

Dance Like There's Nobody Watching

As most of you know, my father is a minister in the United Church of Christ. I have fond memories of going to all-church retreats as a child—sack races, hunting crayfish in a creek, and lots and lots of good things to eat. One of my fondest memories of those retreats was my father leading the hokey-pokey.

You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right foot in and you shake it all about, you do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around, that's what it's all about. I can see him now in my mind's eye, a big man, a man in love with big ideas and fond of serious discussion---a man who was secure enough that he didn't worry about how ridiculous he looked doing the hokey-pokey. Much of the native self-confidence that I have comes from his example. I'm not afraid to do the hokey-pokey either. In fact, I love it!

Those of you who have had the pleasure of doing the hokey-pokey know that it progresses from putting in your hands and feet until finally you put "your whole self in."

Isn't that what life asks of us—to risk putting our whole selves in? To not worry about how we might look to someone else.

One of the songs on Kathy Mattea's album *Willow in the Wind*, written by Susan Clark puts it like this:

You've got to sing like you don't need the money, Love like you'll never get hurt, You've got to dance like nobody's watching.

In other words, you got to put your whole self in.

Have you ever looked at photographs taken in the 19th century and wondered why nobody is smiling? I know I have. I read somewhere that it was the fashion of the times not to smile. I've also read that it took so long for an image to form on the film that your face would cramp if you tried to smile for that long. Those seem like good reasons but I've always thought that the real reason was that we weren't accustomed in the early days of photography to seeing images of ourselves. As soon as we recognized how much more attractive we were when we smiled for the camera, smiling came in vogue. But along with that increase in awareness of how we appeared to the camera came a corresponding increase in self-consciousness. When we danced, so to speak, we became aware not only that someone might be watching but that someone might even be taking a picture!

I purchased a digital camcorder a year or so ago. I plan to use it to help me present religious issues more effectively. But I've also been using it to make videos of my grandchildren. Stephanie, our 3 year old grand-daughter, loves to see herself in a swing or coming down a slide.

It's easy to take footage of Stephanie. She notices the camera but is still too young to be self-conscious. On the other hand, Kaia, our ten year old grand-daughter who lives in Cleveland, becomes extremely self-conscious when she realizes I am recording her.

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I wonder, though, how seeing themselves on video at an early age will affect our children's sense of identity and self-awareness in coming years. When I was a child, though some of our parents made home movies, there was still a significant time delay between recording and playback. Polaroid cameras allow for rapid picture development, but the dramatic impact of a Polaroid pales next to that of seeing one's self on a television screen.

Television in and of itself has made us all more self-conscious. We can't help but imagine how we would appear on a television screen. As a result it's much harder for us to dance as if there's nobody watching. We have all laughed too much at the unconscious foibles of others on the screen to not imagine how foolish we might appear to others. As a direct result, we second-guess ourselves much more often. As we have become more sophisticated, we have lost some of our precious innocence.

Barbara and I spend a lot of time caring for Stephanie. It is, as you might expect, a source of great joy for Barbara and for me. But the joy, for me at least, has come from an unexpected source. Stephanie is a happy child, a child who takes such great delight in simple pleasures. She is often laughing, playing, wondering, looking with unsophisticated and innocent eyes in wonder and delight at the world around her. Sharing in her delight and wonder has become a rich source of delight and wonder for me. Being with her helps me remember to "Open mine eyes that I may see."

No wonder Jesus said, "...unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

It's all too easy to sleepwalk through life. It's all too easy to eat your meals without noticing the taste of the food you are eating. It's all too easy to take our friends and loved ones for granted. Sometimes we need to narrow our attention, to tighten our focus and ignore everything else. You don't want your airline pilot distracted by the beauty of the sunset when she is landing the plane. The problem is that when we tighten our awareness too often or for too long, it can be difficult for us to let go and notice the wonder of everyday life, to notice the sacred in the ordinary.

That is why meditation and prayer are such important spiritual practices. That is why one of the ten commandments is to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. That is why the Buddhist monk Tich Nat Hanh suggests that when one does the dishes one should **only** do the dishes. He calls it mindfulness.

No matter what you call it, being open to the wonder of everyday life is one of the foundations of spirituality.

Most of us go through our days as though we were immortal. We squander the treasures at our feet and sleepwalk through our days. We pass by fields of the color purple and don't notice. We don't, as the character of Emily so poignantly discovered in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, really look at each other. A discovery which prompted her to cry out:

. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?--every, every minute?

