

## Hymnal Theology 2: *Let It Be a Dance*

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First, a reminder of where this service is coming from. Just about a month ago I introduced a series of services devoted to exploring some of our favorite Unitarian Universalist hymns, and what theological messages we express when we sing them. In that service we considered *Spirit of Life*. Next week we'll look at *Come Build a Land*, and over the next month or so we'll explore *We Laugh, We Cry* and *Come, Sing a Song with Me*. But this week, as I've already mentioned, we focus on *Let It Be a Dance*, with lyrics by the late Unitarian Universalist poet and troubador, Ric Masten.

There are certain qualities of dance that make it a natural as a metaphor for life and for human interaction with each other and the world. There are the elements of celebration, self-expression, and emotional catharsis. There are the elements of cooperation and give-and-take between partners. There is the element of finding one's place within a larger pattern of music, rhythm, and motion.

Another artistic medium that lends itself to life metaphors is that of weaving. Life as a tapestry takes into account the way that the many diverse strands of life are woven together into a complex whole pattern of color and shape. And yet, the final product is static, and not necessarily reflective of the dynamic process involved in its creation.

Dance, on the other hand, carries with it, explicitly, the dynamic movement that characterizes ongoing life and creation. But the two arts – weaving and dance – are not really so far apart, are they? I can easily conjure in my mind a picture of the dance of life as the process of weaving together the multifarious strands of experience into an ever-changing, ever-evolving tapestry that itself quivers and shimmers with the rhythms and energy of the universe. May I have this dance with you?

Some of us, myself included, don't always feel comfortable letting ourselves go and fully engaging in dance – or in life. There may be a fear of looking silly or foolish. Well, there's a Japanese proverb that addresses that fear and bears keeping mind. "We're fools whether we dance or not, so we might as well dance."

There is a long history of treating dance as a metaphor for life, both as a cognitive, intellectual construct, and as embodied practice. Life coach, author, storyteller, mythologist, performer and choreographer C. Charis Coyle, in an article called "Understanding Dance as Mystechal Metaphor," addresses both the value of embracing the life-dance link and the danger of neglecting it. She writes:

In this Tower of Babel world of diversity, there are few universal languages that can be understood and shared

worldwide. Dance and music are two such gems. They create bonds of interaction even amongst the most diverse of peoples, ideas and cultures. . . These twin flames are truly god-sparked gifts of interconnectivity. In the arena of music and dance, mental concepts and word constructs are not as important as the experience of the rhythmic singing in the blood, as the harmonic beating of the music's heart. Particle and wave unite.

One of the saddest features of our times is that many adults have forgotten how to dance. They've grown stone deaf to the rhythm that vibrates in every step of life's encounters. . . Our society seems to have forgotten the dance of give and take, the breath of wave and step, the template of forward and back, in its interactions not only with others in our society, but with other cultures of the world as well. We have grown rusty in our practice, and our stiffened flexibility is reflected in our relationships as they dissolve into fighting competitions at worst and wrestling matches at best.

It is time to re-member some hard gained wisdom from our own elders, . . . Our ancestors viewed dance as sacred. It wasn't just some form of social entertainment or physical honing but rather a way of ritualistically engaging the dualities of living, the tension between god and man, so as to refrain from having to do so in the every day world of personal particular.

As it is in the dance, so it is with life. Life is vibration, a flow, an ever changing river of possibility. A diverse multiplicity of patterning engages with us every day. How can we relate to this overwhelm without dissolving into the bickering of me against you battles. We can do this by keeping these opposing elements contained inside the protective whirl of the dance. We can do this by engaging each other in a sacred partnership of give and take, leader and led.

One reason that that passage struck me was that it seemed quite in keeping with Ric Masten's message in *Let It Be a Dance*. That is, it is not enough simply to note similarities between dance and life. Or to acknowledge that life can be seen as dance-like, or that dance can be seen as life-like. No, we have to *let* it be a dance. We need to approach and respond to life with the attitude of a dancer. Willing to connect and interact with *all* the music and rhythms we encounter, and engaging as full participants.

Enough with the generalizations. Let's dig into the lyrics of *Let It Be a Dance* and see what it really says. I don't mean to beat it to death. The song

stands pretty well on its own. But I think it is useful to pay some attention to some of the images and the points being made. By doing that, we may find even more meaning as we sing the song in future months and years.

