

# HONORING THE BODY

*Meditations  
on a Christian Practice*

*A Guide for Conversation,  
Learning, and Growth*

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Stephanie Paulsell, Lani Wright,  
and Dorothy C. Bass



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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

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FIRST EDITION

The Practices of Faith Series  
Dorothy C. Bass, Series Editor

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*Practicing Our Faith:  
A Way of Life for a Searching People*

Dorothy C. Bass

*Receiving the Day:  
Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*

Dorothy C. Bass

*Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice*

Stephanie Paulsell



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# INTRODUCTION

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**D**iscussing a book can be a stimulating and enlightening experience. In a good conversation, we delve more deeply into the material an author has presented. Just as important, we question it and wrestle with it. We apply it to our own situation, adding our own insights to those on the pages and discovering how the ideas we have encountered can make a difference in our lives.

The books in the Practices of Faith Series are especially suitable for group discussion. This is partly because of the nature of practices themselves. Practices are activities that are shared with other people. We do them with and for one another. Therefore, growing in our understanding of practices is something we must do with other people, too. Moreover, practices are not abstractions. Growing in our understanding of and participation in practices requires us to look hard at the everyday realities of our lives—not in general, but in the specific places where we live, work, worship, and play. It is wise to look at these realities with more than one pair of eyes.

This is surely so when it comes to the realities of embodied life. We need each other in order to honor our bodies and the bodies of others.

We need whole communities dedicated to shaping a way of life in which bodies are cherished and received as mysterious, holy gifts.

So conversation is crucial. But excellent conversation is not inevitable. Excellent conversation is more likely when a discussion is carefully tended, and this takes some planning. Excellent conversations are structured to allow space for attention to the particular contexts and thoughts of participants. They are attuned to the life situations and learning styles of those who will gather in search of deeper understanding and more authentic action. They need to be set within the framework of a certain period of time, a certain physical space, and a certain commitment to persevere when tough issues emerge. It is the task of a leader to attend to these needs.

This guide is for you, the leader, as you assume responsibility for hosting such conversations. We hope it will be helpful as you think through how specific occasions can help a specific group of people, gathering in a specific place, explore what steps would make it possible for them to deepen their attention to their bodies and the bodies of others through practices of faith. We do not intend to provide you with a set curriculum and detailed instructions, however. We hope instead to provide guidance that will help you structure conversations that are appropriate for your own group.

Part 1 offers an orientation to your role as a leader, together with some guidelines for structuring group exploration of how we might honor the body.

Part 2 provides an assortment of resources that can be used to help groups draw on their own experiences and explore their own context in connection with each chapter of *Honoring the Body*.

The Practices of Faith Series began with the book *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. It is no accident that *Practicing Our Faith* was written by a team of thirteen authors rather than by an individual. We found that talking together about Christian practices helped us see our way of life more clearly and enabled us to envi-



sion fresh possibilities for faithfulness more imaginatively. *Honoring the Body* grew from that book's chapter on the practice of honoring the body.

Now, it is a joy to invite you to discuss *Honoring the Body* in your own community. Through exploring the holy mystery of the body in your own context, through your own stories and experiences, you will extend the practice of honoring the body much further than one author could ever do alone. We hope that your discussion of this book will be full of discovery and the beginning of more profound attention to the sacredness of embodied life.

Stephanie Paulsell  
Lani Wright  
Dorothy C. Bass



## Part 1

# HOSTING THE CONVERSATION

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**H***onoring the Body* can provide a focus for reflection in a wide variety of contexts. Many church groups—including Bible study groups, sacramental preparation classes, youth groups, retreats, prayer groups, and study groups—will find it germane to their concerns. It can also be used in classrooms, within families, at the workplace, and in nonprofit organizations. Less formally, a group of friends could agree to read and discuss this book together.

Whatever the setting, it is important that the person or persons hosting the conversation honor the hopes and longings participants will bring to the disciplined consideration of how we might honor the body within our communities. This person is charged with shaping a community of learning—one that may last only a few weeks, to be sure, but one whose structure will be an important factor as participants seek to help one another learn and grow. After all, they will not merely study Christian practices during their time together, they will also engage in some of them in a preliminary way—saying yes to clearing time for reading and talking, discerning together what action will result from their learning, offering testimony about their convictions, forgiving one another for the misunderstandings that will surely arise at some point

along the way, and honoring one another's bodies by exchanging hugs or sharing a meal. These are small acts, but how the leader helps them take faithful form is a crucial matter.

## LEADING AS TEACHING

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When you take responsibility for leading a series of conversations or even a single session, you become, in effect, a teacher. Whether you are a solo teacher or part of a leadership team, it becomes your special charge to foster a situation in which those present can help each other grow in the practices of faith. This does not require that you be an “expert,” for your role is not primarily to impart information to the participants. *Honoring the Body* will provide much of the information your group needs—the biblical, historical, theological, and ethical material that will fuel your process of reflection. (You may want to find other resources as you and your group advance, but these are not essential as you begin.) Becoming a teacher-leader does require, however, that you give deliberate attention to the specific nature of your group and how it can best explore Christian practices.

As a teacher-leader, you will be guiding a specific group of people on a specific day for a specific period of time. This is the “live event” of teaching. In that live event, energy will surge and recede, momentum will develop and ebb, the flow of conversation will twist and turn, and any number of planned and unplanned things will happen.