Stage Manager: No. (pause) The saints and poets, maybe--they do some

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Sometimes we are awakened by forceful reminders of our mortality. A woman discovering a suspicious lump in her breast—a man learning that he has prostate cancer—events such as these which threaten to upset all our hopes and dreams. In his book *Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary* Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, not to be confused with Rabbi Harold Kushner, another well known author of religious books, tells of a colleague, Harold Hahn, who noticed one morning while shaving that the razor kept slipping from his hand. It turned out that he had a brain tumor and would soon die. When Kushner saw him at a convention shortly before he died, Hahn related the following passage from Kierkegaard: “A tiger can jump out of the forest at any moment.” In recounting this story of his colleague Kushner tells the story of how he found himself scheduled for an MRI which might reveal a serious medical problem in him. He writes,

Suddenly, everything I did was suffused with meaning. I couldn't take anything for granted.

The most trivial sensations became gifts: the smell of my children's hair. The sound of the dog barking. My wife's kiss. The morning coffee. Each was too precious to let go of.

It turned out his condition was not serious. He tells how one of his congregants said to him afterwards, “Rabbi, it's just God's way of saying ‘Gotcha!’”

But then, Kushner writes “Would that there be some way of getting to that heightened gratitude for life without the terror.”

I know that's what I want. It's what I hope to get from my religion, from my spiritual practice.

It seems to me our purpose here is to help one another awaken to the holy. It doesn't matter what you call the holy or how you understand it. God is not God's name. God is just a word some of us use to point to the mystery in which we live. What's important is not the word but what the word refers to. It doesn't matter what we call it. What matters is that we notice. What matters is that we are awake.

We awake by gathering here in worship and celebrating and reaffirming the good. I seek to do it in my sermons not by teaching you the “right” answers but by reflecting on the important questions, the questions life asks of all of us, and encouraging you to do the same. We awake by singing hymns of hope and praise. If we are lucky, we just might sing our hearts out. {pause}

We awake to the presence of the holy by taking time out to reflect privately. It might be just a few moments on our way to work. It might be a walk in the cool of morning, noticing, just noticing the world around us. It might be taking a few minutes to pray or meditate. Or it might be reading poetry, listening to music, or strolling through a museum. What's important is that we take the time to notice the extraordinary in the ordinary and count our many blessings.

Religion, I believe, begins with gratefulness. But too often, because we are too busy, or too self-conscious, or too sophisticated, we take life for granted. We live mindlessly.

But when we live mindfully, we can see the universe in a grain of sand, infinity in the palm of our hand.

I believe that religion, at its best, helps us sense and uncover a sense of the holy, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the miraculous in the mundane, the infinite in the finite.

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The Hindu mystic Ramakrishna wrote, "*The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail.*"

To worship is to pay attention to that which is of true worth. When we gather together in common worship, we remind ourselves and each other of what is of **true** worth: The affection of friends. The satisfaction of a job well done, the care and nurture of our children. The ordinary events of everyday life.

Worship requires silence just as music requires silence. The use of clay in molding pitchers, according to Lao-tzu, comes from the hollow of its absence. Just as doors and windows are used for their emptiness: Thus we are helped by what is not, to use what is.

Usefulness, in other words, depends on what is not there just as much as on what is there.

When we do nothing, when we stop, when we only do the dishes, we are in truth worshipping. By emptying ourselves, we allow ourselves to be filled by that which is not us. It is only when we stop our our huffing and puffing that we can notice the winds of grace filling our sails.

To me the essence of spirituality is to sense that I am part of something larger than myself. Something which moves me. Something upon which I can reliably depend even though it is beyond my control or comprehension.

To me, spirituality is feeling connected, a part of. But I lose this sense of connection when I am too busy for too long. That sense of connection becomes frayed when I let my busyness prevent me from stopping to smell the roses. That sense of connectedness is lost when I begin to imagine that the world turns through the night by my will.

To go out on a clear night and look at the stars, to go into wilderness and see the cycles of life and death, growth and decay, plants and animals and other patterns that are not of human form or invention is to remind myself that I am part of and connected to a vast and intricate web of life, infinite in its complexity, inconceivable in its power. This is what it means to worship. This is what it means to find the sacred in the ordinary.

I want to regain a sense of the wonder that a child, a young child feels when she sees a butterfly. She doesn't know what kind of butterfly it is, all she knows is that it is a wondrous and beautiful creature. She feels no need to hide or conceal her wonder or her innocence. She is not self-conscious about how she looks or how she dances. All she knows is that it's fun to move with the music. She has a capacity for joy that I envy. *The most infallible sign of the presence of God*, according to Teilhard de Chardin, is *Joy*.

I yearn for her innocence, her lack of self-consciousness. She dances like nobody's watching and she loves like she'll never be hurt.

She knows how to put her whole self in. And that's what it's all about.