

The Spirituality of Dance

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Reston

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We have many methods of spiritual practice: quiet contemplation, journaling, walking in nature, and more. One of my important spiritual practices is social dance. Dance illustrates embodied theology, as you will experience through the dancing presented by my colleagues from the Greater Washington English Country Dance community.

READING: excerpt from *Gift from the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh

A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern, intricate but gay and swift and free, like a country dance of Mozart's. To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand; only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back---it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners, moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it.

The joy of such a pattern is not only the joy of creation or the joy of participation, it is also the joy of living in the moment. Lightness of touch and living in the moment are intertwined. One cannot dance well unless one is completely in time with the music, not leaning back to the last step or pressing forward to the next one, but poised directly on the present step as it comes. Perfect poise on the beat is what gives good dancing its sense of ease, of timelessness, of the eternal... The dancers who are perfectly in time never destroy life in each other or in themselves.

But how does one learn this technique of the dance? Why is it so difficult? What makes us hesitate and stumble? It is fear, I think, that makes one cling nostalgically to the last moment or clutch greedily toward the next.... But how to exorcise fear? It can only be exorcised by its opposite, love. When the heart is flooded with love, there is no room in it for fear, for doubt, for hesitation. And it is this lack of fear that makes for the dance. When each partner loves so completely that he has forgotten to ask himself whether or not he is loved in return: when he only knows that he loves and is moving to its music, then, and then only, are two people able to dance perfectly in tune to the same rhythm.

SERMON: *The Spirituality of Dance*

I want to tell you a story about the power of dance. The story comes from the Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka. She interviewed a Catholic priest, who spent several months in Ethiopia doing famine relief work in a devastated village. He told Thandeka of an experience that changed his life.

Soon after he arrived in the village, an airdrop of food was overdue. Rather than sitting around idly, the people of the village danced a circle dance for hours on end, to send good energies to the 'gods' of the airdrop. To the beat of a drum, the dance was very simple: 1 - 2 - 3 - JUMP, 1 - 2 - 3 - JUMP, over and over. So the priest decided to join in. But he discovered a horrible reality: he was dance-impaired. He couldn't jump at the right time: too soon, too late, never on the beat. Villagers broke out in peals of laughter watching him. Some fell on the ground laughing so hard. The priest knew the villagers were laughing with him, not at him. He admitted that he probably marched to the beat of a different drummer.

But he also learned something much more important. Tears filled his eyes as he recalled for Thandeka that 'ah-hah' moment he had! His whole life through, he told her, he thought he had KNOWN God. But it was only there, dancing in community, that he also FELT God. He felt God as the unconditional love that the community expressed through dancing together.

Definitions

'Dance' is often used metaphorically to describe human relationships, as we heard Anne Morrow Lindberg in the reading. We 'dance' around issues, or psychologists talk about the 'dance of anger' or the 'dance of intimacy.' However, today it is not dance as metaphor, but dance as actual bodily engagement that I want to talk about. Dance, an art form, often to music, a physical activity that is also important spiritual practice for me and many others. That bumper sticker 'Gotta Dance' really does apply to me. I can tell when I've gone too many days without dancing: I am less spiritually tuned, I might even be a bit grumpy.

Many of you have heard my explanation of 'spirituality,' but let me review it in this context of dance. Spirituality for me is about connections that nurture goodness, at four levels that are simultaneous and overlapping. First, connections within myself, how I feel the parts of myself connected as I move in dance. Once connected to myself, I then connect outward to other living creatures: other dancers. Three, I also connect with the earth and the universe around me: with the space I'm dancing in. Finally, spirituality means connections with mysteries of life that I call 'God,' 'Goddess,' 'Love,' and many other names: for me, dancing is often a sacred, transformational experience.

Through dance, the priest in Ethiopia also experienced spiritual transformation. He connected to his own body, even if he wasn't quite on the beat, and then to the villagers and the world around him, and then to the divine. He found a new experience of God.

