

DANCERS EXULT AT THE AWAKENING

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Several years ago, Maria Harris contributed a major metaphor for the field of religious education when she compared our common passion with dance. Her work in *Teaching and Religious Imagination: An Essay in the Theology of Teaching* (Harris, 1987) presented a theology of religious education that brought attention to the aesthetic dimensions of education, as well as to the significance of hearing the voice of the outsiders (especially the voice of women) and of the *null curriculum* in a steady movement toward learning that is best pictured as a dance with five “steps”: silence, awareness, mourning, bonding, and birth (97-116). A year later, her Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality at the Center for Spirituality of St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana focused more direct attention upon the implications of this metaphor for women in *Women and Teaching* (Harris, 1988). That work was brought to even clearer form in *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women’s Spirituality* (Harris, 1988), as she expanded her metaphor from five steps to seven and provided a spiritual workbook for those engaged in a journey toward what she called the “Dancing Spirit” (xiv). During my own graduate work, I was fortunate to hear a form of this approach to religious education and the vocation of teaching when Harris presented the Paul Irwin Lecture at the School of Theology at Claremont in March, 1987.

What is most striking about the dance metaphor as it relates to religious education and the task of the religious educator is the uniqueness of this image of engaging in a spiritual journey. As dance, religious education is an intentional movement toward wholeness, with the point being the journey itself, rather than the method used or the particular steps taken to arrive there. Because I was trained as a musician and have always had an inclination toward the aesthetic dimensions of experience, I was drawn toward what Harris was presenting so powerfully in this remarkable period of her work. Little did I know how that reading and reflection would prepare me for something even more personal.

God has blessed our family with a son and a daughter. Our son has inherited the musical genes that run through our family. God has blessed our daughter with the soul of a dancer. Over the years of her development from tentative steps in first grade to the young woman who now graces our lives, I have been observing the beauty and the power of dance as an art form. The wisdom of Harris’ metaphor for teaching and spirituality has been embodied before us. That is the context out of which this paper has been written. I do not intend to offer a study of Harris’ earlier “steps” of the dance of religious teaching and spirituality. Rather, I propose to stand on her shoulders and offer my own observations about the connections between dance and what we do as religious educators. The title of the paper is taken from a particularly poetic passage in *Dance of the Spirit*:

The Awakening of spirituality resembles the awakening of poets and artists. Painters speak of the awakened eye, where seeing is complete, alert, and intense. Painters talk of facing paintings, and not only looking at them, but *feeling* them with their eyes. Artists acknowledge the awakening of the sense of touch in the hands and the fingertips, especially if they are potters or sculptors. Musicians, both performers and composers, know the awakening of the ear, the outer and the inner ear, to a special world of hearing. Dancers exult at the awakening of the entire body in movement, gesture, and rhythm. And those who are poets know the secret of awakening to words—to their sound and rhythm, their precision and splendor. (3-4)

It is, indeed, this awakening to the “Dancing Spirit” that is the goal of the religious life, and it is the opening up of persons to the possibility of such an awakening that is at the heart of religious education. An investigation of the nature of dance may help us experience our roles in this act of awakening. With this in mind, I propose that there are seven elements of dance that serve as vital metaphors for the task of the religious educator: preparation, rhythm, movement, expectancy, response, embodiment, and performance.

Readiness for the Dance: Preparation

Dance may well be the most ancient of the arts. Phenomenologists of religion, including Gerardus van der Leeuw, have suggested that dance is even more primitive than verbal art, because of “the fundamental human need to communicate [through bodily gestures] with other human beings and with the gods.” (Apostollos-Cappadonna, “Scriptural Women Who Danced”, 95-96). Similarly, anthropologist Roderyk Lange acknowledges, “There is good reason to consider dance as the initial art. Even if it cannot be proved historically, it seems convincing if the progressive development of the human faculties are taken into consideration.” (Lange, 55) At its most basic form, dance begins with motion, progresses into intentional movement, or gesture, then becomes an expression of self to the other. Margaret Taylor defines dance as “moving in rhythm with a pattern of expression” (Taylor, 15) and Suzanne Langer adds that “[a]ll dance motion is gesture, or an element in the exhibition of gesture.... Gesture is the basic abstraction whereby the dance illusion is made and organized.” (Langer, 24). Recent work on “multiple intelligences” has drawn attention to “bodily/ kinesthetic knowing” as one of the several different ways of knowing and expressing the world around us. Dance is one of the ways this “bodily/ kinesthetic knowing” moves from experience of the world to expression of that which has been experienced.

