



PROJECT MUSE®

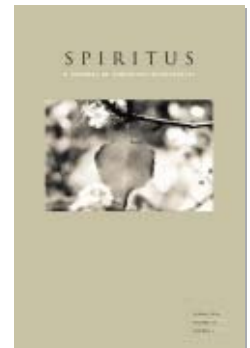
Between Chaos and Light: Calvin, Card Playing, Comic Books, Sex, God, and Dancing

Mary Lane Potter

Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring
2016, pp. 78-98 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2016.0008>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/615266>

Between Chaos and Light: Calvin, Card Playing, Comic Books, Sex, God, and Dancing

MARY LANE POTTER

I was born for dancing, into a Calvinist community that outlawed dancing.

This sounds like a story of belonging. But it's not. I'm not interested in pitting society against the individual or glorifying the artist as rebel. Though I admire Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev* for its rendering of the conflict between tradition and the individual, religion and art, that's not what I'm after here. I'm no rebel, no artist—more a wondering spirit, eager to taste and see that the world is good. I'm also not interested in bashing John Calvin for banning dancing in Geneva as part of his campaign against the libertines and their love of all dissolute pleasures. I'm no Calvin hater. I'm one of Calvin's few admirers—a gargantuan task in an age when Calvin figures as a favorite whipping boy for intellectuals and people on the street alike. Total depravity? Anathema to liberals. Double predestination? Heresy to the New Age law of attraction: Manifest your desires! And then there's the matter of burning Michael Servetus at the stake for denying the trinity and infant baptism—offensive to a host of sensibilities and stances. No, I do not rail against Calvin, or Calvinism, as the Great Repressor who did not permit me to dance. I'm after something different here.

What I want is to understand what dancing *is*. What kind of act is it? Physical? Symbolic? Secular? Spiritual? What makes dancing necessary to my existence? What does it *do* in my life, for my life, that I cannot live without? That's my inquiry. And it's pursuing these questions that leads me into the experience of growing up a dancer in an anti-dancing community, formed by the clash of two commands.

1. FLOWING

"Dance!" a voice commanded. "Dance," I heard, whenever a joy so profound overtook me I felt as if I could not bear it. Before there was I and Not-I, before language was mine, the urging was there, neither inside nor outside me, just there, suddenly, rousing my spirit-flesh—wordless, insistent, irrepressible, undeniable. When the sun warmed my bared belly or lips brushed the fine hairs on the crown of my head. Once self and words had emerged, I heard it

still: “Dance!” When I was swimming in Lake Michigan or the Atlantic Ocean. When I sat on a branch in our maple tree and watched the light and shadow playing through the trembling leaves. When I picked up a twig and it crawled across my palm—the wonder of a stick that was alive! When I was singing with the congregation in church, my sister’s voice resonating with mine. When childhood left me, the voice did not. “Dance!” it whispered. When I heard John Coltrane playing “Welcome,” or a choir singing Handel’s *Messiah* in a cathedral, or a stream rushing over rocks. Backpacking through forested mountains. Standing on a cliff gazing at the ocean. Gazing into the face of my newborn son, the face of my newborn daughter. Meditating. Whenever joy threatens to shatter this earthen vessel, “Dance!” a voice says. And I do, quite without willing it, as if my body had a fail-safe mechanism. In those moments, all my cells straining with the pressure, eager to explode, I am, suddenly, without thinking, without willing, dancing. Not on the ground or any surface. In space, in the dark, among the stars, moving freely, in every direction. No up. No down. No East, West, North, or South. No in, no out. No origin or destination. No pattern and variation. No here or there. Just moving, freely, moving in joy, out of joy, into joy. Spinning, leaping, jumping, tumbling, whirling, whirling, whirling with the music of the spheres. And when I have danced the joy into a bearable state, I return to the earth, my body holding the joy for a glorious moment, until it dissipates and I am clay once again, breathing, moving, animated—but no longer enspirited.

2. STACCATO

“Don’t dance,” the chorus of voices outside me commanded—father, mother, *dominies* (as we called the ministers in our Dutch immigrant community), elders, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, and uncles. “Don’t dance,” they chanted. A single voice, dispassionate, persistent, inescapable, like a heart beating out the rhythm of life. “No dancing. No dancing. No dancing.” As I grew, the chorus grew louder. First a shake of the head. No. Then a whisper. No dancing. Then sober instruction. Dancing is *verboden*. Then a shout and a slap. No dancing! No!

But how could I keep from dancing? And not just in my imagination. I first danced in my body in the living room of my aunt and uncle’s cottage by Lake Michigan. It was the summer of 1960 and I was nine. Cherrie, one of my older cousins, put Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” on her portable record player one afternoon and started hula-hooping to the beat. In the middle of the song she let the hula hoop slide to her feet, kicked it across the room, and started twisting. “It’s exercise!” she said, grinning mischievously. “Come on, try it!” If my aunt, Cherrie’s mom, caught us, she’d harangue us and sentence us to memorizing Bible chapters. She was even stricter than my mother about Sab-



Let's Rock. Courtesy Luis Amaral

bath observance, never allowing her kids to watch TV on Sunday or to swim on Sunday, even when the heat was unbearable. She was vigilant about all the other rules of our denomination too, though once a summer she turned a blind eye while her husband and my other uncles sipped a beer on the screened-in porch. But my aunt was still down at the beach with the little kids, and we'd hear that noisy troop coming up the boardwalk in time to jump back into our sanctioned hoops. I climbed out of my hoop and started twisting too. I can still feel myself in that front room, working my legs and hips, shoulders and arms to the beat, now to the right, now to the left, now down low, now back up again. Breathless. Sweating. Happy.

