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The Preacher's Body

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VOLUME XXVII NUMBER 3 NEW SERIES 2006

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The Preacher's Body

by JANA L. CHILDERS

Dr. Jana L. Childers is Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of Homiletics and Speech Communication at San Francisco Theological Seminary. She is the author of Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre and editor of Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process and Purpose of Preaching. She delivered this lecture as one of the biennial Donald Macleod Preaching Lectures on October 3, 2006, in the Mackay Campus Center.

When people come to a lecture, 55 percent of the message they receive comes from the speaker's body and face. They receive 38 percent of the message from the tone of voice, and they receive a mere 7 percent of the message from the words. These are the astonishing findings of a 1985 study of face-to-face communication conducted by Albert Mehrabian of Stanford University.

For years I have heard Bill Beeners and Chuck Bartow, both professors of speech communication here, mystify and astound students with these numbers. Because I very much enjoy mystifying and astounding students myself, as soon as I began teaching I began to cite them, too. (I should hasten to say that I had read Mehrabian's *Silent Messages* and was familiar with at least some of the literature about nonverbal communication.) However, I did not understand how it could possibly be true that the body conveys 55 percent of all the messages presented in face-to-face communication. And when students asked me to interpret the numbers, all I could do was assure them in the most enthusiastic of tones that it was a reputable study, its results widely affirmed by the experts in the field. They were, as you might imagine, unimpressed.

So, as I often did in those golden days in which I learned more from teaching in classroom situations with Bartow than I ever did in any doctoral seminar, I asked him. The formula, he explained, does not tell you *which* aspect of communication is most valued. And that's right. Mehrabian tells us nothing about how the various elements of communication are prioritized by our culture, or valued, or even, perhaps, noticed. No wonder the numbers leave us gobsmacked and bumfoozled. What could be more surprising than a distinguished researcher's claim that the body is the largest contributor to face-to-face communication? Especially those of us who are used to our battleship-prow pulpits and our Genevan gowns (with their football player shoulders and their long "neutralizing" black folds). How could we not be

amazed to hear that the body is so significant, so strategically important, so intelligible and, perhaps, intelligent?

If you want to astonish homiletics students, therefore, I recommend going that extra step. Do not stop with Mehrabian's discovery that much of what the receiver receives in face-to-face communication depends on the body. Go right on to the claim by Leland Roloff (professor emeritus of performance studies at Northwestern University's School of Communication) that much of what the sender sends depends on the body. Go right on to the thought that the body is intelligent—that much of the perceiving, conceiving, and composing that make the message depends on the body. Think about the observation that "expression deepens impression," that preachers do not really know a text until they have used their body to explore it. Let your basic introductory classroom full of new preachers know that some of us think that the body contributes a massive amount of data to the creation of a sermon, and see what their faces say back to you.

According to Roloff's studies, the body thinks, and the body knows. The body has its own ways of cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit. My point is that preaching in the age of the Holy Spirit requires a body. I believe that we may, in some sense, be living in the age of the Holy Spirit, and that might actually be more of a fit—more of a good thing—for preachers in the Reformed tradition than at first seems to be the case. In a previous lecture, I suggested that the unconscious is a realm where the Holy Spirit especially likes to traffic and that knowing something about how other artists work with this realm could be useful to preachers in their own attempts to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. I would like to emphasize now that I believe the body has a unique and surprisingly important role to play in the preacher's creative process and that the Holy Spirit has a unique and important way of working with preachers through, of all things, their bodies.

I am talking about what homiletics call "the preacher's use of self." It is a field not fully explored. Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the topic is found in Robert C. Dykstra's book *Discovering a Sermon*. He makes a case for, and offers a striking description of, the preacher "playing with the stranger within. . . . Of [coming to] expect the unexpected of themselves."¹ Dykstra and one or two contemporary theorists, such as Richard Thulin, have focused helpfully on the use of the preacher's inner resources. But it would be hard to say that the preacher's use of self is a popular topic in the Academy of Homiletics' annual papers.

¹ Robert C. Dykstra, *Discovering a Sermon* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 78.