What distinguishes dance from other forms of motion is its expressiveness. Dance intends to communicate, through its organized gestures, the inner claim of the self, of the music that drives it, or of the spoken and written word that informs it. As Carla De Sola states:

Dance is a natural, primary expression of every human being. It is founded on the beat of our hearts, the rhythms of our breath, and the flexibility of our joints. It is manifested as an image inexplicable desire to turn a walk into a pattern or a run into a leap. Dance is an integral part of who we are as whole, religious, and expressive persons. (De Sola, 160)

This expression of meaning, emotion, and experience does not occur spontaneously. Dance requires intense preparation before it can express that which may be inexpressible through any other art.

A dancer spends numerous years practicing her craft. Martha Graham, one of the most influential twentieth-century choreographers, claimed that a serious dancer requires about ten years of intensive work to “master the instrument” that is her body. She continued the thought to claim that the preparation of a dancer involves more than simply the training of the necessary muscle groups that will allow dance to occur. It must also involve a cultivation of the craft and it must occur entirely within the interior life of the dancer. (Graham, 238). Ruth St. Denis added that a dancer’s training is twofold: development of the body, but also development of the spirit. (De Sola, 155)

The preparation of the dancer may be divided into several components: spiritual, technical, analytic, as well as preparation of the community, materials, and environment. (161) Many scholars of dance have made reference to the spiritual dimensions of dance. There is evidence the ancient Greeks considered dance the art that most influenced the soul and “provided the expressive way for that overflow of awareness for which there were no words.” (Taylor, 16) Within the context of liturgical dance, there are numerous forms of spiritual preparation that provide the background for dance: “embodied forms of prayer”, traditional religious education, ongoing worship, studies and instruction in prayer and meditation, and the reading of Scripture. (De Sola, 161) But beyond this form of dance, all dance requires a centering activity and an examination of the self in order to express the truth of the dance itself: “A dance, regardless of its conceptual content, can call us to be momentarily quiet and receptive to reality in much the same way that contemplative prayer does.” (Rock, 187)

The technical aspects of dance preparation would include preparatory warm-ups, exercises and stretches to loosen up the muscle groups that will be called upon in the dance, attention to various dance styles and techniques, dance composition, music and (often) voice training, acting, and experimentation with improvisation. (De Sola, 161) A dancer must commit years of muscle training and muscle memory, sore (often disfigured and damaged) feet, study of music and the history of dance itself, attention to philosophy, psychology, theology, biblical study, and church history in order to put the content of one of Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, Bobby McFerrin’s *Psalm 23*, or even Strauss’ *Salome* into physical and artistic expression. The preparation of the dancer must engage body, mind, spirit, and emotion before his performance of the dance will be expressive. The analytic dimension of this preparation requires attention to critical investigation of the truth that will be expressed through the dance. The dancer must first understand what he is attempting to say before something meaningful will be communicated by the dance. If the dancer intends to say something new and offer a fresh insight into the nature of the world, the dancer must first have an awareness of today’s society, be well read and well educated, have a philosophy of art and life, know the human body, music, stagecraft, lighting, acting, and have some insight into the technological achievements of science. (Nadel and Nadel, “The Dance Artist”, 231-32)

The religious educator may learn a valuable lesson from the preparation of the dancer. He or she may be reminded that our preparation is about more than simply learning the proper techniques of teaching or organizing the rooms and the resources with which religious education takes place. We sometimes forget that our own spiritual preparation is a necessary precondition for helping others experience and practice the presence of God. Maria Harris' use of the dance metaphor was powerful because she recognized that religious education is, first and foremost, *spiritual* education. In our attempts to use teaching methods that are challenging, relevant, and engaging, we need to remind ourselves that our own reading of Scripture, engaging in prayer and meditation, and listening to the voice of God are what make us religious educators. We also may learn that technical mastery of the subject matter, knowledge of our students, understanding of the ways persons learn, familiarity with the resources for teaching, and other issues that deal with the techniques of education are absolutely essential for maximizing the learning potential of religious education. The dancer may remind us that the religious educator needs to take care of the body as well as the mind in preparation for teaching. Religious education involves body, mind, soul, and emotion as much as does dance. Margaret H'Doubler states, "The most completely developed person is the one who has trained all his [sic] powers with equal dignity and consideration, in order that he may be physically, intellectually, and emotionally integrated. Of all the arts, dance is peculiarly suited to such a fulfillment of the personality." (H'Doubler, "Education Through Dance", 354) I believe that what she claims about the preparation of the dancer is also true of the preparation of the religious educator. We must prepare all dimensions of ourselves to be effective educators of our faith.

