

timbrel

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WOMEN IN CONVERSATION TOGETHER WITH GOD



Loving Our Bodies, Loving Ourselves

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THE PUBLICATION OF MENNONITE WOMEN USA

Loving Our Bodies, Loving Ourselves



Patricia Burdette

Cover: Maria Paff and Sarah Shirk enjoy punch as they soften their hands at the Menno Spa, part of the Women in Conversation retreats co-sponsored by MW USA and Laurelville Mennonite Church Center.

Photo by Patricia Burdette

All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Many of us would rather not discuss the physical part of ourselves. We have been taught to feel uncomfortable with this subject. But in some cultures the physical condition is thought to be an illustration of the spiritual condition. Just as it is important for us to feel loving toward our spiritual selves, it is also important for us to feel loving toward our physical selves. Remember when you were a child and gave little thought to perfection or lack of it in connection with your body? All small children seem to love their own bodies instinctively, marveling at the wonder of it and the things it can do.

However, the media we are surrounded by value youth and perfection that few can match. And no matter how perfect we may have been at one time, all of us grow old and the perfection fades. Yet, it is still important for us to love our bodies for they are the temples of God's holy spirit. We may wish to deny it, but nonetheless, it is true: God made us body, intellect, emotions, and spirit.

One reason this topic is so important—aside from the fact that God made our bodies—and “wonderfully,” I might add—is that the way we feel about our bodies affects how we feel about ourselves. If we can't love and accept our bodies, it is hard to love and accept ourselves. Jesus tells us to love others as he loves us, and Jesus loves and accepts us just as God made us.

In this issue of *timbrel* Beth Martin Birkey describes an activity Women's Studies students have done to help them think of their bodies as whole entities rather than as separate parts to be judged and compared individually. Kirsten Klassen writes about the deep intimacy between our bodies and the other aspects of ourselves even as our bodies change with time.

After you read this issue of *timbrel*, why not do something loving for your body? Take a bubble bath, go for a walk, or just put your feet up and relax for a while.

Sister Question for July–August

In preparation for the next issue of *timbrel*, which will focus on Healing/Bridges to the Cross, consider: **What (or who) has helped me in my healing journey?** Send your response to <PattyB@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>. 📧

timbrel is the official publication of Mennonite Women USA, a ministry of Mennonite Church USA. *timbrel* provides a place for women to share diverse perspectives and stories and express our prophetic voice as we seek to follow Christ.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the official position of Mennonite Women USA or the board for Mennonite Women USA.

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My body, my closest friend: moving from criticism to unconditional love

by *Kirsten Klassen*

Loving my body has been an intentional journey that has taken me through these places:

- Observing my mother's relationship with her body,
- Realizing that others do not see my body as I do,
- Fearing the lack of control that comes with pregnancy, illness, injury, and aging,
- Fighting the devastating connection of food to body image to self-worth,

As women, we can easily make the mistake of judging our bodies by our weight and our relationships with food.

- Deciding that my daughter would never hear me disparage my body,
- Choosing an active life to maximize my health and strength,
- Inventing my own definition of what it means to be "beautiful" in our society,
- Focusing on what my body can do, instead of how I look,
- Making deliberate choices about the messages I tell myself about my body,
- Entering into a covenant to love my body fat or thin, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, from youth to old age, for all the days of my life.

I'm 51 years old as I write this. The richness of my life, the depth of my experience, is inseparable from having lived it in my

body—with all its bounties, with all its imperfections. My body is such an integral part of what I mean when I say “me” that even saying “my body” seems foreign. We are one.

My brain is part of my body

This integration of body and spirit was reinforced for me recently when my father suffered a minor stroke. It primarily affected the communication center of his brain—his memory and word access. His speech was easy to understand, but what he said didn’t make sense. He was fortunate not to have lost the ability to move his arms, legs, or facial muscles. But his thoughts, his ability to know who and where he was—to know who I was—was disrupted by this injury.

Being grateful that my brain is healthy, that I am a sentient being, has not been part of my daily counting of blessings. And yet, we are all dependent on our bodies for our abilities to think, to analyze, to create, to dream, to imagine, to converse, to explore.

