

## Article

# The Change: Yoga, Theology and the Menopause

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**Abstract:** In this article, I explore the interplay of yoga, theology and the time of perimenopause and menopause. Through an approach centered physically, theologically and philosophically on becoming, I find an integrated web of thinking, feeling and moving that weaves new ways of perceiving and living this time of change; an example, I suggest, of what Keller calls *creatio ex profundis*, new creation from the depths of a life. I bring aspects of process theology (along with feminist and queer theology), phenomenological materialism, embodiment and somatic psychology/physiology into conversation with personal narrative. I examine ideas of severance, threshold and emergence, and images such as release, holding and breath that resonate helpfully with the holistic embodiment of yoga, theologies of change and (peri)menopause.

**Keywords:** process theology; yoga; menopause; embodiment; queer theology; feminist theology; new materialism

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I explore the interplay of yoga, theology and the time of perimenopause and menopause. Through an approach centered physically, theologically and philosophically on becoming, I find an integrated web of thinking, feeling and moving that weaves new ways of perceiving and living this time of change; an example, I suggest, of “*creatio ex profundis*”, new creation from the depths of a life (Keller 2003, p. 155). I bring aspects of process theology (along with feminist and queer theology), phenomenological materialism, embodiment and somatic psychology/physiology into conversation with personal narrative. I examine ideas of severance, threshold and emergence, and images such as release, holding and breath that resonate helpfully with the holistic embodiment of yoga, theologies of change and (peri)menopause.

## 2. Methodology

“We have pain going on on a cycle for years and years and years and then, just when you feel you are making peace with it all, what happens? The menopause comes . . . and it is the most . . . *wonderful* . . . thing in the world . . . you’re free . . . no longer a machine with parts.’

‘I was told it was horrendous.’

‘It is horrendous, but then it’s magnificent’”. (Fleabag 2019)

Perimenopause describes the time leading up to menopause; the latter is considered to begin when there have been no periods for a year. It can be a tumultuous time of spiritual, mental and, of course, physical transition, manifesting over the space of anywhere from a couple of years to a decade or more in a range of ways including irregular, flooding periods, hot flushes, anxiety and rage, aches and pains and consequent sleep deprivation.

Perimenopause and menopause are not diseases—these manifestations are not pathological symptoms in that sense—but this time can prove disruptive and difficult to manage, particularly since those experiencing it are expected to carry on “as normal” while surrounded by a “fog of prejudice” (Greer 2019, p. 16) and the frequent misdiagnoses of medical professionals (Newson 2021, p. 1). Some take hormone replacement therapy (HRT)



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to alleviate or delay some of the manifestations of this transition; others do not. Even though it is a natural event, it can feel subversive to speak of it openly, even among women. And while a widely shared experience (at least since life expectancy has extended long enough to go through it), it affects people in a broad variety of ways. Attitudes towards this transitional time, and those who experience it, also vary across generations, identities and cultures (see, for example, [Meletiou 2015](#); [Ussher et al. 2019](#); [Chadha et al. 2016](#)). While I refer here to women where appropriate, it is important to recognize that there are also some who do not identify as women who experience menopause, just as there may be women who do not experience menopause for various reasons. While theology around women's lives engages critically with the subjects of (in)fertility and motherhood (e.g., [O'Donnell 2022](#); [Powell 2015](#); [Grenholm 2011](#)), the creative potential of menopause for feminist theology is relatively neglected. Althaus-Reid comments that this "becoming" is largely unexplored territory despite representing a "plateau for a theological dialogue . . . a major destabilizer on issues of identity and perceptions of the sacred" ([Althaus-Reid 2008](#), p. 112). This is also despite the fact that (unlike motherhood) it is an experience that the vast majority of women will go through.

In this discussion, I explore this potential by employing an integrative methodology, blending interdisciplinary concepts and a theopoetic approach that embraces change with the material of my own embodied narrative, which is necessarily biased, situated, subjective and particular. This is a braiding together of practice and metaphor in order to holistically reimagine my own experience and theology as a perimenopausal, middle-class, white, British woman in her late forties. It is carried out in the hope that it may, at least in part, resonate for others too. This methodological approach is what Diprose calls, so appropriately, "writing in blood", a "corporeal generosity" (in other words, perhaps, a love) that is for others, written and vulnerably enacted "of a body" ([Diprose 2002](#), p. 190). This leads me to a nomadic theology that looks to a God who wanders too and that "situate[s] us in the world and orient[s] us as we act in it"; in other words, both a material and spiritual theology ([Christ and Plaskow 2016](#), p. 287).

