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**Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology**

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# Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

Fretting about our bodies is hardly a new phenomenon. Is there any culture anytime, anywhere, that has not struggled with human physicality? Most of us worry about our bodies. We try to change our bodies. We betray and feel betrayed by our bodies. We tend to think that our bodies are not quite good enough. Whole industries are founded on these worries and dissatisfactions. While these preoccupations may be exaggerated in the luxury economies of North America, there is evidence that concerns about bodies transcend time and geography.

**The authors in this issue of *Vision* all took up my challenge to them to give us new ways to think about and better value our human being, the bodies we not only inhabit but *are*.**

These fears and distortions seem antithetical to Christian faith. A central truth of our existence as believers is that we only learn to know and love God—and each other—through our bodies. Until we are born into the human family and take our place as embodied beings, we do not know or trust God. We are created in the image of God only as we become creatures of flesh and blood. What a gift this life is!

At the other end of the spectrum of human existence, Christian faith assures us of abundant, eternal life. In faith we die to our fear of dying, as the writer of Hebrews puts it so well. Because relinquishing our bodies does not mean relinquishing our hope, we inhabit these bodies that will die, even as we let go of the fears that confronting our mortality can provoke. As Paul at the end of his own life reminded the believers in Rome, "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

The authors in this issue of *Vision* all took up my challenge to them to give us new ways to think about and better value our human being, the bodies we not only inhabit but *are*.

Laura Brenneman and Rebecca Slough lead off with foundational articles offering biblical, historical, and scientific perspectives. Brenneman works with the strong images and metaphors of the body in Paul's letters to the early church. She notes the distinctions Paul makes between flesh and body, arguing that we have likely seen Paul as too negative toward the body because we have overlooked these distinctions. She makes a case that Paul helps us toward a more robust and richer view of our bodies. Slough draws on some of the practices of the early church as well as some important insights from neuroscience. She uses Alan Kreider's new book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church,* to consider how faith emerges from embodied habits. She then explores notions of embodied cognition to show how faith grows from knowledge we gain through our bodies and our brains. Finally, she offers examples of how her congregation nurtures this embodied faith.

The next group of articles and an earthy poem by Ann Hostetler take as a starting point particular embodiments—our relationship to soil, our embeddedness in culture, and our social locations. Iris de Leon–Hartshorn, Susanne Guenther Loewen, and Illya Nimoy Johnson bring crucial perspectives to our attention. De Leon–Hartshorn took the intriguing step of having her DNA analyzed, which has led her to reflect on her Indigenous worldview and how it contributes to her Christian faith. Guenther Loewen begins with her experience of mothering and explores the impetus it provides for moving into embodied peacemaking. Using the biblical example of Mary of Nazareth—who said yes to God and no to oppression—and drawing on the work of several women theologians, Guenther Loewen develops a view of nonviolent peacemaking characterized by strength, courage, and even ferocity. Johnson explores the theme of embodiment by considering what it means that God has created humanity with great diversity, including sexual diversity, while we share a common identity as bearers of God's image. He moves from reflecting on God's creation of this variety and commonality to a consideration of what it says about God and what it means for how we might better understand each other.

The authors of the last group of articles—and Gayle Gerber Koontz in her wonderful poems about transitions—reflect on and

raise questions about how to understand our bodies through the experiences life brings us. Chris Marchand works with insights about bodies gained through his years of work in youth ministry. In adolescence we are acutely sensitive about the changes in our bodies and about others' perceptions of our bodies. How can the church help teens develop healthy bodies and healthy spirits during this time of life especially critical to physical and spiritual formation? How do we integrate the two in ways that lead to compassion toward ourselves and others? Allan Rudy-Froese deals with that common and uncomfortable ordeal known as stage fright. What can we do when both our bodies and our minds seem to betray us and render us fearful fools—and especially, what can we do when it happens as we lead in our congregation's worship? Overcoming stage fright, he suggests, is partly a matter of moving more fully and mercifully into our embodiment. Don Yost and friends at Maple City Health Care Center write about what it means to care for patients as enspirited bodies and embodied spirits. This health center has a long history of collaborating with its neighbors to enhance their health and the health of their ethnically and socioeconomically diverse neighborhood. These stories of healing emphasize the relational nature of holistic health care and have significance for both church and world. In "Embodied to our end," Beth Landis reflects on how, at the end of life, we relinquish our bodies and enter into death. She provides practical suggestions and theological insights about how we, as believers and faith communities, can find better ways of making that journey. The conversations she advocates are not easy, but undertaking them is some of the most important work we do in life, for ourselves and for those we leave behind.

As I finish working with these writers and these essays, the word that comes to my mind is *compassion*. It is not a word that appears often in these pages, yet I think it is at the heart of every writer's work here. Moving more fully and gracefully into our embodied life is a work of mercy—toward ourselves, first of all. As Chris Marchand puts it, self-love and not self-loathing is the path to greater wholeness, and it also moves us in gratitude toward the One who has made us and in compassion toward one another.