Not until I was fifteen did I dance again. Uxbridge High had regular dances, which was all anyone talked about for months, before and after—Are you going? Anyone asked you yet? Did you go to the quarry after? Did he kiss you? But dances were for “the other kids,” the Catholics, the Presbyterians, the Jews, the Who-Knows-Whats, the *Nothings*. We Christian Reformed—CRC—kids were not allowed to go. No exceptions. Not for prom. Not for the graduation dance. Dancing wasn't the only issue. We were forbidden to fraternize in any way with the unchosen. Our church was “counterculture,” meaning it prided itself on being separate from the dominant culture, *against* it. We took seriously the rule derived from the Gospel of John: be in the world, but not of the world. We weren't permitted to play with the Catholic kids in the neighborhood or enter their houses, which were awash in idols. We couldn't join the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts; we had our own youth organizations, Calvinettes and Calvin Cadets, that sponsored car washes in the summer to raise money for missionary trips, hayrides in the fall, and sledding parties in winter. So there was no way our elders and parents were going to allow good Christian Reformed boys and girls to mingle with worldly boys and girls. Certainly not at a dance. What if one of ours fell for one of theirs, or the other way around? The horror of “marrying out” loomed large and dancing was the slope we were bound to slip down, landing outside the church, which meant hell, for “outside the church there is no salvation.” For years I obeyed this prohibition against exogamy, more by circumstance than by choice: I danced only with other CRC kids. I wasn't a rebel. I just needed to dance.

That's how I danced for years—on the sly, but among my own. The summer I was fifteen I went on a church youth group trip, traveling by train from eastern Massachusetts to Edmonton, Canada, to mingle with other CRC teens. The highlight of that trip was not seeing the Canadian Rockies or horseback riding around Lake Louise or being kissed when the train passed through a long dark tunnel. It was dancing. After our host parents went to bed, we gathered in the girls' bedroom, locked the door, and threw open the windows to see if we could hear Herman's Hermits, who were performing in an outdoor sta-

dium a few blocks away. We had walked past the stadium after dinner, climbing on one another's shoulders to catch a glimpse of the stage. Now we were stuck inside, but we could hear them. "Something tells me I'm into something good." We lip-synced the words along with them. When they started singing, "I'm Henry the Eighth I am," the crowd screamed its pleasure, so we shoved the rug under the bunk beds, took off our shoes, and danced.

When I was sixteen, my parents went away for the weekend, leaving my older brother Steve and me in charge of our three younger siblings. Sunday evenings after church the youth group gathered at one house or another, and that Sunday evening they came to ours. It was mostly our regular high school group, but a few kids home from college showed up. All from our church. Not one outsider. Boys wearing their Sunday dress pants and shirts, girls their Sunday dresses and, as always, no make-up. We sat in the living room of our old farmhouse, on velvet-covered antique love sofas and chairs, talking and laughing. No one cursed God's name or used foul language. No one smoked. No one drank alcohol. No one made out. No one sneaked off to an upstairs bedroom for sex. Steve went upstairs to his room and came down with The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The album had just come out and everyone just had to hear it. He put it on the record player and suddenly the furniture was up against the wall and we were in our stocking feet, sliding across the smooth, wide planks of the floor, our bodies jerking and spinning, our arms carving the air around us. We danced to every song. It was glorious! After helping us put the furniture back, everyone left—at a decent hour—and Steve and I went to bed. But I was too stirred up to sleep. In my mind I was still dancing.

Our parents returned after midnight, none the wiser, and all was well. Until word leaked out—how, we never found out. The minister and two elders made a house visit to inform my parents and us of our sin—dancing, compounded by lies and deception and disobedience—decry it, and call for our confession and repentance. Steve and I were branded as troublemakers in the church community, and we were punished by our parents, though I can't remember how. I remember only how it felt, arms circling over my head, feet tapping the smooth pine of the floor, shoulders, torso, and hips undulating, all of me moving to the rhythm, carried away into an eternal moment of joy in which body and heart and mind—always warring within me—were one. It was an ecstasy—standing outside (*ek-stasis*) the everyday reality of a divided self—that returned me to those moments of joy as a child, an ecstasy that I sought again and again. Had I known then about Friedrich Nietzsche, I would have taped these words of his to my Smith & Corona: "I would believe only in a God that knows how to dance."¹

Dancing was forbidden at Calvin College when I arrived there in 1967. That spring a senior invited me to the Graduation Banquet, which meant “Formal Wear for a Dinner Not Followed by Dancing.” A queen was chosen for the event, and I was one of the “ladies” in her court. But it was *not* a prom; it was a dinner eaten “decently and in good order” (1 *Corinthians* 14:40). Once or twice a year, though, certain unnamed individuals hosted an off-campus dance party for Calvin students—school ID required. The hosts’ names were well-guarded secrets. Attending the dances was almost as dangerous, because representatives of the college raided them. They didn’t take photographs of the crowd, as they did in chapel at seven every weekday morning, to record who and who wasn’t occupying their assigned seat. But if they caught you at one of those dances, you’d be suspended or worse. Those illicit dances were very well attended, which comforted and disturbed me. If so many “good Christian kids” risked not only their souls but their reputations and their futures to dance, how could dancing be so bad? And what, exactly, was wrong with it?

