

# Dancing As Spiritual Practice

**Sermon delivered to First Unitarian Church**

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As I was preparing for this morning, it seemed like a little historical background might be appropriate before I begin my exploration of dancing as spiritual practice. A connection between dancing, religion and spirituality is certainly not an original concept on my part. Liturgical dancing as a form of religious worship is “depicted in Stone Age cave paintings [and] it is still a feature of the observances of many of the world’s major religions.

We see it in the Jewish *Hasidim* dance . . . ; the Sufi Whirling Dervishes. . . ; Hindu temple dancing . . . ; dancing can be witnessed at Buddhist and Shinto shrines . . .” and of course in indigenous religions throughout the world since very early times right up until the present moment.

While Christian history is somewhat ambivalent about dancing, both inside and outside of the church, there are numerous references in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament that support dance as a form of worship. In both Psalm 149 and 150 there are clear instructions to praise God with dancing and in Ecclesiastes we are told that “for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” and then very specifically includes “a time to dance.”

The Shakers who gave us the song, *’Tis a Gift to be Simple*, were a curious bunch. During “the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they had worship services which consisted entirely of dancing, and they put forth a series of arguments in its defense . . .” On the other hand, the same dancing Shakers thought total abstinence in sexual matters was the Godly way to go and in so doing may have self-selected their own extinction.

The Shakers certainly appear to have been more than a little ambivalent about their bodies. That ambivalence seems to encompass in one small sect, the broad spectrum of confusion concerning our bodies that many of us have inherited from our Judaeo-Christian heritage.

While the Shakers were dancing their way out of existence, the early North American Unitarians were nurturing a much more intellectual, less carnal approach to religion and matters of the spirit. Individually and societally, I suspect most of us still have a way to go before we reach what might be considered a “right relationship” between our minds and our bodies.

I am not really here today to discuss either the Shakers, our early Unitarian forebears, or liturgical dancing. I did however want to place worshipful dance in some historical context and simultaneously point out the generally long-held suspicion of things bodily as some how inferior to activities of the mind or spirit.

All of that said, I know that at least some of you will also be very happy to know that I am not here to propose that we include any form of dancing in our Celebration of Life services on a regular basis.

I am here today to briefly look at how dancing might be a spiritual practice. More specifically, how one particular form of dancing, Contra Dancing, which is also becoming known as Community Dancing, has, I believe become a form of spiritual practice for myself and others that I know.

At this point I would imagine that some of you might be asking yourself, “what exactly does Norm mean by spiritual practice?” For many Unitarian Universalists, spiritual and practice, especially when used together in the same sentence are not exactly household words. When I went to the dictionary and looked up spiritual, the various definitions were clear about one thing it seemed. Spiritual was about “the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body or material matters.” Spiritual is not about things carnal, corporeal, the corpus, the flesh, the body. It is about things ethereal which by definition are neither physical . . . nor rational.

Dancing, on the other hand clearly involves things bodily, physical, material, and carnal.

Am I suggesting then that something as physical as dancing can somehow be a means to access one’s spiritual self? Is it possible for something as embodied as dancing to connect us to something as disembodied as the spirit?

As most of you probably already imagine, that is exactly what I am about to propose.

For me the word practice in the term *spiritual practice* simply means to do something regularly to become more comfortable and skillful at it. This sense of the word practice is not all that different from practicing to play the piano, the violin or the cello. Where it gets a little tricky for many of us more rational Unitarians is how do we practice something that isn’t physical, material or rational, something that is *spiritual*? Or, in the spiritual practice I am suggesting, can we do something physical to access our spiritual depths?

For purposes of discussion and expediency, at this point, I am going to ask that, at least for the next several minutes, that you consider using my current definition of spiritual practice.

For me, spiritual practice is simply something that I do regularly and consciously that brings me either closer to, or in greater awareness of: the highest and best in myself, in others, and in the interdependent web of our cosmic community, in all of it’s glorious expansiveness.

Please let me repeat my definition...

Spiritual practice is simply something that I do regularly and consciously that brings me either closer to, or in greater awareness of: the highest and best in myself, in others, and in the interdependent web of our cosmic community, in all of it’s glorious expansiveness.

