

# Liturgical Dance and Liberation

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**I**T IS WRITTEN: "a leper came to him beseeching him and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean" (Mark 1:40-42).

Jesus was moved. The only way one can be moved is to feel. Maybe the mountains move you, or your lover, or the disabled person you sit next to on the bus, or your worst enemy. You feel something way down deep, as Jesus did. What is your response? You move. Just as Jesus stretched out his hand to heal, you stretch out your hands to embrace the mountain, or touch your lover's face; you strike up a conversation with the disabled one sitting next to you or screw up the

courage to speak your heart to your enemy.

This is spirituality: to be moved, to move out in response. Audre Lourde calls this quality of life the erotic. "The erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing." She maintains that our society attempts to separate the spiritual and the political, and that this dichotomy is false. "For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each one of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings."<sup>1</sup>

This felt passion, this erotic connection to the world, to all people, to God, to inner self and to truth is what Jesus felt, and this moved him to

action. This is his spirituality, his way of being in relation to God and his way of being in the world. This is the kind of spirituality we are called to live.

Feeling feelings is not the same as being run by feelings. If one complains without being willing to work for change, thirsts without moving toward water, avoids risk because of fear, then one is using feeling as an excuse for complacency. What I am talking about is allowing oneself to be moved and to move.

### **Liberating the body**

The voice of the third world is growing louder and louder; the voice of the oppressed is speaking to us like the breeze that whispered to Elijah. The poor are beginning to claim their right to exist, their need, their fears, their hope, their power. Liberation means having options. These people had no options until they began to own their self-worth, their ability to respect themselves, to be outraged at their denigration, to love their neighbors rather than accept the message that all the poor are worthless and unlovable. Gustavo Gutierrez writes, "It is on the basis of this affirmation of life that the poor of Latin America are trying to live their faith, recognize the love of God and proclaim their hope."<sup>2</sup>

For some of the same reasons we have oppressed our bodies. We have squelched our most ancient voice by restricting our bodily expression to polite smiles and chit-chat. We do not allow ourselves the option to feel: to be outraged, disgusted, passionate, afraid, jealous, hurt, helpless, empowered, all because we are trying to be "spiritual." In the end, whatever we deny creeps out of us in some unconscious way, in nagging, passivity, violence, illness, or in crucifying whoever challenges us. We become the oppressors, instead of being fully human.

We have this habit of laying restrictions on ourselves like putting on a corset: don't breathe; don't get angry; most of all, don't move your pelvis! No wonder people are dying of cancer, filled with ulcers and medications. Gutierrez writes, "Christian spirituality consists in embracing the 'liberated body.'"<sup>3</sup>

Emotion equals motion. Feelings are not in the mind, they are movements of the body. Clenching your jaw, stomping your feet, a deep belly laugh,

reaching out in need, a sob that comes from way down and then out the throat and eyes and ears, an embrace: we train ourselves to tighten our muscles against this movement for fear someone will discover our weakness, our anger, our hurt.

We are called to recognize our leprosy and reach out for healing; we are called to recognize our ability to heal and reach out to those in pain. This is a spirituality of being moved and moving.

### **Embodied worship**

What does such a spirituality have to do with liturgy? Jake Empereur describes liturgy as a series of proclamations and responses, a rhythm flowing back and forth between receiving the word and acting in response.<sup>4</sup> Proclamations should move people; then the response will be natural and inevitable. This is quite different from "going through the motions." It means proclaiming the word from a place of inner conviction and feeling; it means prayers that give voice to the lives of the assembly; it means giving the assembly a chance to respond with the same emotional intensity with which they have been moved.

Liturgical dance can serve many different functions in prayer: praise, petition, procession. The form of dance I would like to explore here is dance as proclamation. "Dance-drama" is a kind of storytelling through movement that explores and expresses the emotional experience of the characters in scripture and allows us to feel their experience of struggle, conversion and healing. Instead of just hearing words when the scripture is read, or blunting or blurring the power of a passage because we have heard it a hundred times, we need to break open the emotional content of the scriptures so that they move us.

This places a large responsibility on the dancer as preacher. She needs support and affirmation to assume this role. The dancer must be so moved by scripture as to be able to proclaim the word through movement.

The dancer acts as shaman for the community. In primitive tribes, the person who needed healing demonstrated faith in the shaman by coming and confessing the malady. The shaman then "took on" the person's illness and danced through the night until the sickness danced out of the shaman's body and the confessor was healed.



The more we understand health as the interplay among physical, emotional and spiritual wellness, the more we can understand that emotional expression can lead to physical and spiritual healing. When Jesus said to the sick, "Your sins are forgiven," and touched them, the paralyzed, the lame and the blind were restored to physical wholeness.

This is the kind of catharsis the dancer is called to provide for the church by being a spokesperson

for the body of the community. I created a dance for the St. Louis Jesuits' "Be Not Afraid" in which the whole first half of the piece explored the hesitancy, trembling and paralysis of fear. This is our humanity. Only when we have accepted the fear that is embodied in us can we decide to cross the barren desert in order to transform the trembling of fear into the trembling of excitement and trust. Bracing against fear only makes us rigid and brittle.