3. CHAOS

Dancing Leads to “Other Things”

Why was dancing anathema to my Dutch Calvinist community? I never understood. Not as a child, not as a college student, not as a Calvin scholar, not as a professor in Reformed and other seminaries. I still don’t understand, even now as an adult, who decades ago became a Jew, a member of a community that danced its deliverance from slavery on the far shore of the sea and has been dancing ever since, the Chasids dancing their prayers, whole communities dancing with the Torah on *Simchat Torah*, in the synagogue and in the streets. I don’t believe my ancestral community’s prohibition against dancing was simply an unexamined carryover from Calvin’s Geneva. Our community was far too analytical and reflective on matters of doctrine, and we relished theological debates. The only explanation ever given for why dancing was forbidden was this: “It might lead to other things.” What these “other things” were, they never said, which meant they were acts so horrible as to be unspeakable, or that they were so delicious that the mere mention of them was enough to lure both speaker and hearer into temptation, away from God. But my young mind was hooked. *Other things!* Those eviscerated words, cleansed of the concrete, stripped of specifics, purified of all flesh—how those gutted words fascinated me. Like the *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolph Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, they caused in me a *frisson* of attraction and repulsion. How tantalizing—to gain the knowledge of good and evil, to gain the world! How frightening—to lose one’s soul!

I still wonder today. Why this horror of dancing? What were the theological grounds for it? Our community prided itself on its theological acumen and doctrinal purity. At the Sunday dinner table, you were as likely to hear an argument about why the sixteenth-century Dutch theologian Arminius was anathema for declaring man had free will as you were to hear a diatribe against Duncan Littlefair, the local minister preaching the Norman Vincent Peale gospel of optimism—“Duncan Littlefaith” they called him. So there had to be reasons for the prohibition against dancing, in spite of the fact that no one offered me any. If not strictly theological reasons, then reasons of faith. “The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know,” says Pascal. What were the reasons my faith community abhorred dancing?

Card Playing?

Is dancing like card playing? We were strictly forbidden to use playing cards. This meant “face cards,” a distinction I wasn’t aware of until second grade, when the *dominie’s* daughter invited me to her house after school to play games. We sat around the dining room table with her older brothers and their friends, waiting for the *dominie* to join us. He came in smiling, sat down, pulled a deck of cards out of his pocket, and said, “I’ll deal first.” He split the deck in two and began shuffling the cards, face down.

Fear stiffened me, robbed me of words. The only card game we were permitted to play was “Authors,” and these cards looked nothing like those. These shiny-backed cards looked adult, forbidden. I knew I should turn away, say “get thee behind me, Satan,” and run home. But I sat transfixed, staring at the cards flipping up and down, up and down, intermingling again and again in his long, delicate fingers. Well worn, with nicked corners and frayed edges, the cards yielded easily to his hands. I could not grasp what was happening—a minister of God tempting me to sin!

“It’s okay,” the *dominie* said to me, his face and voice softening. “These aren’t *verboden*.”

His kids and their friends sniggered, their contempt of my naiveté obvious.

He shot them a look, and they sat up straight and composed their faces. “Look,” he said, spreading out the cards on the table. “It’s just numbers and colors and a bird. The bird’s called a ‘rook.’ These aren’t face cards. There are no Jacks, Queens, or Kings. No Jokers either. That means these are not the kind of cards people use in gambling, so it’s not forbidden to play with them.”

I didn’t like the look of that bird. Its steely eyes and sharp beak were menacing. And it was black, black as sin. I remembered my dad talking about “getting rooked” by someone, which meant something like being cheated or lied to. How did I know the *dominie* wasn’t lying to me? *Dominies* weren’t infallible. Hadn’t I witnessed my grandfather on the church steps accuse his *dominie*

of preaching falsehoods about God's grace? I played one round of "Rook," ran home, and never stopped at the *dominie's* house after school again.

Comic Books?

Playing with face cards was *verboten* because it led to gambling, a terrible waste of the gifts God has given and faithless reliance on chance instead of trusting in God's providence. But what does that have to do with dancing? Dancing does not lead to gambling. What then? Is dancing like another of those *verboten* "other things"? Is it like reading comic books? Reading material of this ilk was not allowed because it led to another kind of sin: idleness, the most fertile ground for the Devil.