A voyage at sea provides a good analogy. When a group of people embark on a journey together, someone comes with a map and an itinerary to navigate the way. This does not ensure that the travelers will reach the destination they originally set out for, but it might help them stay afloat and find a worthy port. In the course of the voyage, when all are out on the sea together, the group may find that the water is calm and the map is easy to apply; sailing is smooth, just as the navigator had hoped. At other times, however, the sea may turn out to be unexpectedly turbulent, and the original map may seem irrelevant.

Educational designs chart a teacher's hopes for what might happen in an educational event, enabling the leader to guide reflection when that is helpful and to adapt when it is not. They crystallize important issues for reflection, attend to the specific needs of the individuals who will participate, and draw together the resources and ideas that are most likely to fit the circumstances. They lend focus and intentionality to an exploration that could conceivably go in hundreds of directions, making it more likely that learners will be engaged and challenged.

Creating a good educational design is an artistic process. It is a process that is unique to each situation—indeed, just as the teacher, the participants, and the local culture are unique. A fruitful educational design will connect all of these elements—teacher, participants, and local culture—with the larger contexts discussed in *Honoring the Body*, including the Bible, history, and what is happening in the world beyond this place.

## PREPARING TO LEAD EDUCATIONAL EVENTS

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The following pages offer suggestions for charting a single group session. In most cases, such a session will be one in a series, so a few words about creating a series are important as well. Many different formats are possible—such as a weekly study group, an intensive process of reflection during a weekend retreat, a daylong workshop, or a yearlong series with meetings once a month. Any of these, or others, may suit your situation. Whatever format you choose, help the group be clear about what it promises to do over the term of the series as a whole—to read, for example, or to undertake certain activities, such as journaling, performing weekly service to others' bodies, or engaging in activities related to specific seasons.

These suggestions are offered to help you, the teacher-leader, as you prepare an educational design for any given session. Use it in conjunction with other sections of this guide. More important, rely on your

own common sense and educational experiences as you chart the educational course of your group.

**Develop a Clear Sense of What the Session Is About.** Carefully read each relevant chapter in *Honoring the Body*. How does the author define the problems people face regarding the human body, and what practices does she commend? What stories, quotations, and biblical material touched you in this chapter? How is honoring the body something that people do together, and not just something a person does alone?

**Wrestle with the Material in the Chapter.** Allow your reflection to go beyond the discussion in the book. What other examples of this practice occur to you? What other biblical stories are relevant? What questions do you have? Where do you resist entering this practice as the author has portrayed it? Do you need to do further reading or talk with someone who is familiar with particular realities of embodied life—a nurse, a midwife, a dancer, a yoga teacher, a doctor, a biologist, a hospice worker?

**Reflect on Your Personal and Institutional Involvement in This Practice.** Try to identify the ways in which you are already involved in activities described in the chapter, both positive and negative. Some may be hard to recognize because you take them for granted. What assumptions, prejudices, and passions do you bring? What yearning, pain, or experiences of new life do you bring? What responsibilities do you have regarding this practice within your own community, and what are your hopes and fears about exploring the practice in light of these? Do you have a special perspective that arises from your denominational or cultural identity?

**Think About the People with Whom You Will Be in Conversation.** Teaching works only when it is designed for the specific participants and all that they bring to the event. As you chart an educational

event, reflect on who is likely to be present. How do the communities and traditions they represent already engage in this practice? What life circumstances are you familiar with that may resonate with the chapter? Do you suspect that they have experienced pain in relation to the body? Joy? Confusion? What prejudices and passions do you anticipate they will bring? What gifts and wisdom? Where do you think they need to be challenged about their relationship to the human body? What styles of learning and group structures will be comfortable for them?

**Identify Your Hopes for the Session.** Try to articulate in your own mind what you hope for the people who will gather. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* had certain hopes when writing that book about the kinds of reflection the book might generate. These hopes now inform the Practices of Faith Series. As you identify your own hopes for the group you are leading, you might find it helpful to dialogue with the hopes of those authors. They hoped that readers of *Practicing Our Faith* would

- Come to a greater recognition of God’s action in the world, in our communities, and in our lives
- Become more aware of their yearning for a way of life that is whole and holy
- Understand more deeply the rich resources biblical faith and Christian tradition hold for shaping a way of life that can be lived with integrity today
- Learn about the various forms of practices developed by faithful people in history and around the world today
- Reflect critically on the deformations of practices that exist in church and society
- Grow in the skills and language that would help them engage in Christian practices with greater fluidity
- Discover fresh forms of the practices that are responsive to God’s activity in the changing circumstances of our world, communities, and lives

- Be challenged and motivated to engage in practices with greater intentionality, energy, reflectiveness, and commitment

**Consider a Variety of Ways of Exploring the Practices in Each Session.** Reflecting on Christian practices takes more than general conversation. It happens best as part of a process in which participants engage with this material in a variety of ways. Fruitful sessions will usually include activities, exercises, and questions that nurture various forms of personal and communal engagement. Following are some forms of engagement that can help your group explore the practice of honoring the body more fully:

