

The Outward Path pt 1 - Awakening Our Body

Resurrecting Spirituality Series.

April 28, 2019

I love the smell of a charcoal grill. As far as I'm concerned, it's the best part of grilling. All you gas grillers out there...I mean really, what's the point!? You might as well be cooking on the stove.

You're missing the smell of that rich smoke rising out of the coal bed, filling the air... that smell that makes your neighbors jealous that they're not eating at your table.

And that same smoke infusing your meat and whatever else you cook on the grill with deeper flavors... that make the mouth water.

I love a charcoal grill. It is so much more sensual.

It's no wonder that it's also biblical. The resurrected Christ cooked the disciples breakfast over, not just any fire, but a charcoal fire, the Gospel of John says. Of course, he did! Charcoal is obviously what Jesus would use. So, all you gas grillers out there: repent and believe the good news.

Truth is, this whole scene that the Gospel of John paints for us...

here at the edge of the lake in the early morning light...

is so sensual.

The disciples have been out fishing all night. Now they are exhausted and hungry as they sit there next to the water's edge,

with the sound of waves lapping against the rocky shore and birds chirping in the distance,
with the early morning light reflecting off the ripples made by the cool morning breeze,
with the smell of charcoal and fish wafting through the air

making their mouths water and their stomachs grumble,
with the heat of the fire Jesus kindled drying their clothes and warming their cold stiff fingers
and then the taste... of the warm bread, and the warm fish... filling their hungry bodies.

This resurrection meal was engaging all the senses.

The bodies of the disciples were being awakened to the resurrected presence of Christ in all creation,

awakening their bodies to the presence of Christ... as Jesus took the bread and gave it to them... just as he did at the Last Supper when he said, "This is my body."

It hadn't been all that long ago that the disciples and Jesus were gathered in the upper room to celebrate the Passover. That whole week, Jerusalem was a feast for the senses.

Think about it. Pilgrims from all over had descended on the ancient holy city to celebrate the Passover. Heaps of humanity filled every room, bed, nook, and cranny. The smells of the festival permeated the air: cooking fires baking unleavened bread, animals and blood at the temple, the smell of sweaty bodies crammed in close proximity.

The smells were matched by the sights and sounds that accompanied them. The streets, market, and temple were alive all day and late into the night during the festival week.

Children could be heard crying in the wee hours of the morning. The afternoon was marked by the tastes of festival food sold by those who made their living from pilgrims who'd come to town.

During the Passover, Jerusalem was a feast for the senses.

And the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples in the upper room was just as sensual. There was no polite spacing and delicate eating for them. They weren't at some grand Victorian banquet table. Nope.

Actually, their bodies would have been more likely rubbing up against one another as they reclined on the floor at a table the height of a modern-day coffee table. They could feel one another's breath. Their crumbs landed on one another's clothes.

You see, for them, there was no modern fear of germs and mess that inhibited all that, that inhibited the blending of the holy and the human.

The disciples and Jesus came from a tradition that said they were made of both dirt and breath, a sacred combination that reflected the image of the divine. Their scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament, is full of sensual stories of holy food and holy sex, of sweet honey and sweet wine, of sacred creation and sacred bodies.

In the midst of this messy, sacred meal, the gospel twice says that John the disciple was leaning against the bosom of Jesus (John 13:23-25). And it was said among some ancient Christians, that in that moment,

flesh to flesh, body against body,
John was listening to the very heartbeat of God.¹

And it became for them an image, like a holy icon, inviting them to listen for the heartbeat of God in all things:

**in the body of men, women, and children,
in the bodies of neighbors and strangers,
and in our own bodies.**

In the body of all creation.

The psalm we heard this morning says as much. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge..." (Ps. 19:1-2). If we learn to listen, we can discover the very heartbeat of God pulsing through all of creation.

This is where our spiritual formation begins. This is what I call the outward path of spiritual formation. It's the path in which we come to know God all around us through our bodies.

For Christians, this is essential. Unlike some other world religions, Christian spirituality must engage and awaken our bodies to the presence of God all around us.

You see, our spirituality cannot simply be an inward journey of self-reflection, although it will include that, and we'll get to the inward path in May.

¹ J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 1. The author spent time on pilgrimage with John Phillip Newell on the island of Iona, Scotland, April 25 – May 5, 2018. This dissertation, and especially this chapter, draws from time spent with Newell in that setting as well as his published works.

And our Spirituality cannot simply be a pondering of mystical ideas and an opening of our minds, although it will include that too, and we'll get there in June as we explore the upward path.

**But for Christians, spirituality must also include the outward path... in which we engage and awaken our bodies...
to the presence of God in the world around us.**

Because Christianity is a deeply incarnational, embodied faith.

Remember,

We believe that God created the heavens and earth and called it all "Good," ...that there is a goodness in the very fabric of creation.