The Beginnings of the Dance: Rhythm

Selma Jeanne Cohen states dance, "has been defined as rhythmical movement of the human body." (Cohen, 4). There is good reason to claim that the origins of the impulse to dance are to be found in the rhythms that are inherent in the functioning of the human body. Dancers, choreographers, and teachers of dance have long recognized the influence of the beat of the heart and the rhythm of breathing on the development of both dance and, subsequently, music. As Margaret H'Doubler states: "[t]he sensations of the varying intensities and stresses and speeds and irregularities of man's powers of locomotion and body exertion must have always delighted and satisfied his inborn sense of rhythm." (H'Doubler, "Dance and Music", 185) Likewise, Carla De Sola comments that "[d]ance is a natural, primary expression of every human being. It is founded on the beat of our hearts, the rhythms of our breath, and the flexibility of our joints." (De Sola, 160). Indeed, for Doris Humphrey the "breath phrase" was the essence of dance:

Movement had its origins in the organic, breathing center of the body.... To her the body in all its parts was a constant state of falls and recovery: the heart beat was one such; every gesture in daily life, walking, sitting, kneeling, lifting and arm, the very effort to stand, to breathe, symbolized the drama inherent in the fall and recovery, or in yielding to or suspension away from the pull of gravity. (Limon, 190-91)

Humphrey originally used this inherent rhythm of human life to argue for the independence of dance from reliance upon music. It was in the response of the dancer to the pulse of her own body, the fluctuations in tempo and intensity as she responded to emotion and exertion, that

created the shape of the dance, rather than dependence upon something external to the self like music. Later in her career, Humphrey reconnected the two arts as she realized there was something missing when dance was performed to silence. (191)

Beyond the inherent body rhythms that seem to be at the root of dance, it is also clear that dance has a dependence upon (or at least an interdependence with) the rhythms that are given to it in the music, the spoken word, and the texts that provide the images upon which many dances are composed. Hal Taussig suggests that dancers may interpret the songs in Hebrew Scriptures by attending to three elements of these songs: “the rhythm of the text itself, the rhythm of the music being used, and the images of the text.” (Taussig, 71) There is a rhythm to that which music and the word bring to the dance, just as there is a rhythm inherent in one’s physicality. Dance becomes a partner with these external rhythms in the performance of their shared claim to truth. Dance may be performed effectively in partnership with the spoken word or the recited text, since literature has a rhythm of its own.

Religious education also has a rhythm all its own. There is a sense of beat, duration, tempo, rise, and fall to educating one in the faith. This internal rhythm of education drives the process toward its conclusion according to its own “epigenetic” ground plan. Each person being educated in church, synagogue, school, or home has his own rhythm of learning, just as each teacher teaches according to her own rhythm, with awareness of the rhythms of the students. There is an inherent beat and speed to each area of content to be taught, as well as to those being taught.

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore developed an approach to theology and educational method based, at least partly, on Alfred North Whitehead’s discussion of the “rhythm of education”. (Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*). Whitehead’s work in *Aims of Education* described a rhythm to education that begins with the student’s *romance* with the subject matter, and emphasizes the role of the educator in finding ways to spark the student’s interest in the field of study. This *romance* moves toward *precision*, a moment in the educative process in which the student wrestles with the disparate elements of the subject matter in an attempt to properly define a critical understanding of the subject. The final moment in this rhythm is what Whitehead called *generalization* or *satisfaction*. At this point in the process, the student is able to abstract from the details of the specific elements being explored and begin to create a new understanding of the subject matter in relation to the whole of experience and also come to some closure in the disequilibrium that began the learning process. Moore discussed this sense of rhythm in her chapter on gestalt approaches to education, stating:

The three elements in process-gestalt teaching suggest a rhythmic approach in which teachers and learners would begin with exposure to many details, seek to unify the details into a whole, and acknowledge the details that do not fit into the unity. The rhythm naturally leads to unifying wholes and, then, back into details and a renewed search for unity. Teaching is a continual process of searching for wholes and preserving awareness of the inadequacy of any unified conclusion. (Moore, 84)

One task of the religious educator is to seek the rhythm inherent in the subject matter, in light of a reflective knowledge of the rhythm of learning of those to be taught, and then to summon his own rhythm of teaching to maximize the *romance*, the *precision*, and the *satisfaction* of the teaching/ learning occasion. The rhythm of religious education and of the persons we educate is as natural and as inherent as the heartbeat and breathing are to the dancer.

