

“I Was There!” A Story of Being The Body
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A Story

There are few moments in worship that have been held in the long-term memory of so many people as the one I will tell you about. In the seven years since this moment, I have met people all over the nation who have said to me, “I was there!” And then they go on to say how much that moment shaped their understanding of what it meant to truly be in community with those labeled “disabled.”

In May of 2000 at the General Conference of United Methodists, an international gathering, I designed and led a worship service for the Commission on the Status and Role of Women. This organization not only advocates for women, but is also devoted to justice for anyone who has felt the sting of oppression. In earlier months at the on-site planning meeting for this event, it was discovered that the space at the convention center assigned to us for this worship service was completely and totally inaccessible to anyone who was not able to climb stairs. This catapulted the leaders of this group to decide that, not only would they demand an accessible space, the Spirit was moving them to plan the service in such a way that it would speak a word about accessibility in the church.

I set about the task of planning the worship. I drew on some wonderful resources from a book called *That All May Worship*¹ and went about choreographing a dance for myself and Pat, a woman who uses an electric wheelchair. I also wrote a script for what would become the Proclamation of the Word—simply a structure in which various “Voices That Challenge” would bring their testimony of the difficulties they face in the church because of their diverse abilities, perspectives and identities. I knew that the

structure and content of the planned service would provide an opportunity for a powerful message. But I didn't count on what actually happened.

Arriving at the alternative "accessible" space they assigned to us (a theater layout with a stage), I discovered that the floor seating was separated from the raised stage area by an orchestra pit. The only passage between them was a narrow suspended stairway without rails that even I (a trained dancer) was nervous to walk across. And the accessible pathway to the stage for our leaders who would be utilizing their wheelchairs was to come in from a loading dock door located down the outside street, through a deserted hallway, through a supply room and into the backstage area. It took a good 10 minutes to go from the congregation's seating to the stage.

My plan had been to move the altar/table slowly and incrementally from the very back of the stage area to the floor area during the Proclamation of the Word as each person gave their testimony that began with, "Why are you so far away? You are hidden behind steps and distance, fear and rigidity, illusions of normalcy..." and ended with the words, "...we are differently abled—be moved! For we *are* at the Table in the realm of God!" Then the congregation would move to the theatre foyer where we could all gather around the same table for Holy Communion. But I realized this could not happen with any fluidity given the structure of the space. I came up with a solution—I thought.

During the service, Pat and I danced. We began by shouting the word "name" at each other in a name-calling tone of voice that eventually transformed when she said to me, "Know my name!" Then the music began softly and we glided, spun, zoomed, and meandered together to the 139th Psalm—"truly you have formed my inmost being... I give you thanks that I am awesomely, wonderfully made. Wonderful are all your works." At

times she aided me in the dance as she picked me up and swung me around in graceful and smooth arcs on her wheelchair—movements not available to me in my bi-ped mode. It was breathtaking for Pat and me as well as for those who witnessed it. Later in the service, in the midst of the testimonies of the Proclamation of the Word, we learned that after having already been through one week of the General Conference, interpretation for deaf persons and for some non-English speaking persons had still not been adequately cared for. The need for the attention of the general church to issues of accessibility came home to us in personal and profound ways.

And then it was time for our journey to the foyer so that the congregation could gather around the Table of Jesus together. I explained to the congregation of 500 or so persons that we would wait for Pat and the other leaders who travel by wheelchair to make the journey through the backstage area, the supply closet, the deserted hallway and the loading dock door, down the street and back in through the theater foyer doors. I warned them that this would take a while. And I explained that we would wait in silence as a way of praying that the church would truly become accessible, until they could join us and lead the procession to the table. This, I thought, would be the appropriate liturgical action in this moment. But the congregation thought otherwise. Without a word, without hesitation, without someone being an obvious instigator of the action, a whole congregation of 500 simply rose to their feet together and proceeded to take the long journey with them! Scared or not of the narrow passageway over the orchestra pit to the stage, they helped each other and crossed the abyss to find common ground, to proclaim the message that had become clear as they truly became the liturgy—that we're

all on this journey together. And it is this spontaneous moment that still, years later, prompts the often teary-eyed comment, “I was there!”

We Are Bodies

This experience, and others, has taught me important lessons. The first is a realization that some of what might make us uncomfortable when we experience diverse abilities in our communities of worship is that we are faced with the fact that we *are* bodies in worship. Most of us still contain remnants (or large chunks) of Enlightenment attitudes that brought rational thinking into view as the preeminent way of knowing and portrayed emotions as suspect. Many dominant Western Christian traditions became characterized by a verticality in bodily behavior and posture—a “reaching toward heaven” that would eventually lead them to reject the bodies and bodily expression of peoples who didn’t fit the mold. Christian theology itself, in some instances, was to become associated with liturgical “uprightness” and the vocabulary of ritual action narrowed, holding gyrations and ecstatic manifestations at bay along with the emotions that accompanied them.²

