

It Was Then That We Hopped

EMMA PAVEY

*Our gut reigns: how our body teaches us about prayer and partnering
with God*

*I uniquely and lovingly embrace every image I have made out of the earth's
clay. With a fiery spirit I transform it into a body to serve the world.*

Hildegard of Bingen

*T*ry this. Be upright. Pull your shoulders up to your ears and then allow them to fall down your back. Relax your jaw. Consider the space around you on all sides. Breathe in a spacious invitation to know yourself as loved. Breathe out dropping your shoulders (again) and feeling your feet root into the earth. Take as big a stretch as you can, wiggle your fingers and toes if you can, and see how you feel in your body, how you dwell in your space, your soul dwelling in every cell. Listen.

At the first awareness that God and I are partners as we improvise our way forward together, I felt a pull in my heart, in my chest, as though I was being gently tugged forwards. My breath deepened, and I felt energized, with a small smile. This is what it felt like in my body to have agency, to have purpose, to have faith return with a theological (foot) stamp of authenticity. Partnering with God redirects my gaze from the unknowable heavens to the earth as I'm shown possibilities and have my senses sharpened. I witness the detail of life, and with a purposeful step I move. My physical being matters: I have skin in the game. The muscle memory of my faith in things hoped for will be nurtured and demonstrated through my movements, my breath, my words, and my awareness, whether these are instinctive, learned or consciously chosen.

PARTNERING WITH GOD

A body is never static. Even when seemingly motionless the heart beats, the blood pumps, the eyes blink, the cells attempt repair. A body is not a still point around which everything swirls, but part of a dynamic, interwoven web of life with a perpetual ebb and flow. It is ever-changing in its biology and experience, continually reconstructed through its engagement with the world. In this we are made in the image of God. We are creating stories that our bodies will tell through muscle, scar, wrinkle, with each bend and sweep, and in our final bodily breath. Neuroscience tells us that our body is making itself ready to move before our conscious brain is aware that we have made a decision: our gut reigns. Our bodies hold the wisdom that our brains dream of.

Our praying is then no longer disassociated but embodied, connecting us with what somatic therapist Peter Levine (*In an Unspoken Voice*) calls the “full presence of mind and body . . . the source of our own energy and enthusiasm.” We connect our sense of belonging to the Loving God to our felt senses, our conscious mind, and our instincts, which “house the simple but vital knowledge that ‘I am I,’ and ‘I am here.’” The depth of my breath, my posture, what I feel with the soles of my feet, all these will affect the way I dwell with God.

As we partner with God, we realize our interconnectedness through those we touch, see, hear, share grief and joy with, care for, hold, and bury. In *I am My Body*, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell writes that “those who fail to see their bodies fail to see God.” I prefer an invitation: those who are enabled to feel their bodies are enabled to sense God.

Prayer is now the name of a dynamic relationship, a walk in the park. I have faith in a process rather than an outcome. In prayer I state my intention to remember to notice, to remember that I am forever held by Love, to be purposeful and joyful. In prayer I move and live and have my being. The purpose of God is now neither to cause evil nor to prevent it. God dwells with us, lives through our lives with us, accompanies us, strengthens our inner safety, calms our fear, and empowers our resilience and grit. The answer to prayer is in the deep listening of God.

As we learn to bear the beams of love that William Blake speaks of, we will not avoid sorrow but will grow in spaciousness and flexibility, learning to sway back and forth like a tree in the inevitable wind rather than attempting to stand firm and static. With rooted feet we will trust in our ability to “engage our (holy) core,” transmuting the energy that would knock us down to lift us up again to our full height.

The only way that muscle becomes stronger is through damaging it and having it mend again. Suffering is part of life and certainly a part of love. I do not

IT WAS THEN THAT WE HOPPED

know if God can prevent suffering. I do know that we often can. Those who cause harm are broken. How have we allowed them to become disconnected and broken? How can they understand the harm they have caused and become whole again? How do we forgive, recognizing our own brokenness? And how will this feel in our bodies, for us and for them? How do we paint individual and collective scars with gold like a fleshly kintsugi pot?

God partners with us to feel everything that is felt, and is with us as we, like Jesus, seek to inflect our bodily pain into scarred resurrection. As Whitman writes so beautifully in the introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, through this embodied authenticity “your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.”

There is an energy, freedom, and playfulness to partnering with God as embodied beings. I heard a re-telling (attributed to comedian Tim Vine) of the *Footprints in the Sand* poem. As the familiar story goes, there are two sets of footprints in the sand symbolizing God walking with us. After a while there is only one set of footprints in the sand and when asked why, God says, “It was then that we hopped.”

