



Won't You Join the Dance?

Praying with Your Body

When I was six years old, I discovered dance. I suppose I had danced before that, as children do, bouncing knees, waving arms and clapping with glee. But one sunny day in my front yard I heard church bells. Music has a way of transforming time into grace and beauty. As those sounds wafted into my body and soul, suddenly I had the distinct feeling that God was everywhere, that even my yard was sacred. So I danced. I swayed and twirled, lifted my arms and leaned and leaped. I let the Spirit carried in the music move me, move in me, move through me, and move me out of myself. My dance was my immediate, innocent, intuitive response to the experience of the sacred. The revelation of the divine came to me in the simplest of ways. No belief systems stood between me and the expression of my body. So I danced.

I had no idea at that time I would one day be leaping down church aisles, balancing on baptismal fonts, collapsing onto communion rails, wrapping myself with the long red cloth of grief at the foot of the Good Friday cross, or announcing the resurrection as Mary Magdalene. I also had no idea how ancient this form of prayer was. How every culture has entered into the mystery of creation through the medium of dance: binding themselves together, moving as one body, responding to the basic rhythm of creation in drum, gongs, winds, strings and voice. Even in our own tradition, the Old Testa-

ment books are replete with images from the dance, lifting hands, turning, skipping, bowing, falling to earth. These are actual descriptions of embodied prayer.

At six years old, I had no idea where dance had come from or where it was leading me, but I discovered my body had a wisdom all its own I could trust and follow. The simplicity of my innocent response to church bells was the beginning. And from there, something called me, drawing me deeper into mystery, into embodiment and incarnation. I came to know my body as a sanctuary, a place where I could go reliably for revelation; and there the Spirit would stir me to movement, to prayer, to new possibilities.

Perhaps you have had such a beginning? A feeling of oneness with the world as you are jogging on the beach, a sudden urge to skip in the park, or a deep surrender into the arms of God as you weep. Our bodies afford us so many opportunities for blessing and being blessed. And dancing through life brings us into the habit of saying yes to the movement of the Spirit.

Now, when I say "dance," I realize that sometimes that

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word can be confusing, even alarming. Perhaps you're saying to yourself, "Fine, for you . . . but I'm not a dancer." Or perhaps you secretly love to dance but have never gotten much encouragement. In any case, there's one message I'd like to communicate loud and clear: You don't have to be a "dancer" in order to dance your prayers! Anyone with a body is capable of moving in the Spirit and of expressing deep feelings through the gift of our bodies. In this way, we are all called to dance. The movements of a dancing prayer might be joyful like the father of the Prodigal who danced in celebration at the return of his son. Or the movements of prayer might be angry, fearful or grief-stricken, like Christ's deep body prayer of the agony in the garden, where he threw himself on the ground and his sweat poured out of him like drops of blood. The truth is that we come before our God as we are, and we are a people full of longing, unresolved feelings and hurts as well as inspiration, possibility and celebration.

Perhaps you pray with your body without even knowing it. Perhaps you sway when you hear soulful music. Perhaps you find yourself on a hike reaching a beautiful view of the mountains and, without thinking, you lift your arms to match the immensity of this grand gift of creation. Perhaps you are feeling out of sorts, and you put on some music and begin to rock and cry, letting your tears flow out. Or as you hold your baby, suddenly you feel overwhelmed by the mystery of the child in your midst and together the two of you begin to dance. These are all prayers without words, prayers arising from your body. Yet they are more than that. They come from the Spirit that finds its home in your body.

Being the Body

We are the body of Christ. The more we can let that Spirit of Christ be enflashed in us, move in us and through us, the more we bring Christ's incarnation to the world in our lives. Here is an example. At my parish, we have a large deaf community who through their signing bring a wonderful flow of movement to the mass each Sunday. But they are not content to sit in their own section of pews speaking their own language apart. And so they call the entire assembly and our presider to partici-

pate in sign language. How inspiring to have the presider leading us in gesture during the responsive prayers through the use of American Sign Language (ASL). The whole assembly responds with gesture throughout the mass, to the Gloria, the responsorial psalm, the

radiated an inner joy that filled the church, that communicated to me more powerfully than any words that Christ was born into flesh, and we celebrate the beauty of Christ's presence enflashed in us! If only we could all have such un-selfconscious joy to share!

All that being said, do you think of yourself as a dancer? Or better yet, do you consciously give yourself permission to express yourself in movement? If not, what are your experiences in life that have kept you apart from the possibility of moving and dancing your aliveness? Do you perhaps picture yourself at some embarrassing moment in your life when you felt clumsy in your body or you were ridiculed for having two left feet? Perhaps you feel overweight and uneasy in your body. Or maybe there are deeper reasons why you are not comfortable expressing yourself in movement. Many of us have experiences of injury or abuse that make the whole territory of physicality a heavy-laden area that seems necessary to avoid. Maybe you come from a background where dance was forbidden or labeled as "heathen." Or perhaps you think you don't have time to dance!