My body is more than I have imagined

For me, the most profound message about the body was delivered by Flora Slosson Wuellner in her 1987 book, *Prayer and Our Bodies*, when she asks in prayer, “Who is my body?” She receives well over a dozen answers, including these:

- “...the faithful messenger and recorder of your memories, your powers, your hurts, your needs, and your limits.”
- “...the manifestation of the miracle that is you.”
- “...the visible means by which you relate and unite with others.”

I’ve come back to this list many times, sharing it with friends who were facing cancer or struggling in their relationships with their bodies.

My body is more than what I look like.

As women, we can easily make the mistake of judging our bodies by our weight and our relationships with food. In the book *Minding the Body: Women Writers on Body and Soul*, Sallie Tisdale challenges us in her essay “A Weight that Women Carry,” to give ourselves—and others—more grace. She says, “I know many men and women, young and old...who look fine, whom I love to see and whose faces and figures I cherish, who despise themselves

for their weight. For their ordinary human bodies.”

Tisdale says, “We look at fat as a problem of the fat person. Rarely do the tables get turned, rarely do we imagine that it might be the viewer, not the viewed, who is limited.” How would our thinking change us, if we learned a more loving view of others?

Very young children are not concerned with their appearance. They are, however, fully integrated with their bodies, engaging all their senses to take in, process, and respond to stimuli.

Physical setbacks remind us of what we could do

In November last year, I had surgery on one of my ankles. I was on crutches for six weeks. Such restriction renewed my appreciation for the gift of mobility—walking, running, biking, going up and down stairs, standing up long enough to gather ingredients and prepare a meal.

Now, my body is healing. Gradually I can do more. I celebrate walking, grateful my ankle grows stronger and allows me the privilege of balance and movement.

My body means my life

We are alive because of our bodies. We are born into this world as infants. At the moment of death, it will be our bodies who define the end of our experience in this same world. Our bodies, the vessels of our spirits on this journey through our lives, are our most intimate partners. Mysteriously, they create a oneness with our spirits to encompass the vast realm of the human experience. 🐾



Kirsten Klassen with infant, Valency Sissons, who is feeling great about her body!

Courtesy photo

Body and spirit

by *Beth Martin Birkey*

If you are like me, you often glance in the mirror and note the width of your thighs or a new gray hair. Sometimes I consider the whole, look into my own eyes and affirm what I see. But more often, I examine parts, measuring and assessing, and judge my body inferior to some nebulous ideal.

This fragmentation is an insidious practice but one many women are taught to do through our visually saturated culture. Styled, well-dressed, and air-brushed models and celebrities create a false notion of female beauty as they strut down the runway, smile on magazine covers, or pose seductively in clothing ads. Intellectually, we know these images are false; emotionally, we still feel inferior.

Some might argue that women's body dissatisfaction exists only in the "secular" world, but I'm sure an informal poll would prove otherwise. In our churches and families we may know someone who is anorexic, someone on a diet, or someone who spends significant money on body "fixes" that go beyond self-care or cosmetics.

Some might also argue that women's body dissatisfaction is nothing new. I would agree, but I would argue that body loathing occurs today on a scale unimaginable in earlier generations due to the impact of the media, consumerism, and an increasingly sexualized culture. Mennonite Church USA no longer has dress restrictions, deciding wisely not to measure women's faithfulness by the length of hair or hemlines, but we face new challenges related to body image that have serious implications for our spiritual health. In some ways, body dissatisfaction is a rejection of God's gift of incarnation, of body and spirit united to serve God's will. In contrast, acknowledging and even affirming our bodies as unique and beautiful creations can be an act of devotion and worship.

What would celebrating God's incarnation of spirit in the female body actually look like? Could we honor our bodies without idealizing or idolizing them? Answers to those questions are very complex and the subject of many Christian blogs, as well as academic musings by theologians, psychiatrists, and counselors. Fortunately, many resources are available today that weren't pres-

ent 25 years ago. If you or someone you know has personal questions about a current physical condition such as anorexia or bulimia, I encourage you to seek professional help from a doctor or counselor.

In my Women's Studies courses at Goshen College, I encounter female students—and increasingly my male students—who struggle with body image in ways that are detrimental to their health, their self-esteem, their relationships, and yes, even their faith. I wonder how they can feel God's all-encompassing love when they hate the bulge over the top of their jeans. I want my students to know that they are loved for who they are, inside and out, and not just for adherence to a beauty code.

