

**Review: *Embodied Prayer:
Harmonizing Body and Soul***

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Embodied Prayer: Harmonizing Body and Soul

by Celeste Snowber Schroeder.

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209 pp. \$10.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

In recent years, a number of fine books have been published in the popular press which explore the relationship between prayer and the body, and which advocate, in different ways, the worthiness--sometimes even the primacy--of the body as a place of revelation about and communion with the Divine. For anyone who has struggled with an ambivalent relationship to the body (and who hasn't?); for anyone who has pondered our ambiguous Christian heritage, which on the one hand proclaims the goodness of God's creation and the resurrection of the body, but on the other hand has too often promoted a disembodied, even body-hating notion of holiness; for anyone who has wondered how to listen to one's body in prayer and how to find God in and through our bodily selves; books such as Flora Slosson Wuellner's *Prayer and Our Bodies*, Nancy Roth's *The Breath of God* and *A New Christian Yoga*, Tilden Edwards's newly reissued *Living in the Presence*, and Martin Smith's *The Word is Very Near You* (with its marvelous section on "The Body at Prayer") are valuable resources, indeed.

Celeste Snowber Schroeder's *Embodied Prayer* is a worthy contribution to this burgeoning literature, exploring in simple and straightforward language the ways in which we can enlarge the capacity of our bodies to become a sacred space for prayer. The book draws on the author's experience as a liturgical dancer and educator who, according to the book's end-notes, frequently leads workshops for various churches and conferences in the areas of embodied prayer, dance, and spirituality and the arts. A work of frank and impassioned advocacy, the book invites us to learn to listen to our bodies, rather than simply (as many of us were taught) either to ignore or to control and dominate them. A truly biblical spirituality, the author argues, is one which encompasses the body as well as the mind and the spirit, one which invites us to heal our estrangement from our bodies and to welcome them as friends, as places of encounter with God.

The book is divided into three sections. The first ("Genesis of Embodied Prayer") seeks, as the author puts it in her Introduction, "to give a foundation for an embodied faith." This section explores the theological underpinnings of embodied prayer. It considers the anthropology of the Old Testament, with its emphasis on the wholeness of the human person created as one, integral body-soul, in contrast to the dualistic anthropology of much of Western philosophy, which tends to stress the split between soul and body; and it reflects on the incarnation of Jesus Christ, when the Word became flesh, God met us in our humanity, and human beings were redeemed, body and soul.

The second section ("Legacy of Embodied Prayer") traces the history of embodied prayer both in the Bible and in the Church's legacy of ritual and drama. The author considers the ways in which the people of Israel encountered God in their bodily prayer, a God who moves with us and who meets us in our rising and our sinking, our clinging and our letting go, our bowing and falling, our lifting and dancing. A chapter is devoted to exploring the psalms as a particularly potent source of individual and collective prayer with the body. In her consideration of both Old Testament and New, the author emphasizes that the people of God encounter the Divine through a wide variety of movements and postures, and offers practical suggestions as to how we might begin to reclaim this rich heritage in our daily lives. In her overview of how the Church has used movement,

gestures, posture, and dance, the author makes the interesting observation that, in contrast to the comprehensive approach to bodily prayer in biblical times, churches today often have room only for gestures of penitence (such as kneeling) or for gestures of joy (such as dancing with a tambourine). It is the rare church that permits or encourages in its worship the full range of bodily posture in prayer.

The third section (“Encountering God in Embodied Prayer”) offers a myriad of practical suggestions for listening to God in and through the body, and for letting the body be a catalyst for healing and a vehicle for releasing in God’s presence both grief and joy, both lament and celebration.

The strength of Schroeder’s book lies in its timeliness, its simplicity, and its wealth of experiential insight. The book assumes no prior theological background or physical expertise, so it could be read without difficulty by anyone with even a casual interest in its subject. To the lively anecdotes and the exercises described in the book itself, the author has added a useful appendix of further exercises in embodied prayer which could be used either in solitude or as part of a group exploration of prayer.

The book’s strength--its usefulness as a good introduction to the subject of embodied prayer--also constitutes its chief weakness. The theological and historical overview is necessarily sketchy and un-nuanced, and many aspects of the author’s subject must be left unexplored. There is, for example, no inquiry into the political and social dimension of embodied prayer, no mention of how Christians committed to justice and non-violence have used their body as part of their prayer of protest, no consideration of how a renewed awareness of the sacredness of the body might affect one’s perception and evaluation of the natural world in general, or what it might mean to cherish the “body” of the Earth as a manifestation of the Divine. Some readers will also probably be put off (as I was) by the cover of the book, whose soft pink color and whose picture of a lithe and lovely dancer swathed in gauze do not enhance the book’s message that praying with the body should not be regarded as the exclusive province of professional dancers nor of the beautiful and the fit (nor, one might add, of women).

Still, *Embodied Prayer* is one good place to begin deepening our appreciation of the interconnection of body and soul, and it is strengthened by an excellent appendix of further written resources on the subject. Schroeder herself would be the first to agree that the value of her book lies not so much in adding to our theoretical understanding of the subject of embodied prayer, but in encouraging us to begin to explore this way of prayer for ourselves. Simply to read about non-dualistic anthropology--to nod wisely and to agree that yes, we know that body and soul are intimately intertwined--without actually exploring such bodily prayer ourselves, is to perpetuate the old dualism and to remain locked up in our heads. Schroeder cites the wise observation of poet W.B. Yeats that “We only believe those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but the whole body.” And she offers us the inspiration of Isadora Duncan, whose words about dance invite each one of us--trained and untrained dancer alike--to let our whole selves, body and soul alike, join in the great Dance at the center of reality: “[Dance] is always in my heart; it blooms at each of my steps The dance is love, it is only love, it alone, and that is enough.”



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