I mentioned earlier that the body provides us with so many opportunities for blessing. But equally as true, the body is the place of many deep wounds. As children many of us grew up in less than ideal circumstances. Our culture is one that prizes highly the outward appearance of the body's youth and beauty, but does not value the daily practice of honoring the body as temple of the Spirit. Countless children are subject to physical, emotional or sexual abuse that takes its toll on a young soul's willingness to be fully alive in his or her body. Many of us grew up in alcoholic families where our parents exhibited outrageous unbounded expressions of emotion and perhaps violence. Some of us grew up in completely rigid family systems where any expression, including warmth and physical intimacy, was forbidden. Perhaps we were punished if we expressed our anger; perhaps we were ridiculed if we cried. In short, our bodies are often a place laden with painful memories, and so we escape to the more familiar territory of our heads.

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*Resources
in Movement*

- **The Sacred Dance Guild**, 2558 Delaware St., Wickliffe, OH 44092
- **American Dance Therapy Association** - 2000 Century Plaza, Suite 108, 10632 Little Patuxent Pkwy Columbia, MD 21044-3263
- **Body Wisdom, Inc. & Interplay!** 669A 24th St. Oakland, CA 94612
- **Pacific School of Religion**, 1798 Scenic Ave. Berkeley, CA 94709
- **Contemplative Dance**, P.O. Box 94 Haydenville, MA 01039

"Holy Holy" and eucharistic refrains. We are a dancing church!

We also have two deaf-blind parishioners who inspire us tremendously. Every Sunday they have individual interpreters who work with them to sign the entire mass through touch. The first of these is Robert, often a lector for the readings, whose signing of the story of Abraham and Isaac at the Easter Vigil is absolutely riveting. The feeling he communicates to us through his body's proclamation is tangible and holy.

Then there is Angyal. At Christmas Eve service, Angyal organized a deaf choir to interpret "Silent Night" in sign language as an offering to the assembly. I was transfixed. I could not take my eyes off of Angyal. Seated there in the sanctuary in his wheelchair (he has recently been suffering from acute physical weakness), he moved so full of exuberance and joy. Without even hearing the music, he danced. Angyal

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And yet, our bodies and our souls are longing for healing, for permission to speak their truth and be listened to. How then, do we open ourselves to movement as instrument of healing?

Healing with Movement

I shared with you the beginning of my discovery of dance as prayer. One of the next moments when I discovered the healing power of movement came for me at the death of my mother. I was 23 at the time. Mom had been sick for about a year with cancer, and I had the experience of being with her at the dawn of her dying. On the morning she slipped away from us, our family embraced each other with broken hearts and moved into taking care of the tasks that one must attend to in dealing with death.

By the end of the afternoon, my head was pounding with pain. Now, at 23 I was not normally plagued with migraines or even slight headaches. But that day I had a lot going on! My sister-in-law led me back to my room for some time to rest and reflect. I had no idea the torrent that stormed inside of me. All I knew is that I had a headache. As she lovingly laid a cool, wet cloth on my forehead and left me, suddenly the floodgates opened. The gesture of motherly care she offered suddenly brought home the fact I was now a motherless child. I began to sob and sob, allowing the waves of grief to flow through me without need to control, manage or contain. I found myself grabbing my pillow and holding it tightly to my chest, clutching it to me, rocking myself back and forth like a child.

After the first waves of grief moved through me, suddenly I felt outrage! I struck the pillow shouting "No! No! No!" I protested this most unfair loss! How could this happen to me? I would never see my mother again, never be able to lay my head on her chest, never be able to call her on the phone. She would not meet my husband to be, or help me get dressed in my wedding finery; she would never hold my children on her knee or tell me stories of my childhood again. "No! No! NO!" Was I yelling at God? Or the cruel reality of life? Or at cancer? All I knew is that I needed to allow this expression of rage to flow out of me.

I found myself ripping at the pillow, clawing, trying to rip it apart to somehow make physical the feeling that this most primary person in my life had been ripped away from me. I did not judge my body or the movements that came to me. I trusted in that moment that God gave me this body and so my truest instincts and deep expressions must be holy. Suddenly a biblical phrase came out of the recesses of my memory, "and they rend their garments." That's what I was doing, rending my garments — or my pillow as it happened to be. This phrase linked me to the ancient nature of my grieving. And somehow I knew I was in good company. I felt that holy people throughout the ages had given themselves permission to wholeheartedly express the fullness of their grief and anguish in movement. And so my movements prayed me.

