

# Dancing in the Face of Death

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All of creation is in a dance, if we can just see it. As we sit here immobile in this room in this apparently immobile wooden building on this apparently solid piece of ground, we know that in fact this piece of ground is part of a globe that is performing a perpetual pirouette on its own axis and in the process describes a giant circular path around the sun. We know that our only natural satellite, the moon, performs a perpetual pas de deux with us at a near distance, shyly keeping the same face turned toward us at all time, either because she doesn't trust us or because she doesn't want us to see the stain on the back of her dress. We know that the other dancers on the floor include Mars and Venus and Mercury, each absorbed in its own figure, as well as Jupiter and Uranus and Neptune, each with its own coterie of swirling satellites and Saturn, the bell of the ball in her multicolored rings. Asteroids are constantly attempting a clumsy break-dance in their own belt, and occasionally a comet swooshes in from outside to do a do-si-do with the sun. We also know that whole system waltzing around our sun is itself positioned at the outer arm of a huge crowd cakewalking around the center of the Milky Way galaxy, which in turn is tangoing at the edge of an expanding universe. The dance was first called thirteen billion years ago and the dancers show no sign of exhaustion yet; in fact, they seem to be speeding up as the dance progresses.

And it doesn't just happen at the huge end of the scale. While you are sitting in your pews, your red blood cells are performing a wild snake-dance through your veins, arteries and capillaries. Within the cells the various parts, whose names I once knew, sashay in and out, delivering fresh hot nutrients and taking out the garbage. The molecules dance around on the proteins and the atoms dance around on the molecules and the electrons dance around on the atoms. They go so fast, in fact, that we can never be certain of both the size and position of a particle. This was the famous uncertainty principle, discovered by physicists named Heisenberg and Schrodinger in the 1920's, which got them the Nobel prize. In the odd way my mind has of working, I remember this fact because at the time I took my one college course in physics, there was a popular verse form called Higgledy Piggledy. The rules for higgledy piggledy was that it was two verses of four lines each, each line except the last had to be two dactylic meters, and one of the lines had to be one word. Anyhow, my physics professor won the college newspaper's prize for the best such poem with the following entry:

Higgledy piggledy  
Werner H. Heisenberg  
Turned his uncertainty  
Into a prize

Atoms and molecules  
Dancing unceasingly  
Complementarily  
Shielding our eyes.

Indeed all is in motion and everything changes, despite the appearance of stability and permanency. Heraclitus said that you never step into the same river twice, but good Buddhists maintain that you never even step in once. At around the time that Werner Heisenberg was working out his uncertainty principle, Alfred North Whitehead was coming up with the idea that nothing ever is; rather everything is in the process of becoming. This spawned the movement called process theology, and Whitehead's students Charles Hartshorne and Henry Nelson Wieman, two of the foremost Unitarian theologians of the Twentieth Century, developed elaborate systems of thought based on this insight. But the Buddha had declared 2,500 years before that everything is impermanent.

The dance, then is ubiquitous and you are going to be dancing whether you like it or not. The human race has probably been dancing since the dawn of prehistory, and dance is known in almost every human culture.

And nonhumans as well. You may have seen the reports this week about parrot dancing. Scientists confirm what you can see for yourself on Youtube: certain species of parrots appear to have the ability to hear tempo and move their bodies in rhythm to it<sup>1</sup>. If you haven't seen snowball the dancing cockatoo rocking out to the Backstreet Boys, do yourself a favor.

Now, whether or not you have a dancing cockatoo, I know that some of you listening to these words are completely allergic to any suggestion of dancing, and there are others who for one reason or another do not or no longer dance. I want to invite you to take the suggestions and the images of this sermon as metaphorically as you want. If you want to conceive of the dance of ideas or emotions when I say dance, rather than the movement of bodies, feel free.

One of the oldest reasons for dancing is to enhance fertility. Some would say that this is why the peoples of Northern Europe have since time immemorial erected poles around the first of May, decorated them with flowers, and danced around them. The pole is an obvious phallic symbol, planted upon the earth, we might conjecture, in order to fertilize her. Certainly in Celtic pagan religion the land was conceived as the embodiment of a goddess, and there is an old theory in anthropology that the king had to mate with this goddess in order to ensure continued production of crops, livestock and people.