Now if you have been paying any attention at all over the past 25 or 30 years, you have heard about and perhaps personally explored, some of the many different opportunities that abound for spiritual practice. Within this building over the past year and I am sure for many years before that we have offered a variety of such practices from which to choose. Things like Tai Chi, meditation and the recent group led by Harry Pickens here are just a few examples that come to mind.

George Williams, my professor of World Religions at Starr King School for the Ministry gave us a list of 25-30 excellent suggestions for spiritual practice that he had prepared. If you haven't found something that appeals to you yet, copies of his list are available in the volunteer area.

There is also a book available from the UUA's Skinner Books called *Everyday Spiritual Practice* which was edited by the Rev. Scott Alexander and includes essays from about 40 different contributors. They suggest everyday spiritual practices that run the gamut from Art and Adversity to Yoga and Zen. In between you will find chapters on Cooking, Quilting, Martial Arts, Recycling and Social Justice – all as spiritual practices you might follow.

The choices are many. The overall message of the book is straight-forward. According to Alexander, "What makes an everyday spiritual *practice* different from a casual *hobby*," is "intentionality, regularity and depth." If you have read any of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's work I think you will notice a similar thrust to his ideas about mindfulness in everyday life.

So what exactly is Contra Dancing and how has my practice of it on an intentional, regular and in-depth basis brought me either closer to, or in greater awareness of: the highest and best in myself, in others, and our interdependent web of existence?

If you were currently without a partner or significant other and I was trying to entice you to come Contra Dancing, I might tell you that Contra Dancing is walking and flirting to music with an occasional square dance move thrown in. And, I would tell you that we always dance to wonderful, real, live music like we have here today. Music that is mostly made by local people who we eventually get to know as members of the dance community. People like our musicians this morning, Marian, Terry and Terry's good friend Al White from down the road a piece in the wonderful community of Berea, KY.

The more-or-less textbook definition of Contra Dancing is "community dancing for groups of couples." As background I would add that . . . it evolved from the country dance tradition of the British Isles and as such is related to English and Scottish Country Dancing.

The definition says that it's community dancing. That means the etiquette is that you will dance with different partners almost every dance – even if you came with a significant other. My wife, Kathryn and I usually dance the first and last dance of an evening together. The other 8-10 dances in a typical evening we dance with 8-10 other members of the dancing community.

We dance in groups, either circles, squares or long lines. Since these are couple dances, you are always dancing with a partner who is typically, but not always a member of the opposite sex.

Within the groups, you and your current partner are usually dancing with at least one other couple for each cycle through the dance. As a couple, you then move on to another couple for the next cycle and the dance repeats. This progression from couple to couple repeats until, hopefully you have danced with everyone in your current group at least once.

Almost every dance is taught first and then prompted by a caller until, after several cycles through it, people have learned the dance. And then it is just the music and the flow of the dance and the dancers moving in rhythmic kaleidoscopic patterns.

The actual footwork is merely walking. The figures are very simple, basic and few in number. Most people can learn the basics in 4 - 6 evenings of dancing. By the 7<sup>th</sup> time you go you'll know if this is something you would like to make a practice of... spiritual or otherwise. As a matter of fact, Contra Dancing is so simple, that if you were to approach it from a purely analytical perspective, you might think it simplistic and maybe even boring as some people no doubt do. However, while the dance is fairly simple, the variety of the dancers and the randomness with which they interconnect with one another in each dance makes each dance unique and joyful for me.

Erik Hoffman, a dancer and caller who lives in Oakland, California believes that there are three basic types of dancers.

(As I thought about this I saw some parallels to spiritual seekers in his dancer types. So, from here on if you are not interested in dancing pretend that I am talking about life.)

Erik identifies the first type as the beginner . . . those people who are just starting to dance. Almost everyone is a beginner for awhile. The dance community has an ethic of trying to be gently supportive and kind with beginning dancers. As in other areas of life, those of us who are more familiar with the dance, don't always do as well embracing the newcomer as perhaps we could do, or would like to think we do.

[This could be true in some churches also....]

