

Embracing the Body: Finding God in our Flesh and Bone

Available March 2015

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978-0-8308-3593-5

The Literal Embodiment of Spirituality

“If you asked me if I was always comfortable in my body (and required that I answer honestly), I would have to say, *No . . . no, I’m not*. I’m of the opinion that there isn’t anyone alive who is at home in his or her body 100 percent of the time, and I don’t believe that I formed this opinion just to justify my own neuroses.”

So begins Tara Owens in her new book, *Embracing the Body*. This book, praised by Lauren Winner as “beautiful, learned and wise,” invites readers to listen to thoughts about our bodies in a way that draws us into a closer relationship with God. Diving into the relationship between our physicality and spirituality, Owens walks readers through her own bond with her body and allows us to do the same.

Tackling false beliefs such as

- Your physical body doesn’t matter
- You are ugly
- How can you be loved?
- You cannot measure up

Owens brings readers into peace with our spirits, our bodies and with Christianity to make us more whole individuals, connecting with God on every possibly level.

Owens, a certified spiritual director and senior editor of *Conversations Journal*, also provides an entry point into the story of redemption that God tells in and through our bodies, illustrating that the tension we experience around sexuality and physicality are exactly where God’s grace is at work. As she writes in the introduction:

“It’s time to reach for the more that God has for us in relationship with him and with the stuff of our very selves. It’s time to risk taking God at his Word when he says we are redeemed, not in part but the whole.

“It’s time discover why he scooped earth to make man and breathed us into being with bone and blood. It’s time to listen to his murmurs along our muscles, his whispers in the wind and his song of delight in our sexuality.

“It’s time to reach for resurrection, here and now.”

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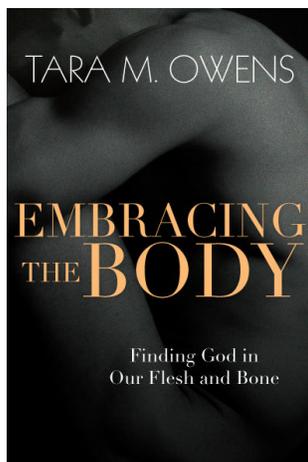
FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com

Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Adrianna Wright, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4096 or awright@ivpress.com

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"Tara Owens writes with warmth and wisdom on a subject that many Christians have at best distrusted or at worst discarded."

"A gift," "wise," "a rare find": praise for Tara Owen's *Embracing the Body*

"This book is beautiful, learned and wise. It will make you think, and it will make you want to say 'amen' – and, more important, it will enable you more fully to live as a body."

Lauren F. Winner, author of *Girl Meets God* and *Still*

"Wise, erudite, loving and tender, *Embracing the Body* will bring true healing and wholeness to our theology of our physical bodies as a church. Tara Owens is the perfect guide for this holy journey."

Sarah Bessey, author of *Jesus Feminist*

"Tara M. Owens is a rare find among contemporary writers. Part theologian, part mystic, her insight is bold and rich, and her writing is fine-tuned. So many of us struggle to make sense of how the spiritual and the physical interplay in our daily lives. Does God care about my body? Does the material world have value in my life of faith? I'm grateful for the ways Tara's words have revealed some of my own wounds and fears and helped me make space for new ways of encountering God, through the body, in the body. I will be meditating on this book for a long time to come. I hope the same for you."

Micha Boyett, author of *Found: A Story of Questions, Grace & Everyday Prayer*

"Tara Owens's *Embracing the Body* is a gift for anyone seeking to understand how the body – with all of its twitches, itches and bentness toward false unions – is not an enemy of spiritual formation but an amazing gift from God and the ground for personal incarnation – experiencing the reality of the apostle Paul's number one teaching point, Christ within. She makes great use of real-life stories and engaging theological reflection."

Gary W. Moon, executive director, Dallas Willard Center, Westmont College

"Truth. Beauty. Revelation. Those are just some of the words to describe *Embracing the Body* by Tara Owens. It is a rare and insightful book written by a poet who longs to love Jesus with every fiber of her being and invites others to do the same."

Stasi Eldredge, coauthor of *Captivating*

"Tara Owens writes with warmth and wisdom on a subject that many Christians have at best distrusted or at worst discarded – our bodies as carriers and avenues of spiritual growth and connection with God. We claim to be people of the incarnation but often live as if only our souls mattered and our bodies did not. Owens calls us back to our whole selves – body

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and soul—and in doing so helps us reconnect with incarnational living both through the central historical event that kicked off Christian movement and our ongoing task of being the disciples of Jesus cloaked in flesh and blood.”

