

Dancing MY LIFE,
DANCING
My God

Judith Pellerin

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Introduction

Have you ever felt as if your heart would burst within you, so deeply were you moved by an experience? Have you ever felt your spirit soar—longing to leave your body, to float free from all restraint, yet never able to feel free enough? Have you ever longed to jump and twirl and spin and glide, even while you remained tied to the earth?

I have—as I sat in the balcony of a theatre, drinking in the music of a symphony or caught up in the movement of a ballet, my inner being taking flight over the railing and out into the open space above the crowd below. Or as I watched highland dancing for the first time or Métis stepping, or Maritime fast step, or the drumming and dancing of a powwow. How the music filled me to my core and called me forth to move in rhythm with its cadence.

For as long as I can remember I wanted to dance, needed to dance. I wanted to move to music, my inner being seeking expression beyond words, in the sounds, the tempos, the melodies. And indeed my inner self danced even when my outer shell sat still and quiet. Was this my own inhibition or the expectations of others?

After all, I wasn't a dancer. I had never taken a dancing lesson in my life. And yet, who among us has never seen a small child dance, twirling and spinning and rejoicing in life? How innate this is to all of us! But somewhere along the path of life, we come to believe that we must be taught to dance; we must do it *right*; we must do it like everyone else. Even to be creative and spontaneous, we must take classes in

creative dance and spontaneous movement. Dance is at the heart of cultural expression for all societies and peoples, and yet we have at times turned dance into a competition, judging who does it best; every step measured and every step the same. Am I doing it perfectly? Am I better at it than everyone else? No wonder then, that for most of us dance ceases to be an integral part of our daily existence. Just how integral and innate the need is for me to express my inner reality through movement gradually became clear when I began to experience these same urgings to move, to sway, to flow, to spin and twirl when I was at prayer. Often I felt moved to bow, to lift my arms in praise, to give expression to my inner experience with and through my entire body. I shared this once with a retreat director, acknowledging that even in the privacy of my own room, I seldom gave expression to this inner calling. After all, I am not a dancer.

And far be it for me to use this medium of self-expression when so many other attempts to be myself had met with criticism, ridicule or rejection.

The retreat director encouraged me to go to one of the large, empty conference rooms in the retreat centre and to dance and move to my heart's content. It took courage, but I did it. My initial hesitant steps gave way to humming and later to taped music, as I discovered the utter freedom of letting myself be me—of letting my experience of God and my God-me relationship overflow into bodily expression. In the following days I danced the sorrows of my life, the wounds that still needed healing, the loves I had known, and above all, the presence of God in all of these. Tentatively, I let my heart burst forth and my inner being soar, carrying over into my body as I prayed the scriptures or exulted in the glory of God in creation. How I longed, from time to time, to bring this physical expression to my liturgical life, my celebrations of Eucharist or reconciliation or sacramental healing.

While on a women's retreat in 2005 I found myself musing that I couldn't be the only person who felt this way. I couldn't be the only person for whom movement and dance could be

a deeply moving spiritual experience. Deep within me I felt a calling to write a book entitled *Dancing My Life, Dancing My God* which would use dance as a metaphor for relationship with God, and for life lived out in this relationship. I wanted to give expression to the deep joy and freedom of uninhibited self-expression that is possible in our relationship with God. I also wanted to invite others to recognize and respond to their own personal calls in expressing their life and love in the Lord.

Several people have commented on the title. They felt that, “dancing my life” made sense. However, they suggested that the second half of the title needed a preposition. But no matter how I worded it: “dancing *with* my God” or “dancing *before* my God” or “dancing *because of* my God”—it just didn’t capture what I wanted to say. The prepositions were too limiting. *Dancing my God* includes **all** prepositions, without exception, and is greater than the meaning of any one. So, for the sake of total inclusiveness that would allow you, the reader, to find your own meaning and context in the title, I have left it as *dancing my God*.

As I wrote, I looked for dance in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. I reflected on how often the word “dance” occurs in our sacred music. I saw “dance” in so many books by a variety of authors, that I knew I wasn’t alone in finding meaning in this metaphor.

I sent out questionnaires to friends and colleagues, inviting them to reflect on their experiences with dance, especially as it related to their spiritual life. I invited them to share the fruit of their reflections with me and, ultimately, with you. Some who responded passed the questionnaire on to their friends with the same invitation. The results of their musings form part of this book. (*This questionnaire can be found in the Appendix*). *Dancing My Life, Dancing My God* in no way tries to be an exhaustive look at dance in spirituality and religion. It is, rather the result of my own interest in dance as a metaphor for my relationship with my God, with creation and with those who share this planet with me.

My hope is that in reading this book you may discover what sets your own inner being free; what brings you inner freedom, release, joy; what helps you give expression to your love, joy, sorrow and energy in the Lord. My hope is that you will be moved to explore that which calls to be loosed and set free in your own life, so that your own expression of your God-me relationship can know no bounds. May this book dance you into your own inner space, there to contact that which can and will and does give you the true freedom of a daughter or son of God.

Dance your life! Dance your God! And thus give glory and praise to the One from Whom all good things come.

Canticle of Judith

*I want to sing my life
merry melodies and dancing.
I want to hear the music in my days
and revel in the tunes of love and harmony.*

*I want to hear the music in my life
the chirp of birds, the sigh of wind in trees,
the screech of hawk, the traffic outside my window.
Robin's song and wren's serenade.
laughter of loved ones and greetings of friends.*

*I want to dance my days of life
slow and weaving, fast and alive.
I want to hum the inner tune of my heart
and sing full-voiced the Spirit-life within me.*

*I want to dance, and skip, and jump.
I want to sway and twirl and spin.
I want to know the varied melodies of life,
missing not a note,
tasting and savoring to the full
the wonders of WHAT IS.*

*I want to rest in gentleness and peace
the lullaby of God melodious in my heart.
I want to sleep embraced by Love divine
to wake anew to dance again
the music of life alive in my bones.*