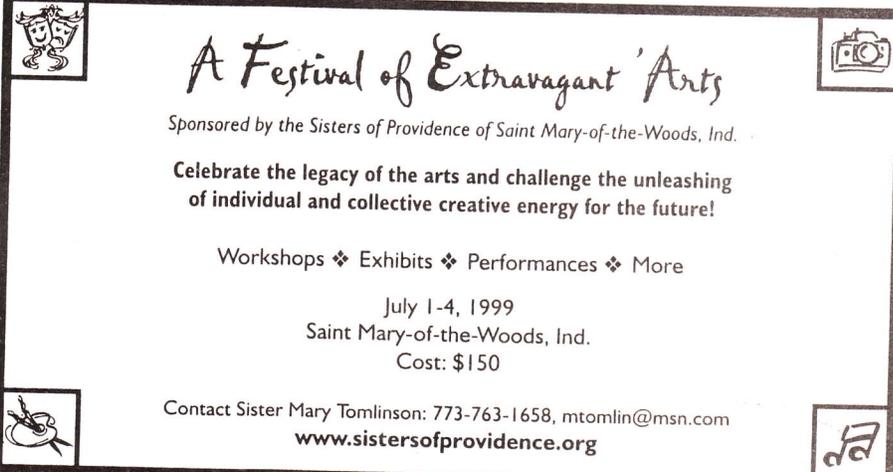
I was spent. I lay there in bed for some time breathing deeply, calmly. I had come home to myself. My mother was gone, yes. She was my first home. But she had borne me, and I was still alive here in the home of my own body. And this was the place where I would continue to feel her love in the mystery of her new life. By way of movement, the Spirit had led me through deep emotional release to a place of connection.

This was a key life experience that led me into the study of movement therapy. All the dance classes I had ever taken had never come close to leading me into the deep caverns and recesses of my body's wisdom. But they had laid the groundwork I needed, a

trust of my body and a willingness to feel my own physicality as a place of goodness and grace. So a couple of years later, I enrolled in an intense journey in movement therapy. Yes, I loved dance for its own sake, I loved liturgical dance for the discovery of how to bring a community to life with embodied prayer. But I knew I needed the time to dive into my own body's fullness of unfettered expression. And that's what I did.

In my journey into movement therapy, I learned that as babies, we are born into the world expressing ourselves. Everything we feel is a movement. Our laughter, our distress, our need, all start as movements deep in our core and move out through muscles, arms, legs, face, voice, fingers and toes. The process of growing up, of necessity, is one of learning inhibition. We would be a reckless world if all individuals express themselves fully and physically in every moment.

Learning to inhibit expression is a necessary tool for survival. But the unfortunate truth is, that often our inhibition becomes our total *modus operandi*. We have become a stiff-necked people, hard-hearted, overworked, stressed out, and our bodies cry out for attention, for respect, for a chance to reveal to us the wisdom of our human and divine nature. The very basis of our Christian faith is in following in the footsteps of Christ, who modeled to us that being divine means living in and through our very flesh, not trying to escape our humanity to become other-worldly.



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Living by Moving

So how can we move out of the deeply ingrained habit of treating our bodies as machines that are expected to follow our every command? Is there an alternative to our neglect? What I'd like to propose is a possibility of learning to live more fully. This means being willing to surrender our habit of riding

rough-shod over our body's natural expressions. And it means coming into a loving relationship with ourselves as physical, emotional and corporal beings.

Of course, giving ourselves permission to express ourselves often entails confronting fears embedded in the body-fear of rejection, abandonment,

punishment, even fear of foolishness. When we find safe, healthy expressions of our truth in body and soul, we can then free the spirit-filled energy that is stored inside us, locked up in tension in belly, fist and jaw. We learn to follow the lead of the Spirit, reaching out in tenderness to those who need embracing, standing up with courage for the causes that call to us and becoming agents of transformation in a broken world, all through the gift of embodiment.

How can you practice embodiment? Dance! Go to your room in private, turn on some music that fits your mood and move! Stomp around in frustration, soften into compassion, twist and wriggle in delight. Bring who you are in the moment to your God. You don't have to know what movements you are going to make. Follow the wisdom of your body. Take turns letting different parts of your body lead you and discover what each part has to tell you. And when you have poured yourself out, listen to God's response to your prayer. Let your breath deepen and move in the clearing that comes from connecting with the Spirit breathing within you.

Look for people who live fully in their bodies and hang out with them. Find out what helps them. Search out classes of creative movement, sacred dance, tai chi, yoga or movement therapy. Pay attention to your body. Listen to your stiffness and recognize constriction and tension are simply movements in your body waiting to happen. Dance with your kids. Go for a walk and become a tree, a cloud, a raindrop, a bird. Dance to church bells. Take yourself lightly. Dare to be foolish. Make love with celebration. Laugh. Cry. Hug. Play.

Most of all, trust your body. St. Paul tells us we are temples of the Spirit. Know that you live in a temple that goes with you everywhere. May you open yourself to the Spirit who moves in you and reaches out to the world through you. As the mock turtle from Alice in Wonderland asks, "Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?" †