

## Only the Dance

Laurie Klein

Several years ago I took a sacred dance class that changed my life. I “got down”. Talk about freedom!

Immediately afterward I broke my toe.

As the weeks passed, rather than ebbing, the initial pain squared itself. My left shoe was a vise; the bed sheet alone weighed twenty pounds. I forgot those dance steps. Two of my toes turned bluish-black. Although icy to the touch, they felt like they’d been doused with kerosene, set ablaze, then plugged into a 220-volt outlet. I couldn’t use the foot, and foreboding (fear’s second cousin once-removed) whispered of tumors, MS, paralysis.

“No,” I staunchly said. God was allowing this pain for my growth. I pictured myself thin and beatifically pale, God’s poster-girl for longsuffering, oozing character as my inspired visitors waited with me for Oprah’s call.

It took several doctors several months to diagnose RSD. By then, I’d lost the sense of where my foot was in space and sprained my ankle. I disassociated, began calling it The Foot, as if it had mutinied. It spastically jerked away from contact with anything: a sock, a towel, a touch. My limp, akin to Chester’s on Gunsmoke, progressed to the death-lurch of Quasimodo.

If you followed dancer/singer Paula Abdul’s struggle with the same condition, you know that, neurologically, RSD impairs the body’s ability to transmit and receive messages within muscles and tendons. The body believes it’s wounded even after the triggering injury, usually a broken bone, has healed. Not unlike bitterness or unbelief, it can spread, affecting other parts of the body which, in extreme cases, atrophy. With RSD, miscommunication is involuntary. For the believer who steels his or her heart against hope (a common response to pain, grief, or disappointment), the result is similar: the still small voice that directs our days is gagged and, eventually, silenced.

Meanwhile, I was ordered to use my foot (it ground like eggshells under my weight) because otherwise, I’d lose it. Recovery evolved slowly, thanks to grace, grit, and some really good drugs. Over those two years I learned to offset pain by being stubbornly grateful. Forget Pollyanna piety. Gut-level gratitude counts blessings without denying realities; it does the math but imagines solutions. It dismantles my “Yes, Lord, but...” fretting and fosters instead my “Yes, Lord, and...” response. It stays willing and soft and open to God, in spite of circumstances. Because it springs from love, thankfulness overrules fear. And this leads to wonder, which, once it has filled me up, overflows into worship. It helps me make my way to the Maker who reassures me I’m loved, whether I’m strong or weak. I have sometimes believed this whole hours at a time.

Like worship, gratitude is a present-tense practice. God is the great I AM, not I Was or I Might Be. When engaged in saying thank you to a sovereign God unaltered by time, I disengage from regret as well as foreboding. Gratitude makes the most of the moment; makes peace with the past; makes prayerful plans for tomorrow.

This is not to say I live there. Angst surfaces; hissy-fits happen. To counteract my alter-Eeyore I keep a gratitude book where I scribble my appreciation for small things each day. Well, most days.

After seven pain-free years my RSD recently reappeared in the same foot. You’d think I’d know by now to amp up the gratitude, but I thrashed through old feelings of anger and fear. There is an 8th century dance that Christians once did through cathedral labyrinths: the Tripudium. Three steps forward, one step back, it symbolizes human progress and frailty. Once again, no matter how I feel – scared, inadequate, irritable – worship is both a choice and an action.

EXPERIENCE WORSHIP

"Look de-e-e-p in my eyes," my father used to say. I'd balance two bare feet on his shiny, brown wingtips. The room blurred as we spun. Our hearts were pounding. I couldn't move on my own, but his singular gaze steadied me. Violins did not sob in the background, nor did clouds of bubbles ascend. But the light, remembered now, seems golden. As the poet, T. S. Eliot, said, "Except for . . . the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance."

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