- Explore participants' experiences by helping them identify formative memories, present realities, and hopes for the future
- Consider the emotions stirred by the practice—the group's yearning for it, joy in it, or worries about it, and the stories, dreams, and promises it evokes
- Think through the analysis set forth in *Honoring the Body*, making sure that its main points are understood but giving participants an opportunity to affirm, question, or challenge issues raised by the reading
- Explore the theological character of human embodiment in scripture and as the author presents it, and relate this to God's activity and our faithful living
- Reflect critically on how our attitudes toward the body can become deformed and harmful in our lives and in our society
- Take on a challenge to live more fully and faithfully, beginning perhaps with some change the group will decide to undertake together

**Create a Design.** Arranging elements like these into a design appropriate for a particular group is one of the chief challenges of the teacher-leader. Often, posing discussion questions seems to be the easiest way to proceed. But in most educational events—particularly those concerned



with Christian practices, other approaches must also be incorporated. Creative exercises, field trips, forms of artistic self-expression, rituals, songs, writing in a journal, interpreting a piece of art, reflecting in silence, sharing in groups of two or three—all these are activities that can enhance learning when used with good judgment.

Part 2 of this study guide offers a number of suggestions for nurturing reflection. Look through these as you prepare a session, but don't rely solely on them. Develop your own ideas, drawing on your hopes, the suggestions in this guide, and, especially, what you know about the specific character of the people you are leading and the places in which they live their lives.

There are no firm rules about how to design an educational event. Different groups are led by their own traditions or deep convictions to prefer one starting point over another. For example, in some churches it will be important to start with the Bible, whereas in other places starting with a contemporary ethical issue or an invitation to share a personal story would work better. Use your common sense, experience, and powers of observation as you determine what will be most fruitful in your situation.

A few more words of advice arise from our sense of the kind of education that nourishes growth in faithful practice. First, be alert to the *concrete* nature of practices, and actually do something together. Do a breath prayer, lead the group in stretching or tai chi, take a worshipful rest, or sing some stirring hymns of the season—all in ways that are instructed by what you are learning about Christian practices for honoring the body. Second, be alert to the challenges inherent in Christian practices. It is easy to get people talking about the body. However, we hope that discussing *Honoring the Body* will evoke much more than smiles of recognition. We hope to stir up some discomfort, too, by encouraging readers to think hard about what it would mean to acknowledge the sacredness of the body in everyday life. This requires facing the places where our society—including ourselves—dishonors the body. It also requires efforts to envision changes in our way of life in light of the biblical, theological, and ethical perspectives we encounter. Finally, be aware that the subject of honoring the body may be especially difficult for anyone in your group whose body has been violated and abused.

Prepare for disclosures and think in advance about how to honor the limits (or lack of limits) of your participants. Establish guidelines for discussion that will foster trust, such as asking the group to agree that no one will repeat stories shared within the group without the permission of the one who told the story. It would be good to have a list of resources in your community that give assistance to survivors of bodily abuse.

**Set Up the Physical Environment.** Though it is easy to overlook, this step is a crucial one. A conversation in an elementary grade classroom feels different from a conversation in the warmth of someone's home. Reflect with care about how the physical space available to your group can be arranged to enhance the educational climate. Following are suggestions:

- Sit in a circle on comfortable chairs (as opposed to sitting in rows with a leader in front) to open up dialogue and mutuality.
- Stimulate the imagination of the participants through the presence of sacred symbols. A candle, a chalice, or a small altar might serve your group in this way. Or consider setting out some symbols of what you will be discussing, such as a beautiful piece of clothing, or a massage kit, or a mirror.
- Do what you can to arrange for good lighting and comfortable room temperature and seating. People can converse more deeply when they are physically comfortable. Sometimes, having food and drink available helps, and sometimes it does not. Use your judgment.
- Prepare in advance all materials that will be needed, such as markers, drawing supplies, writing utensils, paper, or directions to a site.

**Create an Appropriate Emotional Environment.** The emotional climate of any educational setting is crucial to its success. But this is especially so when the topic at hand is the life of Christian faith. How can the interactions among the people who will gather reflect the

quality of Christian practices themselves? How will hospitality, forgiveness, testimony, healing, and other practices be embodied in this small community of learning?

An atmosphere of *mutuality* is important. When people are treated with dignity and respect, they participate more fully in transforming and challenging reflection. Remember, as teacher-leader, you need not have all the answers. Try to show respect for each member and instill in each a sense of mutual regard and gratitude for the variety of gifts and experiences he or she brings to the group.

An atmosphere of *trust* also needs to be fostered. Sharing thoughts and experiences, people expose vulnerabilities and become sensitive to how they will be received by others. Attentive listening, a supportive word, and a nonjudgmental spirit help create an atmosphere of deeper conversation and greater growth. In many groups, it may be helpful to make these expectations explicit and to agree not to repeat personal information shared in this setting.

*Directive but noncontrolling leadership* can also enhance your educational event. Conversation that meanders without any direction can be frustrating for everyone involved. One of the roles of the teacher-leader is to gauge the interests of the entire group and assist it in moving toward its goals. However, do not be overly directional or feel that you have failed if the group does not address all the issues you had charted. Stifling honest and lively engagement frustrates participants, too. What you are seeking is a delicate balance sustained by close attention to the needs and interests of your particular group.