85

The first time I saw a comic book was at my friend Betty's house. I went home with Betty after school one day when we were in third grade. We walked from our Christian school, past our red-brick church with the white pillars and steeple, and just beyond the *dominie's* house, which was across the street from hers. After a snack of Ritz crackers and Hawaiian Punch, Betty pulled out something from under her bed and thrust it in my face as she put her finger to her lips to silence me. It was a Donald Duck comic book. A banned book! I was scared. What would happen now? Would the Devil appear and snatch us away, leaving the comic book behind for our parents to find?

Betty rolled up the comic book, stuffed it under her sweater, and headed outside. I followed. We climbed high in the maple tree in her back yard and read the book, stealing glances at her house to see if her mother had returned from the grocery store and across the street to the *dominie's* house to see if we were being watched. Betty turned the pages, giggling here and there, either because she thought the story was funny or out of nervous delight at our daring. I didn't care much for the book. The story and the drawings didn't impress me. It was Betty's calm, lighthearted defiance of a command that shocked me. Hiding in a tree to furtively read a comic book was not idleness. It was flagrant disobedience of the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," which meant disobeying *God*. Which meant not a few whacks on the butt with the "Board of Education" and being sent to bed without supper but *eternal* punishment.

But if reading comic books, or indulging in other "guilty pleasures," as people today call frivolous, brainless pursuits with no redeeming social value, like watching melodramatic television series and reading romance novels, does contribute to the sin of idleness, what does that have to do with dancing? I can't find a connection. There must be something else that made dancing objectionable to my community.

Sex?

Perhaps it was the association of dancing with the body and sex that led to its prohibition. If the body is bad or dangerous, a fount of temptation and lust, or a descent into flesh and away from spirit, as it is for some religious traditions, and sex is only redeemable by marriage (“Better to marry than to burn,” says Saint Paul), then dancing as a physical pleasure and as a first step toward sex has to be off limits. But this doesn’t make sense for my ancestral tradition. In my experience, the Christian Reformed Church wasn’t riddled with hatred of the body and repression. Quite the opposite. Perhaps it was the Dutch heritage, but sex was referred to frequently and positively in my extended family and in the community. “Hotter’n Dutch love” was a phrase my mother and aunts said often, with a gleam in their eye. And it was common knowledge that on Sunday afternoons children were to make themselves scarce, because the parents would take a nap and “take their pleasure.” It wasn’t the body or sex that were to be avoided at all costs; it was *dancing*. The classic Christian Reformed joke says it well: Why can’t Christian Reformed people make love standing up? Because it might lead to dancing!

No, the body was *not* the problem. We were far from being gnostics, of the ancient or contemporary ilk. We didn’t believe the material world was evil, the creation of an evil god, who stood in opposition to the true god, a god of light and spirit. We didn’t believe the body was a prison of darkness, from which the soul must free itself through *gnosis*, saving knowledge of its true condition, a disembodied spirit that once fell into the world. We must escape from this evil world by acquiring *gnosis* and refraining from all material acts, especially sex and the evil consequences thereof: plunging one’s spirit back into ignorance and darkness and generating new bodies, new prisons for other souls. No, we were no gnostics. We were *Calvinists*. For us there was one God and only one: God, the Giver of Every Good Gift, the creator of the world *and* the redeemer of the world. That meant the created world was good, “a theater of God’s glory,” as Calvin has it. And we were *Dutch*—a people less spiritually or metaphysically inclined and more prone to practicality and action in the material world, the temporal realm—reclaiming land from the sea, colonizing the world to make our food tastier with exotic spices, etching and painting the beauty of the world, teaching the humanism of Erasmus and the ethics of Spinoza. No, for my childhood community the body was not the reason dancing was forbidden.

Freedom?

What then? If dancing is not a gateway sin, a sign of rebelliousness, or a giving way to the flesh, what is it? What makes religious communities—not only the one I grew up in but others as well, with different traditions, different histo-

ries, different ethnicities—recoil from it and set limits around it?

When I moved beyond the Christian Reformed community, first to liberal Protestantism and then to Judaism, I continued to dance. Denied this pleasure in my youth, I seized every opportunity to dance I could—parties, weddings, outdoor festivals, solo sessions in my living room to Aretha singing “Spirit in the Dark.” In those years I danced secularly, by which I mean free-form, non-partner dancing in which I could creatively express myself. If that’s what dancing is, I can understand why some religious communities prohibit it. Freedom of expression, through speech or art, appears threatening to communities that value tradition over change. If individuals do not submit themselves to the inherited ways and thoughts and practices, the tradition will become corrupted, they fear. If individuals give free reign to their thoughts and actions, heretical ideas and ways will undoubtedly surface and the faithful will be tempted by them away from the true path. Better, for the good of all and the honor of the tradition, to suppress freedom of expression.

It’s not only religious traditions that perceive dancing as a threat, though it may seem that way to us in the United States, with our Puritan (read “Calvinist”) beginnings, tradition of separation of church and state, radical individualism, and our own version of the generation wars—the *Footloose* version, in which lively, dancing teenagers triumph over the moribund ways of religious elders. But China’s recent crackdown on the “dancing grannies” reminds us that political systems, too, are alert to the dangers of dancing, especially when those systems value cultural unity over individual expression.