The Flow of the Dance: Movement

Dance not only has rhythm, it has movement. Cohen states, “The medium of dance is human movement. It deals with people, not with facts or ideas.... The area of dance is not that of concepts, which are grasped by the mind by way of words, but of percepts, which are grasped by the eye by way of movement.” (Cohen, 5) The movement of dance differs from other kinds of movement because it begins with gesture. Cohen makes reference to Michel Fokine’s discussion of the nature of movement as gesture, then claims:

Taking gesture, the natural sign of character or emotion, as his base, the choreographer builds from it a movement that has both a visual and an aural design. First he gives the gesture a more definitively perceivable shape in space.... Then he gives the movement a pattern in time; prolonging or quickening it, setting it to a definite rhythm, building it into a phrase. Further, he may enhance the dynamics of the movement, sharpening the contrasts between tension and relaxation, between strong and soft, giving it a more distinctive texture. (6)

Suzanne Langer defines gesture as “expressive movement”, and claims that dance employs both self- expressive and logically- expressive gestures. (Langer 29) She also claims that “Gesture is the basic abstraction whereby the dance is made and organized”, and that these gestures function as signals or symptoms of our “desires, intentions, expectations, demands, and feelings.” (24)

But dance cannot be described as merely a series of isolated and stylized gestures. While a dance contains numerous poses, turns, and attitudes, it is the flow of movement that makes dance an expressive art. When we watch a dancer, we rarely notice the specific angle of the head and the lines of the torso; we see the graceful movement of the arabesque or the dramatic turn or the impressive combination of steps in the tap routine. What we see is more characterized by the phrase or the series of leaps and pirouettes than by the separate contractions of muscle groups that allow these elements to be employed.

By the same token, the dancer must certainly master the individual movements required to perform a dance. But when dancing the dance, she is rarely conscious of these gestures as isolated gestures. They are combined in her consciousness as she is caught up in the flow of expression that is the dance itself. As Maxine Sheets claims:

A dance, as it is formed and performed, is experienced by the dancer as a perpetually moving form, a unity of succession, whose moments cannot be measured: its past has been created, its present is being created, its future awaits creation. Yet, it is not an externally related series of pasts, presents, futures—befores, nows, and afters; it is truly

ekstatic, it is in flight, it is in the process of becoming the dance it is, yet is never the dance at any moment. The dance at any moment is diasporatic, a perpetually moving form whose 'moments' are all of a piece. (Sheets, 41)

It is in this flight, this perpetual motion, this flow of experience that dance communicates. Dance cannot be defined by its steps or by its individual gestures. Eleanor Metheny claims, "[a]s an observer watches another person move he does not see the countless details of the movement. He sees a dynamic pattern created by the changing relationships among the body segments." (Metheny, 50) It is more than the sum of its component parts. It is the total experience of the narrative that is the focus of the dance, not the individual words or plot lines that make it up. When one watches a piece in a ballet, it is the entire ensemble and the collective expression of the emotion and message that is seen. Dance has a flow, a direction, and a movement that carries the audience along in its motion toward a conclusion where its claim to truth will be presented. It is the continuity of the message in dance that gives it its narrative quality:

Movement action in dance has no practical function, it is only through its continuity, its 'lasting', that the phenomenon of dance is evoked. Without respecting the continuity, without stressing the element of 'flow' in movement, there is no dancing action; the 'flow' of movement is the warp of dance. (Lange, 57)

Religious education also has a sense of movement and a flow or flight that characterizes its action. James Michael Lee saw the significance of this sense of movement in the field when he named one volume of his trilogy *The Flow of Religious Instruction* (Lee 1973), and both Maria Harris and Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore discuss the active, ongoing process of "traditioning" as constitutive of spirituality and religious education (Harris 1989; Moore 1983).

Religious education has both a motion and a directionality. If it is (as Sara Little has reminded us) intentional, religious education moves toward a purpose. (Little, 32-39) It has a drive from the past, through the present, toward the future that makes its content more than static facts in a book; because it has movement, it is a dynamic, active experience of education. When religious education is being done well, student and teacher, participant and leader are caught up in the flow of the emergence of truth.