*I want to smile and laugh and cry
to hear the strings and drums and horns.
Reels and jigs, serenades and symphonies,
dirges and funeral hymns.*

*I want to live as one fully alive
eager to **be** in all of my glory.
God's handiwork, God's art, God's masterpiece*

*one among many—all melodies of God's heart.
Unique, special, universal wonder and awe.
Sing, my being, of greatness and wonder.
Sing, my being, of acceptance and love.
Sing, my being, of sorrow and hardship.
Sing, my soul, of all that is and was and will be.*

*Dance my life!
Turn and spin.
Sway and shuffle.
Leap and fly.
Listen and lie still.*

*Dance my life!
Dance with joy.
Dance with sorrow and hope and pain.
Dance in freedom and dance in enslavement.
Dance each day to the final Dance,
never ending,
the Dance of all dances.*

*Hum, sing, dance my life!
I want to dance my singing life of love.*

Judith Pellerin
April 2004

Chapter One

A TIME TO DANCE

It is my belief that dance has always been a part of human experience. Certainly, for some of us, our whole life and inner being call forth this expression of who and what we are. Dance, as history tells us, has also been a part of religious ritual because religious expression is meant to encompass and include the whole of who we are.

Each of us has a dance which is unique, unlike any other that has ever been or will ever be because each person is unlike any other and our relationship with God is one of a kind. The life of the Spirit within us is unique. Only we can dance our dance. How sad to leave it undanced. Each of us, whether we are a lover of dance or not, is called to “dance” our life and to “dance” our relationship with our God.

Someone once said, “You only live once but if you live right, once is enough.” What is “living right”? For me it is to claim each day, each moment, and to live it to the full. To dance each day—not to drag my feet, listless and unenthusiastic. To have zest and zeal for life, be it dusting the furniture, giving a workshop, shopping for groceries, visiting with a friend, ministering at a nursing home, working in my garden, doing Tai Chi, giving a Reiki session, acting as a spiritual director, cooking a meal, washing the clothes—to live each moment and each event of my life as a dance.

Right living also means remembering that I don’t go through life alone. Every moment of every day, God journeys with me, surrounding me in all that is, and dwelling within my innermost being. In *Isaiah 30:21*, God says, “This is the

way; walk in it.” We need to be aware of God’s presence at each moment, in each event and situation, within each person we encounter. Then life can become a dance. There are no times, places or persons in which God is not present. When I remember this Presence, then indeed I can dance the moments of my life.

“But not all the times of my life are necessarily happy,” you might say. “Most of my life is quite routine and ordinary, easily becoming ho-hum and monotonous.” All the more reason to dance each moment so as to keep each second alive and life-giving.

“And what about the sorrows and losses, and disappointments and unfulfilled dreams?” you might add. “What about the fears, and hurts and darkness? Can every moment of my life be danced? The highs and the lows? The exciting and the dull routine? The light and the dark? The lonely and the fulfilled?”

Let’s take a look at the story of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11-32*). The younger son goes off to seek his fortune. His dance at home is not exciting enough. The father honours his son’s seeking and lets him follow his own lead in the dance. This son soon discovers that a lot can go wrong with his dance if he tries to lead himself or lets just anyone lead him. He discovers that not all dances are of equal value for his life. He fails miserably in his dance because he has not discerned which dance is really right for him. And so the lost son returns home and falls at his father’s feet.

And what has his father been doing while his son has been away? Every day he has waited at the gate, his heart dancing with expectation and hope and longing. No room in him for the dance of anger or revenge or punishment. And so when his son appears and falls at his feet, the father raises him up and invites him to dance anew. There are new clothes, a ring for his finger, a feast to celebrate with music and fine food. Just because one dance didn’t work out doesn’t mean the dancing is finished. The son is showered with love and forgiveness. There is no room for shuffling around in shame

and guilt.

And what of the older brother? In him there is no room for the dance of forgiveness, the dance of welcome or the dance of acceptance. His life has been one of servitude, not dance, and so he is unable to share in the joy and thanksgiving of the father. He cannot enter into the dance of hope fulfilled, longing answered and sin forgiven.

Was there dancing at this feast of homecoming? I have no doubt there was. Most important was the dancing of the heart which took place, in the father and the younger son, as well as the dancing which failed to be set free in the elder brother. He had lost his ability to love. His self-centered complacency not only *denied* love, but could not *understand* love. There is much food for thought here, calling us to reflect on our own lives, our own dances danced and dances ignored and denied.

Dancing does not occur only in moments of joy and light. There is dancing to be done in moments of sadness and darkness as well. There are dances into which we readily enter, and, as in the case of the elder brother, dances we deny ourselves because of anger, feelings of betrayal, resentment or jealousy. The person most hurt by his refusal to enter into the dance was the elder brother himself.

Carey Landry wrote a most beautiful hymn entitled, "Dance in the Darkness." It is a song about dancing in the midst of sorrow, of pain, of waiting, of weakness. A song about dancing the darkness of our lives. A song about dancing into new life, new birth, new joy, new strength.

*Dance in the darkness, slow be the pace
surrender to the rhythm of redeeming grace.
Dance in the darkness, slow be the pace
surrender to the rhythm of redeeming grace.*

*Although you go forth weeping, carrying your seed to be sown
you shall come back rejoicing, carrying your sheaves full grown.*

*Dance in the darkness, slow be the pace
surrender to the rhythm of redeeming grace.*

*A woman in childbirth suffers because her time has come
but when she holds her child in her arms, her joy returns again.*

*Dance in the darkness, slow be the pace
surrender to the rhythm of redeeming grace.*

*Jesus, Lord of weakness, we wait in joyful hope;
see our weakness, be our strength,
Jesus be our light, as we*

*dance in the darkness, slow be the pace
surrender to the rhythm of redeeming grace.¹*

¹ Carey Landry. "Dance in the Darkness." *Abba, Father*. OCP Publications. Portland, Oregon. 1988.

Thoughts for Reflection

What is trying to be birthed in my life? What is the pain involved? How can I dance this moment, this birthing, this pain?