*Honest questioning* is another aim. The questions you pose—including the ones you discover in this guide—should have the purpose of opening up dimensions of human experience and reflection. They should not be used to trick participants into saying something you want them to say, and they are not meant as quizzes to which people might give answers that are “correct” or “incorrect.” Ask questions to open, not close, discussion.

Encouraging *shared participation* is also important. Everyone has

been in groups in which one or two members dominate the conversation. We may also have been surprised on occasion by an unexpected insight from a person who usually remains silent. Try to find comfortable ways of making it possible for everyone to participate, even if this means asking a dominant person to give someone else a chance to speak. Let the group be silent for a spell when that is helpful, too. Show that you think it is all right if there are some minutes when no one speaks at all.

## ENCOURAGEMENT: BEYOND THE GUIDELINES

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Reflecting on the practices of faith as they take shape in our lives and communities can be a generative experience. When you lead others in doing this, you are initiating a process far richer and lengthier than the group meetings themselves. As we have noted, your sessions are occasions when people practice together. They are also times of planting, times when ideas are encountered that may lie dormant at first but later grow in unanticipated ways.

You cannot control the outcome of a single session or of the group's experience as a whole, nor should you hope to do so. But you are nonetheless offering a wonderful gift when you agree to serve as a host at the table of mutual learning. May you find that at this table you are a guest as well.

## Part 2

# QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES FOR EVERY CHAPTER

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In Part 2, we offer a sampling of material from which you might choose as you design educational events using *Honoring the Body*. This sampling is not a set of lesson plans but rather a collection of suggestions from which you should select whatever may address the concerns and stretch the thinking of your group. Feel free to ignore some and alter others, depending on the needs and rhythms of your specific group. You will also want to devise fresh questions and activities tailored specifically for your own situation and invite participants to contribute to this creative process as well. In your own educational design, weave these suggestions together with other resources, including the activities suggested in *Honoring the Body* and your own sense of the issues facing your particular group. In addition, be creative about drawing on material beyond the book and this guide. The references at the end of *Honoring the Body* cite numerous books and articles. You can also consult people in your community who possess life wisdom about the practices the book explores.

## CHAPTER 1: AWAKENING TO SACRED VULNERABILITY

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Describe your friendship with your body in a letter to your most trusted health care provider. Mail it to yourself in six months. Is this friendship a difficult one? Beautiful? What do you and your “friend” do together? What do you do to change your relationship? What is your favorite way to feed/nurture your friendship? How did you meet? How do you worship God together? Is this body a good friend or a traitor? Does the friendship feed you or drain you?

Have you ever wanted something so much you got sick over it? Has your flesh ever “fainted for God”?

Take off your shoes when you come into the room. Get barefoot.

Pass around a hand mirror. Ask each person to describe what he or she sees. Do you think more of the action of looking than of what you see? How did you feel as you did this in the presence of other people? Why? Introduce the idea that a notion of incarnation (God in the flesh) is central to how we view ourselves. How many of us, when we gaze into a mirror, see God’s image? Most of us instead see things about our bodies that we’d like to change.

How do we sometimes look to others to see who we are, rather than just look into mirrors?

“I want her bathing and her dressing, her eating and her drinking, to remind her that her body is a sacred gift” (page 3). How? Is there anything in your daily life that reminds you of this?

What are laws that dishonor the body? What are laws that might help communities honor the body?

Compose a mealtime prayer that focuses on how the food affects the body. Share it with God and your table companions at your next meal.

Look at a recent worship bulletin. Mark each place where the congregation is expected to sit, stand, kneel, eat. Mark anything that has to do with bodily sense (bow head, stretch hands, walk, wash, touch).

Plan a service of foot or hand washing or a service of anointing.

Think of all the times you have needed someone to care for your body, or times when you offered care to another.

Pass around the hand mirror again. This time, as each person looks into the mirror, say together, “Behold, the image of God!” Just as the body of Christ is composed of diverse bodies, so is the image of God diverse.

What would it be like if there were *no* mirrors in your house? What would that do for your image of yourself? Listen to the song by Sweet Honey in the Rock, “No Mirrors in My Nana’s House” (available on a CD packaged with the book *No Mirrors in My Nana’s House* or on their album *Still on the Journey*).

What does honoring our individual bodies have to do with honoring the body of Christ? The body of the earth?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

## CHAPTER 2: PONDERING THE MYSTERY OF THE BODY

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Do we inhabit a body, or is a body who we truly are? How did early Christians think about this issue in relation to Jesus' body (page 17).

Do *lectio divina* with Mark Doty's poem (pages 19–20). Read the poem slowly, reread it a second time, circling or underlining the words or phrases that seem to jump out at you or make you stop and think. Repeat those words or phrases until you feel ready to move on. Why do you feel drawn to these words or phrases?

How can we help those who have been abused maintain a sense of the body's integrity? How can we teach this to young people who are just coming into knowledge of their own bodies?

List the ingredients in the last meal you ate. Map where all the items in this meal came from. Alternatively, look at the labels on the clothing you're wearing. Where does it come from? Who makes it? Do you know anything about how well the bodies that made it are cared for?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



## CHAPTER 3: BATHING THE BODY

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Hold this session in a hot tub, a swimming pool, or a communal shower room at a gym. Or bring in soaps, shampoos, and lotions for everyone to smell.