One activity that has opened up space for body appreciation is body casting. In small groups or individually, students create casts of their bodies using a plaster cloth wrap (found in any craft store in a variety of labels) over a part of their body, which they first coat with heavy lotion. After the hardened cast is removed, students decorate it. The casts themselves show breasts uneven in size, belly buttons enveloped by soft flesh, a gentle curve or bulge at the waist. Decorated casts become an aesthetically pleasing art

object when they are painted with swirls, stars, flower petals, or words.

As students reflect on this activity, they share their amazement at the beautiful and varied creations. Repeatedly, students experience a powerful surge of confidence when viewing their own body as art and recognize the pain they have felt with body dissatisfaction. In my most recent Women's Studies class, students felt empowered by looking at other women's body casts and honoring the differences rather than judging them. Others noted that stepping back and admiring their own body casts invited them to appreciate rather than critique what they see in the mirror.

In the context of faith development, body casting—or any structured celebration of our bodies and reframing of society's definition of beauty—can be a devotional act. By creating an object of art, whether realistic, stylized, or abstract, these students



A body cast made from plaster and decoated with paint to show the artistic aspect of a woman's body. This cast was made by Women's Studies students at Goshen College.

Courtesy photo

celebrate their own form and God's wisdom. In the same way that God surveyed creation, both creator and viewer of these amazing body casts conclude, "It is good."

I would argue that body loathing occurs today on a scale unimaginable in earlier generations due to the impact of the media, consumerism, and an increasingly sexualized culture.

Creating, honoring, affirming: these are acts of devotion and worship. I hope we can contemplate the need for such spiritual consideration of our bodies as God's creation. 📖

Resources

Books

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- Foster, Patricia, ed. *Minding the Body: Women Writers on Body and Soul*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994.
- Molinary, Rosie. *Hijas Americanas: Beauty, Body Image, and Growing Up Latina*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.
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- Slosson Wuellner, Flora. *Prayer and Our Bodies*. Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1987.
- Zackheim, Victoria, ed. *For Keeps: Women Tell the Truth About Their Bodies, Growing Older, and Acceptance*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.

Web

- National Women's Health Information Center. 22 Sept. 2009. "Body Image." <<http://womenshealth.gov/bodyimage>>.

Created in God's image

by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht

Genesis 1:26–31; 3:14–19

The story of creation is found in two fascinating narratives, written and preserved within the ancient tradition of male centeredness. We honor and respect these accounts, but remember that they are products of their time. Traditionally, the Christian church has read the creation story in Genesis 2:4–3:24, which emphasizes a hierarchical understanding of creation, focusing on Adam/man being created first and Eve/woman created last.

We will focus on the first creation account from Genesis 1:1–2:4a. The NRSV version of the Bible reads, “God created humankind in his image . . .” (Genesis 1:27). Here humanity (*ha-adam*) is made up of two beings, male and female. Their relationship is equal rather than hierarchical. Both reflect the image of God, not found in the rest of creation. In this account, God creates both genders at the same time and partners with them, giving them the task of administering creation. In God's declaration of making humanity “in our image, according to our likeness” (1:26), there is a sense of companionship with humanity. Creating the two beings at the same time shows their equality and need for mutual companionship.

This session takes us back to the beginning of gender—to Genesis, the creation of woman and man. In doing this, we can recover God's intention of making men and women of equal value. The question we need to struggle with is: Why have Christians placed so much importance on the details of creation, justifying male power over women, humankind over the rest of creation?

In the garden, the first man and woman lived in harmony with all creation and with God. In Genesis 3:14–19, we read about the breaking of that harmony because of humans' disobedience.

Three consequences for that disobedience have ruptured God's intended order: enmity between humans and nature, the domination of man over woman, and the subjection of humanity to endless labor in the land. In verse 14, the word “woman” represents humankind, and the serpent embodies nature. Verse 16



This Bible study is an excerpt from the Bible study guide by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Seek Peace and Pursue It: Women, Faith, and Family Care, which is available from Mennonite Publishing Network.

Seek Peace and Pursue It was developed by Mennonite Women USA and Mennonite Women Canada.

describes the power struggle of man over woman, and her pain in bearing children. Her labor points to how maternity will define her role in society and subject her life to a man. Verse 17 declares that man's hard work will never satisfy him. He will be subject to the demands of working the land, and enslaved to the work he himself has created.