Is there weeping in my life right now? Has there been in the past? Would trying to dance my tears have made a difference? Would my dance of sorrow have ripened my sheaves of joy more fully, more swiftly? Would dancing my woes, my hurts, my woundedness have helped open me to the river of life beneath?

Perhaps this sounds a bit like denial. It isn't intended to. Pain and hurt and grief will always be a part of our lives. But how we deal with these factors will make all the difference in the world. Joy and love and newness will also always be a part of our lives. How fully do we embrace them?

To dance is to choose. To dance is to move, to not sit on

the sidelines as life happens. To dance is to engage my whole being in response to the music of my life, whatever direction that music takes, whatever cadence that music holds. To dance is to be free and honest and total in my response. To dance is sometimes to reach for a partner, knowing that I don't need to dance alone. To dance my life is to dance even when no partner is there. And to dance with my God is to know that a Partner is always dancing with me, within me, unbidden, at my side, leading and guiding gently yet skilfully, knowing all the steps and directing me through the music to the finale, the end. And heaven is the culminating and eternal dance where every step has been mastered, where every person can join in, where majesty and power and greatness abound, where joy and love and unity pervade all that is.

In the novel, *Zorba the Greek*, Zorba's actions are a prime example of dancing one's life in spite of difficult circumstances and setbacks. For Father Ken Koep, a Catholic priest for 50 years, the Zorba's character has been a source of wonder and challenge. Zorba's response to the ups and downs of his life was to dance. For the Greek male of that time, dance was one of the greatest ways to express deep feelings and beliefs, and Zorba is a lively and very human example of this kind of outpouring. On one occasion, when his boss laments the woes of life, Zorba responds, "I spit on your anguish."² When his boss is completely unable to grasp what keeps Zorba going in the face of life's hardships, Zorba invites, "Dance, boss."³

^{2&3} Nikos Kazantzakis. *Zorba the Greek*. John Lehmann Ltd. New York. 1953. (English version).

Father Ken, aged 74 and facing health issues, was reminded of Zorba's positive approach to life. He couldn't help but see a comparison between Zorba and the call of the Gospels to each of us. Father Ken writes:

"We tend to deny the fragility of our human nature. We want to put this fragility out of the way. The sick, suffering and handicapped make us uneasy because they remind us that we are made of the same stuff. Life rubs our name in the fact that we are not in control. We also are

subject to illness, old age, failure and abandonment. We want to get the poor, handicapped, sick and old off the streets because we don't want to be reminded of our own clay feet. But the Risen Lord is still the crucified Lord. The resurrection does not deny or wipe out the crucifixion. 'Put your hand into my side,' Jesus said to Thomas. Christ remains with us as the risen, crucified Lord.

"Our consumer culture promises that all forms of human vulnerability are avoidable if we have a big enough bank account, the right insurance, the latest model car or the most effective deodorant. 'Never let them see you sweat.'

"Even worse, authentic human relationships are suspect because true love means we are totally vulnerable. Not in control. We fall in love with pets, cars, houses, computers and all the latest technology. Why? It's simple. We can control them.

"Zorba danced in the face of defeat. He was much like St. Paul who wrote, 'Gladly will I glory in my infirmity.' (2 Cor.12:10). The true Christian acknowledges and humbly accepts his fragility. I am weak, poor and vulnerable, but this is me. I am happy to have even this much and I need to celebrate even that. For the Christian, there is no room for despair. Why would Paul glory in his infirmities? Because then the power of the risen Christ was active in him. Why did Zorba dance? It came to him quite spontaneously. It wasn't the result of theological reasoning. For Zorba there was humour in human weakness. The incongruity of such a noble personality joined to twenty-two feet of gut.

"We also can laugh at life if we realize that the end of the story is not here. Life is much, much bigger than this or that project. (It is) faith in the nobility of humankind in spite of frailty. My spirit is bigger than this or that setback. And so, with Zorba, we dance."

How do I choose my dance? How do I decide which steps to use? I need to know who I am as a person. What makes me tick? What makes me different from all others? What makes me who I am? This will dictate my dance. What is important in my life? Unimportant? This also will influence my dance. What are my gifts, my talents? How can I bless this world, what can I offer to those around me? The more I know myself, the more successfully I can choose my dance at any given moment of my life.

Martin Smith in *The Word is Very Near You* says that there are two kinds of experiences in life: “experiences of being accompanied by others, in communion with them, included, held, and, on the other hand...the experience of independence and distinctness with initiative all our own.”⁴

These different types of experiences require and call forth different dances within. Different dances for different times. What is my relationship with God? With Jesus? With the Spirit? Who are they for me—and who do I believe I am to them? All of this will affect my dance.

⁴ Martin Smith. *The Word Is Very Near You*. Cowley Publications. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1989.

Carey Landry has another wonderful hymn of dancing in the Lord, “And the Father Will Dance.” In this hymn, God’s Self dances for joy in God’s people:

*Shout for joy all you his people
Rejoice! Exalt with all your heart!
Yahweh, your God, is in your midst.
He will exalt with joy over you.
He will renew you by his love.
He will dance with shouts of joy for you, as on a day of festival.*

*And the Father will dance as on a day of joy
He will exalt over you and renew you by his love.*

*Shout for joy all you his people
Sing aloud and proclaim with all your heart
For Yahweh your God is in your midst.*

*And the Father will dance as on a day of joy
He will exalt over you and renew you by his love.*

*You have no more evil to fear
You have no more evil to fear
Do not let your hands fall limp
For Yahweh your God is in your midst.*

*And the Father will dance as on a day of joy
He will exalt over you and renew you by his love.*

*And when the time comes I will rescue the lame
And when the time comes I will gather the strays
And when the time comes I will be your guide
I will gather you in and give you renown among all peoples.*

*And the Father will dance as on a day of joy
He will exalt over you and renew you by his love.⁵*

⁵ Carey Landry. "And the Father Will Dance." *Abba, Father*. OCP Publications. Portland, Oregon. 1988.