Have you ever *not* had access to a tub? Did you miss it? Why or why not?

Listen to Holly Near's song about children playing in irrigation ditches, "Water Come Down" (available on her *Musical Highlights* CD). Play this song in the bathroom next time you take a shower.

Is daily bathing a waste of water in an environment short on water? What if you used a camp shower outside? What does this do for your attentiveness to your body when you bathe out of doors? Do you feel more vulnerable to other eyes? To wind and chill (especially if you run out of hot water before soap is out of your hair)? To open sky?

On page 47, the author suggests that the notion that cleanliness is next to godliness is not so much a call to divide the world into the clean and the unclean as it is an acknowledgment that when we care for our bodies we respond to God's desire to see all creation thrive. How does this distinction strike you?

Wash one another's hands or feet, saying: "God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple" (Psalm 47 [48]:10). When have you bathed another?

A daughter who was dismayed by an outbreak of acne was taught by her father to wash: "On the first splash, say, 'In the name of the Father,' on the second, 'in the name of the Son,' and on the third, 'in the name of the Holy Spirit.' Then look up into the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty" (page 48). Try washing your face like this. How does it make you feel?

Do you agree that bathing is one of the most fundamental ways we honor our bodies? Have you ever let bathing remind you that we are created in God's image? How might baptism be connected with daily bathing? How did Jesus honor bodies when he washed the feet of his friends (John 13)?

Explore different forms of baptism through reading or speaking with participants in a variety of Christian traditions.

Describe your own baptism. Do you have any memories of it?

How do you bathe? Do you wash hair first, and then the body, or vice versa? What do we teach children about the order of bathing? What about those who can't bathe themselves anymore? Do you think it removes dignity to bathe another? Why or why not?

Have you ever helped bathe a dead person? How does this ritual honor the body?

Write up a guided imagery exercise in which God washes you (as a child) in a big bathtub with bubbles. Describe it in detail—what the soap smells like, how deep and warm the water is. Continue with God helping you prepare for a party—fixing your hair, helping you dress. Describe how you feel about this party, how you will look, what people will say to you.

The next infant baptism you go to, write up what happened and give it as a gift to the child, for the years ahead.

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

## CHAPTER 4: CLOTHING THE BODY

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Adornment is a way to protect ourselves, as well as provide delight. Do you regularly notice what other people wear? When do you pay the most attention to the clothes you wear? What do you hope your clothing says about you and your commitments? Can adornment be overemphasized? When does it separate us from others? When does it unite? Has adornment ever helped you be more attentive to God's presence?

What marks us as children of God?

Can our clothing bear witness to our commitments and our truest selves, or are we acting like chameleons when we change clothes for every occasion? Can the daily clothing of our bodies illuminate our invisible baptismal garb?

Tell stories about your clothes. Who made them? Who gave them to you? What clothes do you have that you'd consider putting in a quilt when they wear out? Why?

"We wear our clothes as extensions of our bodies and as signs of what is happening invisibly inside of us" (page 61). Look down. What do your clothes say about you today? Sloppy? At ease? Not caring? Presenting your best? In pain?

Sometimes, people suffering from depression wear their clothes inside out or backwards, or don't bother to change or dress at all. We dress differently when we *disrespect* ourselves. What do you wear when you're depressed? Conversely, can clothing be an affirmation of ourselves?

Do you think school uniforms are a good idea? Why or why not?

Notice the story in this chapter about the friend who sent a dress "full of prayers" to someone who couldn't pray! Can clothes help us worship? How?

Think back to your last worship experience. Can your group name some of the meanings of the vestments or clothing that your clergy wore?

Do you have any tattoos or piercings (include ears!)? Or do you know someone who does? What do those marks signify? Can you relate to either Tom Beaudoin's or Joan Jacobs Brumberg's interpretation of this trend? Have you grown tired of any of your tattoos or piercings? What has changed in your attitude toward bodily adornment?

Are your habits of adornment a burden or a pleasure, a source of anxiety or confidence? Do your clothes free you to be yourself, or do they constrain you by forcing you into an identity that, however fashionable, you would not have chosen for yourself? Did the production of your adornments constrain the freedom of another? How do your answers to these questions guide your choices of what to buy and wear?

Call two or three friends and have a "fashion show" to decide which clothes to keep or discard. Then have a day or evening to clean or repair clothes together. Get the clothes ready for a giveaway. Share ideas and sewing or cleaning expertise as you get them ready. In a month or two, do the same thing at another friend's house.

What are you willing to wear to fit into your job? What are you *not* willing to wear?



Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

## CHAPTER 5: NOURISHING THE BODY

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The need for food is universal. Is food our friend or our enemy? Is it a gift to be received with thankfulness or a problem to be mastered? Respond to this statement: “We can become disordered in our eating . . . when we do not understand our hungers well enough to respond to them” (page 83).

What foods remind you of where you came from? For this session, have a “taste of,” in which each participant brings a favorite dish that will demonstrate to the group where he or she came from. How does each food, each dish, address the hungers listed on pages 77–78? How is it an “agent of destruction”?

Do a sort of *lectio divina* with eating. Notice how you eat. Chew fifty times on each bite. What do you notice? Chewing on the Word is a frequent image in Christian spiritual traditions for reading and studying the Bible.