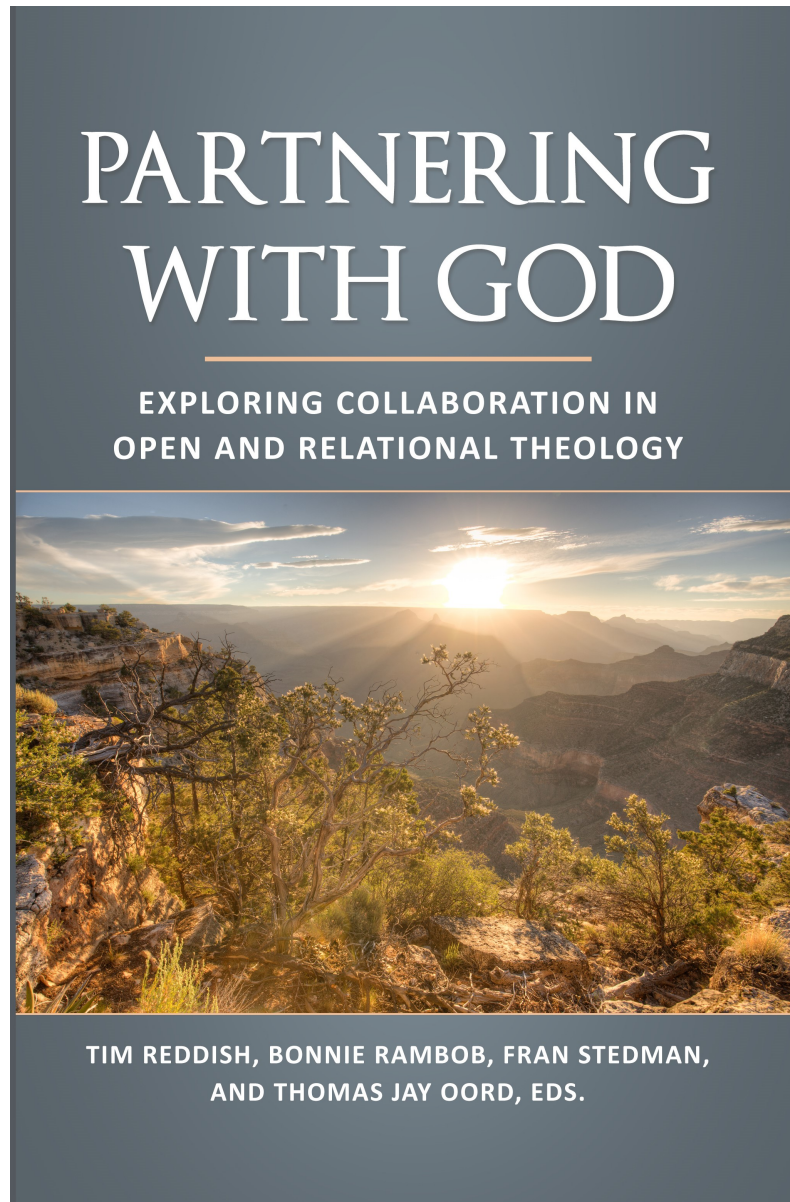
Try this. Be upright. Pull your shoulders up to your ears and then allow them to fall down your back. Relax your jaw. Consider the space around you on all sides. Breathe in a spacious invitation to know yourself as loved. Breathe out by dropping your shoulders (again) and feeling your feet root into the earth. Take as big a stretch as you can, wiggle your fingers and toes if you can, and see how you feel in your body, how you dwell in your space, your soul dwelling in every cell. Listen.

Questions: How do you feel in your body when you pray? What are your gestures and movements? Does prayer seem different when you change these? What stories are written on and through your body by partnering with God?

Emma Pavey works for the Susanna Wesley Foundation, based at the University of Roehampton, London, UK. She holds a PhD in Linguistics from the University of Sussex, UK, and a ThM in Theology from the Vancouver School of Theology, Canada. She enjoys making art and growing food, and can be found at artbetwixt.weebly.com and Instagram (@emmascribbles1).

Reproduced with permission.

Pavey, Emma. 2021. *It was then that we hopped*. In Tim Reddish, Bonnie Rambob, Fran Stedman and Thomas Jay Oord (eds) *Partnering with God: exploring collaboration in open and relational theology* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage), pp. 243-245.



Available now via [amazon](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09K7Q7Q7Q) and soon via other booksellers.