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## DANCE AS PRAYER: MOVING THE BODY TO STIR THE SOUL

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*Renewal—physical, emotional, and spiritual—is a perennial concern of those in leadership. This article explores the medium of dance as one way to re-energize the spirit. Adopting an incarnational theology, the author articulates a spirituality that is rooted, as all things human must be, in the corporeal.*

Catholic schools require leaders with souls grounded in the energy of creation and life-giving practices. It is too easy for school leaders to become lost in the maze of demands and miss the opportunity for growth and personal development required to maintain their spirit of service and call to the ministry of education. This article explores the relationship between leadership and the cultivation of soul through the medium of dance. I have a vision of dance refreshing the heart of the weary leader and opening the channels of grace for the seeking soul. In their recent work, *Leading With Soul*, Bolman and Deal (1995) exhorted leaders to seek their soul and spirit and reminded them that “the heart of leadership is in the heart of leaders” (p. 21). A heart that has grown cold and distant from a source of inspiration soon loses life and focus. Catholic educational leaders by virtue of the sacred ministry entrusted to them must search for a source of life-giving energy and clarity as they journey along the path of ministry.

Leaders who lead from the soul return to a spiritual basis and reclaim the enduring capacity that gives their lives passion and purpose. “Leading with soul requires giving gifts from the heart that breathe spirit and passion into your life and organization” (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p. 12). We must trust that spirit and faith are at the core of a leader’s life. Without these qualities, leaders merely go through the motions; but there’s no passion for their work.

Many indigenous people believe that whenever in our lives we stop dancing, singing, and being enchanted with stories or begin experiencing difficulty with silence is when we begin experiencing soul loss or loss of spirit (Arrien, 1993). Dancing is a powerful way to retrieve those parts of the soul which have been lost or unused.

Leaders in Catholic education are called to be transformers and shapers of the kingdom. Transformational leadership stems from the “ability of the leader to reach the souls of others in a fashion which raises human consciousness, builds meaning, and inspires human intent that is the source of power” (Bennis, 1984, p. 70). Transformational leaders, according to Bennis and Nanus (1985), exhibit four commonly shared strategies: 1) attention through vision, 2) meaning through communication, 3) trust through positioning, and 4) the deployment of self. Such transformational leaders articulate a compelling vision and are able to communicate that vision in a way that allows others to understand the shared meaning around the vision. Further, they evoke a strong perception of trustworthiness enhanced by their commitment to the vision and make the fullest use of personal resources and capacities because they are extremely self-confident in their abilities and optimistic about outcomes. This confidence and optimism are contagious for those around them. The compelling power of transformational leadership flows from a shared vision. “Vision statements create a value framework that enables daily, routine activities to take place in a special meaning and significance making the school a special place and instilling feelings of ownership, identity, participation, and moral fulfillment” (Starratt, 1995, p. 54). Vision embraces an ideal, a dream that is grounded in fundamental meanings and values that feed a sense of human fulfillment.

## **THE EVIDENCE AND BEAUTY OF DANCE**

As we face the new realities of the 21st century, connection to a source of spirit and passion in the hearts of leaders and all members of an organization is vital. While we look to leaders to provide vision and direction, these individuals must feel a connection to the divine that gives meaning to their lives and a source of inspiration to lead others. How can we name this connection? Artress (1995) describes this connection as the great-grandmother’s thread, which connects the heart to a source of divine inspiration.

The great-grandmother’s thread is the God within who has long been ignored and forgotten, who awaits discovery in our castles. It is easy to forget something that is invisible, and yet that is the spiritual challenge. Historically many forces have destroyed memory of the great-grandmother’s thread. It has been destroyed through centuries of patriarchal domination, through fears of creativity and of the traits associated with the feminine, such as empathy, curiosity, community, and holistic thinking. (p. 13)

Leaders are called to walk a sacred path that provides them with touchstones and puts them in contact with the invisible thread attached to the heart of God. As pilgrims on a journey into the challenges of a new century, we must participate in a sacred dance where moments of silence interchange with the frantic pace of life. We need moments where movement draws us into the heart of the divine so that we are energized for the movement outward in service. This spiritual growth can happen anywhere and at any time when we are living consciously, reflecting on our experience (Artress, 1995). The quest of leadership is a journey to find the inner treasure of the true self and, upon returning home, to offer that gift to transform the kingdom. In the process, the very heart of the leader is renewed (Bolman & Deal, 1995).