However, if you're not in any great need of fertility at this stage in your life, don't let that stop you from dancing when you feel like it. For we dance to celebrate the phases of the moon, we dance to please the king, we dance to tell a story, we dance to find a suitable partner, we dance in the end zone to celebrate a touchdown, we dance just for the pleasure of moving our bodies rhythmically in space. We have ritual dance, art dance, folk dance, popular dance. Dancing is all around us. I can't remember who said it, but it's certainly true: "Dancing is music made visible."

Until Medieval times dancing was a feature of Christian worship, as dancing is used in sacred ceremonies of many other religions around the world. Dancing creates a sacred space in and around the body of the dancer, a time out of time and a space out of space, in which the dancer and those observing can get in touch with a higher reality. Peoples from Sufi mystics to Native American shamans have danced to access the holy.

While there are many conservative religious groups today who frown on social dancing because of a supposed association with sexual activity, we should keep in mind that the original Puritans, our religious ancestors, did not object to dancing as such. Oliver Cromwell was said to be a good dancer, and the English country dance tradition that still survives today thrived during the Puritan era in England.

However, the Puritans did object to May Poles. As I said in a recent e-mail, there was a huge May Pole erected in Wollaston, now part of Quincy, in 1626, and there was great revelry around it until the Puritans from Plimouth Plantations came and put a stop to the revelry and chopped down the May Pole.

UU churches have known their share of dancing over the years. I joined the Unitarian Church in Charleston in part because it had a parish hall called Gage Hall with a beautiful sprung-wood floor, great for contra dancing. And it took me several years, but I eventually established a regular contra dance there. Once I was running the dance when an acquaintance of my mother-in-law came in, a distinguished bachelor in his eighties who was known as one of the best social dancers in South Carolina. I knew he was a staunch Episcopalian, and it seemed odd that he would walk into the Unitarian parish hall. I asked him what he was doing there and he said he was showing some young friends around town and wanted to show them where it was that

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7IZmRnAo6s>

he had learned to dance in the 1930s. So at least the Unitarian Church in Charleston had a decades long association with the dance.

The other ubiquitous fact of human existence is death. In fact in two texts from the bible, dancing is paired with death as kind of opposites. The first is the familiar passage from Ecclesiastes, "a time to mourn, and a time to dance." To everything there is a season. The second is the passage attributed to Jesus that I read today from Luke, although it also appears in Matthew. In the passage Jesus is complaining of the people who have heard his good news about the Kingdom of God but somehow don't get it. He says these people who resist the good news are like children in the marketplace who call out "we played the flute for you and you did not dance, we wailed and you did not weep." What this passage says to me is that if you want to get it, if you want to be part of the kingdom of God, you gotta dance when the flute says dance and weep when they say weep. You must be plugged in to the ongoing dance of creation.

On Palm Sunday Jesus in effect danced in the face of death. All of the Gospel accounts portray Jesus as aware of his impending death at the time that people were laying down their cloaks and palm fronds and shouting hosannas. Jesus modeled dancing in the face of his own death on that first Palm Sunday.

I am not one to look for the Kingdom of God in heaven, or in any kind of afterlife. If it's going to happen, if it's happening, for me it's happening in this life, right on earth, and right now. It's happening between you and me, whether we know it or not.

Now I'm going to discuss the afterlife and I have to start out by saying none of us knows. Neither the most ardent advocate of life after death nor the greatest skeptic actually knows what becomes of us when we go to that country, as Hamlet put it, "from whose bourne no traveler returns." But whatever your actual feelings, I want to ask you to try this mindset on for size: I want you for a moment to think about death as the absolute end, lights out, all she wrote, nothing to report. I know that is difficult for some of us, particularly those who are still grieving for loved ones. But contemplation of death is also liberating. Robert Fulghum in his book *From Beginning to End* talks about the gravesite he bought, and how he likes to bring a lawn chair out to it and sit and contemplate the place where his body will spend the rest of time. If you allow yourself to think of death as a complete end, doesn't it make the rest of life more vivid? Doesn't it say to you, you better dance while you got the chance?

A full-stop death implies that the meaning of life is found inside life, not outside of it. Easter calls us to practice resurrection, in the form of spiritual transformation. We can practice resurrection by affirming life, no matter what our views are on an afterlife or the Easter event. The meaning of life can be found inside of it, and it's going to be pretty much what meaning we make, collectively and individually. The dance is one of the meanings we make.