In the 1990s tens of thousands of women in China who had been forced into retirement started dancing in parks and plazas. They chose their own music and styles of dancing—Western music and styles included. They danced freely, each group the way they chose, each woman the way she chose, to music broadcast over speakers. “When I dance,” one woman told an interviewer, “I forget all my cares. And I can also hike up mountains with little effort.”²

In early 2015, when non-dancers objected to the noise and railed against the women’s dancing as a disruption, the Communist Party stepped in to restore harmony. Henceforth, the government announced, public dancing would be regulated to transform it from a counter-revolutionary activity (one that varied from place to place and caused social disharmony) to “a nationally unified, scientifically crafted new activity that brings positive energy to the people.”³ Currently, guidelines are being developed on when and where the dancing should occur, how loud the music is, what kind of music may be played, and what kind of “scientifically crafted” dancing is acceptable. The Chinese government choreographed twelve model routines for the women, to ensure that the women got a proper fitness workout. And they formed a national outdoor dancing association to “strengthen management and promote healthy development” of dancing.

For certain religious and secular systems, dancing means trouble. It encourages free movement, free thinking, and freedom of expression in individuals. And this can lead only to dissent and strife. For the health of the society, therefore, dancing must be prohibited or strictly controlled.

But that is not all dancing is—an example or symbol of free expression of the individual. I learned this late in my life, during the 1990s, when those thousands of Chinese women were discovering dancing. One spring my sister and I attended a week-long drumming workshop at Omega Institute in Upstate New York. On one of our nights off, as an extracurricular activity, I happened on Gabrielle Roth and her son Jonathan leading a “Sweat Your Prayers” gathering. Sometimes called “5Rhythms dance” or “ecstatic dance,” “Sweat Your Prayers” is a form of moving meditation, a meditative practice in which people move to music, alone or occasionally with a partner, in a sequence of rhythms: Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical, Stillness.

I was not prepared for what I experienced. I was familiar with liturgical dance in the Lutheran Church and the United Church of Christ, but had never been drawn to it, in spite of my love for all things danced-related. The examples of liturgical dance I had been exposed to seemed to be a translation of a concept into movement instead of an invitation to a different experience in community. This Sweat Your Prayers dancing was different. It wasn’t sacred dance as much as it was sanctifying dance. I saw men and women of all ages, from teens to elders in their seventies and eighties moving with grace, out of grace, in grace. It seemed to me they were praying, entering into a space of attentiveness in which their bodies and spirits were integrated, united, all through movement and rhythm. Watching their bodies and spirits communing reminded me of the Sufi whirling dervishes I had seen in their white robes and tombstone hats, circling and circling around the one still point as they moved together like planets in the solar system, their bodies prayers. It reminded me, too, of the Native American Sundancers I witnessed one August at a private Sundance near Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. For a week I stood under the pine-bough arbor from sunrise to sundown, doing the two-step in place with other “supporters” while members of many tribes in beautiful regalia danced their prayers inside the sacred circle, around the sacred pole, the *axis mundi*, danced to the rhythm beaten out on animal skins and sung by groups of drummers and singers. They were praying with their bodies. Their bodies had *become* prayers. They were living out the words of the Baal Shem Tov, that dancing mystic: “I am prayer.”

That night as I watched Gabrielle Roth and a room full of dancers sweating their prayers—dancing in a windowless room, dressed in street clothes, moving in no recognizable circle, with no *axis mundi* in sight—I saw that they, too, were praying with their bodies, they too had *become* prayer. For these



Dervishes. Courtesy of Deric Olschner

dancers, like the Sundancers, dancing wasn't a symbol of something else—freedom of expression, freedom of the individual, creativity, the non-rational. It wasn't a language into which they translated feelings or ideas. It wasn't a way to something else; it was the way. It was a communing, of one's body and spirit, of the self and the world, of the self and the One—it was a *spiritual* act.

4. LYRICAL

I didn't join Roth and the other dancers sweating their prayers that evening. I'm not sure why. Perhaps my head was so intent on learning the drum rhythms of the workshop I was attending with my sister that I couldn't hear the rhythms they were dancing to. Perhaps I didn't trust that the grace with which I saw people moving, the ease they had with their bodies and one another—people old and young, slender and rotund, shy and flamboyant—was possible for me. I returned home and continued dancing in my secular, devil-may-care way. A decade went by. I moved from the Southeast to the Northwest. My son and daughter grew up. I went through a divorce, spent a year meditating, danced alone in the dark, hung out with Sufis (meditating, not whirling), started a new life.

Then, one Sunday morning I happened upon a Sweat Your Prayers group in Seattle. For two hours I moved in and among a room full of dancers, moving to music arranged in a carefully selected sequence of rhythms: Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical, Stillness. The rhythms take you on a journey, if you are willing, and I was, finally, twenty years after that first arresting encounter with Roth and a room warm and alive with body-spirits journeying through the rhythms. For Roth, the dance journey is a path to soul or true self. As she writes in *Sweat Your Prayers: Movement as Spiritual Practice*. “The soul can only be present when body and spirit are one.”⁴

“When body and spirit are one.” That is what I had been seeking all my life, the world I had experienced as a child when I danced in my imagination, the world I had tasted and had been looking for ever since—the oneness of body and spirit, space and time. Not flesh warring against the spirit. Not spirit escaping the prison house of the flesh. This—enspirited body, embodied spirit.