A further lesson from this element of dance is precisely the emphasis on the flow and the message being expressed, rather than upon the individual gestures that are the details of dance. A good religious educator must have mastery of all the skills and techniques of the field; indeed, without mastery of the skills, a dancer cannot communicate the message of the dance adequately. He must know the subject matter and have sufficient command of his own skills. He must know the developmental, social, and religious levels of the students or participants. The resources must be in place and the room must be arranged appropriately to maximize the learning experience. The details of planning and of intentional education are absolutely essential to a positive educational experience. But the educative moment is more than all that. It cannot be reduced to the "stuff" of teaching, or to a simple succession of gestures and actions. Good education flows, whether it is classroom teaching, small group interaction, or uplifting worship. It has movement, more than it has details. To be sure, taking care of the details allows the lesson

to take flight. But when the religious educator is in the midst of an engaging, active educative event, he pays scant attention to a reflective analysis of the pieces of his craft. He is caught up in the movement of learning, engaged in the flow of experience as persons connect with their faith, swept away by the flight of the spirit as eyes dance with anticipation, delight, and recognition. There is a time for reflective analysis and evaluation, which is a necessary part of religious education. But if learning takes place, there is a movement from where we all have been to someplace new and holy. And that movement is the point, and it is the goal of teaching and learning.

But Wait...: Expectancy

Having attempted to make the point of the roles of rhythm and movement and the dynamic nature of both dance and religious education, I now pause to reflect on one of the more neglected aspects of dance, music, and religious education. When most persons think of dance, they envision constant motion, intricate steps, fluid arms, and limber bodies. But careful and prolonged observation has convinced me that the power dance possesses to evoke emotion begins in those moments of powerful anticipation before the dancer moves. It is the moment before the turn of the head or the arabesque that gives life and energy to those movements. The pause before the movement draws those watching into the moment of the dance. We are there with the dancers, leaning forward in anticipation, awaiting the appropriate time—the appointed time—when the message of the ballet or the artistry of the tap routine will engulf us in its narrative. Likewise, music is not simply about the notes on the page; it is also about the pauses between the notes, which have as much duration and poignancy as the notes themselves. Expectancy in dance is based upon our past experiences, the relationships we have established, the trust that has developed among us. We lean forward in anticipation because we expect what will come next, and we trust it will move us.

Scholars of dance speak of the role of the pose as an integral part of the experience of dance. (Lange, 57) I have often noted that these interludes in the midst of motion become reflective occasions that allow dance to touch the soul. Judith Rock states, “[a] dance, regardless of its conceptual content, can call us to be momentarily quiet and receptive to reality in much the same way that contemplative prayer does. It can call us to wait, to look, to listen, so that we can receive something new, see something new, and travel to a new place.” (Rock, 187) It is in the pregnant silence and anticipatory stillness before the gesture that we first become aware that we are being called to enter into the performative act. A look precedes the reach toward the other. An attitude anticipates a graceful lift of the leg. A pose readies us for the movement that is to follow. It is in the stillness and the quiet that we begin to anticipate that something new is about to happen to us, and we lean forward in expectation of that revelation

The same is true for the experience of the audience viewing a dance. Jose Limon expresses the expectancy that is characteristic of one who is prepared to receive something new from the performance.

For over twenty-five years I have not gone to a concert, nor sat down to listen to a new recording, without a sense of excitement and expectancy, without saying to myself, ‘Listen carefully and be alert with all of yourself, with your head and your heart, and your

legs and arms and your feet, for here perhaps is your new love. Here perhaps is some new magic, and you will belong to each other, and together you will bring beauty into the world. (Limon, 193)

While it is true that Limon is speaking as a dancer and choreographer responding to the possibility of being inspired by a new piece of music, his words also apply to one who attends a dance performance with a sense of anticipation. If one views dance expecting something revelatory to happen, if one attends the event with an openness to being engaged by the truth, the “new magic” of which Limon speaks may happen.

James Fowler and others have discussed the ways that faith develops in human beings. But it is his discussion of the nature of faith itself, which is heavily indebted to the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, that is most appropriate for this discussion of expectancy. Fowler emphasizes the dynamic, active character of faith, rather than its static, passive nature. He speaks of faith as a verb, rather than a noun, emphasizing that faith is what one does, not what one has. One expression of this attitude toward faith is his claim that faith is one’s way of “leaning into life”. (Fowler, 7) Faith is based on a relationship of trusting experience with the Holy One. Because of that lasting relationship of trust in the presence and love of God, one may live life expectantly, with hope, anticipating that the One who has been there in the act of grace will be there in all one’s acts and missteps. It is the expectancy born from one’s relationship with God that allows one to move with confidence and grace through life. All the technical know-how, training, preparation, awareness of the rhythms of life, and participation in the movement of religious education is lacking without a confident trust in the grace of God. It is the expectancy of being led somewhere meaningful and beautiful that gives impetus to the flow of education. It is in the trusting anticipation of faith that we are empowered to teach and to learn.