We believe that God took the dust of the earth and formed it and breathed spirit into it and said that the body of men and women carry the very life and image of God within them.

We believe that God slipped into skin, that God put on a flesh and bone body, making all fleshy and bony bodies holy.

And we believe that in some mysterious way, God took the dead body of Jesus and resurrected it into a new glorified body...

And we believe that at the end of all things, all creation will be renewed. That there will be no more perceived separation between heaven and earth. (Rev. 21)

From Creation, to the Incarnation, to the Resurrection, to the Consummation: Christianity is a deeply incarnational, embodied, fleshy faith.

So, for any spirituality to be called "Christian Spirituality" it must reconnect us with our own bodies and awaken in us a deep awareness of our oneness with all bodies.

Through our senses and our instincts, we can learn to rediscover our deep connection with all creation,
and in that discovery learn to hear the heart of God.

John leaned against the bosom of Jesus in the midst of their sacred, messy meal. And flesh-to-flesh, body-to-body, John heard the very heartbeat of God. And since the resurrection, that same heartbeat continues to pulse in the energies alive in all creation.

As I said last week, a 9th century theologian and mystic, Erigena said that even a piece of wood and stone is full of light. The energy and life of God, the heartbeat of God, is pulsing in all creation.

But we live so much of our lives as if our body, and the body of the earth... is meaningless material. As if they are void and empty... at best,
or worse... as if our body and/or the body of the earth is unholy and evil.

Before the disciples discover the presence of the Resurrected Christ on the shore, they are out fishing all night. Hour after hour goes by as they bob up and down in the boat,
casting their nets, and pulling them up empty,
casting their nets and pulling them up empty,
casting their nets and pulling them up empty,
again, and again... there is nothing.

As far as they can tell, the sea is empty and void... just like you and I tend to see creation. It's just an "inanimate object" we say.

There's no life in it.

No sacred presence of God.

There's no nourishment for our deepest hungers...

The empty nets on an empty sea is a poignant picture, I think. It is a picture of how we interact with the body of creation and with our own bodies so much of the time.

As far as the disciples can tell, the sea is just... empty.

And their bodies stay hungry.

But then, dawn begins to break. And in the new light the gospel says... there is a presence on the shore that is calling out to them across the water... telling them that all this time, they've been simply missing what has been right under them. They just need to cast their nets a bit differently than they are used to... and they will discover that the sea was teeming with life all this time.

And so, they try it. And their nets are overflowing with life... And in this surprising encounter with the vibrancy of the sea... they recognize the presence on the shore is the resurrected life of Christ.

This moment on the sea is a recognition moment. It's an awakening of their senses... to the life and energy of God, pulsing in the body of creation.

"It is the Lord," John says to Peter.

And Peter doesn't hesitate. He takes his whole body and jumps into the sea, the very sea they thought was empty but now they recognize it as full of life. Peter dives in, soaking his entire body in that sea of life in order to encounter the divine presence of Christ calling out to them from across the water.

This is what it looks like as we begin to engage our bodies in our spiritual formation.

As I said last week, our spiritual formation begins to find new life when we learn to trust God's deep yearning love reaching out to each of us, and then trust it enough to open up all the desires and disappointments of our life to that love.

The yearning desires and energies of our lives are the engine that drive us on the spiritual journey.

And today what I want to challenge you to start to recognize is that the yearning love of God is reaching out to us through the body of creation.

And it is reaching out to us through our own body.

This outward path is an essential part of our spiritual journey. If our spirituality is going to be transformational, then we have to learn to awaken our bodies to the presence of God all around us. We have to jump headlong into the sea with Peter and get soaked.

The mind and the heart, while important in your spiritual life, they are not enough... because our bodies fundamentally shape our soul and connect us to the heartbeat of God within the life of creation in a unique and powerful way.

One spiritual teacher writes, “[O]ur minds and feelings can wander to the past or the future, [but] our body can only exist here and now, in the present moment.... [V]irtually all meaningful spiritual work begins with coming back to the body and becoming more grounded in it.”²

That means then, we’re going to have to learn to listen to the instincts of our body... to what it’s trying to tell us. There is a wisdom it offers us... and there are ways that our body connects us to God that nothing else can.

Belden Lane suggests that the body can be an extremely reliable guide. “What the mind hardly fathoms, the body [though its instincts] already knows.”³ he writes.

Now I know this is hard for a lot of us to grasp... Truth be told, American Christianity hasn’t done too good of a job of teaching us to listen to the wisdom of the body. And so, this can sound really strange. In fact, in the last year, I’ve preached on body spirituality, trying to re-introduce it, but I can tell that it continues to confuse a lot of us.

So, I want to give you a few suggestions to help you get started. In fact, my plan is to give you one or two practical suggestions each week for the next few months during this series on resurrecting spirituality to help you integrate what I’m talking about into your life.