These three "curses" are natural consequences of humans' actions. They represent a violent breaking of the *Shalom*/harmony that God intended us to enjoy. Through Jesus' teachings, we can restore the harmony that was broken. We can choose better ways for women and men to relate to each other. Bearing children will no longer control a woman's life, or labor on the land a man's life. There is a different path—the way of nonviolence illustrated by Jesus.

We are created in God's image! How wonderful can that be? Claim this blessing for your life today. Dismantle the "curse" and live up to the *Shalom*/salvation God has given you through Jesus Christ. You are a woman of God, made in God's image and redeemed by God's son, Jesus. 📖



Elizabeth Soto
Albrecht

PONDER

1. *In what ways do you see God's image in women? In men?*
2. *How do we embrace God's redeemed image of women and men through Jesus?*
3. *What did you learn from your parents about what it means to be a woman?*
4. *The image of God is still active in us. How do you perceive God's image in your life? How do we partner with God to bring back Shalom?*

Pray: Creator God, help us to remember that as women we, too, are made in your image. Help us to live our lives accordingly. Amen.

Three Windows Three Women

Loving our bodies

*Jessica Gotwals, 20
Goshen, Indiana*



At the end of fall semester, several friends of mine spent an afternoon body casting. We turned music on in the bathroom and took turns helping each other mold the slippery plaster strips to our bellies, breasts and collarbones. As the casts were drying on the counter, we were able to look at our bodies from a new perspective. Although the process required vulnerability and was uncomfortable for some, the experience was worth it. Being physically exposed connected us and helped us to be more honest with each other. We spent the rest of the afternoon studying aspects of our bodies we had never noticed before. Other women came by, acknowledging points of beauty or uniqueness in all of our art. What a blessed (and rare) experience it is to have women come together and share the things they love about their bodies.

Living at Goshen College has taught me that attitudes are contagious. Women are often mindful of how they talk about other women's bodies, but the way they interact with their own bodies impacts women around them nearly as much. Without open communication about body image, we assume that our insecurities are unique to us, when all women may feel the same way.

I've begun to understand that issues of body affect women profoundly. There is so much to mourn in connection to women's bodies—pornography, sexual violence, eating disorders, self-destructive habits, and so on. I have also begun to understand the power of connections. At Goshen, I have been part of a community of women who encourage others to appreciate their own bodies, and who have a sense of reverence for their bodies. I have spent time living and working among women who are open about their physical insecurities, and who feel comfortable asking questions about sexuality and bodies.

Today, my body cast sits in my room. On the inside are

words from a poem by Patricia Lynn Reilly, reminding me to celebrate women and balance the pain and joy that come with bodies:

“Imagine a woman in love with her own body.
A woman who believes her body is enough, just as it is.
Who celebrates its rhythms and cycles as an exquisite resource....
Imagine a woman who values the women in her life.
A woman who sits in circles of women.
Who is reminded of the truth about herself when she forgets.
Imagine yourself as this woman.” 📖

*Hilary Scarsella, 25
Elkhart, Indiana*

There was a time when I tried very hard to force my body to be something it wasn't made to be. I tried to mold my shape and size into a billboard figurine. I tried to make my body need less food. I tried to teach it to stay awake after sleepless nights. I tried to convince it that the right thing to do in the face of pain was to grit my teeth and bear it. This all worked for a while.

One day, my left arm went numb. My chest throbbed in pain. I couldn't breathe or speak or think. The doctors in the emergency room had no answers, but I spent the next several months in bed, physically unable to eat or walk. My body had had enough of my “self improvement” technique. It went on strike.

Terrified that it would stop working altogether, I realized the obvious: My body is good, and I need it to survive. So, I closed my eyes and asked a question long overdue:

“Body, what do you need to be well?”

My body said, “Oh, it's simple. When I'm hungry I need you to give me food. When I am tired I need you to give me rest. When I am in pain I need you to protect me. I will never be a figurine. Love me and care for me anyway, and I will give you life.”

I have boxy hands. My thighs are thick, and my waist is small. I have more hair on my body than the average Hollywood star, and I don't like to shave. There is a bump on my nose, and my knees are a bit knobby. I have big eyes and a pretty face. This body is my home. When it is well, so am I. 📖



Editor's note: This column is a forum for women to share perspectives on the current timbre theme. It introduces women spanning their 20's-30's, 40's-50's, and 60's and above. If you are interested in writing for this column, please contact editor, Patricia Burdette, at <PattyB@MenoniteWomenUSA.org>.