And that is what I experienced that first Sunday morning when I danced the five rhythms in that community. Enspirited body. Embodied spirit. Homecoming. Joy. A calm presence that breathed the words of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century anchoress and mystic, through me: “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.” Not every moment of those two hours did I experience this, but enough to taste that union and want more. I started dancing with that community regularly, almost every week.

Over the next two years dancing changed for me. It became a communing, of body and spirit, self and world, self and the One, communing with that which is beyond, a world beyond the ordinary world we experience in our everyday life—it became a *spiritual* act. In the act of dancing or by the act of dancing I entered another way of being. I moved through the rhythms—Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical, Stillness—with eyes sometimes closed, sometimes half-closed, my awareness not centered in my mind or heart or body, but in all of them at once. The rhythms caught me up and I surrendered to them, let them move me. I felt part of the whole and I sensed the others in the room as part of that whole too. I moved easily into and through the spaces between those bodies-hearts-minds-spirits—no thought to what they were doing, how they were dancing, or how I might look to them or to anyone. There was no “anyone” outside to look at me, no “me” to look at. We were all caught up in the rhythms, in a whole beyond ourselves, with a different kind of awareness and a different way of being than we experienced in ordinary life and that refreshed our spirits and sent us home changed—at least for several hours, if not the rest of the day or week.

The sociologist Robert Bellah, in *Religion in Human Evolution*, calls experiences like these “unitive events,” events that bring an “experience of the felt whole,” enactive events “in which the whole body participates, along with mind and spirit, again without a sense of bifurcation.”⁵ Unitive events are more vision than feeling, “vision that puts reality in true perspective, with the focus not on the individual or group or the transient world, but on the majesty of the eternal.”⁶ And they are often accompanied by “a profound sense of wholeness”⁷ and well-being.

Unitive events often occur during rituals, which frequently include dancing and singing. Rituals, for Bellah, are summed up best by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: rituals are not *representations* of religious events but religious *actions*, actions that create worlds; rituals create the world as imagined, which is joined to the world as lived, which in turn leads to the transformation of one’s sense of reality. Bellah also says, following the sociologist Emile Durkheim, that unitive events were primarily and originally collective, with rituals leading to “collective effervescence,” in which people together experience “a different and deeper reality” in a way that changes them. Here’s Durkheim’s description of what happens during rituals as this experience of a different reality disrupts the experience of the lived world.

One can readily see how, when arrived at this state of exaltation, a man does not recognize himself any longer. Feeling himself dominated and carried away by some sort of external power which makes him think and act differently than in normal times, he naturally has the impression of being himself no longer. It seems to him that he has become a new being. . . . And as at

the same time all his companions feel themselves transformed in the same way . . . everything is just as though he really were transported into a special world, entirely different from the one where he ordinarily lives, and into an environment filled with exceptionally intense forces that take hold of him and metamorphose him.⁸

Durkheim's point, argues Bellah, is that "the world of ritual is quite different from the one 'where his daily life drags wearily along.' It is the world of the sacred in contrast to the profane everyday."⁹ Ritual is "a break with the rhythm of everyday life" in which one is transformed.

92

This notion of ritual as a break with the rhythm of everyday life that arises out of an experience of a different and deeper reality, creates a sense of well-being and leads to transformation is as close to describing what I experienced dancing, week after week, as I have found. Dancing bumped me into a unitive event in which ordinary reality with its separation between self and world, between this world and that which is beyond this world, did not apply. It was an integrating event in which the ordinary distinctions between body, mind, and spirit were suspended. Giving myself over to the rhythms, I experienced a deeper and wider world that broke the rhythm of everyday life, created in me a profound sense of wholeness and well-being, and in so doing changed me. During those two hours, as I experienced a communing of body-heart-mind-spirit, a calm and calming joy flowed through me. Joy, not happiness. Not a passing feeling or emotional response, but a steady state of relaxed attention and appreciation that lasted for many hours afterward, coloring everyone and everything I saw, heard, thought, said, and did. I left the dance hall and stepped outside on the street, breathing deeply and unable to stop smiling. I had become joy.

Dancing in this way, experiencing a different way of *being*, became for me a different way of *knowing*, and so a path to transformation. By dancing, in dancing, being present to another world beyond the assumptions and patterns of my everyday world, discoveries came to me, from body to spirit, and from spirit to body. The kind of knowing that happens during this kind of dancing feels similar to the way one knows through meditation: by opening your awareness to a realm larger than the intellectual or psychological alone, you become aware of "more," and that "more" transforms everything you knew before. It was like discovering an "answer" when you didn't even know what the question was, like being reintegrated when you couldn't see or name the pieces that had broken apart from one another. In dancing, through giving myself—body-heart-mind-spirit—over to the rhythms, I became aware of changes I needed to make, longed for, was undergoing. I moved out from the limits of subjective feeling to an expansive vision that put everything else, myself, this daily world we experience, in perspective, that illuminated what could be and

made it possible. Dancing became my preferred way to pray, to meditate, to commune with the One, to be made whole, to become a new being, to be made new.

