

Fearful and wonderful and ordinary

By [Patrick J. Willson](#)

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Here in Tidewater, Virginia, we make our way from city to city via a series of tunnels. As we approach each tunnel a series of signs warn us: “No HAZMATs” and “HAZMATs must exit here.” Trucks carrying hazardous materials of one sort or another provide a danger anywhere, but in tunnels the risk is magnified.

But although we're aware of hazardous truck cargo, we are usually oblivious to hazardous materials that are traveling through the tunnels of our bodies. Only occasionally do circumstances make us aware of this other threat.

As I stood alongside a hospital bed, a parishioner shyly asked me, “Would be it okay to pray for a bowel movement?” After a horrendous round of surgeries and repairs to surgeries, the bowel had been successfully resectioned, but there had been no evidence of that success. In worship a lay reader invites worshipers to pray together the “prayer for illumination” before reading the scriptures. That sometimes sounds like “prayer for elimination,” which is funny only until you are like this patient, hoping for a return to health.

Is it acceptable to call the attention of the high and holy one to a necessity as ordinary or even profane as defecation? The Lord God had knit together that bowel and the surgeon had sewn it back together, and what was needed that afternoon was the daring to trust in the creator's continuing interest.

Although the psalter attributes the 139th psalm to David, biblical scholars regard it as an anonymous composition. We may be quite certain, however, that certain people did *not* write it. It was not that fellow modeling Calvin Klein underwear in the billboard that towers above Times Square, and it was not one of the sprites from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.

This psalmist who is “fearfully and wonderfully made” inhabits an ordinary body that

is inevitably aging, balding, graying, sagging, sometimes limping, sometimes aching, sometimes desperately ill and almost always healing from some strain or wound. Our quotidian physical existence provides occasion to exult: “I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

St. Augustine shook his head in bewilderment that people “go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.” In our day we delight in and heap praise upon our iPod or iPhone or iPad, and ignore the astonishing person who's pushing the keys. Fascinating as the computer circuitry may be, it is vastly less complex than the mind that conjures the words that express the images that are signified by individual keystrokes.

We human creatures created such tools because we are “fearfully and wonderfully” created.

*Additional lectionary columns by Willson appear in the August 24 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*