It's certainly been one of the things which has held my life together. I've been folk dancing for the last 30 years, and I find great comfort in knowing that wherever I go in the United States, I can plug into a community of people who get together on a regular basis to move their bodies to music for the sheer pleasure of it. You'll see folk dancers driving hundreds of miles for a dance weekend, hauling our aging bodies, sleeping bags and instruments out of cramped little cars with stickers that say "dance gypsy" on them, ready for two or three days nonstop allemande and do-si-dos and waltzes, greeting each other, "didn't I meet you last month in Maryland?" As William Butler Yeats' poem has it  
"The good are always the merry,  
save by an evil chance,  
and the merry love the fiddle,  
and the merry love to dance."

I chose Boston as the place where I would come to make myself a minister because first, there was an active folk dance scene there, and second, because Harvard Divinity School was located here. The former factor has proved more important in helping me stay sane in all the other changes of my life. In looking back on it, I think there may be more than coincidence in

the fact that I started dancing the year my father died.

In many cultures around the world, death is marked by dancing, as many other life transitions are marked by dance. In Irish culture, the dancing at wakes used to be quite prevalent, though it has fallen into disuse lately. It takes courage to dance in the face of death. It takes a certain spirit to say, "death, I don't know what you are or what's on the other side, so therefore I'm going to dance." But it is reality. It is a recognition that life is larger than any one individual, that the dance goes on, that we must remember we are part of life.

You in this church, of course, have known your share of death, some of which was peaceful and in the normal course of things, some of which was tragic and wrenching. As we confront deaths in our community, we pause and honor the deceased, to give comfort to the family and close friends, then we return to the dance, renewed in spirit to continue the good work of the church.

Much of the dance that goes on around a church on a daily basis doesn't look much like a dance. It looks like committee meetings, letters, e-mails, newsletter announcements, services, RE programs – a dizzying whirlwind of activity all the time. The beat is sometimes obscured by the busyness. We have been through many deaths, but we keep dancing.

The dance of life goes on despite the deaths, and we know this if we open our eyes and ears. There's something larger than ourselves going on, and if we let it, it can sweep us off our feet. Thoreau said he wanted to live life to the lees. Don't get to the end and discover that you have let the dance pass you by. Don't let it be said, I played the flute for you and you did not dance. Dance and mourn. Dance in the face of death.

Some of you may find these ideas distasteful. Certainly there is a time and place for grief to be experienced in stillness and even in solitude, or in weeping, and there are many occasions where in the cultural context a dance could be taken as a dishonoring of the dead. But acceptance of grief does not have to be a negation of life. We can dance with tears in our eyes. We can affirm the dance as something we hold onto in the face of the terrors of the unknown.

It's a matter of opening up to something larger than ourselves. When we can embrace the height and the depth of life, when we can know its most ebullient joys and its most searing tragedies, when we can hold in one heart at one moment both the fineness of the dance and the finality of death, we stretch our capacity, we make our souls more elastic, we break through the armor that our fears have built around our vulnerability, and we give ourselves the precious gift of feeling the world in all its wonderful and terrifying plenitude.

Something of this spirit was captured by the English Quaker Sydney Carter when he made Jesus the Lord of the Dance in his great song by that name. Jesus dances in the morning when the world was begun, and he dances in the face of misunderstanding and fear generated by those who can't accept his message, and finally he dances even at the cross. Here is dancing portrayed as a victory over death: they buried me but I leapt up high, for I am the light that will never never die, I live in you and you live in me, for I am the lord of the dance said he. They buried my body, they thought I was gone, but I am the dance and the dance lives on. The dance lives on, my friends. God calls us to the dance of life, even in the face of loss, even in the face of defeat despair and even death. Let it be a dance we do. May I have this dance with you? Amen.

Reading: Luke 7 (also in Matthew 11):

31 "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,  
    'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
    we wailed, and you did not weep.'

33 For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; 34 the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' 35 Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Turn Turn Turn

Ecclesiastes and Pete Seeger

Chorus:

To everything (turn, turn, turn)

There is a season (turn, turn, turn)

And a time for every purpose under heaven.

A time to be born, a time to die

A time to plant, a time to reap

A time to kill, a time to heal

A time to laugh, a time to weep.

A time to build up, a time to break down

A time to dance, a time to mourn

A time to cast away stones

A time to gather stones together.

A time of war, a time of peace

A time of love, a time of hate

A time you may embrace

A time to refrain from embracing.

A time to gain, a time to lose

A time to rend, a time to sew

A time of love, a time of hate

A time of peace. . . I swear it's not too late.