

The way of all flesh

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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As the sun rose, I drove twenty-seven miles to my office at the little church in the Cajun swamps. Even though visitors to the office were rare, I showed up on time each day. Determined on my journey, I felt that familiar wave as I crossed the bayou. I eased my car to the gravelly side of the road. I stood, stretched. Breathed deeply. The nausea didn't pass, so I opened up the passenger's door, the back door, and sat in the front seat without the steering wheel. I closed my eyes and breathed some more. The doors and the passenger's seat were part of my privacy rituals. I didn't look big and the town was small, so I didn't want the people passing by to talk about how the Presbyterian pastor must have been hung over. I wretched.

I cursed the heat and the long drive as I closed the doors and got settled back behind the wheel. Then I listened to my body. What did I need? What did I crave? What was I longing for?

I had never been intimate with my peculiar flesh, even with its close proximity. I had learned to ignore it. We had not been friends. I certainly had never wanted to hear its story.

When I was a tiny girl, a bee stung me. I cried. And cried. My brother, who loved me and didn't want to see my tears any longer, gently said, "This is how pain works, Carol. Your skin is sending a message to your brain that something is wrong so that your brain will do something about it. But you know that something is wrong. You know about the bee. So, just tell your body that you know and it can be quiet."

It worked. I stopped crying. I ignored the pain and went on with my day.

Perhaps it worked too well, because from that day forward, I stopped listening to all sorts of things—aches in my back, hunger pangs in my stomach, longing to rest, and need for sleep. I could ignore it. I could overcome it.

In our vanity culture, that space where we set our bodies up as if they were the most important thing, I learned to hate my body. I was surrounded by waif-eyed models in

magazines who hated their flesh so much that they would starve themselves. My television filled with actresses who despised their flesh so much that they would cut it up, or pump it with silicone until they were barely recognizable. Botox became a thing—even though I thought that as a human species we liked to avoid botulism and toxins.

I didn't learn well in church either. I grew up a conservative Baptist, where I was told that the flesh was bad. And the flesh of women was not only a problem because of our own desires, but it had the extra burden of causing others to fall into temptation as well.

Pregnancy changed all of that. I was forced to take care of my flesh and blood, or my body would revolt—in the most revolting manner. I could no longer cling to my stoic martyrdom by working around the clock without any rest. I could no longer practice spiritual discipline of fasting by starving myself. I could no longer blow off exercising and taking care of myself. Even if I had no respect for my own body, I had to take care of the one developing in my womb.

I learned to listen to my cravings, because even though I had a lifetime of people telling me that the desires of my body were bad, I realized sometimes the lust of the flesh was for the vitamin K of leafy greens or the calcium of ice cream. And other times they are being held and loving well. That was okay too.

As the months wore on, my body shifted and moved. Bones dilated. Water gushed. Muscles tightened in an anticipatory wave. I breathed deeply as every bit of me longed for birth. I couldn't understand how it would happen, how that infant would find her way through the canal that was miraculous widening in my center. Making the path straight. It felt as impossible as a snake eating an elephant. Yet, even with all of its absurdity, I knew it had always happened. Everywhere, birth happened. It was the way of the flesh.

It was messy, with slippery fluids, torn flesh, and an umbilical cord threatening to choke my precious child. We were near death, and yet, somehow life in all of its abundance prevailed.

I became connected with my body, as I held this other human in my arms. Six pounds of flesh had so altered my life that I became something else—a fierce mother. As she looked into my eyes, there was nothing in the world that she could ever do to make me love her less. Somehow the force of that love while I held my

daughter, gave me the sense of being held. My soul magnified. The Spirit came upon me. She overshadowed me. I knew what it was like to be born again.