What is the power of dance that frees the heart of a leader? Be the leader a dancer or observer of dance, the energy of freedom awaits the open spirit. De Sola (1990) identifies the essence of dance:

Primarily drawing from a kinesthetic dimension, a dancer will connect feelings, body shapes, forms, and rhythms to bring forth in a heightened way the spirituality of everyday incarnated life. The dancer is a mirror that reflects and magnifies what is hidden or not accessible to the eyes alone. By grounding these perceptions in the body, a dancer then becomes as a mirror of the "within" of things.... The dancer is able to give new life and meaning to the passion of human emotions. (p. 156)

The hand held open to the world carries the energy of availability and acceptance, while the clenched fist blocks energy flow and announces a closed attitude. Take a moment to try this simple movement. With eyes closed open one hand to the light and clench the other tightly. Drawing the open hand to your heart, feel the warmth of life flowing. The closed fist drawn to the heart cuts off the movement of life-giving energy, but carries a strong message of resistance and control.

The beauty of dance moves the heart of the open soul, expresses the emotion of the inner spirit, and celebrates the central movements of the inner spirit. De Sola notes that:

While interpreting abstract forms of spirituality, the dancer draws attention to the exquisite grace of the human body—the beauty of the arching spine, encircling arms, with the limbs alternately supporting weight, gesture, and reaching into space, or retraction, with weight, into the depths. (1990, p. 156)

The dancer awakens within the viewer feelings of empathy; together they feel the ground, the weight, the movements in space, the feeling of the body, and the movements of the spirit. We are natural dancers seeking means to express the kinesthetic dimension of our learning and living. Attention to the

movement of the power of God and life in our beings is the first step in releasing the dancer within our hearts. The body is the primary text of learning and, when guided by the spirit, it mirrors the yearning of God in our hearts. We learn more about who we are through the dance (De Sola, 1990). For we live, move, and exist in God. As De Sola maintains,

All of life involves movement, and movement becomes dance when there is an inner life, a living spirit directing it. True dance draws its strength from the living flow of the universe. With this power, dance can lead us to the heart of reality; it can turn energy loose within us, and this could be a fearsome thing if one were not rooted in good. (1977, p. 9)

The energy of leadership is rooted in the movements of the heart attuned to the power of God alive and active in the leader who is open to deep listening. As VerEecke says, "Even in the stillness of the human heart there is movement of the living Spirit" (1984, p. 126).

It is through creation that God chooses to reveal the movements of growth and change and calls us to see that all of life is movement; without it there is no life (VerEecke, 1984). Movement captures the sense of the "spirit of God" which is described as wind, breath, and fire. This is the God who is creative, restoring, and life-giving. As ministers of God's Word in education, we are called to share in the creative process of God. As co-creators and shapers of minds and hearts, our hearts, too, are in constant need of renewal and nourishment. The dancer, as artist, imitates God's creativity and uses the human body to create changing shapes and forms. VerEecke maintains that:

Through art, the artist enables another to "see" into the beauty, the pain of life that must be deeply rooted in God's creation. The artist offers many different visions of the reality of God's presence in the world. A multi-faceted diamond reveals a brilliance of the whole and yet each face of the diamond gives us an entry into the brilliance of the whole. Each work of art can offer an avenue of approach into the splendor, the majesty, the simple, yet complex beauty of the Creator, the Divine Artist. (1984, p. 127)

Movement that finds its home in the heart of the faithful pilgrim becomes dance when it is joined to the Creator's act of giving life. De Sola observes:

In the stillness of the heart, the movement grows to a prayer and then to a dance. The dance began in the beginning, in silence and stillness, as the world lay worshipping under the hand of God, for "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." The dance began with God! (1977, p. 9)

## DANCE AS HEALING PRAYER

For the dancer, movement leads to prayer where a dialogue with the Creator is initiated. It is an invitation for a greater integration of the body and spirit in a moment of communication with the source of life and love. Reflecting on his own experience of prayer flowing from movement, VerEecke (1984) states:

This experience of moving prayer gave me a sense of power, of beauty, of a dynamic spirit of God dwelling in me and able to be expressed through my flesh. It was an experience rooted in the finite limitation of human grace but open to the full expression of divine graciousness manifested through grace of the human body and spirit in motion or in stillness. (p. 112)

