

Liturgy

COMING TO OUR SENSES

The Body in Worship

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I REMEMBER the first time I was allowed to stand in the sanctuary of my church. Several years after Vatican II, Father Marion gathered the girls in the fifth grade and allowed us to stand stiff, hushed and scared, around the altar. Just as he began the liturgy, someone dropped a book. The culprit was mortified. We all held our breath, bracing ourselves for Father Marion's reaction, but to our amazement, he just grinned. Then he explained that not only were we allowed to be human in church, but we were supposed to be human in God's sight and in this hallowed space. Needless to say, we were astonished! A new message was breaking through the soil of tradition, sprouting new possibilities for ways of being in church.

Such was my first recollection of dancing in the sanctuary. Long before that, I had learned how to bring my body to church: walk quietly (so your shoes don't clack); be sure to leave a space for your guardian angel between you and the person in front of you, and when kneeling, don't cross your ankles. (It's harder that way and gives you something to "offer up.")

I have other memories. I remember the delight of kneeling and gazing into the cut glass in my Mary ring, which reflected the kaleidoscopic colors from a wash of stained-glass windows. Then there was the giddy Good Friday—no one understood why we laughed as the petitions were chanted with "Let us pray. Let us kneel. Let us stand," over and over so that everyone was "up-ping" and "downing" every twenty seconds. Then the church bells. They brought church into my yard, broke into my play and enticed me to dance. While others stopped to say the angelus, I moved.

Movements, feelings, sounds, tastes and smells are church, for a child. I see myself tugging open the cathedral door and inhaling the damp, sweet-musty air of greeting. The smoky perfume of votive candles and the thrill of plunging the long match stick into sand after the candle was lit. Dropping the quarter into the slotted metal box, hearing it clank into the unknown. Jangling bells signaling the procession of priest and altar boys, so stiff and official. The fascination of the little clasps for hanging hats on the pew in front of me. The urge to pet the fur coat of the lady next to

me. My sister and I linking arms and folding our hands for prayer—the comfort of “connecting” with each other.

I remember the first time I received the host. The wafer tasted horrendous. I prayed for the strength to live through eating one every Sunday for the rest of my life. That same year I was chosen to lead a procession. The occasion has left me, but the rose petals have not; we each got a basket of them and led the way, strewing them everywhere, preparing the path.

Bodies fascinated, and church was prime time for enjoying my fascination. The stocky, formal ushers, standing with legs spread and hands clasped, waiting to seat late comers. The boy with multiple sclerosis who worked his way up the aisle for communion. And babies—sometimes my prayer took the form of making faces at one in front of me.

Sense memories, body memories: each of us has our own collection, equally rich and idiosyncratic. As children we were too young to understand theological concepts, but we could certainly enter fully into the church experience: colors, sounds, smells, textures, tastes.

Sensual liturgy

What does this say to adults, creators of liturgy? It suggests a variation on an adage: “Senses speak louder than words.” I am not advocating hedonism or downgrading the value of certain ascetic practices, many of which make the senses more acute. Nor am I proposing that we should leave our intellects behind when we come through the church doors. If we are going to embrace liturgy’s symbolic nature, though, we must embrace our bodies as receptors of the symbols, symbols themselves and evokers of what is holy in and beyond the physical.

Begin with yourself. What are your favorite body experiences? Perhaps a hot bath, the feel of warm sand on skin, a Thanksgiving feast. Or square-dancing, stretching, reveling in Ravel, smelling freshly baked bread, crying in the arms of a friend. Knowing how your senses speak to you is the first step in learning to create rich, satisfying liturgy on a symbolic and sensual level,

thus providing a taste of the holy for the community.

As a presider, imagine lifting your arms to pray with the same energy you would use on a sunny summer day to rise, spread your arms and greet the sun. As the one who brings the gifts to the table, imagine displaying them to all with the same exuberance that marks your emergence from the kitchen bearing the Thanksgiving turkey. As a lector, imagine walking to the lectern with the hushed ease and sweet step you experience on entering the shaded solitude of a pine-needle woods.

Much of the movement of liturgy will not emerge until we begin to breathe deeply every day, allowing *ruah*, spirit, to move within us, inspire us. Dancing in liturgy does not mean bringing in ballerinas to adorn the sanctuary or teaching the whole assembly elaborate hand gestures. It means uncovering the dance of our everyday lives, allowing it to emerge in liturgy, to be expressed, enlarged and celebrated.

Sensual liturgy is not a new concept. The sense-memory reflection that opened this article testifies to our rich symbolic heritage. Before Vatican II the liturgy may have been even more sensual, since all communications were made in a melodious foreign language that set an evocative tone and lent an air of mystery to the event. The mind was set free to roam, while the fingers rhythmically caressed small rosary beads; and, as the priest faced away from the congregation, eyes were free to meditate on holy cards, statues or brightly painted angels in the sanctuary dome. The problem, of course, is that such worship easily becomes very object-oriented and divorced from the life of the assembly. Recalling the style of earlier times reminds us that appealing to the senses in liturgy is not enough. Our choice and use of symbols must be theologically sound and appropriate.

