

Muscle memory

By [David Dragseth](#)

December 27, 2010

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Dragseth's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Athletes and musicians talk about a thing called muscle memory. Our bodies know things, and at the appropriate time they click into function, even if they're a bit rusty. We don't even think about it.

But muscle memory is more than just physical. It is spiritual, too. Our bodies, words made flesh, carry spiritual lessons and realities far beyond the time when our thinking selves forget.

I played in the concert band when I was in high school. Before our large winter production, we would give each other carnations. On our music stands, we would leave each other a single flower, complete with notes of good will, good luck, the occasional flirtation with a flute player. With more than 100 musicians giving their gifts, the concert hall was saturated in carnation smell each night.

To this day, whenever I smell the cheap flower, I feel inspired, loved and a little bit flirty. I cannot help it. My body reminds me.

Our spiritual words work this way, too. Over time they become flesh and dwell among us. If inspiration is a carnation, then confession is certainly the way ash gets stuck under your fingernails after burning all that brush in a November fire. Resurrection is of course the smell of a lily but also the look of a sundress after months of winter gray.

If the word becomes flesh, than muscle memory is not just about muscles. It is about spirits incarnate with Christ in the mystery of the word made flesh so that our flesh, reminded, can bring us back to God again.