

## **Introduction to Body Prayer**

Contents of this page:

- [Our bodies have a vocabulary](#)
- [Simple Breath Prayer](#)
- [A Simple Body Prayer](#)
- [A Body Blessing](#)

### *Our bodies have a vocabulary*

Body prayer is part of our spiritual heritage. There are many things we can do through our bodies that can enhance or restrict our prayers. For instance, simply sitting still is an art which helps us be attentive to God. Our bodies are part of our prayer lives.

Non-verbal body language greatly affects our prayers. Consider our hands. Look at them during prayer. We may be praying with our hands open or closed, relaxed or clenched fists. Our hand positions make an enormous difference in our prayers. A very simple body prayer can begin by relaxing our hands when we pray. Hold them open and gently raised.

Our bodies are physical and take space. They are even called "temples" of God in New Testament scriptures. Our bodies are gifts, made of real flesh and blood. Our bodies are necessary for prayer! Over the centuries, many well intentioned seekers have attempted to separate their prayers from their bodies. Increasing numbers of seekers find that separation of body and mind does not bring wholeness (Hebrew word: shalem).

Some people dislike their bodies. In North American culture, countless numbers of people are obsessed with their body image. Perpetual youth seems a goal for millions. When our hair is gray, we color it. Rather than fast for spiritual growth, we diet or suffer from bulimia in an attempt to achieve a cultural slender body image almost impossible for the majority population! Many overeat, over-smoke, or abuse alcohol and/or other chemical substances. Some may literally punish their bodies with an unhealthy exercise regime. Some change the size of their breasts, their noses, their chins and other body parts in their pursuit of beauty and happiness.

Countless numbers of people even fear their bodies and "secret feelings." For instance, many gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people have grown up in cultures which fear and misunderstand their human sexuality. Rather than accept their sexuality as God's very good gift, many will hide their feelings. Some have found their bodies a joy while others have experienced oppression and even persecution.

Yet all are sacred to God. We are all icons (Greek word for images) of God. The One who made "Adam and Eve" also made "Ruth and Naomi" and "David and Jonathan!"

Our bodies are precious gifts and a blessing from God. They can help us in our common spiritual orientation of seeking the Holy, the Sacred, the Soul.

Even when our bodies betray us through illness and physical suffering, they help us pray. As we age, our prayers can be enhanced through contemplative and centering prayers which help us simply rest/wait/be in the presence of God. Body prayer can be experienced through simply closing or opening our eyes! Slowing our breaths and listening to our heartbeat is something we can do with less than perfect bodies.

We are called in Judeo-Christian scriptures to love God, love our neighbors and love ourselves. We need to love our bodies as they are. We can begin reclaiming our belovedness in God through simple body prayer awareness.

There are many meaningful body positions and gestures which invite our minds and hearts to a prayerful presence. Some use a prayer rug or have a prayer corner in their home. Others make body prayer space by closing a door. Jesus called this a "prayer closet."

We can consciously pray with or without our shoes. Taking off our shoes symbolizes Holy Ground. Many Eastern cultures remove their shoes as part of a regular prayer practice. Taking off our shoes brings us into a profound spiritual humility. Our bodies are in a sacred place.

Many symbolic prayer gestures are universal body prayers. Standing, sitting, kneeling are all part of our prayer vocabulary. Making the sign of the cross is cherished by many religious traditions. We can cup our hands to be open to what God will gift us with. Some touch their hearts, bow low, use their arms in body prayer in the form of a chalice. Even slow walking can help us move our bodies in prayer.

Attention to our bodies is essential for our spiritual life. Our bodies help us be more available to God through openness, balance, alertness and interior stillness. Our bodies are a gift and vehicle of God. We are created with both spiritual and physical dimension.

Posture, breath, movement, gesture, clothing and diet can help us pray. They help us be wholly present as we approach God.

Jesus offers us a beautiful study in body prayer through the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He moved his body into spaces of solitude and in community. He intentionally fasted while at other times enjoyed food and drink. Fasting (going without food) is one of many ways to develop our interior center. Jesus prayed in many different body positions. The gospels record very little of what he said in prayer, but frequently mention his prayer habits, postures and practices. His body prayer vocabulary can be ours with a little practice.

Anything we do with our bodies is a prayer form when our goal is being available and open to God's presence.

Breath and body relaxation can help us pray.

### *Simple Breath Prayer*

Breath is a symbol of life and is fundamental to our physical being. It is real and powerful. Breathing cleanses, enlivens and calms us. The most fundamental breath prayer is simply slowing our breathing. Slowing our breath is one way to be more open to God. We can become very still through intentional breathing. "A still body invites a still, receptive mind!"

Breath prayer is very easy to do. Simply rest for a moment. Listen to your breathing. Notice the rise and fall of your chest. Perhaps you are nervous and breathing rapidly. Simply breathe normally for several minutes and accept your breathing for what it is.

Presence for God through breath prayer can be done in many ways. One of the simplest is to consciously alter our breathing for several breaths. Breathe a normal breath. Then slowly exhale, emptying your breath a bit more than usual. Feel the tension for a moment. Then slowly fill your lungs with air. Breathe in more than usual and feel the tension. Slowly exhale and then inhale again.

Now breathe in the love of God with your inhalation. Exhale slowly the peace (Hebrew word shalom) of God. Simply breathe in love, and breathe out peace. Now breathe normally. You have breathed a "breath prayer."

This simple centering kind of prayer can be prayed anywhere. We can center ourselves and be more aware of God's presence in the car, on the bus, in an elevator and while commuting to work.

Another breath prayer enjoyed by many over the centuries is the famous Jesus prayer. The breath prayer is very simple. The prayer is "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." One phrase is breathed in or out at a time. Breathe in "Lord Jesus Christ." Breathe out "Son of God." Breathe in "have mercy on me." Breathe out "a sinner." If the wording is offensive, change the words to a more comfortable prayer for you. We can only pray as we can. God will understand and hear your prayer.

#### *A Simple Body Prayer*

There are as many body prayer varieties as there are bodies! But one simple body prayer can be wonderful for those who are hesitant to try prayer of any kind.

Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Relax and prepare yourself with simply breathing the previous love and peace breath prayer. Then when you are ready, gently place your hands together in a universal prayer position. Raise your arms up towards the sky with all your spoken and unspoken questions and feelings. Slowly open your arms to the Presence and linger in that position. When you wish to move on, quietly hug yourself in a spirit of tenderness and loving-kindness. Quietly open your hands to be more available and attentive to the Presence of the Holy. Repeat these simple body movements for wordless prayer several times. Rest. Be. Wait. Enjoy your prayer. May you be "surprised by joy!"

#### *A Body Blessing*

The following body blessing is from Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom, by John O'Donohue.

"May your body be blessed. May you realize that your body is a faithful and beautiful friend of your soul. And may you be peaceful and joyful and recognize that your senses are sacred thresholds. May you realize holiness is mindful, gazing, feeling, hearing and touching. May your senses gather you and bring you home. May your sense always enable you to celebrate the universe and the mystery and possibilities in your presence here. May the Eros of the Earth bless you."

The author of this material is "Surprised by Joy" ([surprisedbyjoy@yahoo.com](mailto:surprisedbyjoy@yahoo.com)). "Surprised by Joy" is an ordained UFMCC Christian minister who discovered that God is wonder-full to be with. It is our hope and prayer at [soulfoodministry.org](http://soulfoodministry.org) that all visitors will experience the tenderloving-kindness of God and receive spiritual food for their journey.

