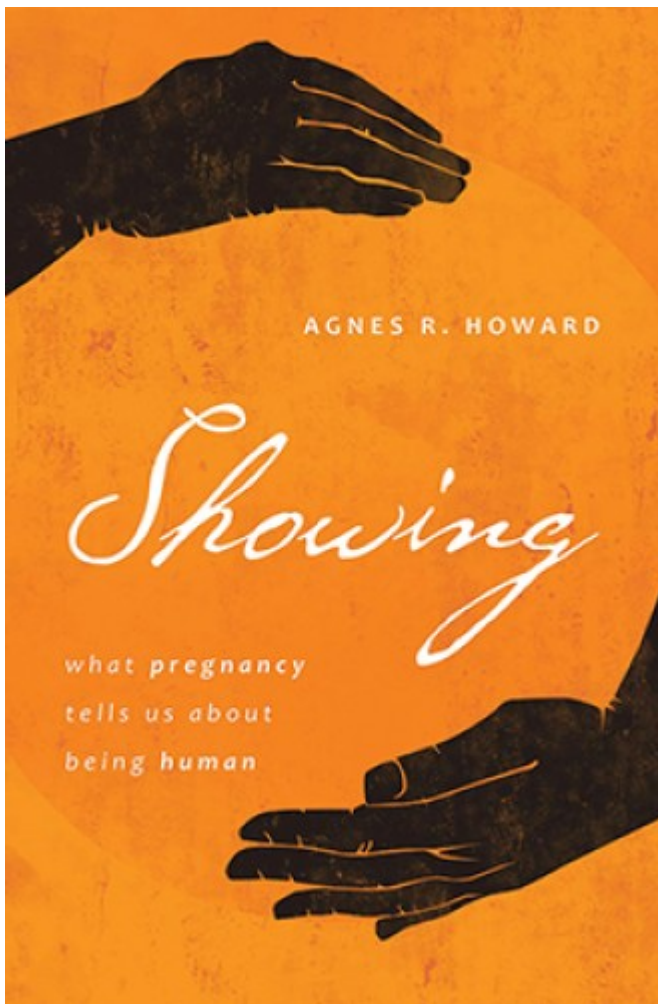


Pregnancy is undeniably beautiful and bizarre

Both Agnes Howard and Brittany Bergman encourage reflection on a transformational experience.

by [Leslie Verner](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue

In Review



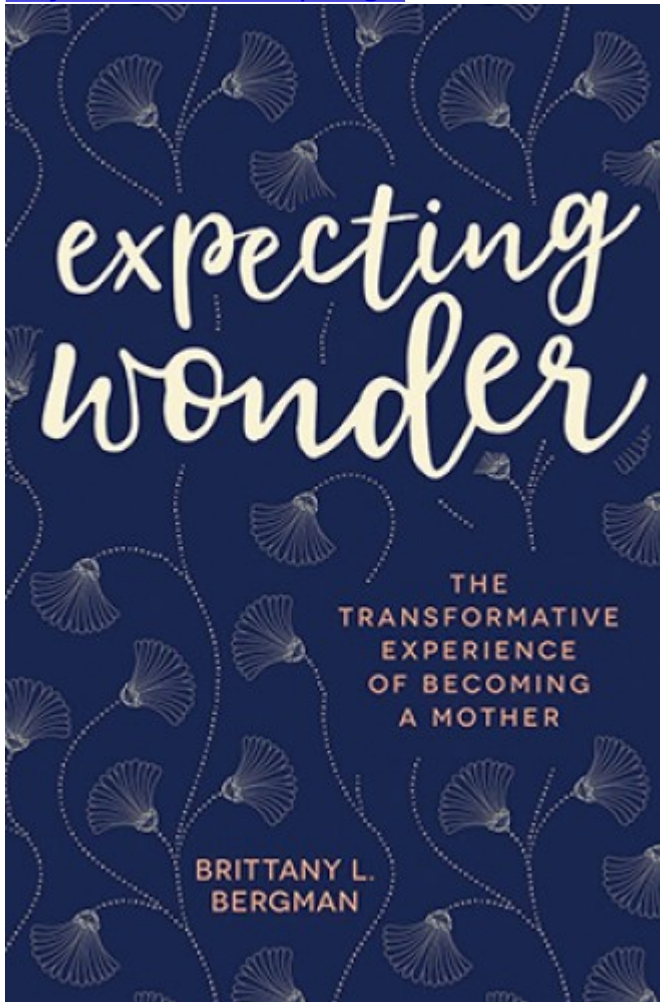
Showing

What Pregnancy Tells Us about Being Human

By Agnes R. Howard

Eerdmans

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)



Expecting Wonder

The Transformative Experience of Becoming a Mother

By Brittany L. Bergman

Broadleaf Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](#)

Even before I gave birth to my own three children, I had the sense that pregnancy and childbirth are a portal to the divine. A deep mystery surrounds the intense

process of knitting a human soul in the secret pocket of the body. Our culture doesn't usually encourage pregnant women to reflect on the transformational experience of bearing and giving birth to a child. But both Agnes Howard and Brittany Bergman do.

Howard, who teaches history and the humanities at Valparaiso University, delves into the philosophies, beliefs, folk traditions, scientific theories, and superstitions surrounding pregnancy. Her extensive research traces the fascinating evolution of thought in the United States on conception, embryology, medical care, and gestation of the fetus. In *Showing*, pregnancy emerges as a phenomenon that is both normal and bizarre.