Besides the obvious reason for general homiletical reluctance to pursue such lines of inquiry, there is at least one major theological conundrum involved. Even those of us who are most enthusiastic about incarnational preaching would have to admit that preaching's power derives from the preacher's self as well as *not* from the preacher's self. The difficulty is putting those two truths into one sentence.

One side of the paradox was articulated in the last Macleod lectures by Richard Lischer. I cannot imagine anyone putting it more clearly or persuasively than Dr. Lischer did. "The preacher makes adjustments," he said, "in matters of diction, figures of speech and manner of speech, *not* on the basis of his or her personality or mood, but in deference to the nature of the text and the demands of the occasion. Even the most introverted cleric will become, must become, a trumpet on Easter Sunday. The kerygma does not emerge from anything deep in ourselves."² So true. So satisfyingly expressed. I would rather do just about anything than disagree with Rick Lischer.

But I am bound to say that that is only half the story. The other half is that the kerygma that does not emerge from deep within ourselves is dead and useless. We preachers can give back our ordination papers and go do something else. Notice that I did not say that the kerygma *in some sense* would be dead. I said it would be dead. I suppose I could say "in some sense." There no doubt *is* some sense in which it is true that the gospel could go forward without human voices and bodies. But it is such a remote and frankly ridiculous possibility that I am going to forego my favorite fig leaf. For the sake of the point and perhaps to be a little provocative here I am just going to say neither statement is true. It is not true, as Lischer said, that the kerygma does not emerge from deep within ourselves and it is not true that it does emerge from deep within ourselves.

If I had to try to put this positively and somewhat more carefully, I would say something like, "For the gospel to have life in any particular time and place, the kerygma must emerge from deep within the preacher." That's about the best I can do in forcing myself to be positive and conservative. What I really want to say, and what I hope to show in the following discussion about the body, is that *without bodies, preaching is not worth talking about*.

More than this, without the Holy Spirit working through the bodies of faithful preachers, there would be no Princeton Seminary, or Miller Chapel, or Macleod lectures. On this, Lischer and I agree completely. It is the same truth that Martin Luther expressed 480 years ago: "Unless spiritual knowl-

² Richard Lischer, *End of Words* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 77.

edge and the Spirit Himself speak through the preachers . . . the final result will be that everyone preaches his own whims and instead of the Gospel and its exposition we shall again have sermons on blue ducks.”³

I want to first discuss “the preacher’s use of self” and how that relates to the word “body.” Then I will review general observations about the body’s role in spirituality and preaching. And finally I will discuss three different approaches to understanding the work of the Holy Spirit and suggest some “body” implications of each.

DEFINITIONS OF “BODY”

What we mean when we say “body” depends very much on who we are and to whom we are talking. Alfred North Whitehead, in speaking to generations of teachers, said, “I lay it down as an educational axiom that in teaching you will come to grief as soon as you forget that your pupils have bodies.”⁴ Martha Graham often told her dance company, “The body is a sacred garment.” And Gloria Steinem recently declared to Oprah, “Each individual woman’s body demands to be accepted on its own terms.”⁵ When twenty-first century homileticians say the word, one might hear overtones of James Nelson, echoes of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or undercurrents of Mary Daly. When preachers—the ones who are interested in talking about the use of self in preaching—say it, one might catch a whiff of Constantine Stanislavski, or Julia Cameron, or Pamela Moeller. The term is put to many uses. My purpose here is not to define it too precisely but to narrow the range of meanings to the part of the spectrum I think is most helpful for preachers.

For our purposes then, the word “body” might be said to mean “personal being” or “the space of consciousness.” That is, it may be taken to refer to the physical space, spiritual apparatus, and biochemistry that house and host one human being’s consciousness or one’s personal being. So Alla Bozarth-Campbell describes the way that the interpretive artist (or “reader”) processes the literature (what she calls “the poem” and what we call the sermon) with the body, saying, “the reader takes the reality of the poem into her or his own body, where it is dispersed and assimilated. Image and word become appre-

³ Freidrich Heiler, ed., *Deutsche Messe, oder, Feier des Herrenmahls: nach altkirchlicher Ordnung* (München: J.&S. Federmann, 1948).

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 91.

⁵ Gloria Steinem, *O Magazine*, May 2004.

hended as one; revelation and resonance occur simultaneously as poetic integration fills the space of consciousness—the human body.”⁶

Bozarth-Campbell, an oral interpretation theorist, is also one of the “Bloody Seven” ordained to the Episcopal priesthood in the 1970s. She is building on an understanding of the word shaped not just by the field of oral interpretation but by feminists and first-wave feminist theologians. In these arenas, the word “body” was understood similarly—as the venue where aspects of experience are integrated. In other words, feminists and artists who were interested in overcoming the tiresomely famous body/soul or feeling/thought philosophical schism provided this kind of language as a corrective. Roloff calls this integrative function of the body, “somatic thinking.” “Somatic thinking,” he says, “transmutes intelligent, critical responses . . . into intuitive and ‘knowing’ responses of all the body: the voice, the musculature, the senses.”⁷ So first of all, the body is a venue of integration.

Many feminists and artists also understand the body to be an instrument of knowing. Beverly Wildung Harrison, for example, says of the body’s role in spiritual development, “Ultimately all our knowledge, including our moral knowledge, is body-mediated knowledge. All knowledge is rooted in our sensuality. . . . If we are not perceptive in discerning our feelings, or if we do not know what we feel, we cannot be effective moral agents. . . . Failure to live deeply in ‘our bodies, ourselves’ destroys the possibility of moral relations between us.”⁸

Finally, feminists and artists view the body as the locus of the “voice”—of the artist’s, or woman’s, or woman artist’s identity. For feminists, the problem of uncovering this aspect of the body’s experience—the voice—is especially interesting. Nancy Mairs describes her struggles with “writing the body,” that is, with expressing her unique experience as an embodied woman in the world in language. If language (in all its “phallogocentricity”) represses “the feminine,” and writing requires language, what, she asks, is a feminist writer to do? How is a woman’s “speaking the body” different from a man’s? She describes her struggle with striking honesty.

While I was stumbling around in my head like this, straining to catch faint echoes of “difference” yet privately convinced that I’d be too

⁶ Alla Bozarth-Campbell, *The Word’s Body: An Incarnational Aesthetic of Interpretation* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 15.

⁷ Leland H. Roloff, *The Perception and Evocation of Literature* (Glen View: Scott Foresman, 1973), 3.

⁸ Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 13.

stupid to recognize it even if it blatted like a tuba straight into my ear, I kept myself busy at whatever writing tasks came my way. More and more often, what I wrote had bodies in it—my own body, sometimes crippled and sometimes not (the way it continues to occupy my dreams), and the bodies of others, Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker and Chinese women with bound feet—and after a while it came to me that I was writing *about* bodies because a body was writing: me. Incorporation is an act. The body writing: writing the body. I couldn't *think* such a thing, I could only *do* it. After that I stopped worrying about whether the feminine can or cannot be written . . . I just keep inscribing the fathers' words with my woman's fingers and hope that the feminine will bleed through.⁹

Incorporation is an act. Embodiment is an act. What bleeds through in our words, Mairs suggests, is an act of our personal being, whether we like it or know it or will it—or not. Identity is an embodied experience.

We have mentioned three facets of the definition of "body," as it is often used by oral interpretation theorists and feminists, that may be useful to the preacher. The body is the space of consciousness or personal being; it is the venue where aspects of experience are perceived, integrated, and expressed. When Roloff says "the body thinks" or "the body knows," he is talking about the way all of personal being, all of the space of consciousness, plays a role in perceiving and evoking meaning.

Perhaps you are not crazy about all this talk about bodies. Perhaps you have secret sympathy for whoever Bill Brower, a visiting lecturer in speech, famously described as "a stack of books with a head on top." Perhaps somatic knowing is not your favorite way of knowing. You do not need to worry. There are other ways to talk about this, and I am happy to provide alternative language for those who have an understandable discomfort with the repeated use of the "B" word. We can simply say that preaching is a psychophysical act. Or we can say that it is an incarnational act. Either way, we mean that it is an act whereby the word comes alive—if it comes alive at all—in our psychophysical selves—in our pneumaphysical selves—or, if you prefer, in our bodies.

THE USE OF THE BODY IN PREACHING: GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

If it is true that the body is more than it seems and that it plays a wider role in preaching than it appears to, it might be useful for me, before proceeding

⁹ Nancy Mairs, *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 48–49.

further, to review some of the body's more significant contributions to preaching. I will discuss just three: the body's capacity for movement, emotion, and gesture.

Movement is a primary way we still the conscious mind and access the unconscious. Rhythmic, repetitive movement, especially of large muscle groups, is one of the most effective ways to soothe the conscious mind and allow—as some artists say—the unconscious mind to “come forward.” Two examples will suffice to underscore what has already been rather fully explored. Graham Wallas tells the story of the great German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, speaking in 1891 at a banquet on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. The much-decorated Helmholtz had begun his work in physiology demonstrating (against the metaphysicians of the previous generation) that muscle force is derived solely from physical and chemical principles. Later in his life, he was known for his work on the conservation of kinetic energy and other research in physics. The last of the great renaissance men of science, he was asked that question most dreaded by thinkers, inventors, and artists in all times and places—the one about the origin of ideas. The answer the old man gave was both surprising and charming. After making a thorough study of the matter, he said, “happy ideas come unexpectedly, without effort, like an inspiration. So far as I am concerned they have never come to me when my mind was fatigued, or when I was at my working table. . . . They came particularly readily during the slow ascent of wooded hills on a sunny day.”¹⁰

The Nobel prize-winning poet William Butler Yeats tells a similar tale. But where the German physicist may seem to have been commenting innocently on an accidental trance induced by rhythmic muscle motion, the Irish poet is anything but innocent. He describes the bodily experience of rhythmic movement as essential to his process, something to be employed deliberately. “The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me,” he says, “is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation. . . .”¹¹ He illustrates his point with a personal example.

I was writing once a very symbolical and abstract poem, when my pen fell on the ground; and, as I stooped to pick it up, I remembered some fantastic adventure that yet did not seem fantastic, and then another like adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I

¹⁰ Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926), 80.

¹¹ William Butler Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” quoted in *Creators on Creating*, ed. Frank Barron, Alfonso Montuori, and Anthea Barron (New York: Putnam, 1997), 80–81.

found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. I tried to remember what I had done the day before and then what I had done that morning; but all my waking life had perished from me, and it was only after a struggle that I came to remember it again, and as I did so that more powerful and startling life perished in its turn. Had my pen not fallen to the ground and so made me turn . . . I would never have known. . . . I would have been like one who does not know he is passing through a wood because his eyes are on the pathway.¹²

Both testimonies point to the importance of the body's movement in the creative process. Movement—the motion which, ironically, Helmholtz himself had shown was nothing more than a combination of physical and chemical forces—is a trigger for “aha's” and trances, for ideas and sense memory. In it we see the very musculature of the body contributing to creative work. Interestingly, where nineteenth-century science once resisted the thought that muscles operated on the basis of physical principles and what we now call organic chemistry, contemporary science is able to show an anatomical relation between hand gestures and facial expression—and the language areas of the brain. (See, for examples, the writings of French neurosurgeon Pierre Paul Broca and German neurologist Carl Wernicke.) That is to say that movement is one way the body knows what it knows. When the hand opens or the face drops, the language area knows and responds.

Another important way the body participates in the creative work of preaching is through the production of emotion. In the limbic system of the mammalian brain, an elaboration of vertebrate arousal patterns occurs and we call it “emotion.” It is more strategically important in preaching than we have time to explore. It so *often* accounts for the difference between lively preaching and dead, between juicy and dry, between Technicolor and gray, gray, gray preaching. Want your sermons to have zoom, zip, and zowie? Want them to fly out across the pews and not just dribble down the front of the pulpit and out into the aisles? Want them to sing? It is not likely to happen without emotion.

Emotions elaborate thinking, teachers of oral interpretation say. Roloff describes emotions as arising from the body during the oral interpretation process and attaching themselves to words, adding layers of meaning. There are probably very few speakers who have not had the experience. Many of us have even been taken by surprise by the experience. Your mind is thinking

¹² Ibid.

the word, your mouth preparing to form it, your mental motion picture screen is conjuring up the image, and all of the sudden up from your toes come the tears, or the laugh, or the choke. Emotions elaborate—they flesh out the bones of a word—they connect our electrical circuits—they help do what Bartow describes as “turning ink into blood.”

That emotions can be just as easily *misused* as used, of course, goes without saying. “In theatre,” the great dramatist Arthur Hopkins said, “I want the thought that arises out of emotion and not the emotion that arises out of thought.”¹³ One yields art and the other propaganda. One facilitates listener participation, the other coerces it. One evokes, the other manipulates. The reflection that follows a quick-struck spark of emotion is more to be desired in theater and in preaching than the emotion that is born after a thought is thought a few times. Why? Because it is a more immediate reaction. And since it is more immediate, it is more likely to be an authentic, organic, wholistic response—what actors call “true.” How does a preacher make sure that at least sometimes she says something that kindles emotion first? By staying close to image and the senses.

When homileitian Fred Craddock says, “I am in the yellow leaf of my life,” what happens to you? Do you think about mortality and then feel sorry for Fred because he may be closer to it than you are? Or do you feel a pang of poignancy first, then stop to admire the metaphor? When Aimee Semple McPherson compares the church without the Holy Spirit to “a fountain that has ceased its flow and offers but the poor apology of a bucket of muddy water from a hardly reached well,” do you think, “I need to reconsider my pneumatology,” or do you feel the stomach drop of disappointment, the dust of worry in your mouth?

In a sermon addressing the scourge of AIDS, Catholic theologian Walter Burghardt tells the story of a group of foxes systematically exterminated by a mythical village. He narrates the story, describing how the men, women and children of the village held hands and made a circle, stepping in little by little to close around the foxes. He describes the foxes’ bewilderment at being clubbed to death by neighbors that had heretofore been friendly. Some of the foxes, he says, hesitated in their confusion and were clubbed to death for their timidity. Some, he says, stayed by their wounded and were struck down for their loyalty. Some snarled and snapped and were clubbed to death for their temerity. Others didn’t know what to do—they moved to the middle of the circle and lay down. “But the people knew what to do. They clubbed the foxes to death and showed their children how.” What happened to you? Did you

¹³ Arthur Hopkins, *How’s Your Second Act?* (New York: Samuel French, 1948).

think, “Yes, AIDS is a terrible thing,” or did you feel the gall rising in your throat?

As every good preacher knows, the emotions and the senses work together in marvelous ways. In her book *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching*, Linda Clader tells the story of her long relationship with a favorite piece of music—the 1963 performance of Gregorio Allegri’s “Miserere” by the King’s College Choir, with treble solo by the young Roy Goodman. “The combination of the soaring tune and the ice-pure sound of the boy’s voice sent chills down my back every time I heard it,” she says. She describes the way it stirs her as an experience with the sublime.

I imagine ecstasy as a standing entirely outside myself, losing myself in something greater. Sublimity on the other hand, seems to be a rising but still within my physical self. Hence the experience of the hair standing on end. Or sometimes a sense that my lungs have gotten bigger or that the far horizon I perceive out on the ocean or in my imagination is humming a tune and a rhythm I feel in my bones. My body vibrates or sings; my breath deepens, my hands stretch me toward a dive into the stars.¹⁴

Her description achieves a kind of *synesthesia*—experiencing, by means of one sense, the data that are usually associated with another sense. That is not an accident, I think. Whether you are talking about sublimity, or rapture, or grief, or despair, the senses are the gateway to the emotions.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE BODY IN PREACHING

Author Annie Dillard retells a story about someone coming up over a ridge in Alaska and looking down from a distance on two Inuit girls sitting cross-legged on the ground, mouth on mouth, blowing by turns on each other’s vocal folds, making a low, unearthly music. “We are played on like a pipe,” she says, “our breath is not our own.”¹⁵ It is a reminder to us that no matter how important the contributions of the body, no matter how instrumental or essential its role in preaching is understood to be, it is not the whole of the story. Unless a breath from beyond ourselves blows through us, even the most fine-tuned pipe is silent.

In concluding, I’d like to review three representative views—three different approaches to understanding the work of the Holy Spirit—and suggest

¹⁴ Linda Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2003), 67–68.

¹⁵ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, quoted in Barron, *Creators on Creating*, 86.

something of their use in preaching. The first spirituality I want to discuss might be understood to rest on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception; it emphasizes *awareness* as the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit. The second makes use of the subject-object model associated with Martin Buber and a host of others; it is especially interested in the Holy Spirit's role in facilitating *dialogue*. (Dialogical personalism, though much assailed—see, for example, Michael Welker's scathing critique in his book *God the Spirit*¹⁶—provides the language and categories for much of the contemporary literature on spirituality, liturgical studies, and homiletics.) The third spirituality may be seen to represent French philosopher and author Gabriel Marcel's philosophy of presence; it emphasizes the Holy Spirit's unique work in drawing us into *participating*.

The three are far from comprehensive and overlap rather roughly. Some of the characteristics of the second model, for example, can be seen quite easily in the other two. I think it is helpful, however, to try to sketch schools of thought and suggest some differences in perspective and emphasis—if only to remind us that no matter how we understand the Holy Spirit, it seems that *she* is intensely interested in bodies.

One more note. In each section I will say something about how the Holy Spirit is understood to be interested in bodies—to use them, work through them, to find their services essential. I will discuss an area of skills that will cooperate with this activity of the Holy Spirit and that may be built in the preacher. By doing so I am not claiming that the Holy Spirit can be indirectly controlled, the way we control the diaphragm by flexing the adjacent abdominal extrinsic muscles. Neither am I assuming that all of the physical expressions and experiences that are desirable in preaching are teachable. I do not believe they are. Preachers must be born—or born anew—with certain abilities. I am claiming, however, that the technique—the skills—through which their talents can find expression may be and should be taught.

THE BROODING SPIRIT

In this view, the same spirit that broods over the face of *tohu va vobohu* (chaos), broods in us. The brooding spirit is the one who makes it possible for us to perceive the presence of others and to develop *awareness* of others and self, to sniff out problems, to recognize opportunities for creative and re-creative work. For preachers, the most significant implication of the brooding spirit model of spirituality may be what is sometimes called the “capacity for

¹⁶ Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

enhanced awareness." The Holy Spirit draws us to higher levels of sensitivity. Our apertures are opened. We are readied to receive data. We are alerted to possibilities. The ground is prepared, and more—it is alerted and tenderized. Its tentacles are lifted and its cilia are waving.

Experience with the brooding spirit may take the form of desire, as in Augustine's description of prayer as "an affectionate reaching out of the mind for God."¹⁷ Or it may be the kind of less urgent, more tranquil openness associated with meditation. For those who hold this view of a spirit whose unique role it is to make *perceiving* possible, the purpose of spiritual experience is increased awareness of everything that is within us. A self-expansion and an expansion of the world is the result. For example, Maurice Nédoncelle says, "if God wants us to pray to him, this is in order that we may become aware of him and of ourselves . . . and this implies an openness to all reality. . . . Such an awareness is not a luxury, it is essential. . . . Apart from it [the human being] remains a mere thing, and might be caught up into the moving belt of the unconscious."¹⁸ Though the spiritual life ultimately leads to choices and change, the emphasis of this understanding of the Holy Spirit falls on the Spirit's role in creating awareness, a capacity for perception, desire, etc. As Barry and Ann Ulanov say, "Our very desire to pray, that we took as our own, turns out to have a much larger source. . . . What we thought was our prayer, our effort to pray, reveals itself as God's praying through us, the Spirit showing the things of Christ to us. . . ."¹⁹

In this pneumatological school of thought, the body is prized for its apertures. The preaching skills prized by such an approach are chiefly observational skills. That is the ability to increase one's capacity for—and here I use one of the contemporary spirituality's favorite words—"noticings."

The great acting teacher Richard Boleslavsky believes that the only thing that can stimulate inspiration in an artist is constant and keen observation of day-by-day life.²⁰ He contends that this skill can be developed—he teaches it to actors—and believes it to have many benefits. Among them he mentions the following:

It builds memory . . . with all visible manifestations of the human spirit. It makes [the person] sensitive to sincerity and to make-believe. It develops [the] sensory and muscular memory and facilitates adjustment to any business that may be required. . . . It opens [the person's] eyes to

¹⁷ Thomas A. Hand, *St. Augustine on Prayer* (Westminster: Newman, 1963), 7.

¹⁸ Maurice Nédoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer*, in Barry and Ann Ulanov, *Primary Speech: A Psychology of Prayer* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

¹⁹ Ulanov, *Primary Speech*, 20–21.

²⁰ Richard Boleslavsky, *Acting: The First Six Lessons* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1973), 99.

the full extent in appreciation of different personalities and values in people and work of art. And lastly, . . . it enriches [the person's] inner life by full and extensive consumption of everything in outward life.²¹

He offers the opinion that the average person thinks that he or she sees everything, but in fact, they do not assimilate any of it. "In the theatre," he says, "where we have to re-create life, we can't afford that. We are obliged to notice the material with which we work." He makes me want to say, on behalf of all preachers, *ouch*.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS ANNUNCIATOR

John Vernon Taylor published *The Go-Between God* in England during the 1970s, while he was Bishop of Winchester. In it, he builds upon the work of Buber to present a picture of the Holy Spirit's work as annunciator. For Taylor, the image of annunciation epitomizes the role and work of God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit is nothing if not the one who introduces us to others, who creates I-thou relationships. She generates a current of communication between us and, at the same time, opens an awareness of ourselves to ourselves—an awareness of both shadow and light. So Taylor says,

The sudden recognition in a single vision of what is and what might be is . . . the gift [the Holy Spirit] imparts to the [preacher]. This also is [the Holy Spirit's] essential act of creation—either in the cosmos or in the self. It begins with the recognition of absolute otherness and goes on to the interplay of communion. It begins with the separation of darkness from light, of the waters above from the waters below, of my shadow from my light, of Simon from Peter, accepting and welcoming each in its distinct truth. But [the Holy Spirit's] act of creation is consummated in the gathering up of all things, the day and the night, the good son and the dark brother, the Jew and the Gentile, all the hated selves, the banished loves, the dead babies in him who holds all things together.²²

Taylor identifies several characteristics of the Holy Spirit's ministry that have a particular resonance, I believe, for preachers and their bodies, but we will focus on the central one here—this ability to bring people and hold things together.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² John Vernon Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 22–23.

If we are to visualize [the Holy Spirit] as a force or element in which all things . . . meet and touch, the best metaphor or image for our use is that of water. Remember the startling intimacy of the almost weightless intertwining when two people, swimming under water, clasp each other. Remember the strange familiarity of the skin-diver's casually brushing contact with the marine life around him. In just such a way the Holy Spirit brings us into more vivid contact with one another and with God while remaining imperceptible himself.²³

What does this understanding of the Holy Spirit as annunciator imply for preachers and their bodies? How can bodies—which represent both the means by which we make connections with others *and* our own boundedness—cooperate with annunciation? Stephanie Paulsell points to one possible answer. “We cannot respond to another’s bodily needs and desires with compassion unless we have the capacity to imagine those needs and desires.”²⁴ This kind of empathy or imaginative projection of one’s experiences derives, of course, from the body and it points to a set of skills that in oral interpretation theory is called “matching.” The preacher, this approach suggests, begins with “listening to the body.”

Flora Slossom Wuellner is one of many teachers of spirituality who advocates such “listening.” “Our faithful bodies try ceaselessly to let us know what is going on in our deep levels,” she says. “The body is a not a minor but a major prophet.”²⁵ The preacher then matches or connects his or her muscle memory, sense memories, and emotions to those suggested by the text. In this careful, attentive, disciplined back-and-forth movement between text and what Sandra Brown, former professor of pastoral theology at the Seminary, used to call the preacher’s “gizzard,” a kind of dialogue or annunciation is made possible. Wallace Bacon describes it as a process that brings the interpreter’s “own life form . . . into congruence with the life form of the poem.” He notes that “the process of matching is also the process of maturation; one grows by giving in to the otherness of the life of the text, by extending oneself, by reaching out, by loving.”²⁶

In his book *Getting the Word Across*, Bob Jacks describes the skill-building such a process requires.²⁷ He briefly tells the story of his encounter with a

²³ Ibid., 44.

²⁴ Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 22.

²⁵ Flora Slossom Wuellner, *Prayer and our Bodies* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1987), 31–32.

²⁶ Wallace Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation* (Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972),

451.

²⁷ G. Robert Jacks, *Getting the Word Across: Speech Communication for Pastors and Lay Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 104.

somewhat opaque student who struggled to match her own sense memories with the images of Psalm 139—responding to his gentle, persistent coaching only at length. I happen to know that there were only two people in the room that day—Bob and the recalcitrant student in question. Since Bob is no longer with us, I believe I may say without fear of contradiction that his description of the process was helpful, his account of the event accurate, and his description of that somewhat opaque student from California overly generous.

Some pneumatologies emphasize the Holy Spirit's ability to create awareness and imply a need for preachers to attend to observation skills. And some emphasize the Holy Spirit's unique ability to create dialogue and imply a redoubling of our efforts at cultivating "matching" skills. But there is yet one more approach that I would like to mention. It is the school of thought that emphasizes the Holy Spirit's tendency to work in a believer against self-interest. And it implies a need for increased attention to the skills and issues that have to do with the preacher's ego.

SPIRIT OF SACRIFICE

In 1979 I took the introduction to preaching course with Dr. Donald Macleod. I had been told to expect a confident man. Indeed, I noticed the first day of class that he did have a way of filling the podium. He filled the air, too, and seemed, perhaps, a bit enamored of the power of repetition. I had never heard an authentic Scottish burr before, I believe, so I did not mind in the least. But I noticed that he filled whatever space he was in—Stuart's lecture hall or the tiny, dark seminar room under Miller Chapel. He liked large cars—there seemed to be no question about that. It was 1979, as I say, and he drove his Cadillac from his house on the corner of campus to the dining hall. He had a way of filling the space and the air—that is, I believe what many of his students remember about him. But I want to close these lectures named in his honor by telling you that he had a way of getting out of the way—of stepping aside so that other young preachers could get what they needed to grow. And for that I am grateful to him.

It was the second week of the class and our precept was meeting in a hobbit hole of a seminar room under Miller Chapel. Dr. Macleod passed out large green index cards and gave instructions about the placement of address, campus phone (if any!), home church, etc. There were a couple of questions—Have you ever preached before? What do you hope to get out of this class? I think I was not managing my nervousness very well. I was feeling that peculiar kind of resistance that comes when you are really very nervous

indeed and someone starts telling you what to do. So my penmanship was not as careful as it might have been. And when I came to the last question about course outcomes I scrawled, "I want to be a great preacher."

Now to appreciate this story you have to know that I had less than no inkling that I could ever be a halfway passable preacher. Neither had I ever had a conscious thought about myself as a preacher—I had come to seminary to learn theology. Still, that is what I wrote. As I tossed the card onto the pile in the middle of the table, I reached for my notebook, thinking we were at the period's end. I was wrong. Not only was Dr. Macleod not dismissing the class, but he was reaching leisurely toward the stack of cards. To my horror, he settled in and began to read aloud. My classmates, more in charge of their own unconscious motives than I, had written judicious, modest answers to all the questions. My horror deepened. Frantically, I tried to imagine what I would say after he read that last line of my card. The moment came. He lifted my card, pronounced my name, gave a murmur of recognition at the name of my home church. Then smoothly and with no change of affect, he picked up the next card.

Preaching in the age of the Holy Spirit requires many things of a preacher. None more important, though, than knowing when to stop.