

## Let's Dance

by Rev. Kent C. Matthies

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I love to dance. At times I love disco, salsa, meringue, country, and house music. At times I love dancing with a partner. And at times as Billy Idol sings, I love dancing with myself. With the right music flowing through my soul I love moving to the rhythm slowly or quickly. I love trying to move my feet in intricate steps or just keeping my feet still and moving my body and my head. Growing up I was fortunate to have an environment that allowed and encouraged me to explore dance. In grade school I came home for lunch and would often quickly exit the kitchen for the stereo in the living room where I would play Michael Jackson Off the Wall, or KC and the Sunshine Band's Greatest Hits or Saturday Night Fever to which I would dance with myself. Then I would go back to school in a much better mood.

In junior high and early high school I had a crew of friends and we were dedicated to dancing. WBMX was our favorite radio station and on Friday and Saturday nights BMX played house mixes from 10 pm until 4 am. We stayed locked in on that station for hours on end. We often didn't have any place to go, but that didn't stop us. We rode around in the each other's cars listening to the mixes and dancing in our seats. When we did find a party we were ready to get out and move. I, like many of you, have always loved to watch people who are talented or simply enthusiastic about dancing. In ballet, swing, foxtrot or contra it is always fun to watch people who are really good. On First Fridays down in Centre City I love to watch the break-dancers jump and spin on their mats.

Throughout the world varieties of dance never end. In college I studied in Costa Rica where they never have a party without dancing. That would not make sense to ticos. My "Costa Rican mother" always pushed me out onto the dance floor even when I knew nothing about salsa music. I have been on trips to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic where music serves like the heartbeat of the people. I met at least three or four Dominicans who sleep with meringue on the radio all night long. In these Caribbean locations I have been enthralled with the energy little kids, elders, and everyone in the middle puts into dance.

During my Candidating, or interviewing Week here at this congregation in the spring of 2002 – we finished off with a party – the annual dinner. When dozens of people were dancing together upstairs with a DJ I knew this should be my church. I have come to love dancing upstairs with you all. I am very happy that many of you danced on New Year's Eve here.

## Dance of Life

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition of ordination the minister being ordained invites the preacher of his or her choice to give the sermon. For my ordination service I asked my minister from childhood, Rev. Don Wheat to preach. To my initial surprise, Don preached about dancing as a primary theme for my ministry. This was an important event in my life so one might have imagined that Don would emphasize a more serious subject

such as social justice or dedication to service. But Don made a point of saying that people would more fully understand and appreciate my ministry if they saw me dance.

There was laughter during that sermon and some embarrassment, but eventually I realized that Don was fulfilling his job as teacher and preacher. With a focus on dancing Don was actually highlighting the core of our philosophy of religion and life. What Don knows and what many of you know is that an inherent part of the human condition includes always encountering new burdens, new problems, and new failures. Within this reality humans need refreshment, nourishment and rejuvenation. In order to get what we need, as human beings we must continually recommit ourselves to being fully alive and celebrating life.

In one of his meditations Don wrote that, “The Hasidic Jews used to say, ‘Life is a dance.’” If so, how foolish it is to struggle with the question, “what does life mean?” A dance simply is, and you either enjoy it or you don’t. As early as the first century, St. Irenaeus said the glory of God is a human being fully alive. This is a challenge for the theist and humanist alike. Perhaps when your dance is over, a group will gather to remember you, and a friend will say, “She danced with such energy that she left the rest of us breathless.”

Dance is one way to celebrate life, but it also represents the multitude of activities in which we can engage to make the most of our brief time here on this planet. A great story of perseverance comes from a famous violinist, Rachel Barton. Barton, a Chicago native, began her violin studies at age three. She practiced six to eight hours a day while being home-schooled. Her devotion paid off when she made her professional debut with the Chicago Symphony -- at the age of seven.

As a young adult Barton was involved in a tragic accident. While getting off the public train her violin case was stuck in the closing door. Rachel could not let go and was eventually seriously hurt under the rolling wheels of the train. Barton underwent at least a year of massive pain and many years of rehabilitation after learning she will never regain the use of her legs. She did not give up her violin. Since the accident, Barton was one of the torchbearers in the Olympic torch relay and was featured as a soloist for the opening ceremonies of the Paralympics Games.