Music, Text, and Dance: Response

Dance is generally not self-generating. It is most often to be seen as a response to the music, the poetry, the passage of Scripture, the “muse” that calls it forth. When a dancer combines torso, head, arms, legs, feet, and mind in graceful movement, it is in response to something calling him from beyond the self. There is always the music, even when there is silence, eliciting an expression of self led by that which is stated by the other. Watch a dancer rehearsing a piece from a ballet or a jazz number by himself. While the other members of the company are rehearsing their own parts in the number, he will run through the series of steps, moves, combinations in response to the music that he hears within his head. Dancers internalize the statement of the partner in the dance and give it bodily form. The music is still there, inside him, even without the contribution of the sound system. The music, or the poem, or the thought lure him on to express that which is being stated through his own physicality. Even in the silence of the moment, the other calls and the dancer responds. As beautiful as a *plie* may be in its own right, it is a mere exercise until it is employed as a response to the leading of a voice from beyond itself.

The relationship between dance and music has been discussed for generations. There is good reason to believe that dance is the first of the arts, and that music derives from it. Since motion is

more basic to human expression than speech, many claim that music, as one form of that verbal expression, is a logical extension from the movement gesture. Margaret H'Doubler states:

Music is said to have come from dance, from the rhythmic impulses of man, and to have taken from dance its rhythmic form and structure.... The sensations of the varying intensities and stresses and speeds and irregularities of man's powers of locomotion and body exertion must have always delighted and satisfied his inborn sense of rhythm.... And because of the dynamic urge of its rhythmic structure, in addition to its melodic and harmonic qualities, music is the most important of all the partners of the dance. (H'Doubler, "Dance and Music", 185-86)

Thus, there has always been an intimate connection between dance and music. Indeed, the music critic Jean D'Udine says, "All music is dance—all melody just a series of attitudes and poses." (Langer, 19-20)

However, the dancer does not simply mirror back what the music states. He takes the music inside, feels it, experiences it in relation to all previous experiences, then interprets the music through her body. While it is true the dancer does not create *ex nihilo*, but responds to a call from beyond the self, the dance does not say exactly the same thing as that stated by the music, the poem, or the Word. It always says something new. No two dancers or choreographers will dance the same piece the same way, even when dancing a well-established role. There is always interpretation in the response to the message of the partner. The process of becoming an artist at dance involves more than learning what the musician or the poet or the prophet was trying to say; it always involves making that statement one's own, running it through one's own personal "filters", and giving it a form that is new and offers a unique claim to truth. Martin Heidegger is known for his claim that there is no understanding without interpretation; there is also no dance without interpretation.

Douglas Adams and Judith Rock discuss modern dance as prophetic form, but what they have to say about this particular form of dance could easily be said about all of dance:

The prophetic is that which speaks the new word and calls us beyond what is. The prophetic transcends the contemporary and is allied with a yet unrealized future. Insofar as modern dance or any art simply reflects or reiterates the beliefs, tendencies, and statements of the surrounding culture it ceases to be prophetic. The prophetic art form grows out of its time and place by calling that time and place into question and by offering a clearer, deeper vision, lest the people perish. (Adams and Rock, 86)

An effective dance can startle as well as delight by throwing a new light on tradition, theology, or spirituality. (Rock, 188-89) The response that dance makes to its partner is always a new way of stating that which is said. A few years ago, a local dance festival featured companies from several area dance studios. Two dances stood out for their new interpretations of familiar material. One, entitled "Nebula", was a *pas de deux* set to music by Bach. The two dancers moved slowly, but responsively to each other and the music, and never lost touch with each other. They rolled, lifted, arched, and moved constantly. It became apparent as the dance

unfolded that the “Nebula” in the title was the emergence of Creation out of the “soup” that was the Deep. I thought of the separation of the waters from the waters and the slow emergence of the dry land from the chaos of *tohu w wohu* (formlessness and void). The familiar Creation story became new as it took on bodily form in the dance. The other performance was quite different from the first. Another studio set several pieces to the music of Led Zeppelin. As one who was socialized in the acid rock era, I know this music by heart. But seeing “Stairway to Heaven” set to dance was a startlingly new experience. It was a prophetic moment. Such is the power of dance.

