

“Dance and Spirit” a summer share by Sara Templeton
July 30, 2006 Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church

Text: Samuel 6:1-15(selections) David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. When they came to the threshing-floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God...So David was unwilling to take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite for three months... It was told King David, ‘The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.’ So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

I WAS INVITED HERE TODAY BECAUSE I DANCE. Specifically, because dance is a way in which I endeavor to the divine. Some even believe that is actually a natural function of my art. But before I get into all that, I must confess that religion as we practice it here does not really happen in my everyday dance life. Perhaps the one constant exception is backstage before a performance when everyone pauses to petition “Oh God, please let me not mess up.” That being said, I am hard pressed to find a more soulfully demanding, spiritually exacting experience than that of understanding what it is to dance. I don’t know where dance came from for me. People usually have a story, a moment that happened. I’ve got no such tale. I suppose that means it was always conscious, and thus did not need to be unveiled in a poignant moment. What I have had in place of that, is validation of the path I was on, this path of dance. I forget who or how many scientists proved this, but once upon a time in the history of this planet, the spiritual leaders of our cultures were also the best dancers. In other words, a prerequisite to being a wise and sacred human being was the ability to dance, the ability to know oneself in this way.

Now I’m not talking about being a performer – that’s a side effect of dancing, but dance itself is much, much deeper. Dance itself involves going so fully in the body, and desiring such grace of the body, that you inquire of and abandon yourself to the source of the body’s life.

I first started to do this in college. I was a dance major, and everyone around me had been studying technique for much longer than me. In my desperation to feel valuable among this crowd of nineteen-year-old dance veterans, I developed a talent for being ‘body smart’. If my feet didn’t point as prettily as I would have liked, or if my turnout wasn’t anything special, I could be secretly content in the knowledge that I understood dance in the body better than my classmates. I couldn’t necessarily execute it, but I

grasped its full value. The interesting thing about this perception was that it made me very dedicated to the spirituality of dance.

You would think that being physically smart would equate with being body-centric. This was not the case. You see, as I developed a relationship to the mass of my self, I discovered that what we have in the body is the brutal and beautiful truth of everyday we've lived. My pain, my pleasure, my grace, my sin, my knowledge and my ignorance are all manifest in my body.

But wait, said I, there's another side isn't there? Maybe, just maybe, my articulation of the body, my practice of technique, can undo or enforce qualities of my life. Maybe my body can not only reflect my life, but influence it as well.

Enter validation number two, which I will speak to as the idea of the Holy Trinity. In religion it represents the dynamic, integrated forces that activate Grace in our lives. Well in dance it is the same. What is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to one is mind, body, and spirit for the other. For me it is no coincidence that the process of dance training mirrors the process of human maturing: first we learn technique, then we learn quality, and finally we learn meaning. There is something desperately tremendous about physical expression. It connects to the heart, as well as the head. Everyone who prays is *moved* to pray. As the emotions surge, as the mind focuses, so the head moves, so the eyes close, so the posture changes...the body is part of the chorus which sings our intentions.

We dancers don't always remember this truth when we're engaged in our practice. We're working hard. Sweating a lot. Falling down. Feeling like we're not getting it right. The irony is, we *are* getting it right. Whether or not we're tuned into it, the reason all this mess happens is because on some level we're taking down the habits that keep the mind, body, and spirit apart. The skill, the strength, and the balance required of dance take us into a divine practice.

In order to dance well, it's helpful to breathe well. And in order to breathe well, it's helpful to be calm. And in order to be calm, it's helpful to be centered. And in order to be centered, it's helpful to be quiet. And in order to be quiet, it's helpful to be accepting. And in order to be accepting, it's helpful to love. And on and on and on until not only has the body achieved ease in virtuosi movement, but the self is fully integrated to a wonderfully whole place...a place which to me, is the abode of God. Or at the very least, God's dance school.

Now if the journey of becoming a master dancer in these terms is a mile, I personally have progressed about a foot. Most of what I know regarding dance's power comes simply because I'm trying so hard. And I'll tell you, great reverence comes quite easily when one loves the goal, and sees that it's still way, waaaaay over there. But that's okay. Some days my dancing is right with it. Some days it is not. Generally when it is not, it's because I am not content in my life. I can't tell you how neat I think that is...that my dance and my life both need goodness from the other in order to be fully realized in their own spheres.

Now that I've told you all of this, I will admit that my spiritual life is not centered solely around dance. But dance is a constant litmus test of where my choices lie, how I exist relative to the divinity of the universe. It speaks to me deeply and honestly. It says, Are you moving with Grace? Yes. Are you feeling with Grace? Yes. Are you breathing with Grace? Yes. (End Rhythm) Then dance. (Start Rhythm again) If you help me, I will dance. (*Sara dancing to the congregation's rhythm*)