Yoga can provide one way of navigating the (peri)menopause season by enhancing meditative breathing practices and by developing flexibility and strength ([Telles and Gupta 2021](#); [Telles and Singh 2018](#)). It can generate a ritual (a "practiced vow", [Betcher 2014](#), p. 167) to mark this transition, a shaped performance of movement and symbol ([Berry 2009](#), p. 2). My own yoga practice is somewhat eclectic and sporadic in incorporating different strands of yoga. I usually practice alone, at various times of the day, sometimes inventing sequences that seem to suit and sometimes guided by online videos. The mat often feels like a steadying space for discipline held in balance with release. Ciołkosz explores how yoga integrates the brain with the rest of the body, enhancing both proprioception (sensing the position and movement of one's body) and interoception (sensing what is happening inside one's body). Quoting [Morley \(2001\)](#), she describes how it "breaks the practitioner's alienation from their own body and allows them to recognize it as 'inhabited, psychical space' . . . In the words of Merleau-Ponty, it transports them from the objective to the lived body" ([Ciołkosz 2020](#), p. 497). Morley describes this recognition as connecting us with the "sentient mass of our bodies" ([Morley 2001](#), p. 76). In other words, they argue that yoga helps a practitioner know who they are and where they are, identifying and co-creating their neurocognitive and neurophysiological language, and allowing that to impact their presence in the world. Morley also suggests that it provides a connection with the lived flesh, the web in which we dwell and move, by considering bodies as "a homology *with* and a microcosm *of* the world" ([Morley 2001](#), p. 77, emphasis in original).

Woven together with this yoga practice, process theology provides a framework that embraces change (eminently appropriate for a time that has been termed 'The Change'; [Greer 2019](#)) and connects with yoga and menopause as, I suggest, an example of what [Keller \(2003\)](#) calls *creatio ex profundis*, a new creation from the depths of a life. Keller's theology dives into chaos and creativity in a way that I have found to resonate richly with this time of physical and spiritual deconstruction. It provides a way to speak of "unspeakable

openings" (p. 6) and respects the "sheer multiplicity" (p. 179) of the lived experience of this "phase transition" and its story of the limitations of embodiment in balance with the release into a new way of life. It also provides a way to connect to a deeper, interdependent rhythm, as she writes:

If the tehomitic infinite exists, it does so only in the materializing of its finitudes, its volatile and vulnerable interdependencies. The shifting limits of our shared embodiment mark the 'edge of chaos'. That trope, borrowed from complexity theory, signifies the 'phase transition' at which a complex system organizes itself ... where the flowing potentiality of each actuality, each creature, realizes itself in limitation. (Keller 2003, p. 7)

Betcher reminds us of the damaging effect of a wholeness/brokenness dichotomy stemming from a focus on "body" over the shared embodiment of "flesh" and its shifting limits. For Betcher, flesh "names a locus of flux; inasmuch as flesh differs with itself day to day, flesh situates difference as preceding identity" (Betcher 2010, p. 111). Shildrick adds the juicy sense of overflowing, "female jouissance which overflows the closure of male discourse", where "anatomical, social and discursive bodies are mutually constitutive" (Shildrick 1997, p. 178), what Creamer terms a queering process (Creamer 2010, p. 126). This space allows for multiplicity, subversion and fluidity in a way that honors rather than erases particularity. It reflects the "always-unfinished confluence of difference within the self" and creates a new myth, a new story, to replace "the myth of the stable, whole body" (Rivera 2010, p. 121). A queer perspective that focuses on flesh, flux and performative power thus facilitates menopause as a "liberation from [a] heteronormativity" that associates it with "fading sexuality and a non-reproductive body" (Österlund 2014, p. 36).

If this mess of shifting flesh, process and relational possibilities raises individualistic hackles, it could be because these ways of being are "neither sentimental nor safe", presenting risky possibilities as they do (Creamer 2010, p. 127). Enriching this emphasis on interconnected flesh, I have found it helpful also to honor the place of solitude, the discovery of boundaries and new identities, the capacity for personal integrity and the unique journeying that accompanies this time. These serve an ethics of personal safety that balances a practice of relational vulnerability.

I agree with Shildrick that "ways of knowing should be dynamic" (Shildrick 1997, p. 5), working across disciplinary boundaries and weaving a this-and-that, collaborative approach of "zigzagging interconnections" that mirrors fleshly flux (Braidotti 2011, p. 17). Overwriting theological and philosophical dichotomies I find fruitful, if paradoxical, scope for both being *and* becoming, language *and* body, body *and* flesh, stillness *and* movement, mediated phenomenology *and* grounded theory. As noted, Betcher calls flesh (in contrast to "body" and its implication of unified wholeness) "a locus of flux [that] differs with itself day to day" (Betcher 2010, p. 111). And yet I feel this zigzagging interconnection is (also) true of my *body*—my piece of flesh—especially in perimenopause. It is, I might say, both *langue* and *parole*: it exists *and* it is constructed; it is both necessarily bounded by skin (Damasio 2000, p. 137) *and* it is materially and metaphorically connected. As yoga allows, I am a peaceful warrior, or finally, as Virginia Woolf puts it, "I am rooted but I flow" (Woolf [1931] 2004, p. 66).

Hekman (2017) argues for a collaboration between process theology and new materialism, suggesting that this makes a better pairing than process theology and postmodernism. (See also Reader 2017 for a different exploration of theology and new materialism). Here, I incorporate ideas from both as useful for the task. Aspects of postmodern theology resonate as perimenopause has been a time for deconstructing faith and life as well as my body—reassessing, sifting, identifying anew what doesn't work and where new possibilities emerge. It has been helpful to me precisely because such theology is centered more on curious, dynamic, relational love than a bedrock of foundational truth. Elements of materialist feminist theology are simultaneously valuable for the reconstructive task of self-organization, creating a new narrative that centers on my lived story and bodily, fleshly experience. In fact, postmodern deconstruction and new materialism have elements in

common: on the one hand, just as postmodernism seems as if it deconstructs into nothing, so new materialism's "constant movement of matter unsettles the stable grounds we assume" (Jones 2016, p. 4). And then, on the other hand, both offer ways to move forward, if not "constructively" then at least hopefully towards what Keller terms a "pneumatic conspiracy . . . to make better orders" (Keller 2003, p. 23).

