

From the Classroom to the Cathedral: Designing Intentional Ways to Access Meaningful or “Soul-full” Content in a Dance Composition Course

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It is the last week of the course Modern Dance I. This week is “project week” when students perform for one another solo dances which they have composed. Although the course is predominantly a technique course to develop movement skill, one aspect of the course involves the student’s own creative process. Alma Hawkins states in Creating Through Dance, “The individual who sets out to study dance should experience it from beginning to end as a creative activity” (8). She says that as the student becomes aware of dance as a creative process, he will be able to “state himself with increasing confidence and clarity” (8). Although Modern Dance I is not a formal dance composition course, it addresses the creative process in an initiatory way, giving students the opportunity to personally express something which is meaningful for them through the nonverbal medium of dance. During the last week of class, then, students show their solo works—the culmination of the creative/compositional aspect of the class.

It is the Fall Semester, 1999. A young man in the class, J.T., begins his piece with no verbal explanation (contrary to the precedence set by his classmates); instead, he prepares by wrapping himself in a rope. The dance begins with J.T. wrapped in the rope from his chest to his feet and lying face up on the floor. The movement is painful to watch, as he struggles to free himself of the rope. He continues his struggle, as one part of his body at a time achieves freedom from the restraint. Ultimately, the tense, pressing style of the movement evolves into a lighter feeling; the young man rises from the floor

as the rope slides down to his feet. He steps out of the rope, opens his arms wide, palms facing up, and with his head slightly back, looks upward. The dance ends here.

The young man's classmates are taken aback. They did not expect to be moved in such a way—to feel his struggle and pain and to experience his brief release. It was a private moment that we had witnessed; it was both shocking and beautiful, and it was evident that the dance's meaning—its expression—was beyond what the man's verbal explanations could have told us. Before he left the performance space, he told us that the dance was based on an experience he had had three years prior when he was in a “bondage of grief,” as he described it. His sister had died in a house fire, while sleeping overnight at a friend's house. His mom woke him in the middle of the night to tell him.

Our experience of the dance gave us a window into J.T.'s grief, in that he spent a comparatively long period in struggle and a relatively brief period in “relief.” His process of grief had not been an easy process—the rope symbolized the strength and unforgiving aspect of the pain, and his resolution—open arms with focus lifted—was simple and unadorned, a testimony to the realization that he had suffered loss, but had found some hope. It's fitting that the dance ends here, with no exaggerated actions reflecting joy.

To experience the dance was to experience the struggle of this person's life and to feel the struggle in our own bodies, relating beyond words. In that moment, we as a community of learners were not in a traditional classroom anymore. We had participated in an experience that I would call a cathedral experience. We had been a part of a dance which moved us, a dance which was the deep expression from someone's soul. It was a “soul full” dance.

But if truth be told, J.T.'s process of making this brilliant dance was a bit of a fluke. Throughout the last few weeks of the course, I had required students to bring to class prepared movement phrases that they had developed as homework. As a class, we watched these "seed" movement phrases and gave feedback. J.T. had been reluctant to bring his seed movement phrase to class. At one point I asked him about this, needing to have some indication from him that he was working on the dance. He relayed that he did not have anything to show yet, but that he was going to use a rope as a prop. (Earlier in the semester, we had experimented with ropes and ribbons as examples of props that dancers could use to extend the body's movement possibilities.) I asked him if he had worked with the rope yet. He answered, "No." I asked him when he was going to start working with the rope, and he said that he would probably get the rope from his mother and begin working soon.

And, then...he danced one of the most beautiful and well designed dances of the class! We responded to J.T.'s dance as an individual's completed assignment (the classroom) and as a story with universal meaning (the cathedral). Through his soul full dance, we found out something about him and we also learned something about grief, in his use of the provocative metaphor, "bondage of grief," which he made real to us through the use of the symbolic rope.