*Samantha Lioi, 31
Allentown, Pennsylvania*

As long as we are walking and breathing on God's good earth, our sense of self and our identities are bound up in our bodies. We are embodied selves, spirited bodies, which carry the image of God. I am able to deny that I bear the divine image—until I spend time outdoors. I head out on a walk, or I get on my bicycle. Standing before the strong, old, gnarled beauty of a sycamore, I have experienced joy that radiates through all my being—body, spirit, mind. Feeling my muscles working in rhythm as I pass the expanse of a farmer's field, something rises within, saying "yes." There is recognition: something in me responding to something outside of me. I feel delight, and my whole self opens out in worship.

As I think about the whole of God's creation, and myself as part of it, I know that God's project of reconciliation includes the bodies and beings of everyone. When I look at human history and see that in most other times and places, my spirited body would not have belonged to me, I see connections. Connections between power male bodies have exercised over female ones, power European bodies and their descendants have used against people they viewed as animals, and the power human beings exercise over the particular creatures we eventually call food. So I am also vegetarian, in my desire to keep love and joy and justice together, to take what I need from God's earth and not more, to participate with the Creator making things new: divine re-creation. 🌱

***MW USA Mission
and Vision:***

Our mission at Mennonite Women USA is to empower women and women's groups as we nurture our life in Christ through studying the Bible, using our gifts, hearing each other, and engaging in mission and service.

Mennonite Women USA invites women across generations, cultures, and places to share and honor our stories, care for each other, and express our prophetic voice boldly as we seek to follow Christ.

Grapevine


Co-directors appointed for Mennonite Women USA

The Mennonite Women USA board approved a new staff structure beginning May 1, 2011. Rhoda Keener and Ruth Lapp Guengerich will work in a job-share as co-executive directors of MW USA. Guengerich's work will focus on MW USA programs and administration while Keener's will focus on financial development and Sister Care seminars. Guengerich, who served as chair of MW USA since 2009, has concluded her work on the board and is succeeded by Rhoda Charles.

In addition, Carolyn Holderread Heggen was affirmed as a primary co-presenter of the Sister Care seminars for the next two years. The board approved these changes at its fall meeting, October 30, 2010.

Be sure to sign up for the Mennonite Women dinner when you register for the Pittsburgh Convention. Speaker Meghan Good (pictured right) and Elizabeth Soto Albrecht (See page 10–11) will share how their spiritual journeys have connected with key concepts in MW USA's Sister Care seminar.

Plan now to attend a Women in Conversation retreat in 2012, *Into the Wilderness: The Journey of God's Beloved*, with keynote speaker Meghan Good, lead pastor for Albany (Oregon) Mennonite Church. The retreat is offered in two locations: April 13–15, 2012 at Laurelville, Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania and April 27–29, 2012 at Cross Wind, Hesston, Kansas.

Thank you for your support of Mennonite Women USA's ministry through your prayers and financial gifts. Careful stewardship, faithful giving, and your *timbrel* subscriptions continue to keep our organization strong. A grant for Sister Care program development received last year is also being used in this current fiscal year. The financial report is available from our office or on our website at <www.mennonitewomenusa.org>. 

Below: Meghan Good will be the keynote speaker at the Women in Conversation Retreats in 2012. The retreats are co-sponsored by MW USA and Laurelville Mennonite Church Center.



Across the Border

Loving a “difficult” body

by Michelle Stabler-Havener

When I was in college, I gained twenty-five pounds from my freshman to my senior year. I simply attributed it to gaining the “freshman fifteen” and, well, then some. I had to admit to myself, that I was eating a lot of pizza, stroganoff, and lasagna, just to name a few of my favorite study-break meals. During my junior and senior year, I was always hungry and always tired. Being an honors student who tended to procrastinate, I pulled a lot of all nighters. It was easy to completely attribute my voracious appetite and exhaustion to sleep deprivation and stress. To compensate, I ate a lot of bread and wheat based foods, because I heard that carbs gave you energy. My stomach was upset a lot during this time as well, but that wasn’t new. I’d had stomach problems since I was a kid.

Ever since elementary school I had wanted to be a missionary, and I specifically felt called to China. During college, the main reason I majored in English education was because I knew that Chinese universities wanted to hire teachers whose first language is English. The fall after I graduated, I went to teach English in China for a non-denominational sending organization.