Name the differences between breaking bread and fueling.

How do you react to the notion that the gap between the hungry and the sated is sinful (page 84)?

Fast for a day, drinking only water and fruit juices, and then break your fast together at a simple supper in the evening. Discuss the experience together.

What do you wish God would provide you with every morning?

Suppose you had a hoard of emergency supplies, and a neighbor who hadn’t stocked up came along needing water. What would you say?

When have you found God to be trustworthy in relation to food? When have you not?

We can usually share generously from hand to hand for a day, a week, a year. But when natural disaster strikes or war goes on and on, how do we keep living generously?

Learn together this table blessing from a Brazilian folk song:

God bless to us this bread—  
and give bread to all those who are hungry  
and hunger for justice to those who are fed.  
God bless to us this bread.

Try cooking out of what you have on hand—choosing menus accordingly, making substitutions if necessary. How long can you do this? A day? A week? A month?

What if you adopt, as Garret Keizer states, “two or three dietary restrictions prayerfully chosen, freely embraced and widely observed” (page 95)? Study the restriction. Will it dishonor any body?

Notice the list on page 95. Which of the items on this list can you embrace? How will you keep each other accountable?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

## CHAPTER 6: BLESSING OUR TABLE LIFE

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With your children or family members, make a list of spoken and sung blessings, and post it where you eat, as a reminder for the times when you flounder for a table grace.

Here's an entire study session designed to help your group connect how mealtime rituals and eating together can help foster healthy relationships (bring food for breakfast or lunch, depending on when you meet):

### **A. Eat up! (10 minutes)**

On a table, put out half the food you brought (you'll use the other half later in the session), and let all the participants serve themselves buffet-style. To make sure that everyone eats alone, and silently, meet each person at the end of the table, and instruct him or her to go silently to a corner of the room and sit at a separate table, or even go outside. Challenge the participants not to talk to one another.

### **B. One is the loneliest number (5 minutes)**

Gather the group members together again by ringing a bell or by touching them silently and signaling that they are to return to the group. Ask, *How was your meal? How did you feel about eating alone? In silence? Have you ever chosen to eat alone? Why might someone choose it?*

### **C. Known in the breaking of bread (10 minutes)**

Distribute Bibles. Ask, *What Bible stories can you name in which Jesus ate with people? Name as many as you can.* Note them on a chalkboard or on newsprint.

Read or tell (or have someone read or tell) Luke 24:13–35, the story of the Emmaus Road encounter. Discuss these questions: *Why didn't the people recognize Jesus until he broke the bread? Had he been obscuring his face in some way? Were they somehow blinded by grief? Did he do something at that particular moment that they recognized?*

Mention that meals were particularly important times of fellowship in the Middle East and in the early Christian communities. Many

of Jesus' most important times with friends and family took place at meals, and he chose a meal—what we now call the Last Supper—to institute what became the earliest ritual of the church: communion. We recreate those times whenever we partake in communion together.

**D. Mealtimes rituals (15 minutes)**

Invite young people to write down any mealtimes rituals observed in their homes. Encourage adults to discuss these rituals with young people over a meal. Compile a pamphlet describing these ideas (glean more from actual practices of families in your congregation) for table graces and family time around a meal. Distribute the pamphlet to families in your congregation, to expand their ideas of mealtimes practices.

Use one of the mealtimes graces you collected to ask God's blessing as you eat the rest of the food together.

How do you celebrate the feast of the sabbath?

How many acts of hospitality can you list from this section? Now pick one to do!

Who in your congregation is a broken body serving the church? How might other broken bodies teach what people do with brokenness in the church? Who might be being "wasted"?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.



## CHAPTER 7: EXERTING AND RESTING THE BODY

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Start a kid's running club. Give small tokens for the number of laps, or for the distance, they run. Run or walk with them to honor their effort!

When we live in the consciousness of the gift of our bodies, both exertion and rest can open a space for contemplation and praise of the mystery that called us into being. We challenge our bodily limits. We celebrate creation when we work on behalf of those who do not have enough work and those who are enslaved and allowed no rest. What are ways in which you already do these things?

Do the mirror exercise again, from Chapter 1. Do you notice anything different this time?

Name the athlete you most admire and why. If you have been an athlete, tell about your most memorable moment of calling your body to its utmost.

Think of the last time you performed a task with muscles unused to it. Bring to mind the soreness of it, the awareness of your body. Or, as a group, do a task together that's likely to make you sore! Walk together, hang drywall at a Habitat for Humanity house, clear land or space to build a labyrinth.

Some bodies (like those of athletes and dancers) move us to praise. But why not to despair, since not everyone can attain such excellence? What do you think of the statement on page 119: "Shouldn't the athletes' unattainable feats of bodily excellence depress us as well? Why do they instead lift us up?"

Muse on what it means to “return to your senses, to return to your body.” Is this not the true meaning of “sensual”?

Which of these things do you do already on your sabbath: eat delicious food, make love, wear beautiful clothes, experience comfort and pleasure? Describe the best sabbath you can imagine. What would you do? What would you wear? What would you eat? Whom would you do it with?

Jews practice blessing the ending of *Shabbat* by giving someone something sweet so that the taste of sabbath peace will linger on the tongue. Try offering this kind of blessing to someone.

