

Won't You Join the Dance?

by Sarah Gibbard Cook

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It was a long, cold winter. Sometimes it seemed like it would never end. Now spring is here for real. The robins are back, the cranes are calling, the trees are in bud (flowers in bloom?) All of nature seems to be dancing and inviting us to join in the dance. In the words of the Mock Turtle's song from *Alice in Wonderland*, "Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance? Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?"

It's a season that lifts the spirits, inspires some to spring cleaning, lures those with seasonal affective disorder back out of hiding. It's also a time when activities seem to speed up – and I didn't really feel like they slowed down all that much over the winter. Life is going from busy to even busier.

I love springtime. I also can rather easily feel overwhelmed. How to keep the busy-ness from squelching the joy? From Aldous Huxley's novel *Island*: "It's dark because you are trying too hard. Lightly child, lightly. Learn to do everything lightly. Yes, feel lightly even though you're feeling deeply. Just lightly let things happen and lightly cope with them. I was so preposterously serious in those days... Lightly, lightly – it's the best advice ever given me . . . There are quicksands all about you, sucking at your feet, trying to suck you down into fear and self-pity and despair. That's why you must walk so lightly."

It seems the more I can experience a life as a dance, the more joy I take in it, even in stressful times. What is it about dancing that might spill over to other aspects of our lives?

- For one thing, it's kinesthetic. It's about sensation and feeling and movement. You can't stay stuck in your head when you dance. You can't filter your experience through intellect. Nothing wrong with intellect, it's important and we need it, but we also need to engage with life in other ways besides the cerebral.

Dancing doesn't depend on your abilities, physical or otherwise. The intergenerational Kairos Dance company in Minneapolis carries participatory dance out to long-term care facilities

and adult day care centers, working most often with elders who are physically frail and have been diagnosed with dementia. Their award-winning “Dancing Heart” program involves participants in improvisation and collaborative choreography, bringing measurable improvements in flexibility, energy, balance, memory, and socialization.

- For another thing, dance is playful. Small children dance spontaneously. Some adults still do, but not so many, not so often. Perhaps it’s because we get self-conscious. You’ve probably heard the saying, “Dance as if nobody’s watching.” Easier said than done, unless there is really nobody else around. But self-consciousness too often gets in the way of our best work, our best play, our best selves.

Or perhaps adults dance less readily than children because we have gotten task-oriented. Like intellect, being task-oriented has its place; it’s helpful for completing tasks. But if it becomes the be-all and end-all of life, it separates us from life. It keeps us in the past and the future, and blocks us from the now.

- A third thing about dance: it’s relational. Dancing is always with somebody or something – maybe a person or a group, maybe with a scarf or tambourine, maybe with the song in your head. “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.”

When we dance with others – or with the inner music, or with nature or the planets – we interact and respond without losing our individual selves. We give and receive cues, not commands. Jeffrey Symnykiewicz explores the metaphor of a circular dance: “All have their places somewhere along the circle. All have something to learn, and something to teach . . . Ever as the dance unfolds, our roles change, and our places shift, constantly. We know that so much of what often passes as success, power, wealth, and fame are but the phantoms of a moment that is already passing away. All that remains is the sway and the movement, the unfolding of the dance.”

- Finally, dance is joyful. Theologian Wendy Wright says, “Joy arrives when divinity dances in us.” Joy, not happiness. They’re not exactly the same thing. Joy is deeper somehow, less dependent on circumstances, more a matter of living from the core of our authentic selves. According to psychologist Rollo May, “Joy is the emotion which accompanies our fulfilling our

natures as human beings. It is based on the experience of one's identity as a being of worth and dignity." Joy arrives when divinity dances in us.

But what about the hard times? I mentioned sometimes feeling overwhelmed, but that's small potatoes compared to pain, or grief, or fear. Am I saying you ought to be able to dance pain, or grief, or fear away? Am I recommending denial? Not at all.

Vivien Greene famously said, "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass, but about learning to dance in the rain." Not denial, not hunkering down and closing off, but finding healing from connecting in the dance of life and love.

In the ancient story of Passover, Miriam danced after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea to safety. Yes, she was celebrating their escape from the Egyptian army that was chasing them. And no, she probably had no way to know they would spend the next forty years wandering in the desert. But she can't have believed their troubles were over. She had to have known there were hard times ahead. Her dance was an expression not just of relief and gratitude but of faith and hope.

Anne Felton Hines talks about the spirit of dancing in the hard times. She says, "Embrace this time for the richness it can provide, knowing always that the hopefulness of life still sings to us – the divine presence of Love still holds us, and that the storm will eventually pass and bring new growth . . . We must engage both the storm and the peace that follows; we must love and learn to dance in them both, for that is where the richness and the healing can be found."

The more I can experience life as a dance, the more joy I can take in it, even in stressful times. Sometimes the dance gets fast and I trip over my own feet; missteps come with the territory of being human. Accept them and move on. Sometimes the dance slows down until I feel I can barely move. Keep on dancing. Dance toward the light. Reach out for the hand of a dancer nearby. Stay connected. Flow with the music of life.