What a magnificent thought! Our God, the great Creator of the universe, the Potter who fashions us and reshapes us (*Jeremiah 18: 1-7*), the One who calls us to oneness, the One to whom Jesus prayed and whom Jesus revealed as Abba, this God dances with joy over us. This God, so moved by love for us, knowing our potential for greatness, dwelling within us and around us, this God dances the dance of exaltation and joy because of us, the works of God's hands. How can we not join in the dance? How can we not unite our dance to that of the Creator? How can we not be as one with the dance of others? How can we not exult over ourselves and our brothers and sisters, dancing and exulting at all God has done and continues to do for us, in us and through us?

In the following chapter, I will share the reflections of others on this theme of spiritual dance.

Chapter Two

THE "DANCE" OF OTHERS

When I first conceived of this book, I invited some individuals to reflect on “dance” in their own lives. It is with joy, awe and gratitude that I share some of these reflections with you. As far as possible, I have left these reflections in the words of the writer. I invite you to seek your own experiences as reflected in those shared here. May these sharings touch a note deep within you, leading you to reflect on your own realities of life and your relationship with the God of your dance.

Connie Mocker-Wernikowski has been a professional modern dancer for over 30 years. She is also a teacher of dance and artistic director of a pre-professional youth ballet company. Connie is married with four children aged 16 to 27. Connie writes:

“For me, dancing can be one of the most exquisite experiences of my life. When I feel that my body is strong and powerful and completely under my control, that every inch of my flesh is—on my call—expressing or interpreting an artistic idea or emotion, then the experience is exhilarating. I think it must be equivalent to when athletes say they are ‘in the zone.’

“Dance is my career, my way of earning a living, my art, my passion, my contribution. It has also been a vehicle of suffering and discouragement as I have dealt with trying to reach an ideal which is impossible, with constant correction

and competition, and with somehow learning to believe that my talent, my body, my ideas are never quite good enough. As I age, there are new challenges—pain and arthritis resulting from years of pushing myself physically. But I still rush off to dance class to continue to train and shape my movement with joy and excited anticipation.

“Dance has been my life. Dance has taught me discipline, how to work very hard and to persevere. It has also given me a creative diversion from the ordinary and the mundane.

“I know that God is with me when I dance, permeating my body, my muscles, my spirit, celebrating together the joy of movement and life. I have often asked God to be part of my dancing, my directing, my choreography, my teaching, to help me spread love and acceptance and peace to those with whom I work, and to give inspiration and a glimpse of the holy to our audiences.”

Marilyn Scheske was educated in the field of journalism. Her career embraced public relations, marketing, communications and advertising. Now retired, Marilyn is engaged in retreat work, spiritual direction and ongoing exploration of the spiritual life. Marilyn’s reflections on life and relationship with God, in the image of dance, gave rise to this poem.

Dance of Life

*Holy One, you come to me
with hands outstretched
inviting me to embrace
the dance of life.
But I
with two left feet
hesitate
and stumble.*

*You invite me to come
to leave worries behind
to enter the now.
And for brief, fleeting seconds I get it*

*I let go
I dance the universe
and the duties of dailiness
disintegrate in the dancing dust.*

*God, turn these seconds into moments
and the moments into hours
and make me intoxicated
with the dance of life.*

Eileen McTeague is a senior citizen, mother of four, grandmother of six. At the time she sent this to me, her husband of 52 years had recently gone into a nursing home. Eileen wrote a poem about dancing with the Lord after a prayer experience on a retreat. In the prayer, she danced with Jesus on marble walkways lined with flowers. She danced under the stars with snow on the ground and in the trees. It was a moving experience for her and she wanted to share her poem with you.

Life's Dance

*Let me hear your heartbeat, Lord,
and let me find the rhythm.
Teach me to dance with heart and soul
with all good men and women.*

*I hear the music in my heart,
I sing with joy and praise,
and hope to dance with lighter step
through my remaining days.*

*You are the music of my soul,
my partner in life's dance
and may I follow always
in your pure and loving glance.*

*And when the music stops for me,
my life gone from this earth,
then may your heartbeat sound a chord
to herald my new birth. Amen.*

Margaret Dufour, aged 71, is married and the mother of three grown children and grandmother of six. A retired nurse, she and her husband, Joe, like to spend part of their winters in Victoria, B.C. and the rest of the year in their beautiful home at Kinookima Beach, SK. Margaret wrote the following thoughts while reflecting on ‘dancing my life, dancing my God.’

“When I hear the word ‘dance’ I think of real joy and happiness. From my earliest memories, I always loved to move to music. Apparently, when I was a 2½ year-old flower girl for a relative’s wedding, every time the music started I got up and ‘danced’ ...or moved somehow to the music. When the music stopped, I stopped.

“As I grew older, my love became figure skating and then, instead of dancing to music, I skated, usually in my daydreams where I could do many more wonderful moves in my head than through my body.

“When Joe and I were married, one of our real pleasures was that we could dance well together. Although we only dance once or twice a year now, we ‘dance’ together in other ways and in other parts of our lives.

“For me, ‘dancing with my God’ means being comfortable living my life as God (Jesus) would want me to. When I move in harmony to what feels right and good in my thoughts, feelings and actions, I feel God is living in and moving with and through me. Although I don’t always feel in harmony with what is going on in my life, I do strive to be happy with who I am and comfortable with what I am doing.”

A rather lengthy account of an actual life experience was sent to me by an Anglican priest, Bonnie Raynor, who, at the time of writing this, had been in the ministry for a couple of years.

“It was my first Pastoral Charge, so there were a lot of new learnings. I had come to ministry from a nursing

perspective, which had been my previous career. More often than not, I approached pastoral situations drawing on my experiences as comforter from that discipline.

“I’ll call her Nancy. And she was fairly new to worship. One Christmas, there was a crisis in her family. Her sister’s new baby developed an infection a few days after his birth. Benjamin lived only nine days, dying two weeks before Christmas. Nancy was devastated. Her tears were constant and her pain deep.