Make a poster of Psalm 127:2 (“It is vain that you rise early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to his beloved.”) to hang on your door lintel. Illuminate (decorate) and laminate it.

Share remedies against insomnia. Share bedtime routines: your own, your kids’, and so forth. Write a short article for your church newsletter and solicit contributions for insomnia remedies. Demonstrate even in your newsletter your congregation’s attentiveness to the bodies of its members! Incorporate one new strategy at a time.

Repeat over and over: “May my [name a part of your body] be blessed for sleep.”

Find someone who has studied dream interpretation, and host a workshop for your congregation with this person as a resource.

On page 138, the author quotes a friend: “She believes that by teaching her daughters to sleep, she is teaching them to die.” What do you make of this statement?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

## CHAPTER 8: HONORING THE SEXUAL BODY

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Sexuality is a source of both pleasure and vulnerability. How does our society honor the sexual body? How do we degrade it? What rituals marking the physical development of young people honor the body by affirming its goodness? How do adolescents acquire the sense of self that's required to resist behaviors that degrade the body?

Have a poetry reading—bring in favorite love poems, or read together the Song of Solomon. Do *lectio divina* with it according to the instructions for reading Mark Doty's poem in Chapter 2.

“Christians have refused sexual relationships in order to preserve their freedom” (page 143). Have you ever done this? Or have you ever “withheld your body” from the state (refused military service, withheld taxes on funds you earned with your bodily labor) because you wanted to make your own choice about the use to which your “body” would be put?

Read the definition of eroticism on page 144: “The erotic is that which allows us a deep connection with others, giving joy, creative energy, and the capacity for feeling; that which empowers persons to change the world; that which is the deep yes within the self.” Does this definition work for you? Why or why not? How would you alter it?

How might we teach young people that refusing sexual relationships can also be a gesture toward freedom? Is it possible? Have you ever experienced eroticism this way? Or is this easy for someone to say only if he or she is sexually satisfied?

Write a letter to a young person about what you hope for his or her sexual relationships. Offer a class on sexuality in your church. Start with youngsters eight and up to start getting the message of blessed bodies early!

Notice the series of questions on page 152. Ask these questions of your group: “Where can a young boy like Mark Doty go as his sexual identity begins to take shape? Who will accompany him as he grows in self-knowledge? Who will welcome him as the gay man he is becoming and keep him from becoming one of the many gay adolescents who commit suicide?”

Which is harder to talk about in church, money or the human body?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.

## CHAPTER 9: HONORING THE SUFFERING BODY

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A pastor once created an Advent worship “center” that consisted of footprints on the floor of the sanctuary, all headed toward the manger. Those footprints honored all types of bodies in her congregation. There were sandal prints, boot prints, barefoot prints. There were squiggly lines that turned out to be the tire marks of a wheel chair. There were dog prints of the seeing eye dog that regularly comes along with his unseeing charge. There were the little round spots left by the cane of someone crippled. What do you do to honor the different kinds of bodies in your midst? Homosexual? Adolescent? Unwashed? Ill?

When have you been most intensely aware of your body? When have you had your language run dry when trying to describe a physical pain? Write a poem or draw a picture or sculpt an experience of physical pain.

On page 166, the author suggests a number of barriers that keep us from giving attention to someone who’s suffering. List the ones the author suggests. From your own experience, add to the list. How can we break over or through these barriers?

Does your congregation expose its youngsters to frail bodies? How do we insulate children from illness and death? Consider helping children visit those whose condition is frail. Practice with kids and dolls beforehand. Model the words to say.

How might we honor someone’s body, ill or not, by first asking if we may touch? The pastor at the bedside asks, “May I hold your hand?” before a prayer, so that she doesn’t inadvertently cause pain. What words are good to use when visiting someone who is ill?

When have you been aware of a healing touch? How have you honored another through touch?

Are some professionals in your community trained *not* to touch others, or to touch “antiseptically” (such as health care professionals)? How

does this heightened sensitivity to issues of litigation affect the way they feel about their jobs?

How do we teach with our bodies (crying, making facial expressions, punishing, grieving, laughing, disciplining, exercising)?

What ritual acts of touching teach us to touch in peace and love (washing feet, exchanging signs of peace, anointing, laying on of hands, commissioning, holding hands around a meal)? Which of these does your congregation practice regularly? Which would you like to try?

How do we teach children to “pass the peace”? How do we teach good touch and bad touch?

Imagine that you are restricted from touching someone you love. Can you “fast” from touching for a day? What happens? Could you do it for a week? A month?

Read about Father Damien, the priest who ministered to lepers on the island of Molokai in Hawaii.

Try therapeutic massage by washing feet or hands with massage.

If you have a “deacon’s closet” or a place where you collect food or clothing items to give away, consider including nice-smelling lotions, massage oil, or aromatherapy oils. Begin to see sensual things as therapy.

What would it mean to receive healing without experiencing a cure?

Consider if there are differences in the way we treat suffering bodies, depending on the following different circumstances:

- The sufferer is on the way to improvement
- The suffering is chronic
- A terminal outcome is expected
- The sufferer is in a coma

How might we “become more conscious of beginning with the body” (page 173)? Would some shy away from such intimacy?