## Dancing at the well

The dancer becomes the mirror to the community of the feelings they are reluctant to face and own. One of the most vivid examples of this in my own experience is a dance of John 4, for which I used the scripture text and some of the dialogue from John Shea's retelling of this passage.<sup>5</sup>

From the back of the church a woman enters, head bowed. With the weight of two buckets, arms taut, she rises and falls to a rhythmic drum-beat. Moving forward and backward, she finally reaches the sanctuary and drops the buckets with a vengeance, jumps over them, her fists pounding the floor. As she rises a voice breaks into the music: "I'm thirsty."

The woman's absorption in her pain and resentment is interrupted, and she begins to move with a mixture of curiosity and fear. First she turns to the voice, startled, then quickly steps away. The woman looks back sharply, then leaps down into a crouched and protected position. She hears, "Give me a drink." Now the request appears a bit more harmless than expected, so the woman collects herself, and gathers her defiance together as she indignantly catches up one of the buckets. She retorts, gesturing flippantly, "What, you a Jew and a man ask me, a Samaritan and a woman, for a drink?" She stares at the stranger with the power of this challenge. The stranger's voice replies masterfully, "Thirst makes friends of us all."

As the dance unfolds, the congregation has more and more of a chance to recognize their own defenses in the movements of anger, pride and fear through which the woman attempts to hide her thirst. We feel her oppression as our own, her inner dryness as our thirst. There are, however, chinks in her armor that begin to open up and eventually Jesus (whose presence is communicated throughout by an offstage voice) has the audacity to suggest, "If you would ask me, I would give you living water."

At this the woman is outraged. To the rising intensity of a saxophone, her arms and legs flail out as she turns and leaps away defiantly, only looking back long enough to proclaim, "I don't ask!" She continues her angry leaps and lashings, spending all the energy she can muster to fight back. When her protest peaks, the need that she has been so valiantly attempting to cover up begins to show itself. Slowly her flashing arms lose

their vehemence even as she tries to keep them moving. She drops to her knees, her anger gradually dissolving into sobs. No longer able to deny her thirst, she whispers with humility and embarrassed honesty, "Give me a drink."

In this movement, we witness the transformation of feeling. If the woman had remained stoic, refusing to engage at all with Jesus, she would have gone away empty. In confronting Jesus, however, she is somehow free to express the whole range of her emotional truth until she gets to the heart of it, and her heart opens like a vessel ready to receive water. This is the purpose of giving ourselves a chance to feel all our feelings, even the ones we call "negative," so that we can confess ourselves in honesty, and empty ourselves to receive the love of the Lord. All feeling can be transformed by love into love.

If this is the kind of proclamation that is shared, the reality of conversion cannot be ignored by the congregation. Each person will have a different quality of emotional response; some might even be angry. But the spirit has been given a chance to move among people, to stir up emotional energy in their hearts. The question then becomes: what kind of response will allow the congregation to express their own experience of the word?

Here is one possibility. After a period of silent reflection, the congregation would be led by the dancer or presider in a movement meditation to express their own need and thirst. For some, this might seem long-awaited; for others, a bit frightening, just as it frightened the Samaritan woman to admit her thirst.

Each individual is invited to partner with a neighbor. One member of the pair will be the thirsting one; the other, the support. The meditation begins:

Because we are human we thirst. There is a place inside each of us that is empty, crying out for healing, a place we desperately deny in order to remain in control. I now ask the thirsting person to turn your back on your support partner and close your eyes. Your support partner will now give you a chance to recognize and accept your own need, so that you might open your mouth to drink in the living water of love. Your support partner will now place his or her hands on your head and invite you slowly to lay your head back into your partner's arms, letting it grow heavier and heavier resting in the arms of another. Gently open your mouth

and breathe deeply to allow yourself a moment of open-hearted receiving.

After a minute of silence, the support person raises the partner's head and the meditation is repeated with partners taking opposite roles.

Dance-drama gives the community a chance to minister to one another, to be poor for one another, to be Christ for one another. Dr. Megan McKenna suggests that liturgy is the place where we practice celebrating with and ministering to one another so that we know how to do it even with those we don't know in the world.<sup>6</sup>

We have been exploring a spirituality of liberation. Dance is a way to support and express this spirituality in the liturgy. We must also practice living our liberation in the world. Instead of stuffing down feelings and stifling movement, the next time you find tears in your eyes, sob; the next time your shoulders are tense with anger, give your pillow a thorough punching. Allow your heart to break open in the expression of its truth. Then the next time your neighbor is in need, your heart will be open and your hands will be free to reach out in loving response.

#### Notes

1. *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984), p. 56.
2. *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1984), p. 28.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
4. "Liturgy as Proclamation" in *Modern Liturgy Handbook*, ed. John Mossi, S.J. (Ramsey, New Jersey: Paulist Press), pp. 49-62.
5. *An Experience Named Spirit* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1983), pp. 174-179.
6. These insights are from a lecture given by Dr. McKenna at Seattle University, July, 1985.

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