Religious education responds to external stimuli as well. To paraphrase the words of the apostle Paul, we pass on what we also receive. The “stuff” of religious education is not created by the religious educator. We dwell in the Scriptures, respond to the doctrines of the faith, celebrate the Law, observe the festivals, engage in the rituals, and all of those come from outside us. We are led by the presence of God who calls to us in the same way the music or the spoken word call to the dancer. We teach because we respond to that which calls us, and this call can give one his vocation. Martha Graham claims, “People have asked me why I chose to become a dancer. I did not choose to be a dancer. I was chosen to be a dancer, and with that you live all your life.” (Graham, 238) The religious educator is called by God and is chosen for this vocation. What we do as educators is a response to that we have received from our partners in the enterprise of religious education.

But we do not simply pass on a completed “package” of information. We take the content of the faith within us, internalize it, analyze it, interpret it, and apply our own distinctive gifts to making it a new word to those with whom we work. As educators, we are constantly shaping and reshaping the tradition we have received and attempting to present it anew. We respond to our partners in the faith and to the leading of God by interpreting that word and making it an active, fresh claim to truth.

“And the Word Became Flesh”: Embodiment

Ted Shawn, one of the founders of the dance community known as Jacob’s Pillow, claimed, “Dance is the only art in which we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made.” (De Sola, 155) One of the most distinctive features of dance is the way it combines body, intellect, spirit, and will. Myron Nadel states:

Dance, as an art form, reveals the beauty of the human body and, more important, the beauty of motion....Dance pushes the body to the utmost extremes. Such significant use of the most fundamental thing we possess is as close to the essentials of the mind as use of any material thing can be. The opening of vistas for the body must of necessity expand the possibility for the mind, and, it follows, for the spirit. Using our own body to the fullest is using our most basic contact with the earth to its limit. (Nadel, 16)

Since the basic instrument of dance is the body, “the meaning of the body is fundamental to the understanding of dance, dancer, and dancing.” (Apostollos-Cappadonna, “Scriptural Women Who Danced”, 95-96) The dancer must know her own body well to be an effective dancer: “As

the primary means to communicate in dance, dancers have a responsibility to learn as much as possible about their own bodies.” (Bauer, 174) Body structure, posture, the strength of the arches in the feet, the muscle groups in the legs, the shape and size of the hips, and other factors related to physicality provide the raw material on which dance is constructed. The affective-physical dimension of knowing and of expression of self is a significant means of relating to the world. As Susan Bauer states:

We both know and communicate through the physical dimension of the body. In Western Christianity, the rational mind has been emphasized at the expense of how we know through the body. There is a body knowledge or kinesthetic intelligence that facilitates an understanding of our world and relationships with people. The vitality and more fully informed perceptions that result from a unity of body and mind need to be recognized. (180)

It was at least partially the Reformation’s emphasis upon the written word and the Enlightenment’s emphasis upon reason that led to the steady loss of acceptance for dance. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, in her discussion of choreographer and dance innovator Martha Graham, emphasizes Graham’s focus on the bodiliness of dance:

It is the recognition of this emotive bodiliness that distinguishes Martha Graham from other choreographers.... If we translate ‘the body’ into ‘movement’, then we recognize a classic Christian doctrine that God is pure act, that his mobility, that is, his freedom to move, characterizes him as the divine.... For Graham, the female, given her cyclical physicality and native intuition is more attuned to nature; she is therefore the more receptive and expressive vehicle of human experience. (Apostolos-Cappadona, “Martha Graham and the Quest for the Feminine in Eve, Lilith, and Judith”, 120-21)

Numerous authors have taken note of the connection between the attention dance brings to the body and the theological themes of embodiment and incarnation. James Nelson, who was one of the first contemporary theologians to emphasize the significance of the body, says “God is uniquely known to us through human presence, and human presence is always embodied presence.” (Bauer, 180) Douglas Adams makes the argument for this sense of embodiment in the context of the use of dance as an element of worship:

It is revealing that many of those who have difficulty accepting dance in Christian worship also have difficulty with communion and the other sacraments in worship. Dancing and the sacraments lead to the same realization: concern for the material world and for its increased intention toward higher forms of activity, complexity, and community. It is crucial for the continued growth of civilization that Western people..., take the incarnation as their model and become recommitted to the material dimension of the world.... One path for this recommitment is dance which brings movement and direction to the body, and so transforms it. Dance is not separate from the body but is more than just body not materially but intentionally. Thus dance is to the body as spirit is to the body—one and inseparable but more. (Adams, 42)

Religious education could learn from dance the significance of the body and the groundedness of our existence in the presence of God in our midst. The symbol of incarnation is one that deals with the connectedness that exists between body and spirit. As Neil Douglas-Klotz suggests that “We are not made of one substance and our bodies of another. The whole scheme of things in reality is not two, but One.” (Douglas-Klotz, 111) That which is God becomes physical, human, and “real”. As religious educators, we become the embodiment of the faith we teach as we interact with those who interact with us. The dance, which embodies concept, emotion, and message, could stand as a powerful reminder to us that we need to embody the faith we espouse.