In our own simple ways of movement, we are invited to enter into a dialogue with the author of our dance to allow the Spirit of God to move our hearts to prayer and praise. Arms raised in a gesture of praise lift the soul from confusion to a connection with the source of love and life. The body of the dancer can lift our earthbound hearts to the Creator. As De Sola writes:

The dancer serves as a living icon of the good news and enables people through dance to rejoice, wonder, and open their hearts to their innermost feelings. A trained and sensitive body is like the lamp set on a stand, illuminating the way for others.... The dancer reminds the community that they are indeed people with feelings who can rejoice, weep, move, be freedom-loving, physical, and capable of resurrection. (1990, p. 158)

For Catholic educational leaders, the spirit of prayer must become a source of energy and discernment as we face our daily challenges. Dance offers a medium of reflection that opens the soul to insight and strength. If we believe that prayer is the central core of life, then dance, which becomes prayer, also expresses our relationship to God, to others, and to all the world of matter and spirit. This prayer must originate from our deepest selves.

The movements of dance-prayer start from our deep center, flow outward like rivulets into the stream of life, and impart life everywhere. So dance can be a part of prayer, just as stillness can be a part of movement and silence can be a part of music. (De Sola, 1977, p. 10)

Dance wells from our true nature, when we are not cut off from our inner selves. Dance invites us to seek our souls so as to be true to the gifts of God planted within by the Holy Spirit. Our hearts grow restless when we are out of touch with those inner gifts and strengths; we feel a sense of loss and isolation. As Artress notes:

This is the longing of co-creation, the search for wholeness through service. This is the essence of spiritual transformation. Our work in the world can become a holy act. The modern pilgrim seeks a passionate connection to his or her individual gifts, and the grace to use them to better humankind. (1995, p. 39)

Dance has long been a source of healing and centering that draws us to walk more faithfully and honestly. Dance allows the searcher to touch the essence of self and experience the unity between spirit and matter (Arrien, 1993). I am truly the woman called by God and gifted by God when I am dancing or have the opportunity to touch into the core of my spirit through dance. It is when I dance that I have energy and the inspiration to lead, that I am most in tune with the rhythms of my inner spirit and the power of God alive within, and that I am free to explore new avenues of life. De Sola asserts that:

Dance is a natural, primary expression of every human being. It is founded on the beat of our hearts, the rhythms of our breath, and the flexibility of our joints. It is manifested as an inexplicable desire to turn a walk into a pattern or a run into a leap. Dance is an integral part of who we are as whole, religious, and expressive persons. (1990, p. 16)

Dance focuses our hearts on basic rhythms that teach the heart, body, and spirit about life and movements of the Spirit of God within each soul. Arrien (1993) identifies five rhythms that hold valuable lessons for the leader's spirit, which are seeking a soul connection. They are: flowing rhythm, the rhythm of chaos, staccato rhythm, lyrical rhythm, and the rhythm of silence. Flowing rhythm instructs the heart about fluidity and grace; moving among our colleagues we experience moments that require the delicate word or touch that eases the awkward situation. The rhythm of chaos, while announcing creativity seeking a new expression, is dreaded and avoided. Where would we be called if the moments of chaos were allowed to dance out their energy and be transformed into a pattern of new life? Refinement and definition are lessons of the staccato rhythm, imitation of the pulse of life racing through our blood vessels in a rapid, repeated beat. So much of our days defy the regularity of the constant pace of the beat; do we stop to listen to the patterns? While the lyrical rhythm instructs us in synthesis and integration, it is only the listening body that is attentive to the weaving of the melody of growth as it soothes and rocks the spirit. Finally, it is the rhythm of silence that provides contentment and peace. How often do we gift ourselves with a moment to savor a pause and breathe in the life-enriching moments of peace and serenity during the normal day? We are more likely to be caught in the moments of ceaseless motion that are unconnected to the natural rhythms of life and dance. To the observer, the movements of the day are without pat-

tern, responding solely to external stimuli; the heart and soul are long forgotten. Focusing on the five rhythms as they naturally flow from one into the other transforms normal walking into focused dance. A spirit connection moves the dance into prayer.