Keller's description of nonlinear, "polytonal co-creativity" (Keller 2003, p. 117) gives words to the approach of letting theology emerge from bodily experience "as our bodies relax, breathe and bleed into the Sacred Body of all bodies" (Keller 2003, p. 23). My goal is a degree of spacious self-organization both in the discussion and in the sense of ending up with a useful theology of flux in perimenopause. This theology becomes "en-carnated" by adapting Keller's term "warrior hermeneutics", which acknowledges the struggle for an identity and body in flux. It provides a momentary pattern—a pose—in the change and chaos, making enough of a toehold to create a playful, imaginative, theopoetic space (Keller 2003, p. 111). I find that this lightly held yet integrated way of thinking about the poses and movement of yoga is literally and metaphorically resonant with, and helpful for, the monstrously gracious menopausal transition and the accompaniment of God.

In the context of the perimenopause, while my body does its material thing, I have come to realize that my imaginary and bodily experience of (peri)menopause will be strongly influenced, even constructed, by the narratives I frame it with, the "myths [I] live by" (Anderson 2020, p. 8). I am liable to influence because what is happening is unprecedented in my own life so I have no frame of reference. Nonetheless, despite my "desire to flee the room", I can also begin to actively "spin the myth that will allow [me] to stay present" (Wigg-Stevenson 2021, p. 74). Part of the motivation for this very article and its research is to create my own myths, and I find the experience draws me out to share with other women who are experiencing this transition at the same time; to journey, share strategies and roll our eyes together while honoring the uniqueness of each experience. To feed such myth creation for (peri)menopause, I encounter a plethora of cultural forces, media representation and influences. This array includes mechanistic mappings of chemicals, ritualistic narratives and practices, and everything in between, and is curated by everyone from hormone replacement therapy (HRT) drug companies to social media influencers to well-meaning elders and academics. (Komesaroff et al. (1997) explore cultural influences in relation to menopause.) Menopause is described by some as a long-term hormone deficiency (e.g., Newson 2021) and by others as the doorway to a new life (e.g., Bridges Johns 2020). My phenomenological perspective and experience suggest that material reality and constructed reality are hand in hand here, in resonance with Jones' argument: "Reality is both constituted by, and resistant to, our constructions" (Jones 2016, p. 8). And on some flooding days of blood, sweat and tears, it has felt more like the soggy description of Neimanis: I am "made mostly of wet matter, but also aswim in the discursive flocculations of embodiment as an idea" (Neimanis 2017, p. 1).

Held in one hand, scientific knowledge about the ways in which the rest of the body directs the brain has complexified thinking about the brain being in charge (Levine 2010; Blake 2018; Porges 2011). Held in the other, wisdom narratives speak of how the body carries stories (such as from theologian Melanie May 1995 and yoga instructor Matthew Sanford 2006). Holding these two ways of knowing together enhances understanding and challenges "neuro-centrism". It is not so much a question of giving the rest of the body a voice but of becoming aware of the voice it already has. At the same time, for all the efforts to listen to the rest of the body, what is heard will be processed by the brain via language with all its limits and freedoms. There is an analogy here with the rejection of anthropocentrism by new materialists (Jones 2016, p. 6), but rather than resulting in a flat ontology, I suggest developing a kind of literacy of embodiment.

This literacy is a way of learning to understand one's own brain processes intertwined with the wisdom from the rest of one's body, recognizing power differentials and role differences in how information is processed. My hormones don't ask my consent to make me anxious; on the other hand, setting a conscious meditative intention can, to an extent,



change my body posture and brain chemistry. Here is where ways of knowing meet and seem to get along just fine. I know that my womb doesn't literally have a mind of its own, yet I also know that it very much does. These are both the mytho-medical truths I live by. This understanding of the "vast and intricate interconnectedness" of my life will be as much about how I am internally woven as it is about my external connectedness, the latter being a prime new materialist concern (Jones 2016, p. 6). This learning, embodied through the practice of yoga in particular, enhances my sense of interoception and, I find, can ease my anxiety during this disruptive time; it enriches my felt theology as I consider my created, connected nature and try to perceive my body, my own organ music, in each moment. As Irigaray writes,

[O]ur body, right here, right now, gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it. But their "truth" immobilizes us, turns us into statues, if we can't loose its hold on us. If we can't defuse its power by trying to say, right here and now, how we are moved. (Irigaray 1985, p. 214)