In his book Dance and the Specific Image: Improvisation, Daniel Nagrin discusses both the use of metaphor and the concept of an "alive" dance. He states:

A dance becomes alive when we are "hooked," caught up, drawn in, forget the bad seating and join the dancers in their dance. We are not experiencing merely their motion any more than a true performer merely

experiences that act of moving about. So what is ‘ineffable’? It is something more than a leg raised, more than a motion. ‘More’ is another name for poetry; the bones of poetry are metaphors, and metaphors represent something other than themselves. (98)

I relate to Nagrin’s idea of an “alive” dance as a dance which has meaningful or soul-full content. The term “soul full” comes from my work with dancer/choreographer Nancy Mellan, as together we investigated common dance ground for Christian and Jewish faith traditions. Nancy reasoned that one form of soul full expression had to do with the embodiment of a story—one’s own or that of another (archetypes, Bible)—in order to gain understanding and acceptance of each other. Additionally, I use the term to describe the dance that touches me deeply--that which speaks to my soul in a new, often surprising way. It is the dance which makes metaphor from literal material. Nagrin’s description of the metaphor as being the “more” of a dance is that connection to meaning beyond a literal representation. Nagrin states:

Getting caught in the literal and the linear was and is the Achilles heel of how we work. The answer? We never fled the literal but tried never to get stuck in it. We learned to bend it, stretch it, squeeze it, quicken it, transmute it to another part of the body, alter the ‘who’; we learned to make the literal a springboard to the metaphor. In so doing we were making motion poems, which could easily be another name for dancing. (96)

Looking once again at the Modern Dance I composition, J.T.’s final project was an experience in sharing something meaningful in a coherent form that we call a dance.

His attention to the elements of dance and the structuring of those elements brought the metaphor in his work to life. Yet, how did he do it? He had studied dance for only one semester. He was not trained in formal choreographic structures. He was in a class of dancers who had much more experience than he, but who had not produced such a gripping product. In a real sense, the dance was an example of grace, freely given. The enigmatic aspect of this grace struck me as in the cathedral, where we go, not knowing how it will happen, but trusting that the Spirit will be there to move us. J.T.'s dance, with all of its mysterious beauty, was a poignant piece of art.

This one dance brought to the surface a particular and persistent challenge that I have faced in the last 13 years of teaching dance on the college level: how to enable all of the students to make beautiful art, or at the very least, how to design experiences for the student choreographers who want to reflect their deepest feelings and thoughts. There are many dances that I have experienced both, as a professor and as an audience member, that have not worked on an aesthetic level, and I have questioned the reason for this. As a Christian artist/educator, I can fall into the trap of thinking that a dance which reflects a spiritual theme is a “good” dance, or at least a good reason to make a dance; however, this logic just isn't right when the dance is not “working” aesthetically. As Madeleine L'Engle reflects in Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art, “Art is art, painting is painting; music is music; a story is a story. If it's bad art, it's bad religion, no matter how pious the subject” (13). When the art is “bad,” we all sense it—the students and myself. But what could we do about?

First, I have noticed that literalism, among other things, tends to work against the production of meaningful, or what I would call “soul inspiring” art. If J.T. had “acted

out” or pantomimed his story, if he had dramatized how his mother had awakened him and how his sister had died, we would have experienced the dance as a superficial skit rather than as a kinesthetic portrayal of an experiential process. Instead, he concentrated on the quality of his experience, the very center of what the experience was “about” for him. He had loved his sister and he had lost her, resulting in unspeakable grief. He danced the essential quality of this experience, the frightening bondage that such grief brought him. So many of my dance students begin with the literal interpretation—the miming of an experience. It is their inexperience with modern dance choreography that causes them to begin with the familiar, literal concept. They want to dance a deeply felt emotion or religious conviction, and they believe that the portrayal of their theme must be made very clear to an audience. This clarity, though, often turns into spoon feeding an audience who would rather be challenged to seek their own meaning as they relate the dance to their own experience. In a literal telling, emotions take on a pantomimic or cartoon quality, losing both their potency and poignancy.

