

Merce Cunningham and the Gift of Grace

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
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Some of you may remember that I once danced with Ballet West...for a day. I shared this unusual experience a few years ago while still flush with excitement and muscle pain. I have had a chance to reflect a little more on it since, especially following the death this summer of Merce Cunningham, one of the greatest dancers and choreographers of the 20th century. I may have rhythm, but I'm no Merce Cunningham. Cunningham ranks among the foremost figures of artistic modernism in general, and is among the few like Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and George Ballanchine, who have transformed the nature of dance itself.

In some way, dance has always been a part of my life, or in my genes. My mother was an extraordinary dancer specializing in tap, who having spent World War II living underground, was the first person in Berlin following the war to organize the Russian sector to brush away the debris and rubble from the bombings, and open a cabaret. This improvised space erected from the ashes of doom became the focal point for artists and artsy people, and she choreographed the shows and breathed new life into a Berlin whose spirit was utterly vanquished. It was dance that resurrected the vision of life as an irrepressible force, and through music and movement a people were revitalized to imagine life beyond the confines of fear, loss, and intimidation.

Being too self-conscious as a youngster about preserving images of my masculinity, I ignored the call to enter the dance world. I couldn't distinguish if the call was from my mother or from God, but either way, I refused to dance...until a few years ago when I received a call from Jonas Kage, artistic director of Ballet West and a member of our church. The teenage ballerinas in training at Ballet West were ready to practice their lifts, and Jonas needed guys to do the heavy lifting since there was a terrible dearth of young men to perform such tasks. Apparently, homophobia still persists in preventing men from expressing artistic sensibilities through movement. (I was glad to be over that nonsense.).

My only concern was what to wear that Saturday morning, fearing I'd end up in tights. Loose clothing was all I needed with the caveat that I should prepare myself for quite a workout. After a very brief training session on how to lift a ballerina, I felt fortunate that my first partner was a young woman with a lithe body who undoubtedly would be light as a feather. I lifted her at the proper beat in the music, and thought I was going to die. I managed to smile through the lifts.

My next partner, a heavy-set young woman who instilled fear in my heart and made me quietly question her choice of artistic expression, was lifted with the greatest of ease. I counted the beat and when the lift was due, she rose in my arms as though I were lifting a ten-pound barbell. Again and again she was lifted up, moving with the

music, moving with me, and I was overwhelmed by her grace. A quick mental note: Grace is not the preserve of the thin-bodied. Grace appears where it will, and blesses those who have learned to move skillfully in dance...and perhaps also in life.

Watching dance performed, the leaping and turning and seemingly weightless bodies giving form to concepts, the dancer brings to mind a vivid demonstration of all that is graceful. But what does that mean...being graceful (full of grace?) What is grace in dance and in life? Do they connect? If you'll remember from our reading, dance is not just entertainment.

Being "full of grace," as understood by my colleague, Ed Frost, is the art of being at ease, and all parts of the whole in perfect accord and balance. How can we avoid relating balance and a sense of ease to our very own dance steps through life? I think of my steps as clumsy, almost comical, as I move through life. We do MOVE through life, as we interact with others or even perform solos. I can hardly consider my steps to be in perfect accord and balance with the rhythms of work, relationships, and self. We are generally not at ease as we dance... unless like the professional dancer, we become more disciplined in the complexity of the steps we take.

The good dancer whose grace we admire, works tirelessly to the point of utter exhaustion in order to seem effortless in his or her movement. Is there not an implication then, that as grace also applies to our daily living, we need to approach this daily living with more discipline. Do not our tensions with the world destroy our sense of ease and make us move awkwardly in our patterns? Do we, in fact, impose ANY discipline in our leaps and steps in order to move more fluidly?

In 1937, Merce Cunningham began to study modern dance with Bonnie Bird, who had herself been trained by Martha Graham. The next year, Bird hired the young composer John Cage as her music director. By the next year, 1939, Bird, Cage, and Cunningham were on the West Coast for the Bennington College Modern Dance Summer School. Merce Cunningham was all of 20, yet his talent and leaping ability were so phenomenal that Martha Graham extended an offer to him to be the second male ever to dance in her mostly female company. He danced with her company on Broadway in 1939 and never left New York.

John Cage and his wife Zenia finally made it to New York in 1942 and soon both Cage and Cunningham began their most remarkable collaboration. In 1944, with music by Cage, Merce Cunningham presented a performance of dance solos that sprung his career as choreographer. He was the main dancer of his own choreography for decades.

Although John Cage and his wife Zenia were divorced, as painful as that was to all, nobody knew that Cage and Cunningham had a personal relationship aside from a professional one until a press conference in 1989. It was a funny occurrence. Cage was asked if his relationship with Cunningham went beyond a professional

collaboration. He surprised everyone by saying: "I do the cooking, and Merce does the dishes." (What a graceful way to come out of the closet, no longer at odds with oneself or the universe, no longer living awkwardly, but feeling the freedom of movement). How effortless: I do the cooking; Merce does the dishes. Period.

John Cage died in 1992. Cunningham once said of life without Cage: On the one hand, I come home at the end of the day and John's not there. On the other hand, I come home and John's not there."