This literacy of my own body leads me to wonder if the rest of my body wants agency, power or freedom in the same way my brain seems to. (Basile 2019 critiques Barad's new materialism in similar fashion). This wondering can also be applied to wider concepts of relationality and agency: does other matter want or need agency in the same way humans do? Does God? What does it look like—how is it enacted—to try to let the rest of my body (and other matter, people and God) express itself in its own manner rather than ascribing to it linguistic terms used for the human brain ("speak" or "know", for example; see Maté 2003; May 1995), or by constructing new meanings for linguistic tokens like agency and freedom? Movement is a way for the rest of my body to work with my brain to make meaning using its own means of communication as it performs a vibrant, limited life. I explore this further below. In the main, new materialists reject transcendence in favor of immanence: that energy, that mysterious life, gets channeled into definitions of agency. That seems helpful but limited for the sense of wonder, difference and grace that the impetus of theology implies. Jones suggests instead resisting the reaction of throwing the new-born, co-creative "gravitas" of transcendence out with the "authoritarian totalit[y]" bathwater (Jones 2016, pp. 17–18). I wonder, like Jones, if transcendence can be reimagined as "an unknown hope for disruption" (Jones 2016, p. 18), an emergent power that is constituted and created by collaborative, non-coercive agency and loving freedom (Pavey 2021, p. 8). This is reimagined language that sits well with process theology, and its embrace of disruption feeds a useful theology of (peri)menopause.

As landmarks for this discussion of the interplay of yoga, theology and menopause, I find three terms from Thornton (1991) helpful for describing overlapping stages along a spiral: severance, threshold and emergence (p. 338). Even though the experience of perimenopause heightens my sense of connectedness to others who experience the same transition, there is nonetheless also a sense in which this journey, like my relationship to God and my yoga practice, is also unique to me and undertaken alone. As Ursula le Guin puts it, "[t]he woman who is willing to make that change must become pregnant with herself, at last. She must bear herself, her third self, her old age, with travail and alone" (le Guin 1991, p. 4). This is not a journey towards a "hallucinatory delusion of wholeness" (Betcher 2010, p. 108) but it is a move towards an honest integrity and relationship with the landscape of my embodied self and my beliefs in order to situate myself anew in the world moving forward. This experience is thus both symbolic, imagined and private *and* materially embodied, performed and public, denying the exclusion of either (Jones 2016, p. 13).

The discussion that follows comprises three sections. In the first section, I look briefly at the impact of the dramatic endings of (peri)menopause, with its consequent griefs, anger and liberation. When I come to the mat of menopause, there are things I must leave behind in order to move forward. Moving on to threshold, I explore how breath can symbolize and incarnate a hospitality, a discipline and a release that are the rhythm of this transition.

In the third section, emergence marries with movement as I create new meaning, shifting my muscle memory to co-create new poses, new stories that will carry me forward.

### 3. Severance: The Mat

“The world is not your oyster. It is your ocean . . . Amidst the undulations of uncertainty and the riptides of loss, can we discern the possibility that is *good* for us?” (Keller 2008, pp. 66–67, emphasis in original).

Perimenopause is a midlife opportunity to set things aside for a moment, to sit within the boundaries of the mat and to re-assess. Thanks to hormone spikes and dips, life changes and a diminishing care for the opinion of others, strong emotions emerge, including anger. It feels too as if the field of potentialities amidst which I make my decisions is shrinking. I find unanticipated processing happening at this time as I consider the “cloud of missed possibilities [that] envelops every beginning” (Keller 2003, p. 160). I try to pick apart genuine endings from a perception of feeling lesser, fed by cultural narratives that value youth and fertility. The grounded nature of warrior poses can give shape and expression to these feelings, and the opening, twisting poses of yoga serve me by drawing out these emotions, connecting movement with breath to serve neurophysiological and spiritual release. The “small smile” of yoga, and indeed laughter, are also medicinal aspects. I often arrive on the midlife mat “forlorn in my crab shell and weary of the chase”, yet prepared (sometimes) to face fear and begin “unbandaging wounds” (Stanley 2021, pp. 7–8). As I emerge from my carefully constructed shell, like a “teacup crackled with ten thousand veins”, I encounter menopause as a time of severance both for my own sake and therefore for my community’s sake since acceptance helps me serve others better (Betcher 2010, p. 108). As Coleman explains, creative transformation through this crack that lets the light in “upsets the status quo and demands that we give up the things to which we are attached. But the challenge is for our own sake as it moves us beyond the stagnation of the past that would destroy us” (Coleman 2008, pp. 89–90). Mirroring the discipline of yoga, Irigaray likewise draws us into the present moment: “Be what you are becoming, without clinging to what you might have been, what you might yet be” (Irigaray 1985, p. 214).

An increased sense of connectedness and integrity can be channeled into activism, grit and a drive to seek justice. It makes me move my body beyond constructed boundaries, stretching out my fingers in my own warrior pose to faithfully reach for and touch the fabric of my healing and power like the hemorrhaging woman whose determined agency is honored (Mark 5: 25–34). This may be diversely enacted: among my friends, I have seen it variously appear as an informed push to gain access to HRT; in creating novel rituals to mark the rhythm of the transition (alone and within a circle); and in enforcing interpersonal boundaries or inviting new connections. I find I have diminished patience for pretence and a desire for depth, which has played out in severing adherence to dogmatic, fixed theologies in favor of a broader spiritual journey. This gives me space to feel, move and behave in ways that honor this new desire for embodied, theological authenticity. I feel both challenged and relieved that an in-breath of self-acceptance and release of judgement in this time through permission to feel all emotions has the potential to equip me to tap into a kind of corporeal generosity (Diprose 2002), a spacious, collaborative paradigm that honors boundaries and serves interconnectedness.