Another problem for the choreographer is the reliance on typical symbols which have lost their power and become too familiar cliches. For example, students asked to dance the concept of prayer often clasp their hands together in the “prayer gesture.” So much about prayer is beyond such a symbol, albeit a powerful symbol. Daniel Nagrin states: “A handshake, an embrace, a thrust fist are all literal gestures which have been used in dance time and again with powerful effect, but only when they are spare islands in a sea of evocative signs and metaphors. At other times, they are banal, sentimental, trite and, worst of all, lacking in poetic vision” (98). Expression through dance, as through other arts, is an opportunity to go beyond the traditional symbols, to break from

the usual, often trite response and to discover something new—to cause the audience to think of prayer or to understand prayer differently or maybe even to help the audience to identify something about prayer that they have always, inherently “known.” Dance, with “poetic vision” can be an avenue for this type of knowledge. Madeleine L’Engle states that “it is impossible for an artist to attempt a graphic reproduction of Jesus in any way that is meant to be literal” (30). She sympathizes with the Hassidic teaching that is wrong to try in any way to make pictures of God, yet she states that the Orthodox painter of icons, though representing Jesus in one particular way is actually pointing us to a representation of some quality of Jesus. Therefore, as she relays it, icons become “an open window through which we can be given a glimpse of the love of God” (30). Like an elusive icon (except perhaps as captured on video tape), dance, to be particularly meaningful, must reflect the quality of our story or experience, not the actual/literal story itself.

In Dance: Rituals of Experience, Jamake Highwater discusses this qualitative aspect of dance: “Every emotional state expresses itself in movements that are not necessarily utilitarian or representational, but that nevertheless reflect the specific quality of the experience that causes them” (24). He goes on to say that the term “emotional state” is less accurate than the word “sentience” (“the mergence of thought and feeling”) since he speaks about something beyond rampant emotion (24). The students desire to produce art that is beyond rampant emotion. Their impulse is the same as that of the most accomplished artist: to produce works which are a reflection of their most profound feelings and beliefs, beyond trivial artistic forms. The problem was how to bring them to this type of artistic expression. My question, then, was: “If dancing the quality of an

experience brings meaningful identification, then how do we access such a quality when we want to portray or speak about a particular experience or theme?

As the teacher/choreographer, I began a process of identifying ways to access quality in the composition of dance works. In order to answer the above question, I developed procedures or “recipes” which enable one to strip away the problematic literal aspect of a story/experience/theme/familiar text. Like recipes used in a kitchen, I am intentional about what goes into the dish, but I am not always sure how the it will come out. I trust and hope and have faith, but in a way, the outcome is mysterious. The movement recipes allow us to work on the process of making art in the classroom to eventually end up with beautiful, essential dances, fit for the cathedral. This is because the process of the recipes enables us intentionally to glean essential qualities of a literal idea, to make metaphor connected to a core meaning.

Furthermore, once students have been able to access metaphor in dance phrases designed in class, they are then able to pursue the making of a full-length dance. In this process they will attend to both content and choreographic form, manipulating the dance elements of time, space, and energy to achieve a creative work which reflects artistic unity. In Creating Through Dance, Alma Hawkins discusses this unity as “an inner play of the space/time/force elements of a dance which create a totality or Gestalt experience” (60). Hawkins relates that “these virtual forces within the Gestalt cause the perceiver to empathize with the dancer. The unified structure becomes apparent and meaningful to the perceiver through inner mimicry and experiencing of these forces” (60).

This meaningful identification with the perceiver (or the audience) is what the student choreographer, or any choreographer for that matter, is eager to achieve in the

composition of a dance work. We want art to speak. We want it to be worth something; we want it to be “good.” So the “recipes” have been a method by which I have offered students a way to get to the inner quality of their choreographic ideas and reflect that quality in their dance works. The recipes evolved out of commonly used ideas for choreography in the realm of sacred dance choreography or “soul-full” dances. Although these recipes were specifically designed for the makers of dances with a connection to religious content, they could be used in any context where stories, themes, text, are the subject of dance works.

Recipe One

Topic: Scripture Verse/Visual Art

Procedure: Students are asked to bring to class a line of poetry or a scripture verse which inspires them to make a dance. In class, they are presented with late nineteenth century and early twentieth century visual art examples, which represent a mixture of specifically religious and non-religious content. (See Figures 1 through 6) The students are asked to choose the visual art representations which would interact well with their chosen text, either comparatively or in contrast. The ingredients of the dance, then, are somewhat determined by chance, since the students are presented with the visual art choices once they arrive at the class with their chosen text in hand.

