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How do I love my body?

by Jenna Pulkowski

I hate my body.

I know I’m supposed to start this off with talking about how I’ve learned to love my body, and you can too. I know it’s not cool to admit that I hate my body. I also understand that hating my body accomplishes nothing for no one.

Still, I scroll right by any body-positive Instagram selfies and “ignore the haters, love your rolls” posts. I avoid being in pictures, especially full-length pictures and close-ups. I have hundreds of pictures of my dog, but only a couple dozen of myself. (To be fair—my dog is adorable.)

At 13, I was diagnosed with Hashimoto’s thyroiditis and Graves’ disease. These are two autoimmune conditions that impact the thyroid. For almost my whole life, I have been exhausted. I’ve had frequent stomach issues, joint pain and brain fog.

I recall my mother once saying that she can’t remember a time when I was a child where I woke up and said I felt good. Even as a teenager playing competitive sports year-round, with a full academic load, I never felt good. Never felt strong. Never felt healthy.

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You know that game we play when we're kids, where we ask each other if you could change one thing about yourself, what it would be? The world has, in fact, taught many of us to want to be skinnier, prettier, have larger breasts or smaller noses. But I just want, desperately, to have a healthy, well-functioning body.

I want to not have pain. I want to wake up feeling refreshed and remember daily tasks without having to write them down so I don't forget. I want to go for long walks or take up an active sport without feeling like I have to take a three-hour nap afterward.

So much of my hatred for my body is tied up in shame. Shame for not being as tiny as my mom or my sister. Shame for not always being able to find clothes that fit. Shame for having a chronic illness. Shame for not being one of those inspiring body-positive people on Instagram.

That last one recently came up in conversation with one of my best friends. I was trying to find some cute clothes for a family trip and nothing was working. Things that looked adorable on the hanger were not fitting me. They were too tight in some spots and loose in others. Bottoms wouldn't zip up at all even though the labels said they were my usual size.

Shopping usually reduces me to despair, so I texted my friend as a way to keep my spirits up. I texted her about how much I hate my body and she responded that she wished she could forget her body. All I could say was, "I know. There are so many people who write about learning to love their bodies, and I just want to take those words and throw them in a crevasse."

Being told I shouldn't let the world make me hate my body doesn't inspire me to love my body. Instead, it makes me angry and bitter, obstinate and oppositional. I have great coping mechanisms, don't I? Oh, well.

And yet, my chronic autoimmune condition, invisible to most people but a daily part of my life, has given me insights about my body and my relationship to the world around me.

It led me to a healing diet where the focus is on eating foods to nourish my body, not to punish it. This taught me to remove morality from food. I'm not "having a cheat day" or "being naughty" if I choose to eat a piece of cake. Now, I know I probably won't feel good after eating that cake, so I often choose not to eat it. But that doesn't mean I'm "being good." Instead, I am empowered to make the best choice for myself, to choose what will nourish me and help me feel good.

Pursuing a healing diet has connected me with some amazing people who work to help others find health and healing. Even though we've never met in person, they recognize me and my words on social media. I am known by others in a different, encouraging way.

All of this has helped me to know myself better – to trust myself. I can trust that I am not a hypochondriac, that the symptoms I experience, elusive though they may be, are not imagined. I can trust that I know my body -- a body that takes up space! Human beings exist in the physical world -- we are going to take up space! And I can trust that it's perfectly okay if my body takes up a little more of that space than my sister's body does.

Because of my autoimmune condition, I get to share my faith with people online who are unlikely to be a part of a church or faith community. This is the deepest joy of my life. It's a reminder that I carry within me a wonderful capacity to bear witness to God and God's love for creation. The opportunity for evangelism that my condition has brought me has been the most surprising for me.

I still sometimes feel hate for my body. At the end of the day, I can't change the body I have. But hatred isn't the only emotion I have toward this body God gave me.

It's God's creation, and God called all creation good. I may want my body to be able to do more, but I can still do a lot with it. I can surround myself with people who make me feel good about myself. It isn't my job to be body-positive or inspirational or live with my autoimmune condition the "right" way.

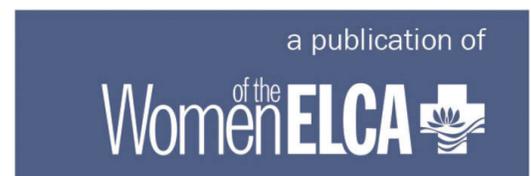
To those who do feel called to that kind of work—thank you. It is important. Everything I've expressed here is mine and no one else's. I really am grateful you're in the world doing this work! But please forgive me when I unfollow you or scroll right on past. I've got cute dogs to look at.

Discussion questions:

1. No matter what our bodies are like, most of us have problems with our own bodies. What is something that helps you move toward self-compassion and away from self-hatred?
2. If you have a chronic illness or condition, has it changed how you interact with the world, for good or for ill? How? If you do not have such a condition, consider what it might be like. How would it affect the way you interact with others if you found it difficult to do many of the things you do?
3. Who are the people you turn to when you're at your lowest? What is it about them that you trust and turn to for care and compassion?