We have begun to realize that the assembly, the body of Christ gathered, is the primary liturgical symbol. But even with this shift in theology, our meager attempts at symbol-making often miss the natural power of basic universal symbols. The assembly prefers observing to participating; bread looks like a plastic wafer; the water of the bath becomes a trickle on the forehead; and for the oil of gladness, the slogan “a little dab’ll do ya” has been taken to heart.

We must uncover the mystery that resides in and pervades our everyday life: the food we eat, the water we drink and bathe in, the air we breathe, our bodies at play and work. These are the infinite God made manifest in creation. Our challenge is to find ways to recover the richness of nature we have lost.

Eating and drinking together

During my undergraduate years at Georgetown University, we celebrated an annual harvest liturgy near Thanksgiving. The church floor was strewn with crisp autumn leaves, and at the preparation of the table we brought forward bread and wine, baskets of fruit, cornucopias, loaves of bread and plates of grapes. These we arranged as an autumnal décor in the sanctuary, while four dancers blessed the space with an interpretation of "All Good Gifts" from *Godspell*. At the close of the liturgy, the assembly was invited forward to feast and celebrate the earth's richness.

Running water

One Ash Wednesday, during those same Georgetown years, we focused on water as the symbol of purification. The baptismal bowl was placed before the altar; at the beginning of the penitential rite, we filled it with water as we meditated on the sound and cascade of water being poured. Then two dancers approached the bowl, each dipping one hand into the water, lifting it skyward and sprinkling the water randomly over everything.

At this moment, the cantor intoned Psalm 51, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." The dancers slowly lowered their hands in front of their faces, as if taking the Lord's purifying, unconditional acceptance into themselves. Then they repeated the gesture, inviting the whole assembly to join them. Each person raised a hand and slowly drew it past his or her face, echoing the falling of water. During the verses, the dancers developed the theme of approaching and avoiding the water, representing our desire for and fear of healing. At each refrain, the assembly, including the dancers, repeated the gesture. For the final verse, the dancers dipped evergreen branches and danced an *asperges* of the assembly.

That is how one community ritualized the spiritual cleansing power of water, with clear allusions to baptism, our primary water ritual. Baptism by immersion, of course, is the ultimate full-body water ritual. I heartily recommend that each church provide a symbolic rendition of the River Jordan for its Easter vigil. Last year, the most powerful moment in my community's vigil was the baptism by immersion of a one-year-old, naked child. It was the first time I had ever seen someone naked in church. I am not recommending the practice for adults (yet!), but the full flesh of that toddler eloquently revealed the absolute holiness of our naked selves. Amen, I say.

Anointing with oil

Oil is one of the most underestimated, underused symbols in our heritage. My hunch is that we fail to enjoy its sacramental richness because we have forgotten its richness in life. The bible praises oil for its cosmetic qualities (after a bath, for example), its medicinal qualities and its fragrance, all of which contribute to its power as a symbol in the ritual anointing of kings, priests and prophets. And when the Israelites anointed, they poured quantities of rich, redolent oil over the head.¹

The practice prevailed in early Christian tradition. In Mark 14:3, when Jesus was at Bethany, a woman appeared bearing an alabaster jar of ointment; she broke the jar and poured the ointment over Jesus' head in anticipation of his burial. The early Christians often blessed oil and used it for healing rituals, sometimes rubbing it over the entire body of the sick or offering it to them to drink.²

Oil does not appear regularly in our eucharistic liturgies, but perhaps we should consider creating home rituals of healing for the sick, including anointings and even massage. The first full-body massage I ever had was given by a Methodist minister, trained in the skill in order to bring the body dimension to his ministry. He certainly won me as a convert—to massage, that is.

New ways must be explored to employ "the oil of gladness." My appreciation for this symbol deepened when I participated in a small-group liturgy with the Fountain Square Fools, a liturgical

story theater company in Cincinnati, Ohio, of which I am an original member. For our dismissal rite, each person turned to the one on the right and prayed a blessing for that sister or brother "fool." While we prayed the words of blessing, we also anointed one another with oil on some part of the body that symbolically represented the person's need for healing—hands, knees, face, heart. The oil used was richly perfumed and soothed our sense of smell as well as our skin.

Gestures

One Sunday I attended a parish that dared to be creative. The Sunday school teacher stood, inviting the children to lead the assembly in singing and gesturing "His Banner over Me Is Love." I was delighted, but my delight soon dissipated. Here is what happened: The leader jumped into the song without making clear contact with the youngsters or asking them to stand and face the assembly. She then went through the motions of the song with a perfunctory quality of movement, as if she were putting on a hat or a coat. As the congregation had no clear lead from the children or their teacher, it is not surprising that no one joined in.

What could they have done to make their idea work? The leader could have rehearsed a few (or all) of the children in the sanctuary to be models for other worshipers. The leader could also have rehearsed herself in front of a mirror, practicing the art of connecting and fulfilling her gestures. The tendency in this kind of motion is to assume a position and freeze, then move to the next position only to freeze again. Can you imagine making the sign of the cross—or washing the windows—in this fashion?