Brent Bill, author of *Awaken Your Senses* and *Finding God in the Verbs*

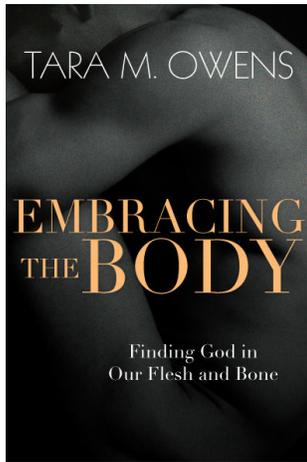
“Tara Owens offers us a wise and tender exploration of the gifts our bodies offer to us as portals into God’s grace and wisdom. This book is much needed and should be required reading in every church’s adult faith formation program. Tara doesn’t just invite us to read, but to ponder, to engage and to practice so that we might claim the truth of the incarnation in new ways.”

Christine Valters Paintner, abbeyofthearts.com, author of *The Artist’s Rule*

“God has created us to be connected to our bodies, and life has a way of disconnecting us. Tara has begun a conversation that will be helpful to many who feel alienated or even in conflict with their own bodies.”

Dr. Henry Cloud, author of *Boundaries* and *Never Go Back*

“A wise and tender exploration of the gifts our bodies offer to us as portals into God’s grace and wisdom.”



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Watch the Signs

In his pioneering teachings titled *The Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II wrote that “the body, in fact, and only the body is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.” It is only in our bodies that we experience God at all; without them, we cease to exist. When we focus only on our “spiritual lives” – the interior realm of thought and feeling – we lack a foundational understanding and attentiveness to that which is at the center of our very lives, the only vehicle through which God reaches us and we reach others: our incarnate, bound-in-time, utterly beloved bodies.

When we try to split ourselves in two, to separate our bodies from our souls, we do violence and make difficult the healing of our bodies. This is something that modern medicine is only recently beginning to realize, as more and more hospitals encourage practices of prayer, meditations and silence as ways of facilitating physical healing. Hospitals have historically been places where worship or faith have no place, especially in the lives of the doctors bringing the healing work, and the split between body and soul is rigid, painful. So often, doctors and nurses burn out because they are not allowed to experience themselves as fully human – body and soul – even as they try to bring holistic healing to those they tend.

So, too, do we feel this fissure in the church. From the opposite side, the church insists through silence that we focus on the soul instead of the body, as if the two could be fully separated. In the church, we insist that the body is somehow separate, not something to be brought into the life of the community. In so doing we watch clergy and those in ministry run ragged with fatigue, living unhealthy lifestyles that lead to the slew of moral and ethical failures that grab headlines today. Whether it’s the body without soul (hospital) or soul without body (the modern church), we’re living in part, not in full, and at the depths of us, we know it.

Sadly, we have lived with this schizophrenia of self for a long time. Bound by our bodies but told to ignore or castigate them, the lives of the faithful – mine included – have been marked by a set of false dichotomies that categorize actions into “sacred” or “secular,” “spiritual” or “physical,” as if the two are not ineluctably intertwined. We live our bodily lives – eating, sleeping, touching, weeping – with a whispering sense that we are experiencing the sacred in these mundane moments, in the taste of soup on our tongue or the tender touch of a friend in comfort. We intuitively feel that the aches in our joints are communicating something larger of God’s presence to us, but we are told (explicitly and implicitly) to ignore these murmurs in favor of something more spiritual, more holy.

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Tara M. Owens (MTS, Tyndale Seminary) is a Certified Spiritual Director and the senior editor for *Conversations Journal*, a forum for authentic spiritual transformation. Owens also provides spiritual direction through her ministry Anam Cara and is a part-time instructor for the Benedictine Spiritual Formation Program at Benet Hill Monastery, both based in Colorado Springs.

In the midst of this brokenness, the exile from our bodies in which we find ourselves, Isaiah stands in bold proclamation:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives,
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.
They shall rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations. (Isaiah 61:1-4)

God is about the work of redemption, he proclaims. He is about binding up our broken pieces—every piece reclaimed from our hearts and souls and minds all the way through our maligned and misappropriated bodies. God is about the work of liberation from the yokes of oppression, and it is in our very bodies that we are to be free, whole, restored. These bodies of ours have been treated as ruined, lost, devastated and unable to be redeemed. And yet the Lord of all creation is coming for them, indeed, has given to each of us the work of rebuilding these ancient ruins, reclaiming the very fortress of our selves, our blood and bones and skin and muscle, from the devastations of the fall and of our mishandled attempts at holiness. God is about this work, and we are called to see it and to receive it.

— Taken from chapter three, "Broken Body, Broken Church"