Once I discovered this, I used dancing intentionally as a path to transformation. At first I would just let myself feel whatever it was, sorrow or pain or discouragement or hope—feel it in my heart-self, and my body-self and move through it. Other times I would dance out my heart’s deepest desire—such as for a true companion. Sometimes I would ask a question and let my dancing self lead me to an answer. For example, one of my greatest challenges has been how to be a full self in an intimate relationship with a partner. Like most women, I’m other-directed, too quick to give away my freedom or give up my desires for the sake of another. On the other hand, I’m fiercely independent and an unapologetic feminist. This wasn’t an issue with my children. I knew the joy of dancing with my infant son and infant daughter held close to my heart, and dancing with my children when they were young, in the living room or at outdoor concerts, with wild abandon and joy. Dancing with my son at his wedding outdoors on Lopez Island, overlooking glorious Puget Sound, the two of us moving easily from the traditional slow first dance to a faster free-form dance, overjoyed me. But I was constitutionally unable to dance with a partner—what? Me follow someone else’s, a *man*’s, lead? Conform my “free-form” moves and position to *his*?

Through dancing in this new way, the puzzle of how to reconcile these pulls in opposite directions—to other, to self—a puzzle that had eluded my body, heart, and mind for decades, was somehow solved. It was a transformation that occurred beyond rationality. It wasn’t that I received a solution to the problem, a resolution of this issue that had troubled me for so long, or even a reconciliation of the conflict. It ceased to be a conflict. It was as if whatever had been the problem or had troubled me dissolved. I don’t believe I would have married again, taken the risk of intensely living out being an individual-in-relation, if not for this transformation by and through dancing.

As dancing in this way changed me, week after week, dancing itself changed for me. I came to think of dancing not as a secular activity but a spiritual act, for spirituality, like religion with its rituals, opens up another world to live in, if even for a moment, a world that puts the ordinary world in perspective and makes possible a different way of living, a transformation of self that lasts not just for the moment of dancing but endures beyond that moment and bears fruit in one’s life.

I also came to think of dancing as a sanctifying act, a sanctifying of space by moving in time, a sanctifying of time by moving through space. When you are dancing, moving your body in time, from one moment to the next, you are sculpting the physical space around you into a unique form, an invisible, time-

bound sanctuary that holds and lifts you. And as you create this sacred space with each movement, as it takes shape and you begin to dwell, to move within that space, time seems to cease—you enter a time beyond time, a sacred time.

The language of “another world” and “being transported” during rituals focuses on space and obscures this dimension of time, which is also fundamental to ritual. Rituals in many traditions open up another world beyond the everyday world by sanctifying time as well as space. This can be seen in Judaism, which distinguishes clearly between the holy and the everyday, marking off every seventh day as Shabbat and the holidays during their season as sacred time, time beyond time. The community enters those times to break with the rhythm of everyday life and be present to the Presence. One may speak of holy places—Mt. Sinai, the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, the Holy City and Israel, the Holy Land—but, for me, there is no holiness inherent in place, unchanging, for all time, without human beings moving through it. The ground on which Moses stood was holy not in and of itself for all time, but because Moses encountered the Presence there: space was transformed in that moment in time when he took off his shoes and stepped close. Synagogues are not sacred spaces in and of themselves for all time. They are sacred spaces only when a living community is moving through them in the dance of prayer and praise, open to a different and deeper reality, ready to encounter the Presence. When a community dies and its building is no longer a place of ritual, that space is decommissioned, desanctified. Moving through time in space, moving through space in time—that’s when sanctifying occurs.

Dancing can become a sanctifying act when one moves through space in time, moves through time in space, in a way that invites an experience of a world beyond the ordinary world, an encounter with the One, the Presence. Neither the sanctifying nor an experience of a world beyond is guaranteed. It’s a gift when it happens. You enter a dancing session just as you enter a place, a synagogue or church or temple or circle, or you enter a moment, Shabbat or Christmas or Diwali: in hope for such a meeting, such a communion, such a sanctifying, and the transformation that can result. Out of that praying, ritualizing, and dancing, all moving through space in time, moving through time in space, something new is created. The opening verses of *Genesis* point to this. *Genesis* 1:2: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God (*ruach elohim*) was moving (*merachephet*) upon the face of the waters.” The Spirit of God was moving (trembling, hovering, fluttering, whirling) over the face of the waters. Spirit was in motion, moving, in space, over time. Over chaos, over what was not whole. And what was the result? *Genesis* 1:3: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.” Between chaos and light comes sanctifying movement.



Summertime. ©Anja Bühler

This is how I think of dancing now—the way I have come to dance, on Sunday mornings in a group, sweating our prayers, and by myself, at home—as the creative, transformative movement between chaos and light. A movement of the body through space in time, through time in space, that unites space and time, body-heart-mind-spirit, the self with the Whole. An event that breaks the rhythm of daily life and bumps me into a deeper, wider reality, opens me to Presence. A communing. A sanctifying. A spiritual act.