When does "ensoulment" of a fetus occur? What have we lost as we've allowed modern medicine to reign over our pregnant bodies? How does pregnancy at the same time incubate new life and change women? Howard considers these questions from an academic framework; yet, her artful prose makes the book accessible to any thoughtful reader interested in understanding pregnancy within the context of history and culture. "Not only pregnant women need to think about pregnancy," she argues. "The experience of giving hospitality in the body to another human is not just a useful lesson for women who do it, but for all of us."

Most recent books about pregnancy focus on the baby rather than the mother, Howard notes, and they lean heavily on science while undercutting cultural tradition and intuition. She touches on spirituality as a way of framing how pregnancy impacts a woman's inner life, but the book's main goal is to advocate for a new vision of pregnancy that is less dependent on the vocabulary and routines of the medical establishment for making sense of the experience. "The lack of a culturally current way of appreciating childbearing, outside the medical-scientific one, tends to trivialize an enormously important part of human experience."

Howard contemplates the link between a pregnant mother's deeds and her child's present and future health. Noting that pregnancy is both personal and public in nature, she writes that "the witness of the woman with child communicates in a 'semi-public' way our mutual dependence, participation in creation, and invitation to charity." Pregnancy is not a passive or solo endeavor.

For this reason, pregnancy frequently catalyzes an identity overhaul in women. Bearing a child impacts all of a woman's relationships. It reshapes her previously

existing relationship with her partner, creates a new relationship with her offspring, and shifts her understanding of herself. Certain character virtues tend to become “especially conspicuous in pregnancy,” including prudence, charity, hospitality, and courage.

The prudent mother, Howard explains, educates herself on actions that will most benefit her growing child and may alleviate her own anxiety. Charity is the most evident virtue exhibited in pregnancy, as a woman offers her body for the sake of growing and sustaining new life. The discomforts of pregnancy trigger sacrificial love on behalf of another human being—a stranger. Howard suggests that “pregnancy is an ongoing act of welcoming the stranger even as that hospitality transforms the stranger into a beloved person.” Women not only suffer from rapid physical changes and pain in childbirth, but they may also need courage to face miscarriage, stillbirth, birth defects, disabilities, or other unforeseen challenges.

Howard proposes some cultural gestures and rituals that communities and churches might utilize to better honor childbearing. Parties, maternity clothing exchanges, and forming groups with other pregnant women can help center pregnancy as a sacred rite of passage. She quips, “What a loss it would be to understand the point of this prenatal activity as just to get a baby born.” Indeed, something profound vanishes in our culture when we ignore the deep meaning inherent in bearing and birthing a human child.

While *Showing* chronicles the breadth of the history, culture, and science of pregnancy in the United States, *Expecting Wonder* mines the soul of one pregnant woman. Bergman echoes Howard when she declares pregnancy to be both “undeniably beautiful” and “totally bizarre.” Like all good memoirists, Bergman unveils universal truth within her particular tale.

Through a chronological retelling of her own first pregnancy, Bergman considers body image, perfectionism, self-care, marriage, identity shifts, friendship, trusting intuition, facing limitations, and releasing control. What if the pain, inconvenience, and discomfort of pregnancy are meant for our good? How can we emerge from this experience with greater confidence, strength, and a sense of self? How can we connect with God and others through bearing a child?

Like a friend writing an intimate letter, Bergman relates how she overcame some of her own fears, worries, and body struggles. Her book is a safe, humble, and gentle

guide for women who long to go beyond birth plans and baby registries to search for deeper purposes in pregnancy. Her style is candid and conversational, but she doesn't adopt the flippant tone of the typical mommy blogger.

Bergman begins each brief chapter by sharing an anecdote from her pregnancy experience—taking a pregnancy test, navigating her first ultrasound, deciding whether to get an epidural. She then reflects on the levity of that experience and shares what she discovered about God, herself, and others. At the point when she “started to feel like pregnancy was happening to me while I wasn't paying attention,” Bergman made the conscious choice to probe deeper into the entire process of pregnancy.

Bergman nudges readers to love, nurture, and listen to their own pregnant bodies. She also reveals how she has learned to be kind to herself. A friend reminds her she doesn't need to be a hero, a mantra she often repeats to herself as she chooses smooth paths over bumpy ones when given the option. Her birthing experience is both agonizing and illuminating to her. In the end, she envisions a sisterhood of mothers who empower her to do what women have always done. She finds that she can trust her body.

Bergman portrays pregnancy and childbirth as spiritual sacraments that have the potential to permanently transform women. Walking with her through her experience offers pregnant women the solace of solidarity during their own internal and external metamorphosis. “We will never be the same,” she writes. “We will always be marked by motherhood.” I couldn't help but think that reading *Expecting Wonder* before bed when I was pregnant would have comforted me more than the pregnancy manual I did read, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

Both Bergman and Howard show how much a pregnant woman can benefit from spiritualizing, dramatizing, and plumbing the depths of herself and God for wisdom amid the prenatal checkups, hospitals, and pregnancy apps. Read in tandem, these two books celebrate the deep meaning found in the ordinary, bizarre, and holy human experience of pregnancy.