A “constitutive multiplicity” (Rivera 2010, p. 121) of self that comes from thinking of a spirited flesh over against “whole”, “normal” bodies provides a way for me to hold together this inevitable midlife mixed bag of joy and pain, regret and hope. This holding together lightly is key to my practice of yoga, blending the hold with the release, the acceptance with the challenge to release further into flexibility. This is not a push: Moore warns that “a muscled, strong-willed pursuit of change can actually stand in the way of substantive transformation” (Moore 1992, p. 19). Thus, through severance, I seek new, salvific ways of perceiving “visions of redemption capable of embracing the fluidity, dynamism and vulnerability of the flesh” both metaphorically and literally (Rivera 2010, p. 122). As I

work to let go of what is not needed and cannot be carried, I enter into a threshold time, symbolized here by the breath.

#### 4. Threshold: Breath

“Another world is not only possible, she’s on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing”. (Roy 2003, p. 75)

Breathing practices of yoga provide a framework here for thinking about the threshold nature of perimenopause and the importance of focus. Morley describes how, with breath as the point of focus in yoga, other aspects of perception recede and “a link or relation is developed between self and object . . . until he or she is joined with and assumes the position of the point of focus (*samadhi*)” (Morley 2001, p. 79). This sense of receding relates to the kenotic, apophatic release of yin yoga poses (which are held for several minutes), the discipline of staying with the body in trouble, the chaos, the anti-structure and the liminality. All these terms serve to describe an in-between time of unknowing that is sustained by the billowing waves of the in-breath, the hold and the out-breath, our “inspiration and . . . expiration of Being” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 167, quoted in Morley 2001, p. 78).

There is a balance here between the inward breath into the world of the body and the outward breath into the flesh of the world; for a “theology of becoming”, it embodies the “dichotomy of ‘making’ and ‘letting be’” (Keller 2003, p. 17). Coupling physiology with spirituality, a breathing meditation works with our parasympathetic nervous system to enhance a feeling of spacious harmony that makes room for spirit: “*ruach* . . . names the experience of the divine as breathing room, as ‘the space of freedom in which the living being can unfold’” (Betcher 2014, pp. 174–75, quoting Moltmann 1992, p. 43). Betcher goes on to cite Eliade’s work exploring spirit as a sacred metaphor in times of “catastrophic dislocation” for the Hebrew people; in other words, “[f]or ancient persons who had lost their religiocultural maps of meaning and mattering and whose lives were constricted by ethnocultural xenophobia” (Betcher 2014, p. 175). The metaphor works too for the dislocation, the loss of “living map[s]” (Braidotti 2011, p. 10) of bodily meaning and my sense of lostness in perimenopause: a spirited space opens up through breath.

##### 4.1. The In-Breath

The in-breath is a place of accepting help in the form of the incoming oxygen provided and the spiritual support of both fellow travelers and a God who accompanies and sustains. Breathing practices of yoga take what is instinctive and make it deliberate, drawing our attention to this movement of air. They help with the visualization of air filling one’s whole body as an imagined act and gift of spacious nourishment. In the body scan meditation to accompany his book, Williams (2011) asks his listeners at one point to visualize the in-breath on the back of their face. This intriguing image prompts consideration of how one’s self is nurtured behind the scenes; that inner depth behind the face that forms the outward-facing surface.

The sharp in-breath, the held breath and the whispered whistle of a slow out-breath can be an act of managing pain, and pain of various kinds is part of menstruation and the perimenopause transition. Unfortunately, as Betcher points out, “we have little or no cultural wisdom for navigating pain, for making sense of it or with it” even though it is key for our moral and ethical sensibilities and actions (Betcher 2010, p. 113). She adds that “[p]ain introduces one to a certain ‘submission’ or ‘patience’ with life” and is deeply connected to a time of transition, of threshold. She continues: “Suffering allows our rigid, defensive selves to move through an unmarked door of disorganization and reorganization, to recognize the nominal looseness and, equally, the permissiveness of existence” (Betcher 2014, p. 182). She draws an analogy between suffering and generosity in its giving up of control and mastery (p. 182). In both, there is an openness to deep plenitude and thereby to generosity or hospitality as a way of being, a practice that is embedded in “the deeps of intercorporeal tissue” and also, I would suggest, intracorporeal tissue. This practice

becomes an obligation in the sense of an inherent ligature both within myself and between me and the other—“sympathy with the cellular”—rather than an imposed duty (p. 184). Breathing in this plenitude strengthens these ligatures, these binds that release.

Posthuman feminists such as Shildrick, Braidotti and Betcher, along with theologian Keller, work with the image of the monster to bring energy and hospitality, each in their own way, to difference, chaos and grace (Betcher 2010, p. 114; Keller 2003, p. 101). For Shildrick, the monstrous and its incoherence “exposes the vulnerability at the heart of all becoming” but also “opens up the question of how to open up—provisionally—other more adequate structures that can incorporate corporate undecidability” (Shildrick 2002, p. 8). Similarly, Keller’s “tehomitic ethic” means that “to love is to bear with the chaos. Not to like it or foster it but to recognize there the unformed future” (Keller 2003, p. 29). She suggests that “even amidst”, and I would add especially amidst, “their more abysmal uncertainties—the chaos that cannot be controlled, the mystery that cannot be solved—appear ‘monsters of grace’” (Keller 2003, p. 23, quoting the title of a Philip Glass piece).