But, Barton is not focused on her accident or the loss of her legs. Although these are publicly well-known aspects of her life her web page makes no mention of her tough fate. Instead she focuses on her mission in life: bringing the joys of music to people of all walks of life. Among her goals is to illuminate the parallels between classical and popular music. A fan of hard rock and heavy metal since childhood, Barton helped form a group called Stringendo. This group recorded an album with arranged songs by rock artists from Ozzy Osbourne to Led Zeppelin to Nirvana. In her life’s work Barton has dedicated herself as a classical music evangelist of sorts, winning new listeners for the genre by proving that, contrary to popular belief, classical music is not stagnant and irrelevant in today’s society. Barton has become one of the world’s most acclaimed classical musicians, playing with top symphonies worldwide and winning prizes in leading

competitions from Brussels to Montreal to Vienna. She has released five classical albums, including one honoring the works of 18th- and 19th-century black composers.

We all deal with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. We have not all been involved in violent and tragic accidents, but we have all known troubles and the blues. Rachel Barton serves as one of many reminders about the resiliency of the human spirit. Abraham Lincoln went through tremendous amounts of suffering and turmoil yet he said, “Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be.” As human beings we have great capacities for suffering and joy, at many points we make up our minds about which way its going to go. In a similar vein the Buddhist Robert Thurman wrote, “Our human heart thrives on being happy. We are in fact the form of evolution that is built most for pleasure. Scientists go on and on about how the brain is redundant because they can’t understand why we need such a big brain just to run out and jab some buffalo with a spear. But that isn’t our job. Our job may be to go and caress the buffalo, to be loving and playful and experience pleasure. That’s what all the brain is for; it’s like a sea of anemone that loves to feel pleasure. Our power and greatness come from our ability to see the vision of happiness.”

Thank goodness this religious community provides a place for people to see visions of happiness. Here we remember that we have choices about how we live life. Not everyone dances, and that’s ok. This is a place where we can learn more deeply about our own interests and passions, what fills our spirit. I think we should be proud and definitely grateful for the many ways in which the people of this community use their own individual gifts. One of the best benefits of ministry is that you all continually teach me about enjoying life. You provide examples, insight and inspiration for one another in your gardening, painting, hiking, theatre, praying, cooking, reading, sharing of meals, biking, singing, listening to music, meditating in the sun, doing martial arts and yoga, writing creatively, and visiting friends. You engage in these successful ways of living life to the fullest in the face of real trials and tribulations.

Of course, in addition to our myriad of ways in which we enjoy life many of us work very hard in our jobs, for our families and ourselves. We also work hard for the congregation – buildings and grounds, fundraising, finances, social justice, worship and religious education. As we continue in this important work we should always remember that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. In our Unitarian Universalist movement if we don’t have a certain whistle in our work, a certain level of joy evident in our hearts our congregations will never meet their greatest potential. Even in our toughest social justice work we must listen for the music, which charges us up and gets us to move our feet and bodies. Even in times of illness and anger we must look for that which lifts our souls and makes us laugh. Maybe at some of our USG meetings we should take a break to play some music and dance.

In doing so we can continue to live in tune with a philosophy found in certain East African communities, which believe that each person comes into this world with his or her own song. “The tradition is that the community honors that song by singing it as welcome when a child is born, as comfort when the child is ill, in celebration when the

child marries, and in affirmation and love when death comes.” Here in this congregation together we help each other figure out which our song. Together we sing our songs of love and longing, encouragement and comfort, struggle and security.

Mark Sanders wrote a book entitled, *I Hope You Dance*, which is a challenge to make the most out of life. I will close this sermon by quoting him, "If you can figure out a way to keep the energy and gumption and fire alive, you'll always stay young. And where there's youth, there's hope... where there's hope, there's wonder... where there's wonder, there's faith... where there's faith, there's chance... where's there chance, there's love...where's there's love, there's music... and dancing. So in my heart of hearts, I hope you dance." I hope you dance! AMEN.

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