With this backdrop, we might speculate on how these underlying remnants might be working on our attitudes about so-called “out-of-the-ordinary” bodiliness and expression that comes with diverse physical and cognitive abilities. Diverse expressions and dynamics that come about as a result of worshipping with those labeled disabled focuses us on the fact that any of our bodies cannot, in fact, be “checked at the door” of the sanctuary. Drawing our attention to our physicality as part and parcel of what constitutes worship can help us grasp the fact that we are all more different from each

other than what immediately “meets the eye.” Each of us is created with various physiological rhythms that affect our modes of participation, our resonance with worship forms and, perhaps most especially, what we consider holy.³ As our diverse bodies inhabit our liturgies, our incarnational faith is enriched and deepened. The more we embrace the vast array of bodies and bodily expression and their inherent goodness and wisdom, the more we learn together as a community the range of God’s love, presence and action in the world.

We are A Body

As we become more aware of our physical presence to one another in worship, we become more aware that we are not just individuals who happen to be in the same room—we are a Body of worshipers. This concept is, of course, theological in the way we think of the church as the Body of Christ. But it is also physiological, which grounds our metaphor in lived experience. Being present to another—the foundation of relationship—is to be open to the particular rhythms of the other. Body speaks to body in a kinesthetic identification that is part of the gift of being human. The human brain has developed the ability to try on the experience of others in order to produce an empathic solidarity needed to help one another survive. We are simply able to tune in to each other. The Law of Entrainment is a law of physics that describes the ways that rhythms synchronize when they come into close proximity to one another.⁴ This is also what happens in group bodies when ritualized action and rhythms create a synchronization of limbic discharges (concerned with emotion) in the brain—a kind of “emotional rapport.”⁵ At the heart of disciple formation is our ability, like all things that vibrate or have rhythm, to entrain or

synchronize with other rhythms. The entrainment of human vibrations to other beings creates a heightened sense of empathy, community and belonging. This is part of the formative nature of our rituals. I believe that the worshipers in the story above had experienced not only a cognitive-intellectual solidarity through the liturgy, but a kinesthetic connection with Pat in the dance and throughout the liturgy to such an extent they simply could not imagine her taking the arduous journey through backstage and alley passageways alone. Drummer and scholar Layne Redmond has said, “Falling in love is falling in rhythm.”⁶ Falling in love with the neighbor is to fall in the rhythms of the Spirit of God, making the connection between God’s action and our own agency.

The Act of Improvisation is the Gift of *Sacramentum*

Improvisation is a way of life for all of us but most especially for those who constantly have to adapt in order to participate. The act of improvisation, taken up communally by the worshiping community, can provide opportunities for the gift of sacramental moments when God is present in palpable, and sometimes surprising ways. When the body of worshipers at General Conference went “off the page” (a theater term used for improvisation) and created their own response to the Word, aspects of God’s immanent nature were revealed. In my home church in Dallas, an Ash Wednesday service wherein participants imposed ashes on each other provided the opportunity for just such a profoundly sacramental moment—in spite of the pastor’s panic:

One of our parishioners had polio as a teenager and comes to worship in a motorized wheelchair. She does not have the use of her right hand, and her left hand fits into a device that helps to guide the chair. As the ashes passed around the circle, I was seized with a sense of horror that I might have excluded this wonderful woman from the act of imposing ashes given her limited dexterity. What happened was a work of God. The woman who was

beside her leaned over, placing her head on the tray table of the wheelchair, close enough to allow for the imposition. Priesthood and compassion intersected in a magnificent way.⁷

Another story comes to mind as an improvisational joy. At a conference gathering, I had planned to teach a movement version of the Lord's Prayer that requires two people making symbolic gestures while connected by their hands. Doing the prayer this way always reveals more about what the prayer says about how we are to be in relationship than praying it with heads bowed and eyes shut. At the beginning of the conference, as I usually do, I intentionally found out what diversity of ability was represented in the community. After discovering that one of the participants had one arm, I considered deleting the movement version of the Lord's Prayer from the worship. Instead, I decided to approach the woman and her friends to find out how we could make the gestures more inclusive of her. We had the greatest time adapting it for four people, each using one arm. In fact, this version was so wonderful that we decided everyone should try it this way—and that she should lead it. The themes of relationship in the prayer were magnified because of our adaptation. When our improvisational skills are engaged, our capacity for creativity, play and imagination is expanded. These holy-human attributes are a true gift to the community as we imagine and bring into being God's possibilities, God's future, God's reign.

The Need for Diverse Modes of Communication Enriches Our Worship

I was recently a keynote speaker for a group who specifically asked me to address what they believed to be the struggle to incorporate more visuals, music and movement into worship without being unwelcoming to people who can't see, hear or move,

respectively. What I realized as I prepared to speak to the group about enhancing worship with multiple senses while being welcoming to a diversity of sensory abilities was that pushing ourselves to continually think in multiple senses as we plan worship *is* the way to be welcoming—rather than shying away from expressions that rely deeply on what I call the “Three V’s: Verbal, Visual and Visceral.”⁸ When we ask of ourselves how the story/message can be told in a variety of ways, we are more likely to include persons of diverse abilities—if not in one sensory mode, then in another!