So, when my perimenopausal body is unpredictable, when it shows up as a bloody, anxious monster that cannot be ignored, “neither a total stranger nor completely familiar” (Braidotti 2011, p. 216), can I welcome it as it is? Can I offer it—offer myself—nourishing grace and a place to rest, with an in-breath of corporeal hospitality, recognizing my own unformed future? Moore observes that this befriending in-breath of hospitality to monstrous pain is, in fact, homeopathic: indeed, “an intent to heal can get in the way of seeing . . . . Observance is homeopathic in its workings . . . in the paradoxical way that it befriends a problem rather than making an enemy” (Moore 1992, p. 10). In parallel, Creamer points to Betcher’s “theological pedagogy of pain” as creative for disability theology and as extending beyond this theology to recognize the “creative/creating value of the engagement of pain [in order to] reimagine relationality and authentic interdependence” (Creamer 2010, p. 127). This is not to glorify pain but to recognize that it carries a lesson. The pain of menstruation and the often painful process of (peri)menopause may be a gift, or at least have a silver lining. While disability is a distinct experience, we can learn from Betcher’s disability theology here for understanding menopause and its impact.

#### 4.2. *Hold the Pose*

Yoga comes from the same root as yoke, a word that describes the means and act of restricting and controlling the movement of a creature “so that the creature, the vehicle it is yoked to and the driver arrive at a chosen destination” (Ciołkosz 2020, p. 492). The meaning of “yoga” became metonymically extended to refer to a journey itself (Ciołkosz 2020, p. 493). Holding a pose, like yoking a creature, is not static but part of a journey. Our first instinct may be to imagine our brain as the driver, the rest of our body as the creature and yoga as the yoke. There is, however, imaginative potential in rearranging these roles to see how our perception shifts. Stanley, for example, describes “yoking” life to rise up stronger through grit and loving determination, to be “present to [one’s] own divinity” (Stanley 2021, p. 17). This metaphor of the yoga journey works well for the perimenopausal nomadic transition, “moving across different territories on even or bumpy roads, encountering various obstacles and possibly enemies to fight, and, finally, arriving at a point of destination” (Ciołkosz 2020, p. 492).

Betcher argues that “the space of ultimate freedom always comes . . . by way of a yoke” (Betcher 2014, p. 247), offering a reminder of the role of limitations. Keller similarly insists, “in that borderland . . . the flowing potentiality of each actuality, each creature, realizes itself in limitation” (Keller 2003, p. 7). This recognition of limit can be enacted through the holding discipline of yoga, which has a role in physiological self-regulation, “a conscious ability to maintain stability of the system by managing or altering responses to threat or adversity” (Sullivan et al. 2018, p. 2). Holding a pose as I go through perimenopause thus teaches me about a kind of control and discipline of limits that is dynamic and freeing. Shildrick notes that menstruation has been taken historically to be a sign of “women’s inherent lack of control of the body and, by extension, of the self” (Shildrick 1997, p. 34). In



fact, living with menstruation and menopause may offer an advantage in understanding different interpretations of control.

Through theological imagination, I would extend this holding image, adding to holding a sense of being held by God. Holding a pose thus centers me in the balance and form of my body, reminding me of the forces keeping me up and those rooting me down. Amidst the chaos of my freedom and limitation, my bounded body and connected self are held. As I move off the mat, my task is to hold space for others to balance in, yoked as we are to each other in a bind that adds stability and strength, to prevent our vehicles overturning as we carry our burdens. Working and journeying together is how the shared yoke that Jesus invites us to take on becomes gentle, humble and easy (Matthew 11: 29–30). Thus, while a yoke suggests fearful submission, Betcher suggests reading this submission as “opening oneself outward” (Betcher 2014, p. 173) in vulnerability and interdependence. As Buechner notes, to hold is not to grasp: “the one thing a clenched fist cannot do is accept, even from *le bon Dieu* himself, a helping hand” (Buechner 1992, pp. 13–14). Nor is it to force or to reimpose mastery, but rather is inherently, constructively peaceful. As yoga instructor Sanford observes: “energetic realization both requires and creates the realization of nonviolence” (Sanford 2006, p. 203).

In holding a pose, I am turning tensions into performative moments of dynamic balance, of composition of self in relation to the Divine, embodying Keller’s theology of becoming, where I find a “layered complexity, a multidimensionality of becoming, in which differences are neither kept separate (as in a clearly bounded dyad of Creator/creature) nor fused (as in a pantheistic substance) but *held* in contrast” (Keller 2003, p. 164, emphasis added). These threshold moments provide handholds in my journey of transition.