A Dance Among Partners: Performance

Deeply imbedded in the personality of a dancer, there is a desire to share one’s experience of the world with others. While some dances are solitary, the basic nature of dance is a communal event. Dance is interactive in nature. It involves the music or other stimulus, the dancers, and the audience in a dance among partners. The dancer’s analysis and interpretation of the “text” of the dance is not engaged merely for the enrichment of the self. The formation of the dancer’s soul and point of view are accomplished through study, meditation, a ritual of centering, a conscious attention to the flow of the music and the message of the text, an awareness of social, political, and economic issues, and reflection upon philosophical and theological principles. But all this critical formation is for the purpose of performance, not just personal formation. Once the dancer has interpreted the music, the poem, the spoken word in one’s own way, the word cries out to be shared. There is a call-and-response between dance and its partners that is as clear as that between jazz musicians. A dancer lives the voice of the other through his or her body in order to share that joy with others.

One example of the performance character of dance is liturgical dance. In this form of dance, the dancer both communicates the understanding of the world and of the presence of God as she experiences it, and engages the viewer/ congregant in the expression of that understanding. Carla De Sola claims: “Practiced by liturgical artists, dance serves and functions as a conduit from the inner workings of the spirit to the outer expression of today’s worship.... Communication is body-to-body with the distance between sanctuary to pew being traversed kinesthetically. (De Sola, 153-54) Because dance is a natural experience of human being, and because it draws upon the universal experience of the unity of body, mind, and soul, dance has the ability to remind members of the congregation of the “spirituality of everyday incarnated life.” (156) De Sola continues by saying:

While interpreting abstract forms of spirituality, the dancer draws attention to the exquisite grace of the human body—the beauty of the arching spine, encircling arms, with the limbs alternately supporting weight, gesturing, and reaching out into space, or retracting, with weight, into the depths. Thus, the dancer connects the same elements with the viewer who empathetically feels the ground, the weight, the movements in space, the feelings of the body, and the movements of the spirit. (156)

Douglas Adams similarly voices the opinion that, “There is a strong and positive correlation between the use of dance in worship and people’s consciousness of their ability to change and

affect their condition in spite of apparent conflicts.” (Adams, 41) The unique combination of body, mind, and spirit that characterizes dance can serve as a powerful symbol of the connection between human nature and the material world.

Likewise, the religious educator develops numerous critical skills that allow him or her to identify the crucial elements of the faith that may be shared with those with whom she or he works. But those critical skills serve little purpose if they are used solely for the personal spiritual development of the educator. We develop our skills so we may better share what we have discovered with those with whom we are in an educational and ministerial partnership. We grow in body, mind, and spirit for the betterment of our own souls, to be sure. But we also grow in these vital areas so we may share that information, that experience of grace, with others. Religious education is performative as well as formative. We learn in order to share what we have learned. Theological study is not simply for intellectual gratification, as satisfying an experience as that may be to many of us. Nor is it merely for the purpose of spiritual enlightenment. Theological education in general, and religious education in particular, is preparation for the exercise of ministry. We would do well to remember that, as performance, religious education needs to attend to the needs, concerns, interests, and learning styles of those we are called to serve. What we do is not just about how we prepare ourselves for ministry; it is also about those whom we serve. Like the dancer who is only satisfied when her performance reaches the emotion and souls of the persons in the audience, the religious educator can only be satisfied when the carefully planned lesson connects with the experience of the student and helps to change his view of the world and become around of the presence and the grace of God.

Conclusion

The complexity of dance can serve as a powerful metaphor of the field of religious education, as well as a challenge to the religious educator. The seven aspects of dance presented here suggest something of the task of those who engage in this enterprise. If one pays attention to one’s preparation, discovers the rhythm of religious education, engages in the movement of the act of education, celebrates the hope experienced in the expectancy and anticipation of teaching, responds to the call of the partners in the faith, embodies the presence and grace of God, and shares one’s critical discoveries about the nature of the faith, those whom one serves will be empowered to exult at the awakening of the spirit.

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