Merce Cunningham continued to choreograph following Cages' death. He was a dancer on fire, and in 1999, at age 80, he choreographed "Biped" with computer-generated visual imagery suggesting many aspects of transcendence. It is acclaimed as the single most sensational dance choreographed by anyone in the 1990's.

Throughout his life, Merce Cunningham sought to banish predictable compositional habits. In 1954 when his lead dancer, asked him what the dance called "Minutiae" was really all about, he took her to the window of the New York studio, showed her the street below and said, "That."

As an aside, I can't help but remember Miles Davis back in the 60's while lying on the floor of his apartment in Harlem with the windows open, listening to the street sounds, said "That's the music." And he then introduced the world to rap music.

Breaking with convention and working positively with *change* defined Cunningham as an artist. Change poses an enormous concept in all of our lives, and to work with change as (or in) an art form staggers my mind. For one thing, I am anything but graceful in the face of change. But it stands to reason, that since change is generally suspect, and because we are certainly not at ease with change, then it is precisely change that we must learn to adapt to. (May we be so fortunate as to do so gracefully). I admit my own clumsiness and awkwardness when dealing with change. Applying grace to change, inevitable change, lies beyond my ken.

A major influence on the thinking and philosophy of Merce that he so remarkably could translate into dance, was the I Ching: The Book of Changes. He read it constantly. Cunningham's choreography expressed the nature of change itself. Upon examining the ancient Chinese text of the I Ching we can begin to understand its inspiration for Cunningham. The I Ching is a text that reflects the universe in miniature. Three huge principles underly the I Ching are: Simplicity, Variability, and Persistency.

Simplicity: The fundamental law underlying everything in the universe is utterly plain and simple, no matter how abstruse or complex some things may appear to be.
Variability: Everything in the universe is continually changing. By comprehending this one may realize the importance of flexibility in life and may thus cultivate the proper attitude for dealing with a multiplicity of diverse situations.

Persistency: While everything in the universe appears to be changing, among the changing tides is a persistent principle, a central rule, which does not vary with space and time.

It is interesting to contemplate that which does not change, that which persists in the changing tide of the universe. As a choreographer, as a human being, how do we distinguish (as Theodore Parker wrote in his sermon 175 years ago)...how do we distinguish between what is permanent and what is transient?

The I Ching introduces the concept of simplicity underlying observable complexity and thus it becomes an important first step to living more gracefully. (Knowing there is simplicity, find that simplicity). But even more powerful, I think, is the notion of flexibility in a constantly changing universe, and add to that: "cultivating the right attitude for dealing with it all."

Does not acquiring flexibility (the discipline of becoming flexible) enable us to feel more at ease and help us begin to move in accord with life rhythms? And the notion of attitude, achieving the right attitude or the proper attitude in the face of life's overwhelming multiplicity would undoubtedly help us regain "balance" and limit our clumsiness.

Flexibility in dance and in life does not come without rigorous discipline. And it also begs the question: Are life and dance really separate? Milton Aylor (from our reading this morning) reminds us: We dance to feel life, to know and celebrate our aliveness...we think in jumps and speak in steps...The meeting of minds bring strangers together in conversation about doing things differently, quite literally, for a change. Change is essential to vitality and growth...dancing is what we should want not only our feet to do, but also our thoughts..."

The gift of grace...a term of great religious significance and a term indispensable to dance, basically lifts us towards a new orientation in life. Life is strenuous, and yet, the gift of grace remains to bless us. Are we even remotely receptive to the flexibility, attitude, the simplicity? For example, this Zen poem stops me in my tracks:

In spring, the flowers, and in autumn the moon. In summer a refreshing breeze, and in winter the snow. What else do I have need of? Each hour to me is an hour of joy.

I can't help return to the I Ching's wisdom that attitude is a corollary to flexibility. Without being in the moment...without being in the right frame of mind, am I even conscious of the movement from flowers to breeze to moon to snow to flowers to breeze and so on? Unconsciously, do I make a judgment about life that robs me of grace? Is it any wonder that I am clumsy, for I lack the discipline to awaken to the beauty and goodness of life in every moment...despite change and turmoil and setbacks. Let me give you an example:

If I am hungry and am given a bowl of vegetable soup, do I appreciate the soup as good? Or do I think and remark, "Well last week I had this great clam chowder that was really good." Am I judging the soup in the moment of my hunger as good? If I can, I move closer to grace.

We dance to feel life; to know and celebrate our aliveness. I think back on the heavy-set dancer I lifted with such ease at Ballet West. She possessed the gift of grace.

I reflect, too, on the opening of the first cabaret in Berlin after WWII. It underscored what is meant by: After winter comes the spring. After death feel life again with dance and music and movement and humor and laughter and fellowship. The attitude is that life remains fundamentally good although preoccupied with evil. It takes enormous discipline..and flexibility to receive the grace that is freely given.

And finally I think of Merce Cunningham, the genius who not only choreographed new steps to unconventional dance patterns. For him, all life was grace. Life is a gift and the gift is good. Even when your lover dies, even throughout heavy loss, life always offers opportunity. (change). And in that opportunity grace resides. Grace springs naturally from the heart. It jumps and leaps and springs...in our dancing...in our living.