This chance merging of elements comes from a post-modern practice in modern dance first introduced by Merce Cunningham in the 1950’s. In his work with composer John Cage, Cunningham wanted to allow the art to evolve in the performance moment, actually watching it unfold for the very first time, along with the audience. The concept

has intrigued me because I have found over and over again that when we (the choreographers) get out of the way of the artistic process, and in essence, allow the spirit to work, we will be given an answer. It is trusting the unknown. It is realizing that we have tendencies and biases in our artistic process that we can eliminate if we let go and listen. And although Cunningham most probably did not approach this concept from a theological prospective, it works for the choreographer of religious themes because we know that we are not really in charge of the dance, or of anything, for that matter. The formula for making dance movement is then presented to the students:

Design a dance phrase which is a response to your line of poetry or scripture verse. Include in the phrase:

1. one shape from the visual art representation
2. one color from the visual art representation (make a dance movement for the color)
3. one person/thing from the poetry or scripture
4. one word you are to speak during the performance of the dance phrase.

Arrange the movement in any order. Add connective movement phrases when necessary.

Results: The end products were engaging because students sought to make connections between the two genres (text and visual art) and also discovered what came up in the process. Overall, the performance of the dance phrase was intriguing, because in each case, a connection was made. This connection was rooted in the particular essences of the motivational elements (shape, color, person/thing, word) rather than in full, literally danced “explanations” of the found connections. In one case, a student chose Kupka’s

“Disks of Newton” (See Figure 1) to connect to her scripture from the second chapter of Acts regarding the Pentecost. At first she relayed that she chose the Kupka painting because of the red color in the middle (a commonly associated color for the fire of the Holy spirit); however, as she connected the painting to the core meaning of the Pentecost, she also related to the shapes of the painting, which reminded her of the swirling, circular (eternal) aspects of the Pentecost.

To reiterate my earlier hypothesis, the movement created by the student got to the core quality of meaning so much better than if she had “acted out the disciples being taken over by the Holy Spirit.” We know what that “looks” like, since we have the biblical story which relates it to us. Dance is a way to find out something that we didn’t know or didn’t think about when we read the story.

Recipe Two

Topic: Dancing a person/character

Procedure: Students are asked to design a dance phrase based on an historical person or biblical figure. This assignment is an example of embodying a character in order to connect to their story as it relates to our own. Here, I return to Nancy Mellan as a choreographer who would encourage such an activity as a way for students to experience “the connectedness of the family of humankind where differences and commonalities can be celebrated. Additionally, it is a way for all of us to “attain deeper understanding and acceptance of each other” “Dance as Integrated with Children’s Literature,” Dance Unit). The assignment also has within it my early experience of writing a poem, based

on grammatical components as minimal springboards for meaning. The components, though simple, were a specific way into the creative process. The formula is as follows:

Create movement which reflects each of the following items as they relate to your chosen person:

1. noun (s)
2. verb (s)
3. descriptor (s)
4. one aspect of the narrative (e.g., phrase or sentence from the story)
5. one theme from the person's story

Arrange the movement in any order. Add connective movement phrases when necessary.

Results: This assignment caused the students to move away from dancing a literal representation of the chosen person's story and move toward a dance which got to the heart of who the person is/was. One example from class was a dance of Joseph, husband of Mary of Nazareth. Nouns listed for Joseph were: father, servant, husband, carpenter, traveler, worker. Verbs included: dreaming, journeying, protecting, believing, trusting, praying, obeying. Descriptors included: faithful, just, meek, young, Jewish, loving, honorable. One aspect of Joseph's narrative was that "there was not room in the inn." One theme in Joseph's story was that there is blessing when one listens and follows. Again, the movement phrases reflected the essence of the person or the character and not a pantomimic representation, allowing for a different kind of knowing. Also, dancing an aspect of another person's story in our own bodies taught us something new about

ourselves and our connection to them; we identified kinesthetically with what they experienced. It brought us closer to the essence of the person.