As I was preparing to leave for the organization’s training, my mother told me to get tested for celiac disease (CD), a genetic disease that my father had and with which my mother had recently been diagnosed. CD is an autoimmune disease, which means that my immune system is overactive and attacks some of my healthy cells. It is controlled by keeping a strict gluten-free (GF) diet. One cannot eat wheat, barley, or rye and only certified GF oats.

Essentially, when a person with CD eats gluten, it damages the cilia in the small intestine, making it difficult to digest or absorb nutrition from food. Because the body is not getting enough

Across the Ocean

nourishment, one is fatigued and often hungry; hence, weight gain may result. In the extreme, a person may get to the point where the body will no longer absorb any nutrition at all, causing starvation.

It turned out that my CD test was positive. I was told this news twenty-four hours before I was to get on the plane for training in California. Angry, I ate a bowl of noodles for a midnight snack as I was finishing my packing. When my stomach got upset a few hours later on the ride to the airport, I finally made the connection between my chronic stomach trouble and what I ate. I decided then and there to follow a GF diet.

This was easier said than done. Processed food, which North American people are so fond of, is full of gluten, which is used for fillers, flavoring, and coloring. Since I had just been diagnosed, I did not have any experience managing my diet in my home country, much less in a completely foreign one.

During the first week of training, I barely ate anything, yet I was sicker than ever. Finally, I got smart enough to start reading ingredients. It turned out that the soy sauce I was putting on my GF sushi for lunch was fermented with wheat. Finding out you can't have soy sauce when going to an Asian country is not the most auspicious beginning to the journey.

Following a GF diet when I first came to China wasn't easy. And sometimes it still isn't easy. However, for seven of my nine years in China I have been blessed to live in the rice basket of the South. I've learned how to tell restaurants, employers, and friends that I can't have soy sauce and several other sauces that have soy sauce in them. Fortunately, a lot of Chinese food is made with unprocessed meats and fresh vegetables. At home, I also eat a lot of fruit and some GF products, which I bring, or friends and family ship me, from the States.

Today I'm healthy. I have energy. These things help me to love my body even when I accidentally eat some gluten, making it seem like my body doesn't love me. 📷



Michelle Stabler-Havener and her husband, James, serve in China with Mennonite Mission Network. Here they visit a student's family at their farm.

Courtesy photo

Trust, love, strength, vitality

by *Ingrid Friesen Moser*

Trust. Love. Strength. Vitality.

There was a time when I thought I would not have the chance to be a mother, but today I know the blessing of two wonderful sons. For close to five years however, my body, and my spiritual life fell far away from me as motherhood took its hold. I craved a practice that would bring me back to myself. For the last year I have found renewed trust, love, strength and vitality in my body and my life, by using the Christian practice of *lectio divina* as a way of engaging the Biblical story, and allowing that practice to lead me into a way of praying that incorporates stretching, strength, and balance work. I call this way of praying body prayer.

Body prayer has become a centering point in my life. I value the integration it offers in what can be a disconnected life in the context of a larger culture that is also disconnected at best, and destructive to our bodies at its worst. I treasure the way I can bring all of me to the practice of body prayer, and how it in turn honors and deepens the Christian scriptures in me, as I pray with my body.

Following the lectionary, a recent reading brought me to one of the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 6: 25–34, Jesus challenges us not to worry about what we will eat or wear—both bodily concerns. He reminds us that all we need will be provided. We are asked to trust. Stay in the present, and let tomorrow’s worries be for tomorrow.

After reading the Matthew text, I found myself drawn to pray in positions that required a challenging degree of balance and focus. Physical positions that require balance demand that you bring all of yourself into the present. Balance is much more difficult when you are worried about the future or the past; what you will eat or what you will wear. This was trust in action.

The most memorable piece of advice I got when I graduated

from college many years ago was “Act brave, feelings will follow.” In other words, “Do what you wish to become.” Practicing body prayer has helped me do this. It gives me a way to take into my body the words of the prophets, the Psalmist, and Jesus and be the trust, love, strength, and vitality I desire.

I was introduced to the possibility of praying in this way by a friend. That experience made me want to learn more. This in turn led me to attend a workshop and start experimenting with developing my own style of praying the Christian scriptures using my body. Ironically, my children, the ones who led me to the point of craving this prayer practice, were the first ones I then taught to pray in this way. Now I teach adults, and love it.