And the first is this: **Listen to your body. Pay attention to it.**

When you’re faced with new opportunities,
or when you’re trying to make a decision
don’t just parse out ideas in your head,

listen to your body. Does the idea give you energy or make your shoulders tighten? And what might that be telling you?

Or when you’re anxious or when you’re excited—can you locate where you’re experiencing that in your body?

Are you fidgety? Having a hard time relaxing? Where is that energy coming from and what might it be saying about the rhythms of your life?

John O’Donohue, suggests that, “[Y]our body rarely lies. Your mind can deceive you and put all kinds of barriers between you and your true nature [Your mind can get you to believe certain things about your life]; but your body does not lie. Your body tells you, if you attend to it, how your life is and whether you are living from your soul or from the labyrinths of your negativity.”⁴

Your body will tell you the truth.

The first thing I want to challenge you to do this week is to start listening to your body.

And the second is this: **Your senses, your five senses of touch, taste, sight, sound and smell... your physical senses are a gateway to the senses of the soul.** So, use them! Pay attention to them when you are outside working in your yard, and when you’re sitting on the couch next to your pet or one of your kids.

² Riso and Hudson, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram*, 51.

³ Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints*, 7.

⁴ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 48.

Engage your senses when you are preparing a meal
and when you are going on a hike.

Pay attention to each one of your senses in turn, one after the other... to listen for the heartbeat of God in the body of the earth and the body of those you encounter each day, coming to you through your five senses.

The more you do this, the more your awareness of God's life and energy will grow,
and the more you will not only be aware of it,
but you'll discover that God's life and energy are alive in your body and that can open and shape your soul.
So, pay attention to your senses – they are a gateway to the senses of your soul.

**To the hungry, tired, cold bodies of the disciples, the resurrected Jesus gave a simple invitation:
"Come and have breakfast." Taste and see. Be filled and know.**

This is the beginning of resurrection spirituality. "Bring your hungry bodies to my table, and eat," he tells them.

So, they came, and he took the warm fresh bread that had been cooking on that charcoal fire
and he took the fish that had been smoked to that delicious flaky texture and flavor,
he took it and gave it to each of them.

And I imagine they heard an echo from the upper room: This is my body, given up for you.

The Gospel of John says this is how he appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

And this may surprise you, but this is how the Resurrected Christ continues to appear to us:
through the hunger and thirst, the energy and desire of our bodies,
through the bodily senses awakened to God's life in the body of creation,
connecting creation to the senses of the soul,
through the gifts of the table, where the bread is broken and shared.

So come again.

Eat and drink.

And encounter the life of God.

Amen.

“At the heart of matter is the heart of God.” Teilhard de Chardin.⁵

“Matter matters because at the heart of the physical is the spiritual.” George MacLeod, quoted in Newell, *Sounds of the Eternal*, vii.

A. J. Scott puts it well, “Through sun, moon, and stars, through earth and sea... trees and flowers, through the bodies of men and women, the looks of human consonances, and the tones of human voices... [It is through these that God’s soul is being expressed to our soul, and we may express our soul to God.]”⁶

“Your soul reaches out farther than your body, and it simultaneously suffuses your body.” O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*

The more we practice listening for the heartbeat of God in all things, we will discover “the notes of the universe are not empty. They are filled with God,” as Newell puts it. “This will radically change the way we touch matter, the matter of human bodies, the matter of the earth, the matter of the body politic and how we relate as sovereign nations. And it will set us free to move in relationship, rather than fear, with the deepest energies that pulse within us, within our bodies, and within the earth.”⁷

When I love God I love the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the embraces, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all this protean creation. When I love you, my God, I want to embrace it all, for I love you with all my senses in the creations of your love. In all the things that encounter me, you are waiting for me.

For a long time, I looked for you within myself and crept into the shell of my soul, shielding myself with an armor of inapproachability. But you were outside—outside myself—and enticed me out of the narrowness of my heart into the broad place of love for life. So, I came out of myself and found my soul in my senses, and my own self in others.

The experience of God deepens the experiences of life. It does not reduce them. For it awakens the unconditional Yes to life. The more I love God, the more gladly I exist. The more immediately and wholly I exist, the more I sense the living God, the inexhaustible source of life and eternal livingness.⁸

With the rising of the sun
life rises again within me, O God.
In the dawning of the morning light
you lead me from the mists of the night
into the clarity of the day.
In the new light of this day
bring me to a clearer knowing
of the Mystery that first bore me from the dark.
Bring me to a clearer knowing
of the Love from which all life is born.
Amen.

~ John Philip Newell, *Celtic Benediction*.

⁵ Quoted in J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 96.

⁶ Quoted by Newell, “Alexander John Scott” (lecture, Iona, Scotland, May 2018).

⁷ Newell, *Christ of the Celts*, 55.

⁸ Jurgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Auto Biography*, trans. Margaret Kohl. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 349-50. Quoted in Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 147.