“Sometime later, I again had occasion to visit with Nancy at the hospital. This time, she was grieving a more personal loss. When Nancy was pregnant with her fourth child, her husband, a man of different nationality and upbringing, insisted she have an abortion.

“He felt they could not afford another child. She was already overburdened with the children they had. In her confusion and desire to please him, she went ahead with the abortion. We talked of this. I listened and let her cry. Then I asked her if she would come with me to the hospital chapel where we could have more privacy.

“Ironically, as we entered, there was the statue of the infant Jesus under a makeshift nativity scene. We were so emotional by this time about babies, our initial reaction was to laugh. We knelt in prayer. In pouring out her heart over the loss of her own beloved fourth infant, Nancy discovered the true and deeper meaning of God’s great love and forgiveness. And oh, how she needed to forgive herself. Prayer, compassion and a recognition that life can begin anew were the hallmarks of our chapel visit. We walked together back to her hospital room and I went on my way to tend to other pastoral and ministerial duties.

“Several weeks later I received a phone call from Nancy. Would I go and see her? When I entered her room, the healing was evident. Smiling, she told me how her pain had begun to subside, her heart losing its burden. She

presented me with a shoe box and inside lay a crepe paper angel she had made. In the angel's arms was a child, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

'Thank you, Nancy,' I exclaimed through my own tears. 'But this angel is not holding the Christ Child or little Benjamin is it? This angel is holding your own little infant.' Nancy wept and smiled, appreciative of my perception of her own heart.

"Our relationship continued as friends and pastor/parishioner as long as I remained in the Charge. It was sometime later; in another Pastorate, that Angelique, at seven months gestation, lived only long enough for her parents to see her beautiful blue eyes. And once again, I found myself going to offer comfort and support as they laid their firstborn to rest.

"What to do? What words to offer? Almost on impulse, I picked up the angel Nancy had given me and drove to the cemetery. Standing at the graveside, I told them the story and gave them the angel. The mother thanked me and clung to this angel, sharing somehow in another woman's pain. I know that a year later they gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

"Still the story goes on. That Christmas, having told one of my nursing friends Nancy's story, I received from my friend another angel. I tucked it away in my cupboard of treasures.

"Last year, in yet another church, we began Advent with a celebration of angels. We called it a 'Season of Angels'. We hung tiny lace angels on the tree. These symbols of God's presence fairly danced on the evergreen. We shared stories of people's experiences with angels and listened to God's messages through angels in biblical times.

"A grandmother in the congregation had just completed a year of chemo and radiation. She was doing well, and

she and her husband were delightedly awaiting the birth of their first grandchild. Sadly, this infant boy died at term during the birthing process. Once again, I was beset with the need for words, faith in distress and symbols of comfort. Once again, I told the story to the congregation, and gave the angel away to these receptive grandparents.

“It is hard to write these words and to share the sense of profound pain, mixed as it was with attempts to find consolation. What is it about ‘angels’ that helps people come to terms with faith, with life and death issues, with unfairness in the face of living? I have no answers except that in actions of love and offering of ourselves, we discover more about the strength and grace of others.

“The lace angels of that Christmas found their way to bedsides of the elderly, to the hands of little children and to hospital patients. And their dance goes on because the angels were given with the understanding that those who received would pass them on when a need for them was made known. I know they will, because I too have another angel in my care, waiting for just that time when tears overwhelm and someone needs a visible symbol to take to heart the message of God’s love: ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ The dance of life is felt in the gentle sound of knowing that God and God’s angels are near.”

What a variety of responses from reflecting on the image of dance. How unique was each person’s experience as, in prayer, she explored her own relationship with God and some key moments in her life.

Perhaps these reflections awakened within you a memory, a life experience, a time of prayer, an inner movement, a call, a new or old insight. I invite you to sit with whatever arose within you as you read these accounts, these poems, these prayers. Let your own response expand within you. Get in touch with your own inner self. Call to mind your own dances of life, sad and joyful. Think, write, draw, dance—whatever response is called forth from within you. Set free within yourself

that expression which best connects you with your lived experience. Know the presence of the One who leads you in the Dance and is always there to partner you along the way.

Thoughts for Reflection

1. For some, “dance” conjures up happy thoughts and feelings, while for others it is a word of dread. For these latter, dance is something to be avoided, surely not enjoyed. What is your personal experience in this regard? You may want to journal about this.

2. What kind of dance has your life been? Draw a timeline, from your birth until the present moment. Along it write the important events of your life. Now go back and fill in the ordinary but memorable times, be they happy or sad.

- Which moments in your life line would have been a ballet? A jig? A waltz? A reel? Which would have been a dirge? Perhaps other forms of dance would best describe some of the events of your life. Write them in along your timeline.
- When would you have danced alone? When did you dance with a partner or a group? Perhaps you would like to name them.
- Perhaps you want to take a few days, or weeks, to dance each chapter of your life as you have written it here. Let yourself move freely, in whatever way your inner being feels called to move. Let your whole being, body and spirit, express your inner feelings as you review your life.
- Know the freedom, the intensity, the divine communion, the healing and wholeness which comes from dancing your life.

3. Do you enjoy the dance(s) of your life or are you simply going through the motions, dragging your feet, stooped over, sighing? Where does God fit in? Do you believe that God wants you to dance?

- What are you dancing now, at this moment in your life? Is there a dance within you longing to be set free? What is

keeping it chained within?

4. Do you let others dictate how you are to dance, or even if you will dance at all? By whom is your life choreographed: society, culture, the media, fashion gurus, the Church, neighbours, family, friends, peers, career...? Do you let your own inner music well up within you and overflow into your life, or do you squelch it and push it down further inside yourself? Do you dare to live spontaneously, letting the dance develop as it will?

5. Is your dance of life a competition where you need to be perfect, to get every step right, to be the best, to win the prize? Do you need to do your dance like everyone else or can you vary from the crowd? What does this say about your outlook on life? On God? On other people?

6. For you, what is life when viewed as dance? Who is God when viewed as the Creator of the dance? The Master of the dance?

