flesh was discounted by the world in which they lived.*
9. *By faith I understand that is not possible to trust that God loves all of me, including my body, without also trusting that God loves all bodies everywhere—the bodies of hungry children and indentured women along with the bodies of sleek athletes and cigar-smoking tycoons. While we might not have one other thing in common we all wore skin. We all have breath and beating hearts. Most of us weep, although not for the same reasons. Few of our bodies work the way we want them to.*
10. *One of the truer things about bodies is that it is just about impossible to increase the reverence I show mine without also increasing the reverence I show yours.*
11. *Daniel Berrigan, "it all comes down to this: whose flesh are you touching and why? Whose flesh are you recoiling from and why? Whose flesh are you burning and why?"*
12. *To hold a sleeping child in your arms can teach you more about the meaning of life than any than any ten books on the subject.*
13. *I find myself rebelling against any religious definition of goodness that leaves the body behind.*
14. *I am happy for practices that bring me back to my body where the operative categories are not "bad" and "good" but "dead" and "alive".*
15. *Do we dismiss the body's wisdom because it does not use word? The practice of wearing skin is so obvious that almost no one engages it as spiritual practice, yet here is a place to begin—with tears, aches, moans, gooseflesh, heat.*

Good is the Flesh

A hymn by Brian Wren

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,
good is the body for knowing the world,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,
feeling, perceiving, within and around,
good is the body, from cradle to grave,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,
growing and aging, arousing, impaired,
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,
good is the body, for good and for God,
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Spiritual Exercise: Wearing Your Skin to the Glory of God

1. Goals:
 - a. To learn to honour your body the way God honours it
 - b. To learn to listen to your body as part of what it means to listen to God
 - c. To offer your body as it now is afresh to God.

2. Listening Prayer
 - a. Do listening prayer around the lyrics; *Good is the Flesh*, by Brian Wren. Substitute “your” for “the” as you read it aloud where appropriate.
 - i. Each person read it aloud
 - ii. Listen for what stands out to you
 - iii. Ask God what he wants you to pay attention to
 - iv. Share that
 - v. Pray these things into each other’s lives.

3. Assignments –pick one or two of the following suggestions, do the exercise and report back
 - a. Read a summary of research findings on body image found in the article *Mirror, mirror* found on the Social Issues Research Centre [SIRC] at <http://www.sirc.org/publik/mirror.html>
 - b. Accepting the body you have: Work through the exercise, *Accepting Your Body as God’s Gift & Deciding on Your Future Sexual Self-Identity*² and discuss it in a mentoring session.
 - c. Naked praying: Barbara Brown Taylor in *An Altar in The World*; pp. 35-51; suggests that if you struggle with liking your body that you try praying in front of a full length mirror naked.
 - *Maybe you are full of loathing for your body; maybe you think you are too heavy.*
 - *Maybe you have never liked the way your hipbones stick out.*
 - *Maybe you think you are too hairy?*
 - *Maybe you have been sick or been through surgery?*
 - *Maybe staying covered up is the only way you can maintain your equilibrium?*
 - *It is always something*
 - *Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular, there comes a time when it is vitally important for your spiritual healthy to drop your clothes, look in the mirror and say “here I am. This is the body like no other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul’s address”.*
 - i. *Offer your body to God to go on being useful to the world in ways both sublime and ridiculous.*
 - ii. *Practice some reverence for your body right there in front of the mirror.*

² Cf. *Accepting Your Body as God’s Gift & Deciding on Your Future Sexual Self-Identity* in the *Resources for the Cap Mentoring Manual* at www.capchurch.ca

- d. Wash one another's feet
- i. In a mentoring session wash one another's' feet
 1. Make observations about the foot you are washing
 2. Ask questions about the life these feet have walked as you wash the foot
 3. Linger in the experience
 - ii. After you have finished talk about what the experience is like to wash and be washed
 1. How does this connect you with the gospel?
 2. How does this connect you with your body?
 3. How does this connect you with each other?
- e. Create a Tableau
- i. Invite 3-6 people over for the experience of creating a tableau of one of the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount [Matt 5]. Have 3 people take one beatitude and bring it to life by embodying it without words—arrange the people so that the tableau shows the meaning of the beatitude.
 1. When you are finished discuss what this “embodied experience” was like.
 2. Consider doing this again in your home group or in worship setting.
- f. Sexuality and Relationships
- i. Read through the paper on Sexuality and Relationship called *Love Life* found on the CapChurch website www.capchurch.ca and discuss relevant sections in a mentoring section
 1. Go to “resource downloads”
 - a. “sexuality resources”
 - i. “relationships and sexuality”
 1. Download the PDF called :***Love Life: Sexuality, Singleness, Relationships, and Marriage From A Christian Perspective***