The first point that jumps out at me, when I consider the song as a whole, is that it acknowledges all of life – not just those parts that might make us feel like dancing. It calls on us to let it be a dance “through the good times and the bad times, too.” It’s all part of the package. You can’t have one without the other. As the song says, “If nothing’s wrong, then nothing’s right.” In fact, their juxtaposition with the bad times may make the good times all that much sweeter.

The point is so central that it is made repeatedly in different ways. “a time for joy, a time to cry,” it says. And “Let the sun shine, let it rain; share the laughter, bear the pain.” Just as an aside, there is a typo in that last line in the hymnal, which most people don’t notice, but which does change and diminish the meaning. The line says to “bear” (b-e-a-r) the pain. That is, put up with it, tolerate it, presumably without complaint. It, too, is a part of life. But Ric Masten’s original line called on us to “bare” (b-a-r-e) the pain. That is, uncover it, acknowledge it, and share it with our companions in the dance. That’s a part of what our custom of Sharing Joys and Sorrows is about. As we b-a-r-e our pain and suffering and give them over to the caring and compassion of our sisters and brothers, they become easier for us to b-e-a-r.

The good and bad that we encounter in life are one source of the rhythms to which we dance. There are others as well, as reflected in that line at the end of the third verse, “and round and round we go again.” Round and round through the cycles of joy and pain. Round and round through the cycles of the seasons and the generations. “A child is born, the old must die.” Those are the bookends that mark the first and last steps of each of our individual dances through life. Within that span there are the repeating cycles of the years and the seasons.

And in order to be full participants in the dance, we must do more than simply observe and let those cycles happen to us like uninvolved wallflowers. “To reap the harvest, plant the seed.” If you wish to receive and enjoy the gifts of life, then you must share with it your gifts. You must plant those seeds and tend them with loving care.

One of the qualities of dance I mentioned right up front this morning was that of celebration. That quality, too, holds a central place in this song. Right in the middle of each verse, there is a break with the repeated phrase “Let it be a dance,” that strikes me as an expression of celebration and joy. “Let it be a dance. Let it be a dance. Let it be a dance.”

I think that little break is brilliantly placed, because what we should be doing is making and taking regular opportunities, in the midst of the flow of life’s dance, to pause and celebrate it. Doing so represents our faith that, acknowledging all of the joys and the sorrows that life brings, ultimately hope will triumph. In the end,

life is worth it. It is good. Especially if you cultivate the ability to “let your body learn to bend . . . like a willow with the wind.”

I also mentioned earlier the quality of self-expression. We each find our own way to “turn and spin.” But ours is not a solo dance. It’s not “Let it be a dance *I* do.” It’s “Let it be a dance *we* do.” This is an ensemble affair. It’s “*Everybody* turn and spin.” If we share the music, and coordinate our steps and our spins, then it’s a thing of beauty. That is life in community, so much richer than going it alone.

We sang this song, *Let It Be a Dance*, at my Service of Installation as your minister here nearly nine years ago. On that occasion, the Rev. Carol Taylor, one of my valued mentors, spoke. She gave the Charge to the Congregation, and she based her words on the idea of dance as a metaphor for congregational life, using this song as supporting text. That was appropriate for Carol, as she has been a dancer for much of her life.

I don’t remember everything she said that day. But I do remember her calling particular attention to the line that says “Learn to follow, learn to lead.” That is a fine lesson – or philosophy - in many areas of life, and particularly in a faith community like ours. I, as your professional spiritual leader, am clearly called upon to lead. That is an explicit part of my defined role with you. I do so, bringing all of my training and my life experience to bear. I do my best to share what experience and expertise I have in guiding us in healthy, productive directions.

But, in a liberal religious community, filled with people with a wealth and variety of experience and wisdom, I must also be able to follow when that is appropriate. To recognize and acknowledge the wisdom of others, from wherever it comes. I would have it no other way. This is not a puppet show with me, or anyone else, pulling the strings. This is a dance, where the aim - and occasionally the reality - is a mutual give and take in which, together, we create something of beauty. Something greater than any of us alone can even dream of.

Let me say another word about the importance of following well. You’ve probably heard the quote about Fred Astaire that first appeared in a 1982 “Frank and Ernest” cartoon by Bob Thaves: “Sure he was great, but don’t forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did - backwards . . . and in high heels!” So never underestimate the value of good followers.

I encourage each of you to cultivate your abilities both to lead and to follow. To “feel the rhythm” and “fill the need” as you are able. And let’s never forget to celebrate our life – our dance – together. May I have this dance with you?

So may it be.