The second type of dancer is what Erik calls the "hot-shot." They've learned all of the basic stuff and perhaps a few extra slick flourishes and they want everyone to know that they know what's happening. It is at this stage that some dancers begin to figure that they know-it-all, get bored and decide to take up some other activity.

It seems to me that faith communities often have travellers who pass through them and quickly discover "the Truth" with a capital "T" and move on when they discover that everyone else isn't as enlightened as they are... which may or may not also be the truth with a small "t" however.

The third type of dancer is what Erik calls community dancers. These people have acquired some skills, may actually even be pretty good dancers, but more importantly they have come to realize that this really isn't just about dancing. It is about relationships. It is about community and our connection to that community.

How does that connection happen?

For one thing, the connection tends to happen slowly. As we cycle through the dances with our dancing partners and neighbors we begin to get to know them. We begin to show up on a regular basis. We begin to realize that it is in fact engaging in the dance of life and community that really does matter. And slowly, we begin to make friends and connections in the community. Kathryn and I became friends slowly, over a period of 4-5 years before we eventually became life partners. The dance community made that slowness possible.

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I have learned from dancing has to do with timing... the rhythm at which the dance unfolds. I have learned that I don't control the pace of the dance and if I try to go too fast or too slowly I won't help the dance. We've all got to move together for the good of the dance.

The connections I mentioned a moment ago are also of course physical in a very real sense. Sam Keen, in his book, *To a Dancing God*, asked a very poignant question. "Is it really possible to be in touch without touching, to be moved without moving?"

In the dance we are almost always touching and moving and connected to others. It is through this touching and connectedness, the essence of the dance, that I believe we are indeed able to access our own spiritual selves.

When Kathryn and I got married, we wrote our own wedding service and vows. It was mostly with stuff we stole from other sources who in turn had apparently pirated it from still others. In researching today's sermon, I came across material that we had used in our wedding service without knowing its original source at the time. Since becoming a minister, I have discovered that it is often used in wedding services. The original author it turns out was Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Writing in a *Gift From the Sea*, she said,

*A good relationship has a pattern like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The partners do not need to hold on tightly, because they move confidently in the same pattern... like a country dance.... To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand; only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back—it does not matter which. Because they know they are partners moving to the same rhythm, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it. The joy of such a pattern is not only the joy of creation or the joy of participation, it is also the joy of living in the moment. Lightness of touch and living in the moment are intertwined.*

It is this living in the moment, intimately connected ever so briefly in a good relationship with my partner and my neighbors. In touch . . . touching . . . moving together, but not clinging to one another . . . , it is here that the dance becomes spiritual for me. In that moment, I can not be thinking of anything but the dance. Not what I have to do tomorrow. Not what is going on back

at the church. Not how poorly I may have done something yesterday. Or not how many bills are still waiting to be paid. In that moment I am totally absorbed in the dance.

In those moments I begin to get in touch with the highest and best in myself, my current partner, the other couple we are dancing with, the group we are dancing with, and the whole room with whom we are dancing. I realize that I and all of us are a part of something that we have co-created with each other.

Something that at least in that moment feels like a much greater dance.

As I wrote this I found myself reflecting on Anne Lindbergh's passage about relationships and dancing and thought what it might sound like if she had been writing about a church instead of about one-to-one relationships.

*A good church has patterns like a dance and is built on some of the same rules. The members do not need to hold on tightly, because they move in familiar patterns . . . like a country dance . . . . To touch heavily would be to arrest the pattern and freeze the movement, to check the endlessly changing beauty of its unfolding. There is no place here for the possessive clutch, the clinging arm, the heavy hand; only the barest touch in passing. Now arm in arm, now face to face, now back to back—it does not matter which. Because we know that we are partners moving to the same rhythm of life, creating a pattern together, and being invisibly nourished by it. The joy of such a pattern is not only the joy of creation or the joy of participation, it is also the joy of living in the moment. Lightness of touch and living in the moment are intertwined.*

In closing, I suspect that in the dance of life many if not most of us including myself are still beginners. And I realize that my spiritual practice is not about dancing. And I am aware that the dance of life which is so much more complex and challenging than Contra Dancing will continue whether any of us choose to dance together or not.

May it be a dance we choose to do . . . .