

Extravagant delight

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Perhaps there is a connection we shouldn't miss between David's dancing with all his might--uninhibited, unclad, unaware of disapproval--and the generosity with which he blesses and distributes food to all the people. Both are extravagant gestures that turn love into action, withholding nothing.

I believed what I was taught as a young person about the wisdom of "taking no thought for the morrow." But I took rather a lot of thought for other things. Prudence, propriety, and reserve ranked high among virtues I counted as marks of godliness, mandated by scripture and ratified by Jesus. I would never have been caught in a wild liturgical dance. My generosity was laced with a certain nervous anxiety about the budget. Extravagance was not generally encouraged in the circles I inhabited, though generosity was; sometimes it was hard to distinguish between the two, so I erred on the side of withholding something.

Though I loved the David stories as a child, it wasn't until I was an adult that I reread the story of his dancing before the Ark of the Covenant and suddenly felt something like the longing of a child looking through a fence at a party. I wanted to experience the lavish joy and self-abandonment the scene suggested. I also wanted to love God in a way that would lift me out of myself. I wanted ecstasy. I wanted, like the saints and mystics, to be *in* love with God--*in* an altered state, *in* a holy place, *in* the center of the labyrinth, encountering God whose "center is everywhere and whose periphery is nowhere."

This desire set me on a path I have certainly strayed from, but which has led me into back roads of scripture and spiritual autobiography, into liturgical practices beyond the pale of my evangelical upbringing, into chant and litany and silent retreats. And into libraries with delicious rows of books whose inviting titles made me feel as though I was "at play in the fields of the Lord."

I was well warned against seeking religious experience for its own sake: when the "who" questions diminish to a "what," the seeking leads into a dark wood. Abstractions and "isms" are one danger; exalted sensations sought for their own sake are another. But those who seek God with their whole hearts teach us that as long as the Beloved One is sought, there is joy in the seeking.

Years ago, after a spiritually dry period of many months, as I was running in place in the early morning and listening to Fleetwood Mac, I received a gift that impelled me back into that life of seeking, finding, loving, wondering, and seeking more--that life I believe each of us is called to. Rising from touching my toes, the words, "Read the Gospel of John" came to me as clearly as if I had physically heard them. The sharp, strong imperative, wherever it came from, startled me enough to make me stop, turn off the music (in the middle of one of my favorite songs!), and pull the Bible off a shelf where it had languished for some time.

I stood there and read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." A pastor once explained that the whole focus of John's Gospel is the question, "Who is this man?" And the answer, which occurs repeatedly in that Gospel, echoing the God of the burning bush, is "*Ego emi*." It is I. YHWH. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. Hebrew, Greek, English, Latin can only approximate the name of the one whose robe is the light, whose canopy is space--who came naked into this world, made this journey for us, and makes it with us.

As I read the familiar words, I was, as Lewis beautifully puts it, "surprised by joy." To reclaim my faith didn't have to mean resolving theological arguments, anguishing over doctrinal differences, figuring out what happens to Hindus or Buddhists, answering my agnostic friends to their satisfaction, or even committing myself to a devotional practice that would keep me on the straight path. Then, and later, I was moved to a simple, powerful prayer: "Yes." Yes, I'm here. Yes, you're here. Yes, for now, and then again, for now.

It was like spinning in place. I found myself in the presence of the Holy One, as David finds himself before the Ark of the Covenant that day, seized by a knowing that

surges through the body, opens the heart, and focuses the mind: knowing the Beloved, transcendent and utterly immanent. Knowing, as Augustine puts it, that "the end of all things is delight."