- Do you see God, the Choreographer, as One who demands that you dance in a predetermined way, or as One who puts on the music and tells you to do your own thing?

- Or does God give you directions then invite you to be creative, improvising as the Spirit and your inner being suggest?

7. Remember, “You only live once but if you live right, once is enough” and “Life is not a dress rehearsal.” What do these say about dancing your life? About dancing your God?

Chapter Three

THOSE OLD TIME DANCES

Has there ever been a civilization that did not know “dance”? Has there ever been a people, a tribe, a group of any kind that did not give expression to their experiences of life through movement of one kind or another, accompanied by some type of music produced either through crude instruments or by the various melodies and sounds of their own voices? Even a very cursory glance at the past tells us that dance has been a part of human expression, in one form or another, throughout the many ages of human existence.

Primitive dances often seem to have been attempts to imitate creation—wind, water, trees, animals—people giving expression to the world around them as experienced in daily life.

On some occasions, the dance was connected with the hunt, the dancers becoming the hunters or the animals hunted, their movements re-enacting the chase. We find instances of this, for example, in Aboriginal dances of North America still danced as part of powwow. And in ancient Egypt, the simple rituals used by hunters to help find their prey developed into dances believed to help in later hunts. In some groups, dances accompanied sacrifices made to the gods in thanksgiving for a successful hunt or to appease the gods whom the group thought they had offended when the hunt ended poorly.⁶

6 www.britannica.com/ebi/article-199415. Britannica Student Encyclopedia. Accessed Sept. 2006.

Some pottery finds from ancient China reveal that dance was sometimes connected with labour, life and religious activities.

In ancient China, the Jingo ethnic group believed that only heaven had music and dance, and that these came to earth as gifts of heaven. A legend of the Dong people says they didn't know music or dance until their ancestors got them as a grant from heaven. The ancient Donga religion among the Naxi ethnic people also believed that humankind learned dancing from the gods and goddesses. Many such myths, passed down through centuries, reflected the close

relationship between primitive dance and nature, clan ancestors, sacrificial ceremonies and the “divine”.⁷

“Traditional Korean dance and music evolved from the religious ceremonies of primitive tribes some 3000 years ago. Dance and music were often linked to the agricultural cycle ...and were indispensable elements in festivals and ceremonies in traditional society.”⁸

In India, “a dance known as *Odissi* traces its origins to the ritual dances performed in the temples of ancient northern India. The dance in Hinduism used to be part of a sacred temple ritual...where the female priestesses...worshipped different aspects of the Divine through elaborate language of mime and gestures.”⁹

Because “dancing is not only an aesthetic pursuit but also a divine service, there are halls for sacred dance annexed to some temples. The rhythmic movement...induces the experience of the divine...Even today, religious themes and the various relations between humans and God are danced and made visible by the codified symbolic meanings of gesture and movements.”¹⁰

7 www.seechina.com.cn. Accessed Sept. 2006.

8 www.indiana.edu/~easc/resources/korea_slides/dance_and_music/7-1htm. Accessed Sept. 2006.

9 <http://hinduism.iskcon.com/lifestyle/803.htm>. Accessed Sept. 10, 2006.

10 www.britannica.com/eb/article-59810. Accessed Sept. 2006.

“From a Hindu point of view, the whole Universe is being brought into existence as the manifestation of the dance of the Supreme Dancer.”¹¹ In the Hindu scriptures, each god has his or her own style, and we read about 23 celestial beings who dance to please the gods and express the supreme truths in movement.¹²

Classical Greek mythology also has its references to dance. “In a classical Greek song, Apollo...was called The Dancer” and “Zeus himself is represented as dancing.”¹³ “In Sparta, a province of ancient Greece, the law compelled parents to exercise their children in dancing from the age of five years. They were led by grown men, and sang hymns and songs as they danced. In very early times, a Greek chorus, consisting of the whole population of the city, would meet in the marketplace to offer up thanksgivings to the god of the country. Their jubilees were always attended with hymn-singing and dancing.”¹⁴

The important place that dancing has had in many religious rituals down through the ages has even included the belief of some peoples that dancing builds up “the moment of ecstatic union with the deity.”¹⁵ For others, “True sacred dance is a means of focusing and directing consciousness through physical behaviour. It is an outer expression of the inner spirit.”¹⁶

“Ancient worshippers of the goddess (Shiva) attributed the initial creation of the universe to her magic dance over the Waters of Chaos, or the Great Deep.”¹⁷ “With the rhythmic movements she organized the as-yet-unformed elements, making orderly patterns that the Greeks called *diakosmos*, the goddess’s ordering.”¹⁸ She is seen as being the same as the spirit referred to in the Bible as “the spirit that moved on the face of the Deep before God spoke the universe into being.”¹⁹

11-14 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dance_in_mythology_and_religion. Accessed Sept. 2006.

15-19 www.erowid.org/spirit/dancing/dancing.shtml. Accessed Sept. 2006.

The Jewish sacred scriptures are rich with references to dance and it is here that I want to focus. It is difficult to separate these references into religious and non-religious activities because the ancient Hebrew knew no such distinction. All of life was lived in God. Their Jewish religion touched all aspects of living. Yahweh was indeed the Ruler of all life, the Giver of the whole Law, the Judge of all action, the Creator of all that is, the Leader, the Protector, the Provider, the Merciful One. To live as a Hebrew was to live in Yahweh, with Yahweh, for Yahweh. Every aspect of one’s day, of one’s life journey was covered by the Law of Yahweh. It became simply a matter of living that life, that Law willingly with joy or reluctantly, totally or half-heartedly. To “dance” life was to “dance” God. To “dance” God was to “dance” life. Life and God were one.

Central to Hebrew history and faith, which were one and the same, was the *Exodus* experience. The *Book of Exodus*, the second book of the Hebrew scriptures, is indeed a book of faith and lived faith experience. But even for a reader who shares no such faith, *Exodus* is a book well worth reading, with its excitement and adventure, its crises, its villains and heroes, its twists of plot, its drama.