The Body in Religion

The notion that spirituality can be found through the body might be a new idea for some of us. Westerners inherited a 'mind-over-body' philosophy from the Greek emphasis on reason. This located spirituality in the mind, making spirituality something intangible, perhaps otherworldly. Thus, deep religious questions were also located in the mind, a safer location than the body, especially during periods in history ravaged by wars, plagues, and pestilence. Locating the sacred in the mind created an envelope of safety, and the mind was analogous to the heavens: that is, removed from the devastations on the earth. Mind, the heavens, and the sacred: these were associated together, quite separated from body, the earth, and the everyday. This is the same mindset that to this day prohibits dancing in some religions.

Then Descartes came along in the seventeenth century and juxtaposed mind and body all the more by defining mind as superior over body. Descartes didn't say, 'I dance, therefore I am.' No, he said, 'I think, therefore I am.' Such Cartesian dualism also associated the mind with 'man' and the body with 'woman.' And since mind was superior over body, well , you know the consequence. Women and their bodies ended up in a subservient role. Until recently, didn't western culture assume math and science were disciplines for the male mind alone? Many other dualisms developed, in race, class, income, and so on, that can account for so many other types of oppression that I can't get into here. These are topics for other sermons.

I also realize there are plenty of examples of the body having an important role in religion and theology. Certainly Buddhism honors mind and body equally: no line between the two. Christianity celebrates the notion of Incarnation: that is, the Word made flesh, the holy articulated through a human being, Jesus. Incarnational theology is body theology. Further, our own liberal theology is grounded in body and sense experiences: the German who many consider the Father of current UU theology, Frederick Schleiermacher, promoted 'embodied theology,' the notion that humans access religious experience through the senses. Religion, an experience of feeling more than knowing. More recently, women-centered theology locates the holy in the body, and especially in women's bodies. It's probably not coincidental that one of the best-known books by one of the best-known feminist theologians---Starhawk---is called 'Spiral Dance.' The theology that I most identify with, Process Theology, understands the earth as God's body. As God's body, it is important to care for the earth, to insure her health and survival. Even the call to people of religion to work for social justice addresses the needs of the body and the body politic. That is, to be fully realized and lived, religion must be at work in the world. Listen to these words from social ethicist James Luther Adams. He wrote: "... Religion must be seen, touched, voiced, and heard, in order to be identified or expressed.

Call for more body work

Most Americans could engage their bodies more. How many of you made New Year's resolutions to think more each day? In contract, how many of you resolved to work out, or lose weight? My daughter is a professional work-out coach and trainer and she knows that January will be her busiest month in the gym. Here at the start of the twenty-first century, we are still the inheritors of Descartes. We live in a culture that rewards mind over body. Think about how much of modern life is not in touch with real-life bodies. How many video games include victims of shooting or drivers who crash cars at high speed, who come back to life the next time the game is played? Think about how we don't celebrate the body: young women prone to anorexia, for example, a disease that detaches them from their bodies.

It doesn't have to be dancing: there are so many physical activities that can help us honor the body and its potential for spiritual connections. I had a UU congregant awhile back who said the one thing she missed from her former religion was kneeling during worship services: that physical act took her body into a spiritual place. Another UU reported that she 'got religion' in a new way by watching fourteen-year-old boys in an African-American church in Dallas dance to the gospel choir.

For me, an important physical activity is dance. I also use dance as a lens to examine church life. I attend social dances as often as possible--- by social dance, I mean dance done for the pleasure of being in the company of others. I can tell when I've gone too many days without dancing: I'm less spiritually tuned. Dancing puts me right with myself and others. My passion is a style called English Country dance, which originated in 17th-century English country houses. Then the dance was social training: one learned etiquette through the dance. You can often see this dance in movies set in England, as in the various Jane Ayre productions. It is this English dance we are performing today.

Should you have a negative response to the thought of dancing, I want to suggest that dancing is not about the feet: it's about the spirit. All of us can dance, even with physical limitations. At a ball I attended last April, a dancer in wheel chair participated in nearly every dance. Dancing connects the spirit of our bodies with the spirit of the music, the people around us, and the setting we are in. As Anne Morrow Lindbergh said metaphorically, it is fear, not physical limitations, which can keep us from dancing.