As DeMarinis notes, "Movement serves as a bridge, bringing together body and soul, inside and outside thoughts, and all of the energies" (1990, p. 200). Dance requires a spiritual balance between releasing and containing energy, stillness and motion, relaxation and tension. The dancer balances and aligns the energy centers within, keeping head, heart, and spirit in union. In dance each movement has the potential for spiritual value. When dancers ground themselves to the floor with sureness, viewers' spirits also become grounded. De Sola maintains that a dancer's

commitment is shown by the way the feet touch the ground, the alignment of the body, and what the eyes convey. When the dancer's body is aligned, the harmony is facilitated and energy flows from one body part to another, imparting beauty in grace-filled movements. Alignment of the body is a source of awareness and grace for both the dancer and viewer. (1990, p. 159)

The gift of alignment holds valuable lessons for the leader; alignment connects the head and heart of the educator.

Movement and dance are powerful tools for focusing and directing energy (DeMarinis, 1990). The nature of movement accomplishes this by literally and symbolically bringing mental and physical energies together. In this way, dance can provide leaders with a way to balance the complexities of ministry. Dance provides a sense of center along the vertical axis of the body. Along this axis the core of the body parts is integrated (Hawkins, 1991). This frees the dancer/leader to explore beyond the self, take risks, and return to the center with confidence. As dancers grow more secure in the center, they are able to interact with greater openness and respond with more spontaneity. While the vertical axis grounds the dancer to the earth, exploration of the space above into the heavens releases the spirit. "This inner drive to ascend is symbolic of growth. A requisite for this kind of upward growth is a sense of being well grounded, having a strong foundation, and being surrounded by an environment that is stimulating and challenging" (Hawkins, 1991, p. 104). Grounded, centered leaders, secure in the gifts of the heart, are able to reach out to challenge those around them and stretch a group to grow beyond its limits.

What brings you to the core of the inward journey into the heart of the reality? What maintains the balance between staying close to the center and stretching the organization to a new height, a new challenge? The heart of the leader must be grounded in the realization and security of balance and inner strength to extend the movement along a new plane with others sharing in the



direction of the energy flow. Remaining confined to a narrow circle limits the possibility of new forms and shapes.

The dancer/leader must also explore the horizontal axis. Movement outward from the center along the horizontal axis parallels openness to expression and receptivity to new ideas and experiences. "Being able to respond to receptivity is essential for the taking in from the outer world and giving out in the process of interacting and creating" (Hawkins, 1991, p. 106). Grounded in the core of the heart, the dancer/leader reaches out to invite others into the movement and ministry. Solo movements are powerful moments of beauty touching the heart of the observer, while the interplay in a duet enhances the movements of one another. "Effective leadership is a relationship rooted in community. Successful leaders embody their group's most precious values and beliefs. Their ability to lead emerges from the strength and sustenance of those around them" (Bolman & Deal, 1995, p. 56). Invite others into the dance and celebrate the new life emerging in the rhythms that grow from the interplay of movement from the center to the heaven or from the center to embrace the neighbor.

Dance provides an ideal way to balance the complexities of life. While spiritual balance is required for the dance, the fundamental balance required is between releasing and containing energy (DeMarinis, 1990). Building on the basic rhythms of the dance lexicon, the dancer builds a pattern of movements and rests. The dancer learns about stillness by the timing of the gestures, the coordination of arms and torso, the shapes of the sequence, and the transference of feeling from one to another. "The movement is right when it makes sense both bodily and spiritually; this might occur when hand, heart, and mind pause at the exact same moment" (De Sola, 1990, p. 163). When the heart, body, and mind are aligned, the spirit moves in the grace of God. The dance is prayer and the heart of the leader is healed and new energy emerges for ministry. Dance brings the dancer/leader into contact with what is essential in the heart. The wisdom shared by the fox in *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry, 1943) strongly reminds us where attention needs to be placed. "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye" (p. 73).

Along the journey of the heart dance is the touchstone that returns me to wholeness and restores the energy that I need in the ministry of school leadership. It is the great-grandmother's thread that connects my heart and being to the Divine Creator and Dancer. In order to enter into the power of dance, the alignment of head and heart is essential. Dance from the head center alone lacks the inspiration of the life-giving energy of the heart. It is calculated, precise, passionless, and efficient. The dancer stands alone, removed from the Divine partner. This partner longs to shape and share the movements of vulnerability and expectation that open the heart to healing and growth. Dancing from a heart center aligned with the head allows energy to flow from

the whole person into the lift of the arm and tilt of the head. Moving from the center draws me into a posture of presence that communicates a willingness to be available to the workings of the spirit of love and grace. When I am closed to this invitation, I dance alone or not at all.