In most cases, the congregation needs a specific invitation to join in movement. After the children had demonstrated the refrain once through, the leader could have turned to the congregation and invited them to join in, this time making direct contact with them and at the same time enlarging her gestures for all to see. The leader of gesture plays a role parallel to that of the cantor: he or she calls the people to prayer, conducts their entrances and exits, and models the level of energy needed to fulfill the prayer. In an informal setting, after the congregation has completed the gesture

once, the leader may even stop and make a playful comment such as, "How many of you feel a little foolish? That's why the kids are here to teach us! Let's do it again and see if we can show them we're willing to learn." Sometimes the congregation needs a short rehearsal and explicit permission to express some emotion besides solemnity.

These criticisms are not meant to discourage brave souls from stepping out to lead. I hope that these guidelines will help those who do step out to be more satisfied with their results.

Breathing

The spiritual and physical disciplines of eastern practices such as yoga, aikido and tai chi offer us some signposts on this path toward integration of body, mind and spirit. Among the most powerful is the practice of breathing. Our tradition often speaks symbolically about breath: God breathed into the nostrils of man and woman; God breathed life into the figures in the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37); the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples, breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

Breath is spirit. At the same time, it is our physical regulator, changing for every emotion, held when we are fearful. An experience of breath that made an indelible mark on me occurred at my mother's death. In the final moments, we who were closest to her gathered around her bed and listened to her breathe . . . shallow, rough, stopping, starting . . . stopping. And then, only silence. With the passing of her breath, her life had passed.

At The Gathering, the Great Lakes Pastoral Ministry Convention, I led a centering prayer that focused on breathing:

Begin by placing all paraphernalia aside. Place your feet flat on the floor and lift your spine gently in to make room for the breath within you. Close your eyes . . . and place your hand on your belly, your center; in eastern religions this is a home for the *ki* energy, the root energy of life.

Now begin to breathe deeply through your nostrils, filling your lungs and expanding into your abdomen like a balloon. As you exhale, do so fully, allowing your lungs and abdomen to empty, to hollow out. Continue to focus on the gentle act of inhaling, taking

in and slowly exhaling, giving back. This is the basic pulse of life: breathing in the Spirit of God and sending it forth.

Now notice if there is any place in your body where you are feeling tension, some manner of holding against the present moment, some unwanted feeling. It may be in your neck, your back, your face. As you breathe in, breathe the Spirit of God into this holding, and as you exhale, let go whatever is keeping you from being fully with yourself and with God in this moment.

As I read this meditation slowly, I breathed into the microphone loud enough so that I could be heard, modeling the long exhalations. A meditation of this kind might be used as the opening centering prayer for a liturgy or as a communion meditation. Practice breathing by yourself before you lead it. Make sure that when you breathe in, your abdomen is filling with breath, and as you exhale, your stomach flattens. Many do the process backwards, which cuts off belly breath and maintains a shallower chest breath.

After this portion of the meditation, I led the assembly in gestured prayer, which we then used at the next day's eucharist:

Continue to image a cycle of breathing between yourself and God, the source of breath. In a moment, I am going to ask you to rise and stand in the Lord's presence. As you do this, continue to focus on the flow of breath so that your act of standing is itself a dance, a motion of harmony, an active response to the Lord's call. To prepare, empty your lungs. Now as you inhale slowly, please rise.

To conclude, let us pray a three-part amen with body and spirit. As I teach it, keep your eyes closed so you can more readily pray it from within yourself. (1) Place both hands on your heart. As you exhale, let your heart and upper body curve forward, making a concave, a hollow. As you do this, slightly bend your knees, thus giving in to a full-body action, a folding in to your inner core. (2) Now, lift up in your spine, raising your heart and head and soul. (3) And for the third action, from your heart, send your hands with an impulse up and beyond you, and gently let them float down, palms up.

Open your eyes. Let us repeat this together several times so we can become comfortable praying the gesture as a congregation.

When you lead this meditation, first practice bending your knees as you fold, and then letting your spine curl forward (as opposed to bending forward with a flat-board spine). Practice will help

you gain the needed ease and flexibility as you model for the assembly.

This gesture was originally choreographed to Richard Proulx's Eucharistic Acclamation and Amen from "A Community Mass."³ We then repeated the gesture like a refrain throughout the eucharistic prayer, both at the "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again" and the "Amen."

I have a fantasy of the presider rising to greet the whole congregation and instead of saying "Let us pray," saying "Let us breathe." Then presider and all inhale and exhale as one. Words, then, would rise up from our breaths.

These reflections only hint at the sensual and symbolic possibilities of liturgy. I hope that this collection of memories, suggestions and dreams can be a jumping-off point for you in your private and liturgical lives. With a bit of breath, we may all come to our senses, allowing them to lead us to God.

Notes

1. See William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., Spire Books, n.d.).
2. See Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Image Books, 1982).
3. Richard Proulx, "A Community Mass" (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, rev. 1977).

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