When have you experienced the paradox of “whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:8–10).

The twelfth-century abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, came to understand that her body's vulnerability to illness also made her vulnerable to the Holy Spirit. She had what medieval medicine referred to as an "airy temperament," a bodily permeability that opened her both to recurring sickness and to God. If she had enjoyed more "security of the flesh," she believed, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would not have dwelt in her so strongly, opening her to visions of what she called "the Living Light." Two centuries later, the anchorite Julian of Norwich would pray to fall ill, so that she might have a deeper understanding of Christ's sufferings. *Have you ever had an experience in which illness led to heightened understanding? Have you ever experienced sickness bringing you to more empathy with others who are ill?*

In Psalm 73, the psalmist writes that those who have not experienced pain are prideful and prone to violence, gossip, and folly.

What issues (for example, environmental toxins) become important for people of faith to engage with when honoring the body is understood as a central Christian practice?

"When the community gathers for communion, a space opens up that can hold both suffering and healing, endings and beginnings, life and death and resurrection. A space opens up for hope" (pages 179–180). Is this your experience of communion?

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Use this space to record your own ideas for questions and activities.





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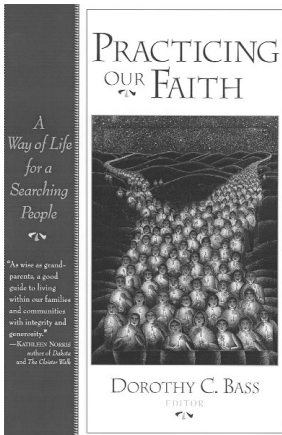
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The development of *Honoring the Body: A Guide for Conversation, Learning, and Growth* was supported by the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith, a project of Lilly Endowment Inc.





## Practicing Our Faith

*A Way of Life for a Searching People*

Dorothy C. Bass

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\$14.00 Paperback ISBN: 0787938831

\$8.00 Study Guide ISBN: 0787903655

*"As wise as grandparents, a good guide to living within our families and communities with integrity and generosity."*

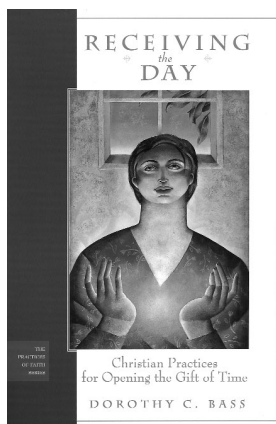
—Kathleen Norris, author of  
*Dakota* and *The Cloister Walk*

Many Christians are looking for ways to deepen their relationship with God by practicing their faith in everyday life. Some go on retreats but are often disappointed to find that the integrated life they experienced in a place apart is difficult to recreate in their day-to-day world. Many thoughtful, educated Christians search for spiritual guidance in Eastern religious traditions, unaware of the great riches within their own heritage. To all these seekers, *Practicing Our Faith* offers help that is rooted in Christian faith and tradition.

Refusing to leave our beliefs in the realm of theory, this book explores twelve central Christian practices—shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life. The contributors explore in depth each practice—such as keeping Sabbath, honoring the body, and forgiving one another—by placing it in its historical and biblical context, reexamining its relevance to our times, and showing how it gives depth and meaning to daily life. Shaped by the Christian community over the centuries yet richly grounded in the experiences of living communities today, these practices show us how Christian spiritual disciplines can become an integral part of how we live each day.

*Practicing Our Faith* also has a guide, *Practicing Our Faith: A Guide to Conversation, Learning, and Growth*. This guide helps leaders structure educational activities around practices described in the book, and in ways they can tailor to their own needs. The guide offers a straightforward orientation to the role of leader, guidelines for exploration of practices, ample resources, and real-life examples after which the leader can model his or her own teachings.

DOROTHY C. BASS is a noted church historian and the director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith.



## Receiving the Day

*Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*

Dorothy C. Bass

\$20.00 Hardcover ISBN: 0787942871

\$14.95 Paperback ISBN: 0787956473

\$7.95 Study Guide ISBN: 0787958786

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—WALTER WANGERIN JR., author, *The Book of God*

Our pace is accelerating. Our hours are unhinged from nature. Whether we as human beings will or can or should adapt to the emerging rhythms of time is an open question. Numerous helpful works by economists, sociologists, historians, and management consultants have analyzed the shape of time in our society. However, almost no attention has been given to its deepest and most urgent dimension of our problem with time: the spiritual dimension. How we live in time shapes the quality of our relationships with our innermost selves, with other people, with the natural world, and with God.

This book is also intended for readers whose initial interest is sheerly practical—readers pressed for time who may even think what they really need is a book on time management. *Receiving the Day* invites readers to embrace the temporal landmarks of our lives as opportunities for a deeper relationship with God and one another, and hopefully to see that our predicament with time is more complex, our yearning deeper, and the shape of time in our lives of greater importance than can be easily solved by a quick fix.

*Receiving the Day* also has an accompanying study guide, *Receiving the Day: A Guide for Conversation*. This guide is for busy people who see time as something to be managed, manipulated, and measured. Here comes a refreshing alternative vision of time as a gift waiting to be unwrapped.

DOROTHY C. BASS is a noted church historian and the director of the Valparaiso Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith.