

*I can honor my
Heavenly Father
by caring for my
body and using it
for wise purposes.*



The Gift

OF OUR

PHYSICAL BODIES

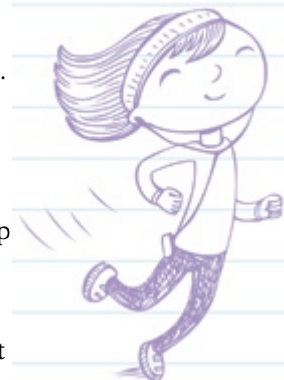
By Victoria Webb Rutherford

Years ago as an early teen, I began to be aware that my body, the precious tabernacle I had likely yearned for in the pre-earth life, was much bigger than might be physically or socially healthy for me, and I wondered what that would mean for my life. It was a confusing time as I struggled to reconcile the contradictory views being thrown at me: God looked on the heart, but it seemed His children, both old and young, cared a great deal about what size I was and what clothes I wore. I did not then understand the relationships between healthful eating, physical exercise, and my appearance, but I did know that God loved me and that He had a plan for me.

My Identity as a Daughter of God

I once confided to my Young Women leader that I was afraid that the boys might not be interested in me because I was overweight. She wisely told me to concentrate on being a friend to all, both boys and girls, and assured me that a person who was a friend to all would be very attractive to the right kind of person. She told me that what we find attractive is a type of mirror into our own souls: “For intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light” (D&C 88:40). I tucked her message into my heart and prayed to Heavenly Father to know if it was true.

I remember praying often to Heavenly Father about the struggle with my weight. In my prayers I attempted to strike a bargain with Him, suggesting that if I read my scriptures every day and prayed to Him day and night, He might respond by making me thin. For days and weeks I kept my end of the so-called deal, yet my body altered little. Even after years of praying, I still found myself bowing on plump knees. Fortunately, beneficial change is not only physical, and in my effort to pour out my heart to Him and keep His commandments, He was working a miracle in my heart. In those days and years of drawing close to Him, I came to feel the sweet companionship of His Spirit testifying that I was His daughter.





The Role of Challenges

In order to avoid these traps, I found it helpful to ponder deeply what God wanted me to learn from an experience in *this* particular body and why a physical body is indispensable in the process of becoming more like Him. I began to see similarities between my struggles and other people’s seemingly unrelated challenges. I discovered that often their problems, like mine, followed the pattern God set for Adam and Eve when he said to them, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; . . . thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground” (Genesis 3:17–19). In other words, Adam and Eve had to consistently and recurrently work very hard to tame things that spontaneously grew out of control in their lives, but in a sense, God cursed the ground and caused the thorns to grow *for their sakes*. This insight helped me to recognize the numerous blessings I had experienced in my life by working through my challenges.

Additionally, as I learned more about the Savior’s life and more closely observed struggles in the lives of others, my ability to perceive and recognize beauty grew. The promise of my Young Women leader—that being a friend to all would attract the right kind of person, that “light cleaveth unto light”—was fulfilled in an external way; a truly great-hearted man came into my life and we eventually married. But it was also fulfilled *within my own heart*. Jesus, of whom Isaiah wrote, “He hath no form nor comeliness; and . . . there is no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2), was a friend to all, and the more I learned about the remarkable ways He coped with challenges in the flesh, the more I wanted to know Him. He mastered His body through fasting, prayer, and self-discipline—not so that He could become an admired physical specimen but so that his body could become a living testament of God’s love for the human family. He used His flesh in a unique, profoundly selfless way to bring about the salvation of all mankind, and He did so in a way that could be called nothing less than beautiful.

Choices concerning My Body

As I learned more about my identity as God’s daughter, I experimented with ways that I could use my agency to affect change in my physical body. Through the foods I chose to eat and the activities in which I participated, I worked very hard to achieve and later maintain a healthy body weight. I discovered that I could honor my Heavenly Father through caring for the gift of my physical body and using it for wise purposes.

However, I also realized that if I wasn’t careful, I could easily become distracted and fashion my body after a worldly image or even reject the gift of my body because it did not measure up to impossible worldly standards. Worse yet, I became tempted to believe Korihor’s philosophy that we “[fare] in this life according to the management of the creature” (Alma 30:17)—that my value would somehow increase or diminish depending upon my ability to achieve a certain size or number on a scale. I learned that improved body management *may* be an outcome as God helps us make weak things strong, but as an end in itself, “fixation on the physical . . . is spiritually destructive.”¹



A Tool for Service and Learning

Today, I too desire that my body might be a testament of God's love. Like many people, I work hard every day to reign in my body's natural predispositions as well as combat worldly "vain imaginations" (1 Nephi 12:18),² but because of Christ's example, when I keep His perspective, my body becomes a tool to bless the lives of God's children, and proper maintenance and care of that tool demonstrates my recognition of His noble purposes.

My body also continues to be a vehicle through which I can learn more about Heavenly Father and the Savior. I experience the wonders of nature and creation to a greater degree because of my body, and I find that hiking and running are specific ways I can commune with heaven. My heart echoes the sentiment expressed by a runner in the film *Chariots of Fire*: "When I run I feel [God's] pleasure." I love to feel my pulsing heart provide cleansing, sustaining blood to my inner vessel, and it reminds me of the life-giving blood of the Lamb. It assures me I am a living thing—and indeed it is great to be alive! Similarly, when I truly nourish my physical body through good food and clean water, I feel my very cells respond to revitalization and life, and I see clearer connections with the bread and water He offers us. Even when I am ill, injured, or not as well conditioned as I might like to be, I appreciate what these situations teach me about opposition in all things, faith, line-upon-line growth, and gratitude for any small capacity I may possess.

I feel like Louise Lake, polio victim, who once said, "I love my body . . . because I have disciplined this flesh, and in times when normally it would have said, 'Oh I can't, this is too much, too difficult,' I have said to my

flesh, 'Arise, you *will* get out of bed, you *will* prepare this, you *will* do that, you *will* attend this.'"³ Though it may seem ordinary or unremarkable to the eyes of the world, my corporeal collection of cells is a miraculous testament of His grace and love.

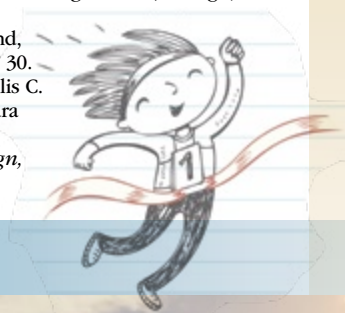
May the God of heaven and earth be praised for the flesh—for the bodies that give us opportunities for both physical and spiritual growth. Although the flesh may be weak and can sometimes be the source of trials in this life (see Matthew 26:41), it is also a sweet gift that our wise Father in Heaven has bestowed upon us, His children—a gift through which we can be made strong and become more like Him. ■

The author lives in Oregon, USA.

An article on this same topic for children can be found on page 24 of this month's Friend.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, "To Young Women," *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 30.
2. See Jeffrey R. Holland, "To Young Women," 30.
3. Louise Lake, in Phyllis C. Jacobson and Barbara Vance, "'Fit' Is More Than Not Fat," *Ensign*, June 1978, 48.



ACCEPT YOUR BODY

"I plead with you young women to please be more accepting of yourselves, including your body shape and style, with a little less longing to look like someone else. We are all different. Some are tall, and some are short. Some are round, and some are thin. And almost everyone at some time or other wants to be something they are not! . . . Every young woman is a child of destiny and every adult woman a powerful force for good."

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "To Young Women," *Ensign*, Nov. 2005, 29.