A people who have known years of slavery are unexpectedly freed by Pharaoh after many signs sent through the unlikely hero, Moses, God’s chosen leader. After setting the Hebrews free, Pharaoh has a sudden change of heart and sends his army

and chariots in pursuit of the people who, on foot, are fleeing Egypt and all the suffering and death that had been part of their lives there. The dramatic climax occurs as the Hebrews in terror race across the dry sea bed to freedom. Looking back, they see Pharaoh's pursuing chariots, horses and riders overcome by the returning water and drowned in the sea.

What excitement! What exhilaration! What joy! And we read in *Exodus 15:20*, "Then the prophet, Miriam...took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing." What a sight that must have been. Robes swirling, feet flying, hands clapping. Faces smiling, eyes sparkling, hair flowing. They had been saved by Yahweh and their entire being gave way to the dance. Their lives, in freedom or slavery, had been a dance to the Lord and so spontaneously, their inner spirit overflowed into their bodies, expressing outwardly what was inwardly their stance before their God.

Now life began anew. In Egypt they had not forgotten Yahweh in spite of the horrors of their slavery. Yahweh, their God in slavery, was now the God of new beginnings and freedom and would be their God in the years that stretched ahead. They danced with great joy their newfound lives.

We all can look back over our lives and recall new beginnings. We all know we have been rescued more than once from peril, from a path wrongly taken, from selfishness, pride, greed, lust or whatever our sinful compulsion may be. We, too, have reason to dance—to dance our gratitude, our relief, our joy, and yes, our repentance. For us also, life and faith are one and we need to dance the challenges, the changes, the transformations, the sins and the forgiveness, the new beginnings—for none of these happen apart from our loving and ever-present God.

In *1 Samuel*, the ninth book of the Hebrew scriptures, we again find a lived faith history worth reading, with all the characteristics of a well-written drama. *1 Samuel:17* tells the familiar story of David and Goliath. As a young boy, David went out against Goliath, a Philistine warrior of great size and might. Carrying only a slingshot and some stones, David delivered a deadly blow that left Goliath slain and the Israelites, under Saul, victorious over their enemies. An incomprehensible feat!

And how the people rejoiced. "As they were coming home,

when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments” (*1 Samuel 18:6*). This greeting, with dance and music, was no small thing. In *1 Samuel 21:11* we find another reference to this celebration. “Is this not David, the king of the land? Did they not sing to one another of him in dances?” and again in *1 Samuel 29:5* “Is this not David, of whom they sing to one another in dances?”

Life is to be danced. Victory is to be danced. The returning hero, the leader, the hope and joy of the people, is to be danced. And as the people remembered and talked about the deeds of David, his heroic feat, they recalled the dancing and the singing that had marked the event. The celebration and pure emotional response flowed from lives that had been danced and were causes themselves for remembering.

We read of occasions when David himself entered into dancing. In *2 Samuel 6:1-5* we read how “David gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out...to bring from there the ark of God...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.” Just imagine the sight. Thirty thousand people dancing before the Lord. Again, in *2 Samuel 6:14* we read about the Ark of the Covenant being moved by David from the house of Obed-edom, where it had been residing for three months, to the city of David, with great rejoicing. “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.” *2 Samuel 6:16* speaks of the same celebration. “As the Ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal, daughter of Saul...saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord...” This event was seen to have such great importance that it was also recorded by the writer of *1 Chronicles 15:29*.

This passage goes on to say that Michal despised David and criticized him for his public display, girded as he was with only an ephod. But David would not be denied this expression of his joy in the Lord. “I have danced before the Lord,” he said (*2 Sam.6:21*).

In three places in the Hebrew scriptures we find reference to this event (*2 Samuel 6:16, 1 Chronicles 13:8 & 15:29*). How

it must have impressed itself on the Hebrew people to have been so recorded. David, the king of the nation, dancing halfnaked before the Lord and refusing to be admonished for it.

Are we afraid others might make fun of us or criticize us if we break into dance? How deep within each of us is this need to dance before the Lord the successes of our lives and not let ourselves be squelched by critical reactions around us. How deep our need to let our joy and enthusiasm rise up within us and explode forth for all to see. Our life in the Lord invites this response of total freedom, spontaneity and unhindered exuberance. We have our times to dance in joy, gratitude and praise as did David, and we need not let ourselves be deterred. We need to break forth with joy and dance before the Lord, in whatever form this dancing takes for us, however our exuberance and joy take expression. We need to have the spirit of David, who responded to the criticism of Michal, “It was before the Lord, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord, that I have danced before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but...I shall be held in honour.” (2 Samuel:21-22).

David is believed to be the author of many of the psalms found in the *Book of Psalms* in the Hebrew scriptures. In some of these prayers and hymns we find references to dancing in various circumstances of life. This dancing can, for each of us, take whatever expressive form comes naturally to us, or can be held silently in our hearts, no less expressive and deep because it is danced in inner stillness.

Psalms 30:11 encourages us not to lose hope in the difficult times of life, but rather to look back on how the Lord has been with us in the past. “You have turned my mourning into dancing...so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.”

Several of the psalms give voice to our praise of the Lord. “Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. Let Israel be glad in its Maker, let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. For the Lord takes pleasure in his people...” (*Psalms 149:1-4*). And again in *Psalms 150:1-4*, “Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with the trumpet

sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with string and pipe!”

Barbara Mondo, in her book *Rejoice Beloved Woman*, has rewritten the psalms from a feminine and contemporary point of view, using words and images more in keeping with today and with the heart and voice of women. In her 31st Psalm she writes, “In your wisdom you know the truth of my love and you despise those who lie. I will trust in you and dance at your coming.” Her Psalm 5 reads, “Dance with me when the task is done and I have succeeded. Then hear me hum to you with the sounds of my peaceful sleeping.”

What joy and expectation at the coming of the Lord. What faith and trust that indeed the Lord does not stay far from us but comes so near to us it causes us to dance, perhaps with our feet, but also our heart and soul, our entire being. Indeed, foot dancing is a poor dance without our whole being taking part. What exuberance breaks forth as a task well done gives way to dancing in the reality and joy of success. What intimacy as even in peaceful sleep I commune with the Holy One.

