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Shaping the Earth

Erika Price

*Water is fluid, soft, and yielding.
But water will wear away rock,
which is rigid and cannot yield . . .
This is another paradox:
what is soft is strong.*

—Lao Tzu

Indiana produced two of this nation's greatest oddities: Michael Jackson and my brother-in-law. I never met Michael, but my thirty-five-year-old brother-in-law introduced himself to me by rolling up his left shirtsleeve past his shoulder, bending his arm like he had someone in a chokehold, and then demanding, "Feel my pecs!" I stood paralyzed, trying to avoid eye contact with any muscle group below his forehead. Either this was a test—a bizarre type of in-law initiation—or Indiana folk were far less reserved than I had imagined.

When I didn't accept my brother-in-law's generous invitation, he grabbed my hand and placed my three middle fingers just below his collarbone and to the right of the flexed and freckled bicep that was now turning a shade of purple. "See?" he grinned with satisfaction at the firmness of his chest. "I lift weights." I could have countered his offer with my mouth open wide, inviting him to inspect my cavity-free molars with a declaration that "See? I floss!" But I didn't. Instead, I nervously pulled my lips wide across my face in what I hoped would pass for a smile and excused myself from the room to collect my nerves: I still had four more in-laws to meet.



In a way, I can see why my brother-in-law was so anxious to flaunt his physique: it took a lot of effort to make all that muscle. Heaven knows I've tried to make some muscle of my own. I've joined gyms, run in races, hefted weights, and crunched my abdominals into spasms. And yet, when I look in the mirror, I still see a silhouette that is more rolled than ripped, more curved than cut.

I blame the disappearance of my figure on the fact that it spent years trying to contain large pregnancies and has since gone into retirement out of sheer exhaustion. But where is the sexiness in that trade-off? Marble bodies—not motherly ones—get our compliments, our headlines, and our resources. But why is it that we value hardened bodies so highly? Is it the work ethic inherent in the product? The attractiveness of the aesthetic? A fascination with the alchemy that turns weakness into strength, flesh into fiber?

Maybe it's the psychology of the language we use: Exercise. Fit. Physique. These words slice the air with their syllables. They are crisp, emphatic, strong—a motto for the modern age. We could use more holistic terms like *being*, *person*, and *soul*, but these words slow our mouths with taffylike vowels and rolling transitions. They are round, patient, gentle, even motherly—qualities we simply don't have time for in the rush for physical perfection.



Just hours after my first childbirth, a young nurse came into my room and leaned over my exhausted body. She gently pulled down the blanket that rested on my stomach to reveal a bruised and broken but triumphant womb. I'm not quite sure what I expected her to do at that moment. Did I think she would put her hand over her heart in a moment of silence? Place a blue ribbon on my belly? Clap?

Instead, she quickly flexed her hands in the air and then pressed her fingertips into the raw dough of my abdomen and began to knead. With straightened arms and flexed palms, she descended into my midsection like a curse. That is when I, too, began to curse. Between gasps for air I asked her why she was torturing me. She explained that pressing on the uterus would help it to cramp down, stem its blood flow, and return it back to its normal size. If I had had the presence of mind to chitchat with her about the physiology of the womb that she was in the process of pulverizing, I would have reminded her that my uterus had just exerted

up to one hundred pounds of downward force with each contraction of an eternal labor and that after superhuman efforts such as those, then maybe, just maybe, my muscles might deserve a little break and lot more credit. After all, it took my uterus nine months to get to the size it was that day, and I was quite sure it could get back to where it came from if given the same amount of time. But no, unfortunately for me, that is not how things work in the forsaken world of postpartum care. The nurse assured me it was for my own health and safety as she continued to dig her fists in toward my spine.

It was an abrupt transition: the act of bringing life into this world had reversed the modern trajectory that softness must yield to hardness. I had survived the most physically trying experience of my life, where everything was hard—my womb was hard, my bed was hard, my labor was hard, my breathing was hard. Pain and exertion had sculpted my brow like stone. But after the crisis, after the hardness had threatened to consume and break me, my world gave way to softness—soft cries, soft skin, soft blankets, soft light. That night I swaddled my mewling baby in the warmth of my folds and fed him from the strength of my body. At that moment, I sensed the meaning of this new pattern: Softness wasn't the absence of hardness, it was the completion of it. Stone had joined with water, death had joined with life, woman had joined with mother.