A couple of stories come to mind to illustrate what I mean. At a gathering of Deacons in the process of their ordination, I realized moments before worship started that a woman who is blind was present. The opening of worship relied heavily on a procession of objects to a worship center during a reading depicting the goodness of creation. Two things happened as a result of her presence: the readers and I wove in an improvised poetic description of the objects into the reading; and later during communion, I incorporated a stop at the worship center into the journey to receive communion and invited people to touch the objects as a way of praying for creation. The entire worship was enriched by this need to multiply the modes of communication.

The second story has to do with another dance done by a friend of mine who uses a wheelchair. We struggled with the fact that there would be several people present who would not see the dance with their eyes. Finally, we clipped a playing card to the spokes of her wheelchair so that her movements could be heard. The rhythm of the click-clacking changed the focus and feel of that dance for the better—literally adding another dimension to the message.

On the same day that I gave my keynote address to the group mentioned above who so wisely asked that I address this topic of sensory hospitality, I also led a worship service in which the group was invited to walk a spiral journey symbolizing our faith journey that required navigating several aisles and spending about ten to fifteen minutes on their feet. When I have done this in a wide, open space, I have had wheelchairs available for anyone who might need assistance. This sanctuary space of fixed pews, however, was not conducive to that solution. So at the beginning of the journey, I invited those for whom the walking would be arduous to “anchor our journey” by sitting near the aisles so they could offer a touch of encouragement, if they so chose, to those passing by. And I asked them to be our intentional prayer stewards, praying for individuals as they passed. This gave them options for leadership and participation and the response was very positive both from those who remained seated and for those who walked. The whole experience was enriched and deepened.

What We Do in Worship Matters

I have a limited vocabulary in American Sign Language and I am always trying to learn more. Whenever I am leading worship at a conference, I ask the sign language interpreters if they will spend some time with me before worship helping me to speak a portion of a song or a liturgical response in sign language. Then during worship, I invite the whole congregation to learn and speak this with only their bodies. This is not a token gesture of inclusivity—the whole of the worship service is to be interpreted. But to engage the whole congregation at some point in gestures comes from my love of languages and the profound experience of connection and revelation I have felt whenever I have

attempted to learn and communicate in another person's first language. To speak, pray, sing or move in another language is to literally fix in our sensory memory a different dynamic through which the Spirit moves. In particular, the experience of a body of worshipers moving in, what to hearing folks feels like "silence," is a moment of profound visual and kinesthetic connection that cannot be reproduced in another language.

Recent scientific research is helping us to grasp the profound connection between what we do in our worship practices and who we are. Our body's activity and the accompanying emotion and memory have an impact on subsequent behavior. This is not a new concept and certainly some schools of theological ethics have been speaking of "practices" for some time.⁹ But when we study and see what physically happens in our bodies when we engage in particular practices, the fact that we must pay close attention to what we do in worship—not just what we say—comes to the fore. It is said, "cells that fire together, wire together!"¹⁰ Each time neural connections are made in the brain associated with a particular sensory input (image, action, sound, touch, etc), a neural binding occurs, the connection between the synapses are strengthened, making the next connection of firing easier. Being neurally facile (having certain neural connections that fire without us having to think about it) is the way that we become particular sorts of persons.

When a community continually embodies what it means to celebrate and utilize the inherent gifts of diversity within it, the message that "this is what community is meant to be" is wired or cemented into our concepts of ourselves, into our image of who we are as the Body of Christ. What we *do* in our rituals becomes important to the sorts of persons we become. In worship we embody, or "try on for size," what it means to live in

the reign of God. If we overlook, simply ignore or are downright inhospitable to the diversity of person's abilities in our worship, we do not "practice" ourselves into those who recognize and celebrate that diversity outside of worship. We are formed in ways that do not embody the hospitality of the Gospel. Just as the people at the General Conference worship did those years ago, let us open ourselves to the Spirit's gifts of unexpected revelation, of profound improvisation, of deepened communication that comes when we dare to be fully present alongside all who come to worship. To say with passion, "I was there! And I will never be the same."

¹ *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities* (National Organization on Disability, 1994).

² For more on the effects of the Enlightenment on worship see James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

³ See Marcia McFee, *Primal Patterns: Ritual Dynamics, Ritual Resonance, Polyrhythmic Strategies and the Formation of Christian Disciples* (diss. Graduate Theological Union, 2005), 16-46.

⁴ Mickey Hart, *Drumming at the Edge of Magic: A Journey Into the Spirit of Percussion* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 121.

⁵ See Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 103-117.

⁶ Layne Redmond, *When the Drummers Were Women: A Spiritual History of Rhythm* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 174.

⁷ John Thomburg, "They Knew It Was Theirs All the Time" (<http://www.congregationalsinging.com/essays/essay03.htm>, 1999).

⁸ Marcia McFee, *The Worship Workshop: Creative Ways to Design Worship Together* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

⁹ For instance, see William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

¹⁰ Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), 214.