#### 4.3. The Out-Breath

As part of a journey of severance and threshold, the out-breath is both a metaphor for, and the physical experience of, letting go, of flow: of the flooding blood and sweat, the possibility of childbirth, the previous waistline, the identities and roles, the missed opportunities and the illusion of control that are part of this “bifurcating and diverging” time of life (Keller 2003, p. 170). Our bodies and selves refuse any longer to be “forcefully consolidated” (Wigg-Stevenson 2021, p. 128). As Betcher describes, they reflect “a deep anxiety inherent in humanism’s relation to the flesh . . . the dread fear of the precarious vulnerability of flesh” and mortality (Betcher 2010, p. 110).

Keller also notes the connection between “tehomophobia” and women’s sexuality, connecting it with the image of the flood (Keller 2003, pp. 31–32). I would connect it too with a fear of blood and its association with pain. Shildrick describes the “especial immanence of the female body [with its] putative leakiness, the outflow of the body which breaches the boundaries of the proper”, causing a monstrous “loss of definition, or dissolution” of established differences such as mind/body, inner/outer, self/other, prompting “unease, even horror” (Shildrick 1997, pp. 16–17). The menopausal woman, argue Komesaroff et al., is presented socially and psychologically as “the personification of the ‘object’” (Komesaroff et al. 1997, p. 10). However, while I recognize this representation, this is not how it feels to me and, as I choose my menopausal myths to live by, not what brings life: as Keller promises, “Tiamat’s insurrection has barely begun” (Keller 2003, p. 34). There is power in the blood. As I swim in this chaotic, fertile flood of disruption, will I find a toehold, a mountain pose that lifts my head above the surface to breathe, or will I find a vinyasa flow that reminds me how to breathe underwater like a newborn? Or both?

In yogic tradition, energy flows from the belly, and Ravindra’s reading of John 7: 37–38—“Out of the believer’s belly shall flow rivers of living water”—provides an image of “life-giving streams” and jewels that may elicit a slight (if ironic) smile when the painful floods flow in the middle of the night and with an out-breath we feel our “old self . . . be[ing] crucified”:

The seat of the spirit here is identified with the belly (Greek *koilia*), in keeping with many spiritual traditions, including the Hebraic . . . This center is in the

belly, below the solar plexus . . . near the navel, which physically is the place for the inflow of the life-sustaining energies in the womb through the umbilical cord. In the theory of Yoga, one of the very important chakras (centers of energy) located near the navel is the *manipura chakra*, which literally means ‘the center that fills with jewels’. (Ravindra 2004, p. 96)

For all the talk of floods and fluids, to feel dried up (metaphorically or physically) in menopause is to feel disconnected, to lose one way in which wateriness is connecting us to the flesh and fluid of the world, especially if offered a feminist framework that centers wateriness as definitive of life and feminine nature (Neimanis 2017, p. 2; Keller 2003, pp. 31, 35). The metaphor of fluidity may then feel less resonant here, although perhaps only in one way. As a metaphor of multiplicity, it is carried into a queering of identity, as noted earlier: “Queering, in this way, means to question and complicate, to challenge and play, to propose and subvert, and to push continually toward complexity. It is a move beyond the body and into flesh” (Creamer 2010, p. 126), a description that feels apt for the (peri)menopause season.

The out-breath release of yoga reflects a sense of kenosis, of both literal and metaphorical self-emptying but to make space for the new. The space becomes *chora*, crucially both empty and full: “[r]oomy, womby, but dangerously indeterminate” (Keller in Kearney 2016, p. 74). Keller describes the Jewish mysticism where “God is revealed as place, as *Makom*—in whom dwell all creatures” (Keller 2003, p. 167). This is a “spatiality of spirit, an articulate space that cannot be opposed to interior depth” (p. 167). We might think about our bodies as articulate, free space that situates us in a richer, networked spatiality of spirit through movement such as yoga, participating in constant becoming. And here the emotions find a place connecting the spaciousness of spirit with the vulnerability of flesh away from the “logic of one . . . not so interested in wholeness as in passion” (Betcher 2010, p. 108). In my perimenopausal journey, a roomy, “womby” God takes the risk of non-mastery, accompanying me, equipping me to find the way rather than imposing directions. In finding the way towards emergence, I must participate by making a move and this leads us to the next section.

## 5. Emergence: Movement

“Above all, what a teaching demands is that one engage in practice, that a wayfarer actually tread the path” (Ravindra 2004, p. 93).

In balance with severance, release and stillness comes a decision to move forward and co-create a kinesthetic vinyasa of integrity, authenticity, voice and identity: the menopause is both an ending and a beginning. Apophatic unknowing is a humble posture that prevents the imposition of foreclosure but leaves me treading water, which I can only do for a limited amount of time. Movement keeps me afloat; it allows me to move and reach for a conceptual handhold or toehold, to see if for a moment I can touch the ground. In this sense, movement such as through yoga can be the cataphatic, self-organizing determination that balances with apophatic acknowledgement: faith without agency is dead. Otherwise, as Betcher notes, “[a]pophatic unknowing could further suppress that which culture holds abject” (Betcher 2010, p. 115).