I knew someone once who refused to dance, someone who would not believe that dancing is not about the feet. Echoing Anne Morrow Lindbergh, I suspect that this person who wouldn't dance was blocked with fears that dancing actually might have alleviated. I often wish there could be a dance before any important meeting, perhaps before your next congregational meeting? Dancing opens communication. It's almost impossible to avoid smiling when dancing. Dancing can be transformative. If I go to a dance stewing about something, within one or two dances I am renewed: returned to right relations with myself and others, and that's spiritual practice.

Let me describe this dance, so to tune your eyes to our performances. This is a partner dance: male/female roles, although today we have five women and one man. Admittedly, as in life, some dancers make better partners than others: there is spontaneous clicking with a compatible partner. But, as in life, you take them as they come. You dance with everyone, striving for the greatest beauty you can create in your ten seconds of dancing together. There are many different connections that one experiences during a typical English dance: with your partner, between one couple and another, with the whole group, with the entire dance floor. Eye contact is important. You learn a lot about others, looking them in the eye. You build trust. Especially in more robust styles of social dancing, as in swinging with your partner, trust is essential if your hope to find the freedom dance makes possible. Dance is also egalitarian: social, economic and class status don't matter. Oh yes, flirting is also an option while looking other dancers in the eye.

We also connect with persons other than the dancers. A dance has a leader, known as the "caller." The caller reminds dancers of what geometric pattern comes next, and keeps dancers moving on the same step at the same time: we will illustrate how calls are given, before actually dancing the offering dance. The caller in turn relies on many others for the evening of dance to come off well: musicians, the sound system, the readiness of the hall, the publicity announcing the dance, the dancers who show up, the people who bring snacks, those who clean up at the end.

That is to say, a dance is like a healthy congregation working together in shared ministry --- where all of the pieces work together, on the same page, stepping to the same beat at the same time, inspired together by the energy of the music. The dance and the congregation alike do not

function beautifully unless the caller is in charge, fully knowledgeable of the patterns of the dance and able to communicate these patterns clearly and concisely. Also, the dancers need to be responsive to the caller: stepping on the beat, not before, not after. And not having a group discussion about whether or not to agree with the calling. Yes, it is possible for self-reliant Unitarian Universalists to be good dancers: the two are not necessarily diametrically opposed.

When all this comes together well, the experience can be holy. I don't know much about this life with certainty, but I know with assurance that as long as English dance continues, the holy as I understand the holy will continue to exist. I remember one dance, during an English Ball a few years ago. I was dancing with a partner I'd never met before. It was beautiful choreography, a dance called 'Elizabeth.' My partner and I clicked well together and with the other dancers in our line, the caller was clear and supportive, and the musicians were amazing. The dance lasted all of six minutes, but for those six minutes we shared a world of beauty and love. We both had tears in our eyes by the end of the dance. Dance creates moments of beauty. Dancing assures me that all will be well.

Call for Your Body Engagement

Do you have physical activities that are your spiritual practice? It doesn't have to be dancing. What matters is that we engage the body. Most people who work out know that they will be physically healthier, but let us not forget that we will be spiritually healthier as well. Perhaps its team sports which call you. Or power-walking with a friend, or meditative walking by yourself. Perhaps it's gardening or yoga or swimming. For me, skiing and other winter sports are also spiritual: they are great physical conditioning and also connect me with the sacred that lives in the mountains.

No matter what your theology, physical activity that we regard as spiritual practice enhance our participation in religious community and our personal experience with this journey we call life. Spiritual practice matters.

My friends, 'May I have this dance with you?... through the good times and the bad times too... Let it be a dance.'¹

SO BE IT.

¹A reference to hymn #311, "Let It Be a Dance," by Ric Masten, in *Singing the Living Tradition*. This hymn was sung in the service in which this sermon was presented.