If you desire to grow, and be challenged in the ways God is calling you—Stretch

If you desire deeper reserves, and courage—Strengthen

If you desire more trust, and focus on what is truly important—Balance

At its core, prayer is about aligning ourselves with God. What could be more right or righteous than doing that with our whole being? 🌱



Ingrid Friesen Moser prays with her sons (l to r) Peter, 4, and Levi, 5.

Courtesy photo

Loving who we are instead

by Heidi Martin



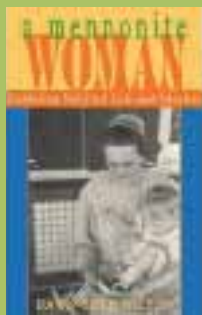
In 2003, Jars of Clay released an album that I still play frequently. *Who We Are Instead* combines calming, “folksy” melodies with rich lyrics which result in a simple but significantly strong album. The song “Trouble Is” relates to *timbrel’s* theme of loving ourselves and to the book I want to feature, *A Mennonite Woman: Exploring Spiritual Life and Identity* by Dawn Ruth Nelson.

The chorus to “Trouble Is” is quite simple and catchy: “Man, the trouble is / We don’t know who we are instead.” These eleven words capture an idea that is rather troubling. The Bible gives us unbelievable titles such as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, friends of Jesus, and having his incomparably great power (Romans 8:17, John 15:15, Ephesians 1:19). Even so, we do not quite understand. We do not grasp the power of who we are.

I am convinced that we cannot fully love ourselves until we understand our identity—not only our personalities and quirks, but also our history and what has shaped us. Though she does not say so explicitly, the research in Nelson’s book leads me to believe she has the same convictions.

A significant piece of Nelson’s journey began in 1979 when Nelson and her husband agreed to go to Ireland to “model the peace of Christ” in the midst of the country’s political upheaval and violence (16). The years following were mixed with anger, brokenness, loss and loneliness. Away from the typical Mennonite community, Nelson began to explore Mennonite spirituality—an adventure that continued when she returned to the States in 1991:

I determined to someday study Mennonite spirituality, and in 1998 I started a D.Min. program at Lancaster Theological Seminary to do that. As I formulated my question and proposal for study, I decided that much had been written already about Mennonite spirituality in an abstract way and mostly by men. I wanted to write about it in a narrative way. And I wanted to write about it from a woman’s point of view. (19)



As a result, Nelson hopes that her book is a resource for men and women as they explore Mennonite spirituality in this new era. More than that, she hopes the book stimulates conversation and new ideas. The process is simple and can be modeled after her own journey described in the book.

The book begins by stepping into history as Nelson interviews her grandmother, Susan Ruth (1909–2005). The story of Ruth's life draws readers in to an idyllic world and then analyzes the traditions and life routines that shaped Grandmother Ruth and her Mennonite faith during that era.

"A Wake-Up Call!" is the title of chapter four and rightly so. Nelson explains it best:

I think Mennonites have a problem. Many are not recognizing that we have a new spiritual situation: The communities many of our forebears, and often we ourselves grew up in, no longer exist in the same way.... There is a lack of recognition that Mennonites today...have been formed much more by the American culture.... Hey, folks, we're living in a different world; we have different Christian formation needs! (86, 87)

Nelson suggests that we look within our own traditions as well as others to discover what shaped Mennonite spirituality in the past. Then move forward by holding on to some of the old and adding some new. This allows for spiritual practices that are helpful and fitting for the current time.

In chapter seven, Nelson asks, "What is needed in a Mennonite spirituality for the twenty-first century" (126)? She suggests six themes steeped in the past with potential in the future: an everyday, embodied sacramentality, nonconformity, community service, *gelassenheit* or meekness, the person of Jesus, and the Bible. Still, each theme may look different: "We saw in my grandmother's life that following Jesus does not mean we all are alike. Jesus calls us each by name. There are as many ways of following as there are names, as there are individuals" (150). This uniqueness is the true beauty of spirituality and is the reason this book is only the beginning of the discussion.