Recipe Three

Topic: Dancing the Opposites

Procedure: I always have been intrigued with the polarities of the life of faith: the paradox of the Resurrection, God's choosing of unlikely persons to do tasks of great importance, the existence of joy amidst pain, a beginning nestled into an ending. Modern dancer, Isadora Duncan, considered the Mother of Modern Dance, reflected on the polarity of life as she related her reaction to the accidental deaths of her two children. In

My Life she said:

Looking back, it is difficult for me to understand my strange state of mind. Was it that I was really in a state of clairvoyance, and that I knew that death does not exist—that those two little cold images of wax were not my children, but merely their cast-off garments? That the souls of my children lived on in radiance, but always lived? Only twice comes that cry of the mother which one hears as without one's self—at Birth and at Death—for when I felt in mine those little cold hands that would never again press mine in return I heard my cries—the same cries as I had heard at their births. Why the same—since one is the cry of supreme joy and the other of Sorrow? I do not know why but I know they are the same. Is it that in all the Universe there is but one Great Cry containing Sorrow, Joy, Ecstasy, Agony, the Mother Cry of Creation? (7-8)

Duncan's words cause me to imagine Mary's experience of losing Jesus. The pain of His and her suffering and the promise of redemptive compassion exist in the same experience. In Walk With Jesus: Stations of the Cross, Henri Nouwen, twentieth century theologian speaks of this dichotomy as follows:

My true call is to look the suffering Jesus in the eyes and not be crushed by his pain, but to receive it in my heart and let it bear the fruit of compassion. I know that the longer I live, the more suffering I will see and that the more suffering I see, the more sorrow I will be asked to live. But it is this deep human sorrow that unites my wounded heart with the heart of humanity. It is in this mystery of union in suffering that hope is hidden. (29)

“Dancing the Opposites” is a way to come to grips with how opposing ideas actually merge together and exist in the same reality. The formula for this recipe is as follows:

With another person design a dance phrase for two people which involves two opposing characteristics in the world (birth/death; joy/sorrow) or two opposing characters/biblical figures (Martha/Mary; David/Goliath; Theseus/Minotaur). Each dancer should depict one of the opposing sides of the pair. The dance phrase should include:

1. a call and a response movement section between the two dancers
2. two simultaneously danced movement phrases
3. a unison phrase which points to a resolution of the opposites chosen, or to some common ground

The dance can be crafted in any order, but it works well to end with the reconciliatory phrase.

Results: The difficult aspect of this exercise was step 3, finding the common ground, but it was an exciting problem to solve, often with surprising results. At first, some students were reluctant to craft the unison phrase, stating that there could never be a resolution or common ground, but when pressed to find this common ground through movement, an answer was found most of the time. The message was clear—there is a common place where opposing forces or polarities exist. The movement enabled the students to find it. One group chose the story of Martha and Mary as they prepared to have Jesus as their guest. As the story goes, Martha works hard to prepare the meal, while Mary sits and listens to Jesus' words. The students found commonality in that both portrayed in their movement phrase (walking hand in hand) the desire of the biblical women to be present for the prophet in their home, though they went about it in completely different ways. In this bodily rendition, the dancers were able to find the common ground, though so often in the retelling of this story, one of the women (Martha) is blamed for her inattention to Jesus.

Recipe Four

Topic: The essentials of text

Procedure: Students are asked to bring to class a familiar text which has been used often in their church services or other religious rituals. It could be a text which, with overuse, has ceased to speak to them, or a text that has rich meaning for them, perhaps because of its familiarity or how the individual has personalized it. After reading the texts, students

are asked to choose what they determine to be two or three essential words from the text and to improvise through movement on those two or three words, saying only those aloud as they dance. Students then are asked to craft a dance phrase which has come from the improvisational work, eliminating the spoken words. After settling on the dance phrase, students are then given the option to hear the original familiar text read in its entirety while they dance.