Because I experience dance in this way now, views of dance that relegate it exclusively or primarily to one or the other, body or spirit, this world or that world, don't make sense to me. If you think of dance as gesture, for example, as merely the expression of self or an expression of desire, it appears to be separate from the spiritual realm. The Swiss theologian and philosopher Max Picard defines gesture this way, asserting that it belongs to the physical world, the passions and the desires of the body out of which it emerges. As such, it is “unfree, unredeemed, still completely mixed with the material it uses.”¹⁰ On this view, though dancing may not be “evil,” it is definitely caught in the material world and therefore lower than language, which for Picard is a different category altogether. For him, gesture expresses a desire, while language expresses a *being*, a whole, not merely a desire that is only part of a being and not a whole being in itself.

Even thinking of gesture as a kind of language, like sign language, doesn't strike me as adequate now. That dancing is not gesture in this sense became clear to me one morning during a recent Sweat Your Prayers. The leader that morning was a substitute and, wanting the group to meet before the dancing journey began, asked us to stand in a circle and introduce ourselves. “Say your name,” the leader said, “and make a gesture to show who you are or how you are feeling today.” As we spoke our names and translated our inner states into a gesture to communicate to the group, it became obvious that this was not dancing. The gestures were drawn from a limited set of stock movements; they shared little of the creativity of our bodies in motion during dancing. And they were created for the benefit of *representing* ourselves to others. They were not a unitive experience or spiritual act.

This suggests to me that viewing dancing primarily as an expression or representation of the non-corporeal world is no more adequate for understanding what dancing can be than is conceptualizing dancing as gesture. Dancing is not *simply* symbolic—of ideas, feelings, or “higher” realms, or even events—though it can be used that way and beautifully so. My favorite playwright for decades has been Athol Fugard, who uses dance as a metaphor in many of his plays. The metaphor runs throughout *Master Harold and the Boys*, culminating when the two male characters dance together in harmony for the first time, overcoming oppositions. And it plays a central role in *Boesman and Lena*,

when Lena counsels the man who has taken out his oppression on her to dance his sorrows into the ground. This is a beautiful and moving way to think of and use dancing. But, given my experience of dancing as a unitive event that transforms one, it is not enough. Like ritual, the kind of dancing I am trying to speak about is not a representation of anything. Like ritual, it is a spiritual act. An action in which one's experiences of an imagined world fuses with the ordinary world in such a way that you are changed. A way of being. A way of knowing. A path to transformation. A way of ecstasy. A sanctifying. A hovering over the waters of life, moving from chaos to light. Joy.

5. STILLNESS

97

Dancing in this way has opened for me a new way of understanding why I was so attracted to Judaism over twenty years ago and why I feel such a kinship with the Chasids of the eighteenth century. It's because they know this creative encounter. It's because they know this joy. It's because they dance. When Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760), the founder of the Chassidic movement known as the Besht, was asked by one of his disciples why some of his opponents criticized the Chasids for their excessive joy and their dancing, saying this was not the behavior of healthy, sane individuals, he responded with this story of collective effervescence:

Once, a talented fiddler stood in the street playing in an ecstasy of passion. Many people stopped to listen and were so enchanted by his music that they began to dance, lost to the world.

A deaf man happened to pass by and, since he couldn't hear the ravishing music, was utterly astonished at the bizarre scene before his eyes. Not knowing why the people were dancing, he was certain the people were actually madmen! The truth is, if he heard the music and experienced the tremendous joy and ecstasy, he would have danced with them.

"My disciples," said the Besht, "hear and see the song that emanates from each and every thing that God, blessed be He, has created. If so, how can they keep from dancing?"¹¹

Perhaps this story is what inspired the creation of this common modern proverb, often attributed to Nietzsche but not found in his works: "Those who dance are thought mad by those who hear not the music."

Deaf. Hearing. Sane. Insane. Secular. Spiritual. No dancing. Dancing. Dancing in the imagination. Dancing in the body. Before words. After words. What do these divisions among us matter? What matters is to be moving, whirling with the music of the spheres, trembling with creation—from chaos to light.

This is why I dance.

To become a new being, to be made whole, made new.

This is why I dance.

For the joy of it.

NOTES

1. Friedrich W. Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Thomas Common, trans. (New York: Dover, 1999), 24.
2. Andrew Jacobs, “China Puts a Hitch in the Step of ‘Dancing Grannies.’” *New York Times*, March 24, 2015.
3. Andrew Jacobs, “China Puts a Hitch in the Step of ‘Dancing Grannies.’”
4. Gabrielle Roth, *Sweat Your Prayers: Movement as Spiritual Practice* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 4.
5. Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 12 and 13.
6. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 13.
7. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 36.
8. Bellah in *Religion in Human Evolution*, 17.
9. Bellah in *Religion in Human Evolution*, 17.
10. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Wichita, Kansas: Eighth Day Press, 2002 reprint edition. Originally published in Switzerland: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1948), 53.
11. Yitzhak Buxbaum, *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 151. Another version of this story appears in Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken, 1947), I: 53.