Dancing from the heart re-creates the heart of this leader and releases the energy of creation and compassion. It is essential that each leader in Catholic education find a soul connection, a means of returning to the source of inspiration that keeps alive the vision and the message of transformation. I have often danced a line of scripture or a song refrain from a hymn that speaks to my heart. At the present time, I am grounded in my heart as I pray and dance each morning this refrain: "In the morning let me know your love. I give my life into your hands and let me know the way that I should walk with you. I lift my soul to you, I give it to your care" (Deignan, 1986). The heart of this school leader knows the pain of isolation and loss that disconnection from my soul and spirit mean in the daily race. Vision and energy are lost when the heart and head are not aligned; the life of the school community is also diminished. The challenges of leadership are vast, but the gifts available to the leader in touch with the heart of God are beyond measure. If the heart of leadership is in the heart of the leader, dance to free the energy of the heart.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

Those interested in pursuing concrete experience of the power of dance will find some helpful suggestions below.

- Stop for a moment and concentrate on the breath moving in and out of your lungs. Place one hand over your lower abdomen and one over your heart. Allow your breathing to be long and deep. As the energy of this movement travels into your consciousness, image the Spirit of God moving over the depths of your being. Allow yourself to experience the refreshment of new life as it courses through your body, bringing life-giving air to your cells. As the Spirit calls, extend the movement into the space around you, reaching out with the energy of life flowing through your fingers.
- Mark off a circle of space and claim it as your own.
  1. Walk the circle, making smaller and smaller circles until you reach the core of the circle.
  2. Now feel your feet connect to the earth; feel the pull of gravity into the earth.
  3. Let the pull take you toward the earth but not so much that you fall. Now recover upward to the standing position.
  4. Continue exploring the pull of gravity and recovery.

5. Now shift the sensation so that you feel the energy coming up from the earth through your body. Feel the energy rising and taking you upward toward the heavens. Explore this upward pull.
  6. Now explore the pull downward toward the earth and then upward toward the heavens.
  7. Let this move in any way but keep the concentration on the pull between the downward and the upward; give it freedom to move on its own. (Hawkins, 1991, p. 105)
- In the quiet and privacy of your room, find a comfortable space where you can lie perfectly straight; allow the head to shift and find the center of your body over the spine. Let your hands extend up over your head and reach out beyond your regular length. Point your toes and stretch them and elongate yourself to a new length. Stay with this stretch of your body and invite the Spirit of God to aid you as you explore new limits. Breathe very deeply from the diaphragm; allow your abdomen to rise with each inhalation and fall with each exhalation. Slowly move your outstretched hands over the length of your body beginning with your head and face, drawing into yourself the energy of newly explored boundaries. Move down to your heart; again pause to allow the energy to warm your heart with new life. As you move down the torso, come to a sitting position and continue to draw the spirit of exploration into your whole being. Bring the insight into your feet, as they will carry you on your journey to new horizons. Remain quiet for a few moments and remember the feelings of energy or resistance that you encountered. Reflecting on the movement of exploring new limits, what part of the exercise brought you energy? Was there a time when you experienced resistance? Take time to explore these movements again.
  - The following movements can be danced across the floor or prayed seated in a chair. Sweeping the arms in front and over the head as a rising sun [In the morning], they are brought down over the heart in a pulsing motion [let me know your love]. The hands are then extended outward in a gesture of open giving [I give my life into your hands]. For a floor dance, the body is rotated outward and the right leg is extended to the side and flexed to extend the movement to a new dimension. Gracefully walk across the floor or allow one hand to lead the other one in a forward motion [and let me know the way I should walk with you]. Reaching from the lower portion of the body, purposefully lift the arms in a wide upward sweep and open them out in a gesture of acceptance and trust [I lift my soul to you, I give it to your care]. This relatively short sequence of phrases may be repeated slowly a number of times, each time allowing the movements to carry the heart deeper into the source of the dance, seeking the strength needed for the day. At moments of difficulty during the day, reflect on the movement or, if privacy allows, seated at your desk slowly move through the phrases and reground your spirit for the challenges that confront you.

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