Results: These movement phrases, based on the essential components of a familiar text, were reflective of the inherent qualitative meaning at the core of the text, as opposed to a literal representation of the text. One example used was the depiction of two words which originated from the Doxology (praise to God):

Praise God from whom all blessings flow,

Praise Him, all creatures here below,

Praise Him, above, ye heavenly host,

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Two students chose the words “praise” and “God,” the obvious choices, but these words seemed only to lend themselves to a literal representation, since so much of religious dance focuses on movement of the upper torso with arms raised over the head, meaning literally, “to Praise God.” And then, there was the problem of dancing “God.” Another group of students chose the words “creatures” and “flow.” In these two words, both the energy of God and God’s connection to humanity were evident. These students crouched low to the earth (creatures) and smoothly wove in and out of each other’s movement pathways in an intricate pattern (flow). Is this not the core of the doxology, that which causes the human being to desire to praise God? The dance which depicted these two

words had the capacity to get to the heart of the doxology more than a dance which would have literally depicted each word, or the dominant “Praise God” phrase.

The recipes help students to access meaning in their work. They work because they provide entry points to the students which are both abstract and concrete. For instance, the problem of dancing a color is exploration through play; however, the verbs are deliberate human actions, easily translated to a dance movement format. Likewise, dancing an aspect of someone’s story is a specific example of embodiment, whereas finding movement for a dualistic concept calls on the need to abstract a theme. The use of text works on both levels since the entry points to movement can and should begin with the literal and end in the metaphoric expression. When the above recipes are employed and dance phrases are composed (as well as full-length dances which attend to time, space and energy in a unified whole), what I notice about the movement is that it reflects the qualitative nuance that is so important in a work of art—that which moves it beyond the literal and presents its audience with a theme reflective of a core meaning. The dances also reflect struggle and questioning when necessary, eliminating the idea that all religious dances must look pleasant or have praise as their focus. Much of my discontent in witnessing choreographic studies has been with sugar-coated religious dances that don’t seem to get to the heart of what the life of faith is all about. L’Engle discusses this idea in the following way:

Some of those soppy pictures of Jesus, looking like a tubercular, fair-haired, blue-eyed boy, are far more secular than a Picasso mother and child. The Lord Jesus who rules my life is not a sentimental, self-pitying weakling. He was a Jew, a carpenter, and strong. He took into his own

heart, for our sakes, that pain which brings ‘wisdom through the awful grace of God.’ (30)

The recipes have helped students to get to the core of what they are trying to portray, which is often the real-life struggle to believe, and accept the mystery of God—to be open to the glory as it comes and to be ready for the surprises found in God’s graceful gifts.

The recipes are also a way of enabling us to work at the skill of art making, beyond emotive literacy. The recipes provide a structure, a way of working that brings us through a detailed process to an ultimate product, one that changes us in some way and helps us to grow as artists and people. In Passion for Creation, Matthew Fox, in his commentary on Meister Eckhart’s writings states that “art is not mere inspiration. It takes an act of the will and a willingness to discipline oneself” (103). Fox speaks of Mary as the first folk artist—“the first one to birth God from within and not merely from without or above. Mary had the imagination, the courage, and the discipline to make the most sublime the innermost. To bring God in and to birth God outwardly” (102-103). L’Engle reiterates the idea by stating that “the artist is a servant who is willing to be a birth-giver. In a very real sense, the artist should be like Mary, who, when the angel told her that she was to bear the Messiah, was obedient to the command” (17).

It is fitting that J.T., the young man in my Modern I class, served as impetus for my work of envisioning and then making practical a choreographic process. His trusting the process of making a dance helped me to realize that the gift is for all. It also is fitting that Mary serves as a model for the artist dancer—there is no cathedral that does not reflect her creative energy—Mary’s act of surrender, her sense of mystery and the fruit of

her labor—the Christ. For the dancer who wishes to reflect religious themes, the concepts of surrender, mystery, and labor are at the heart of the work. The dance classroom, where so much of the work takes place, ceases to be a mere classroom when connected to the often puzzling and mysterious process of getting to the core of qualitative meaning in the making of art. Then the classroom becomes the cathedral.

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