The depth of the union between God and God’s people echoes in Mondo’s Psalm 47: “Seated on mountains, she is praised by the songs in your hearts and the music of your souls.” Our very being, our inner core, is in union with our God. Let the dance begin!

While we are invited to enter into the many dances of our lives, we keep ourselves free from evil. “She never dances with evil but keeps her steps guided by principle.” (Mondo, Psalm 119).

The entire cosmos is called into the dance. “Sing...a new song in a new century. Let all creation rejoice in their Mother. Dance in her name a new dance, one that reveres all her procreation, all her motherly fecundity.” (Mondo, Psalm 149).²⁰

²⁰ Barbara Mondo. *Rejoice Beloved Woman*. Sorin Books. Notre Dame, Indiana. 2004.

Write your own psalm of praise to God acknowledging God's greatness. Write your own psalm of praise for all God has done for you, in you, through you.

Or perhaps you prefer to draw, or paint, or mold. Maybe movement and dance is right for you. Let your "dance" come from within and be a true expression of your inner response to God's greatness.

Return to your creative work during the next few days, and know the freedom of responding honestly and deeply to your dance with the Lord. Return often during the day to that quiet space within, where you experienced your dance in, through, with and to the Lord.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures we find prophets, spokespersons for Yahweh. Their task was, in one way or another, to remind the people of Yahweh's love and fidelity, and to call them back to a faithful following of Yahweh. By their words and actions, they reminded the people that there is no room in the life of a believer for dances of sin but only for dances of faithfulness. These words are also reminders for us that although we might have fallen from the way of Yahweh, we need not cease to dance, for recognition of sin and forgiveness are themselves occasions to let our dance come alive again in our hearts.

In *Jeremiah 31:34*, Jeremiah speaks these words of the Lord: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you...Again you shall take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers..." And in *Jeremiah 31:13* we read, "Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry," a reminder, a call to reflect on God's faithfulness in the past, present and into the future.

For the Hebrews, especially the women, dance was such an authentic recurring response to all that Yahweh had done in their lives. They were able to take up the lyre and lute and dance before the Lord because for them there was no separation of life and religion. There was no division between secular and sacred. All was sacred. To know Yahweh, to love and serve Yahweh were one and the same, whether in the Temple, the synagogue, the field, the street or the marketplace. Yahweh

was seen and encountered in all aspects of life. Yahweh's hand was everywhere. The dance of feet began first as a dance of the heart. The dance of celebration began first as a dance of faith and hope and trust. The dance of remembrance was a dance of gratitude and awe. The dance to the future was a heartfelt dance of confidence and expectation.

So many emotions were expressed in the dance. So many events gave rise to the dance. In the *Book of Judith* we read about an Israelite woman, a widow, who at great risk to herself and to save her entire people, entered into the camp of an army led by Holofernes which had surrounded the Israelites, cutting them off from food and water.

Pretending to be a traitor, Judith attracted Holofernes with her beauty and wisdom. After three days in the camp of the enemy, Judith went to Holofernes' tent, and getting him drunk with wine, cut off his head with his sword (*Judith 13:1-10a*). Before undertaking this act of bravery, Judith spoke to the leaders of the Israelites. Her words sprang from a heart and a faith that had danced the Lord all her life:

Listen to me, rulers of the people...what you have said to the people today is not right; you have even sworn and pronounced this oath between God and you, promising to surrender the town to our enemies unless the Lord turns and helps us within so many days. Who are you to put God to the test today and to set yourselves up in the place of God in human affairs? You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test but you will never learn anything! You cannot plumb the depths of the human heart or understand the workings of the human mind; how do you expect to search out God, who made all these things, and find out his mind or comprehend his thought? ...Do not anger the Lord our God. For if he does not choose to help us within these five days, he has power to protect us within any time he pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies. Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him. (Judith 8:11-17)

Here was a woman who knew how to dance her life, dance her God. Here was a woman whose spirit could soar with the Lord, who could know the dance in good times and

in bad; whose life of dancing with Yahweh had given her wisdom and courage, and an unselfish spirit which went far beyond the worth of her beauty and riches. And the people of Israel, knowing she had saved them, but knowing also her blessedness, rejoiced in her greatness and in her deeds. Her dance had reminded them of their own need to dance in faithfulness with the Lord: “All the women of Israel gathered to see her, and some of them performed a dance in her honour. She took ivy-wreathed wands in her hands and distributed them to the women who were with her; and she and those who were with her crowned themselves with olive wreaths. She went before all the people in the dance, leading all the women, while all the men of Israel followed ...” (*Judith 15:12-13*)

I encourage you to look up Judith’s hymn of praise, *Judith 16:1-17*, and to reflect on it as you muse on your own dance of life, dance of God.

Our dance of life is ongoing and meant to be a dance in the present. Sometimes when we look to the past, we see that our dance has become one of anger, sorrow or resentment. These dances are authentic and need to be honoured, but we need to move beyond them. Otherwise, we lose the dance of today because we are so preoccupied with what went before. And perhaps dwelling on the future can lead us to dances of anxiety, doubt or fear. If our dance of life is a dance in the Lord, then thoughts of the future will lead us to dances of hope, trust and expectation. For we do not dance alone, without a partner. We dance with the One who is the best of partners and who will lead us through all things to riches beyond our imaginings.

The *Book of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8* expresses this in words familiar to many of us. In fact, it even became a popular song.

*For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones,
and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;*

*a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.*

For those who know deeply the presence of God within, all times are times to dance. Sometimes the dance may be a jig and at other times a dirge, but if we let our inner being dance its dance through all stages of life, we will come through with our faith strengthened, our hope renewed, our hearts serene, our spirits alive, our minds and eyes still fixed on the Lord. The inner dance of the soul isn't just for good times or happy times or successful times. To recall again the words of Carey Landry, we need also to "dance in the darkness."