Closing prayer:

God of all bodies, we know that hate is the opposite of what you want for us. We know that you so deeply desire a relationship with us that you have gone to extraordinary lengths to be with us. You have given us your beloved Son, your holy ever-present Spirit, your beloved church. But the teachings of the world are strong and corrosive. The evil lies we are told and we believe destroy





us from within. Help each of us to remember that no matter what we think about our bodies, and our value within those bodies, you love us. You treasure us in mind, spirit, and body. Help us in the midst of our struggles with, and even hatred for, our bodies. Let your light pour through the cracks in our brokenness and shine into the depths of our despair and pain. Holy healer, we pray in your name, Amen.

Jenna lives in Chicago with her husband and two fur babies. Her current ministry position is as the chaplain in a long-term care and assisted living community, where she serves some of the most amazing residents in the world.



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What the Bible says about body image

by Jenna Pulkowski

I have long struggled with my relationship with my body. It's a relationship that on the best days is positive, on most days is apathetic and on the worst days is downright hateful.

Scripture has a lot to say about bodies. From Genesis to Revelation, law and Gospel, prophets to Jesus, the message can be a bit mixed. Sometimes scripture lifts up our physical selves. The Torah has a lot to say about how we are meant to treat people and meet their physical needs. Sometimes scripture emphasizes how our bodies are less important than our souls.

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes that we ought to live by the Spirit and put the desires of the body to death (5:16). He goes on to say that the body — “the works of the flesh” — are things like anger, jealousy, impurity, and the like. In contrast, when we live by the Spirit, we will instead show the fruits of the Spirit — kindness, compassion, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The body leads to death, and the Spirit leads to life.

However, in Psalm 139, David emphasizes the wonderful way in which God is the creator of our whole selves, the One who knit us together in the womb, who “formed our inward parts.” And in 1 Corinthians, Paul argues that because our bodies are a “Temple of the Lord God,” what we do with our bodies matters!

So, when scripture sends mixed messages, I turn to the gospel. One of my professors would say to us, the gospel is our norming norm. It's what provides the lens through which we look at the rest of scripture, and how we interpret it. God tells us about our bodies in the person of Jesus Christ about how God values our physical bodies.

Through the four gospels, we learn about the paradox that is the Incarnation. As ELCA Lutherans we affirm that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. This is a physical and metaphysical impossibility to us mere human beings: an unsolvable mystery.





We affirm that Jesus was born of Mary, going from conception to birth just as any other human being is born. Jesus' life included things we all experience: sleep, hunger, laughter, crying, eating and drinking, and what comes after eating. His body had the same needs all of ours do.

What a remarkable method for God to choose to show us the way. Bodies are fallible and easily hurt, broken and destroyed. Why would God choose such a fragile path, and allow for such a humiliating and excruciating death?

I don't claim to understand God's ways. I do the best I can with the background information found in scripture, Christianity's traditions, our world today and my own life experiences to help me make sense of it all. That's part of my job as a pastor and preacher.

I believe that God's taking on a human body in the form of Jesus Christ, God's own beloved child, sends a resounding, world-changing message: that God deeply and beautifully values our humanity and our physical bodies. God didn't have to become human. God didn't have to allow the Roman leaders and the religious leaders to arrest him, no matter how much he alarmed the mighty among them. Yet God chose to be born to human parents, at least one of whom was quite young, and both of whom were quite poor. God chose to live and die as a human being.

The body matters. Why else would Jesus have chosen to return people to their communities, to their loved ones, if our ordinary human lives didn't matter? Why else would Jesus have defeated death and the grave by coming back to life? He had his wounds to show his disciples that he was the person they knew. He wasn't a ghost or a figment of their collective imagination. He had truly, physically returned to them. He ate a lot of meals to prove this, using his physical self to bear witness to who he really was and is—fully human and fully divine.

This, more than anything about my body as a temple of the Lord or the emphasis on my soul's eternal nature, helps me to be grateful for my body. Studying how Jesus lived, died and resurrected as a human being shows me that God values my physical self. That my body, as imperfect as it is, matters.

Discussion questions:

1. How has scripture impacted your body image? If that image has been negative, how might God be calling you to reframe it?
2. Have you ever considered why God chose to become a human being, and not only to die but to be resurrected? Does how you think of this affect how you view your and others' bodies?
3. What are positive scripture passages that can encourage you when you're struggling with your body image?

Closing prayer:

Incarnate God, you have emphatically shown us how deeply you value us and our physical selves. Thank you for your witness to the importance of each of us as an entire person, and for sending us other witnesses who fight against the dangerous separation of body and soul. Help each of us as we work to be bearers of this beautiful, good news. Reassure us and remind us whenever we doubt and forget that we have been made in your holy image and that nothing the world says about our bodies determining our value and worth actually determines anything. Our value is in being your beloved children. Creator and Sustainer, we pray, Amen.

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