Movement is elemental and intuitive; Ciołkosz calls it our “primary—and primal—experience” (Ciołkosz 2020, p. 490). She continues: “human kinaesthetic experience—or, more broadly, human sensorimotor experience—is a key substratum for concept formation and language” (Ciołkosz 2020, p. 49). Thus, movement and sensation underpin our perception of our experience. Through movement, we inhabit and “en-carnate” our theology, and participate in a “rhythm of bodily becoming” that builds this felt sense of who we are (LaMothe 2008, p. 583). LaMothe further insists, “*we are movement*: we know that the movements we are make us who we are. And we know it by *participating* in the process of making ourselves” (LaMothe 2008, p. 583, emphasis in original). However, Betcher’s conceptual move from body to flesh is important here in challenging notions of ability and its power that are tied to mobility. While we do need our internal organs and cells to

keep moving in order to live, we are not wholly defined by external movement (Betcher 2010, p. 118). I explore in this section the role that conscious movement can have as one way of making meaning and weaving embodied theology, particularly through yoga, but Betcher's caution is important to keep in mind.

The movements we make are analogous to the linguistic metaphors we use; they shape and open up meaning. Change the movement and you change the metaphor, and experience, perception, brain chemistry and theology change. In other words, while language has a role in shaping thought and action, bodily movement that stretches muscle memory is also performative in changing reality, shaping perception and language, and instantiating my "living map, a transformative account of the self" (Braidotti 2011, p. 10). My figure, my postures and my movements are my cartographic method, situating me in the world. They are my way of implementing my integrity and "taking up space", as yoga teachers like to say. Thus, as I experience the chaotic physical, spiritual and mental re-organization of perimenopause, movements and bodily gestures help me shape the way these experiences are perceived. Grosz (describing Henri Bergson's work Bergson 2014) captures the back and forth of movement and meaning in terms of performative free acts:

[I]f this subject from which the act springs is never the same, never self-identical, always and imperceptibly becoming other than what it once was and is now, then free acts, having been undertaken, are those which transform us, which we can incorporate into our becomings in the very process of their changing us. Free acts are those which both express us and which transform us, which express our transforming. (Grosz 2010, p. 146)

Movement immediately connects one to the other in novel ways: "New creation . . . takes place within the shared, spatiotemporal body of all creatures" (Keller 2003, p. 19). The *creatio ex profundis* transition of perimenopause both requires and invites me to move differently, and to live out my interconnectedness as a creative, co-operative salutation to God's flexible, holding love, making new "living gestures of aliveness" (Weber 2019, p. 47). The turning and twisting around—the repentance—places me in a position to be open to receive salvific grace. As reflected in process theology, the process is (at least) as important as the destination.

Yoga practice relies on "inventive, rigorously prescribed ways" of moving for the purpose of "attaining, or at least facilitating liberation" (Ciołkosz 2020, p. 491). And yet, while poses and movements may be experienced differently in each practice, expansion also implies novelty. Some of my friends lean on the repeated rituals of traditional religion during their perimenopause, while others (like me) prefer to wander theologically. In parallel, some benefit from the same yoga sequence repeated every practice, while others (like me) blend yoga with playful improvised movement. Expressive arts therapy of all kinds is helpful here for the latter and enhances the literacy of listening to the body. Irigaray encourages this creativity, cautioning that "if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story" (Irigaray 1985, p. 214). From this expressive arts perspective, the invitation is to roll out the mat and let one's body form a pose, a shape, of its choosing. The pose can be named if desired, but not interpreted, rather letting it "speak for itself without analysing" (Levine 2019, p. 66). This playful, poetic approach relinquishes the need and responsibility for interpretative control and allows for playful emergence through movement. The role of movement in generating meaning gives rise to a sense of performative ritual that brings forth transformative healing through a vulnerability and openness before the Divine: "if we perform [our] brokenness through our own fragmented selves, we offer God the raw materials required to transgress reality as it is in order to transform it into what it could be" (Wigg-Stevenson 2021, pp. 21–22).

## 6. Conclusions

These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea. These streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries. This unceasing mobility.

This life—which will perhaps be called our restlessness, whims, pretenses, or lies. All this remains very strange to anyone claiming to stand on solid ground. (Irigaray 1985, p. 215)

Using the notions of severance, threshold and emergence, I have woven together an exploration of yoga, theology and menopause using the material of my own narrative. I have grafted in insights and imagery from process theology along with feminist and queer theology, new materialism, yoga research, somatic therapy and neurophysiology. Keller's process theology of becoming and change, sourced in the flooding depths, resonates with this period of change, transition and transformation, as does queer theology's interest in the performative and the flesh/body distinction. Themes of hospitality and generosity both to oneself and to others at this time of loss, anger, pain and liberation present hopeful ways of creating meaning, and these themes are embodied and represented through the patterned balance and changing movement of yoga.

Given what has been discussed, what might it look like for theology to consider an image of God as a menopausal woman, still changing, shaped by life, wrinkled, open and fluent? She accompanies us on the heroine's journey of perimenopause and menopause, yoking life and co-creating ligatures within and without in order to sculpt a flowing path forward. Unlike the archetypal hero's journey (Campbell 1949), this journey, the change, is not linear and involves as much community as solitude: as Coleman rightly emphasizes, "[s]alvation does not come to an individual" (Coleman 2008, p. 166). While an almost universal transition for close to half of all humans, the experience varies widely and so this discussion has been necessarily situated and resonant for my own experience, one which I have found, so far, to be serious and ridiculous in equal measure. It is somewhat horrendous, but then it'll be magnificent.

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