Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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I was sitting at my desk in the middle of the workday when I realized I couldn't get up from my chair. The offending move? I'd leaned a little too far forward, causing a sharp pain to radiate through my lower back and hips and rendering me incapable of standing up without a double white-knuckled grasp on my desk.

At six months pregnant, I was gradually getting used to the general physical discomforts that come along with the shifting organs, weight gain and quickening baby kicks, but what I wrote off as a minor back spasm followed me throughout the next two weeks, preventing me from doing most day-to-day tasks without pain. At my next prenatal appointment, my doctor gently informed me that no, it was not normal to be in excruciating pain when rising from a chair. I left with a six-week prescription for physical therapy.

I've been fortunate to avoid major physical maladies throughout my life. I've never broken a bone, only been in one minor car accident and never reached the competitive levels of athletics that invite injury. When I entered the outpatient rehab center 10 minutes from my house, I had no idea what lay ahead.

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Now that I'm halfway through my prescribed appointments, I've grown more tolerant of — if not yet comfortable in — the large, brightly lit training room. We patients are a vulnerable, motley crew: elderly folks recovering from strokes and falls, high school athletes rehabbing sports injuries, people working to get back on their feet after car accidents. Then there's me, the lone pregnant woman waddling around belly-first among exercise balls and stationary bikes, stretching on machines with laughably low levels of resistance. It's been a challenging and uncomfortable experience, but also an unexpectedly holy one that has taught me several spiritual lessons.

I loathe admitting that something is too difficult for me to accomplish, and my weekly physical therapy appointments have become a time for reflection on human finitude. We all have limits, and pregnancy has made me acutely aware of my own:

lifting heavy objects and standing for long periods, to name a few. My cheerful physical therapist is quick to suggest modifications for exercises that prove too painful, as well as postures and breathing techniques that accommodate my growing body. My current physical state has reiterated my need to depend on others and on God when the literal and metaphorical weight becomes too great to bear.

When St. Ignatius of Loyola experienced a maiming injury from a cannonball and was forced onto a long and painful road to recovery, he had a lot of time to think. And while our circumstances are certainly different, Ignatius inspires me to make the most of my forced time-out. At physical therapy appointments, my slow, intentional movements have become an "offering up" of sorts; and though I'm not always successful, I try to use the quiet time of my repetitive exercise sets to pray, meditate and talk with God about my worries and hopes for my growing family.

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In the open training room, it's easy to catch glimpses of other patients' small challenges and triumphs. Perhaps amplified by a tiny tornado of pregnancy hormones, I often find myself moved to tears by what my soul sees as sheer resilience. We patients, with ages and abilities across the spectrum, are showing up and doing the work through pain and injury to build strength, improve mobility and live well in the bodies that we have. I never expected to feel a sense of community at physical therapy, but the solidarity of quiet, encouraging nods has shown me I'm not alone.

All the bodies at physical therapy are working through some kind of brokenness. As I move through the final trimester of my pregnancy, I can't help but think about Mary, herself breaking open to bring the Christ child into a broken world. I know through my faith that brokenness can lead to healing and renewal, and my belief in a God who restores is crucial to my physical journey through the suffering of a back injury, the pain of childbirth and the unpredictability of postpartum recovery.

When I first received that script for physical therapy, I was not thrilled about the idea of adding even more doctors' appointments to my calendar. Yet, these past few weeks have changed my perspective, inviting me to discover a body and spirit connection that I never would have realized without landing in a room full of others on the journey right alongside me.