My hope is that each of our journeys—both individually and communally—is leading us to a deeper understanding of who we are and a deeper love for that identity. Perhaps one day, Jars of Clay will have to change their lyrics to "Man, the wonder is / that we love who we are instead." 📖



Dawn Ruth Nelson

Stirrings

Response to Sister Question:

Editor's note: Each issue, we print responses to our Sister Question. The question for **May-June** was: **What has helped me love and accept myself as God created me?**



Donna Potts-Walling



Lesa Rumbalski

Donna Potts-Walling, Stanwood, Washington, responded: I have never had a problem...until the house became empty. An "empty nest" can be a real struggle if you are trying to find work for which you feel qualified. After all, 30 years is a long time with lots of experience doing everything.

Talking that up, multi-taskers unite!

Yet, old habits creep in when I am asked, "What have you done with your life?" I often start by saying "I was just..." How do I break the cycle? Keep busy! Gardening is my salvation, and the greatest sacrament ever.

Lesa Rumbalski, Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, responded: My daughter has helped me. She is four years old and thinks I am the most beautiful woman in the world. My daughter hopes she will look just like me when she is older. Her feeling about me makes me feel beautiful and less critical of myself. 📧

Cup of Water

Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward (Matthew 10:42).

Support women and girls by helping them deal with self-image problems and eating disorders. Shalom Counseling and Mediation Center, Archbold, Ohio, has therapists who specialize in these issues in a way that brings healing which integrates mind, body, and spirit.

Shalom is committed to not turning anyone away due to inability to pay. Twenty-four per cent of Shalom's revenue comes from individual donations and 16% comes from congregational donations.

For more information about Shalom see their website at <<http://www.shalomworks.org>>. To donate, send your check to Shalom Counseling and Mediation Center, 22251 St. Rt. 2, Archbold, OH 43502, or donate online at <<http://www.shalomworks.org/Home/Give>>. 📧

ON THE ROAD WITH RUTH AND RHODA


Open heart

In mid-October on an otherwise ordinary road trip from Harrisonburg, Virginia to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for the Mennonite Church USA Leaders' Forum, I stopped to meet Rhoda Keener, so that we could work on Mennonite Women USA agenda as we traveled. Rhoda had several items to discuss and did not waste time getting to her agenda. All I remember was her request to reduce her hours as executive director for MW USA, and to invite someone to job share so she could focus on fundraising for MW USA and on Sister Care seminars.

As I listened, I thought about the complexities of job sharing, and the challenge of finding someone willing to job share. And then I thought that what Rhoda was describing sounded like something I could enjoy doing. I dismissed the latter thought, and wondered aloud who Rhoda had in mind to job share. Rhoda had two people in mind, and I was the first on her list.

My heart stops now as I write this. I was dreaming about retirement, not about taking on a new three-year commitment. As I listened carefully to Rhoda's thinking, I was convinced she had listened to her inner spirit "with open hands." Now I needed to listen with open hands and open heart.

Over my lifetime God has provided me with meaningful work, sometimes in surprising ways that I did not understand immediately. Rhoda's invitation required thoughtful and prayerful decision-making. I shared this decision with my husband, Ron, a few friends, and with the executive committee of MW USA, and I prayed for wisdom. No one said the job would be easy; no one said it was impossible. Most were affirming and encouraging, with pledges to pray for us. Together with open hands Rhoda and I pray for God's blessing and wisdom for this new venture.

In the March/April issue of *timbrel* Rhoda reflected on the process which led her to invite me to job share with her. In future issues we will continue to share how we experience God "on the road." I imagine God has more surprises in store as we listen to God with open hands and open hearts. —by Ruth Lapp Guengerich 



Ruth Lapp Guengerich and Rhoda Keener are co-executive directors of Mennonite Women USA.

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Photo by Jonathan Charles



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MW USA board changes



Rhoda Charles

Rhoda Charles has accepted the position of chair of the Mennonite Women USA board beginning April 1, 2011. Transitioning from her role as vice chair, she will complete the term of Ruth Lapp Guengerich (see page 15). Charles is a member of Habecker Mennonite Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She and her husband, Jonathan, operate Charles photography.

Peggy Martin has accepted the MW USA board position of vice chair and will complete the term of Rhoda Charles who served in this position since August 1, 2010. Martin will serve as vice chair beginning April 1, 2011. Martin lives in Cheraw, Colorado and is a member of East Holbrook Mennonite Church. She works as a registered nurse at Arkansas Valley Regional Medical Center in La Junta, Colorado. ☐



Peggy Martin

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