I have had the privilege of coming home from the hospital with five boys. Five times I have agonized over finding the perfect name for the new arrival. I believe in strong and regal names for my boys—names that will go before them in life, names that will shape them into men and sound good when they take over the presidency or the desk of the nightly news. For example, I wanted to name our fifth baby Henry. It was a confident and commanding calling card—the perfect name for a son. My husband, on the other hand, liked the name Sheldon. Sheldon might have gotten points for being an ancestral name, but it had the rhetorical strength of a marshmallow. We named our fifth baby Henry.

From the moment these babies of mine took breath, it seems like the world and I have been constructing a space for them where the expectations of “manliness” are clear: strong names and strong bodies, sharp toys and sharp tools, tough jobs and even tougher attitudes. And to some extent these expectations might be good ones. Our society needs men who can and will do hard things—men who will face the world outside their parents' basements, get their hands dirty, work at marriage,

and support their kids. But I'm fearful that with all my efforts to harden my boys' resolve and cement them into pillars of strength, I haven't made enough room for them to be soft.

Take today, for instance. My thirteen-year-old came home from school and promptly fell into a coma on the couch. His nine-year-old brother took this opportunity to put a taffy-colored teddy bear with a bow around its neck in his big brother's arms. When the rest of us discovered the prank, there was nothing left to do but take a picture with the iPhone and send it to everyone we knew. Within nanoseconds, the picture was surfing the Internet and ringing text message tones. Our thirteen-year-old received more likes and LOLs than a Harlem Shake—and all because he was seen with a stuffed animal.

It's not that I want my boys to take up cuddling with toys, but I do want them to know that it is okay to be tender and vulnerable and that softness isn't a concession to strength—it is a corollary and one that the Savior knew well. In the New Testament, Christ is referred to as both the sacrificial Lamb of God and the King of the Jews. He silently writes with his finger in the sand and then later overcomes a tomb of stone. He heals the lame with tender hands and then cleanses the temple with a whip. He is the son who worries about his mother from the cross and then commends his spirit into the hands of his father.

Christ is the sublime combination of strength and subtlety, humility and power. His nature is one of perfect paradoxes: "Listen to the voice of the Lord your God, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whose course is one eternal round" (D&C 35:1). He is everything good that is masculine, but he is everything good that is feminine, too—the fruition of his mother's and Father's best qualities, a Son of the Most High.

Maybe that is what I'm really wishing for my sons. Not only do I want them to be like their Savior, but I want them to reflect the best that is in me and my husband. Somewhere in the tableaux of our sons' lives, I hope I'll see broad strokes of crimson and soft wisps of sapphire and know that they got those colors from me: my modest nose, my love of music, my resilient joints, my quick laughter, my strong stomach, my sentimental heart. These are my best qualities, the best I have to offer them from my body and soul.



Every year we try to plan a unique family trip with the boys. This year we're thinking of backpacking the Grand Canyon. I can see the hike in

my mind already: my boys will go through 3.9 pounds of trail mix in less than two miles, my husband will give a tour-guide discourse on the geologic history of the area, and I will be composing my will. It will be dusty and hot, and dehydrated exhaustion will lurk around every corner. My sons will love it: the ultimate physical challenge, a male badge of courage. On the other hand, my fear of the animal kingdom and I will be praying that we don't encounter any bighorn sheep along the way.

At some point during our hike, however, I imagine that we will pause our step to take in the surroundings: the coral cliffs and their jagged majesty, the way they look as though they've been etched with God's hammer and chisel. Once we have taken in the power of the expansive cleft, I wonder if we will glance down at the Colorado River below—that soft, satin ribbon of water that flows beneath it all, caressing the rock and singing life into the desert. Perhaps then we'll realize that it has been there all along, gently shaping the earth in its path.

This essay by Erika Price received an honorable mention in the BYU Studies 2014 personal essay contest.