

ARGENTINE TANGO AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

By Connie Vitale, MPS, MA

I have been searching for a church for the past couple of years since my move from the house in the country to the condo in the city - a move that heralded as well, my move from being an active minister to a wanderer from one church to another. It is my goal for this summer to end this search and settle into a faith community. But I start with this void in my life because it allowed me to notice an experience that might otherwise have gone unattended. I was on my way home one Wednesday after work, contemplating dinner. Nothing that I suggested to myself hit the mark. I was feeling the kind of dissatisfied, nagging hunger that wreaks havoc with the best laid plans for healthy eating. My mind only rested once I realized that since this was Wednesday, I could go to tango class. With a mixture of horror and gratitude I heard myself proclaim that tango class was the most nurturing experience of my life at this moment and time.

How could this be, I thought with some shame. What about your family and friends, the wonderful colleagues that you get to work with, the meaningful work that you are blessed to be able to do? Close, but... How could this be ... this odd experience with a mis-matched group of people taught by a tall, gruff black man, who many of us affectionately referred to as Sergeant Al or Sr. Mary Al. There must be something wrong with my life. But I rushed home anyway, grabbed my practice shoes and with relief ran off for two hours of walking, stumbling, crashing into other couples and occasionally gliding across the floor, feet and legs coordinated with another, executing intricate patterns on the dance floor. Alleluia.

So that evening marked my shift from an unconscious tango student to a contemplator of my experience. An unexamined tango is just tango ... but after study, here are some of my reflections on tango as spiritual practice, as a vehicle for a deepening awareness of the Sacred.

First there is the ritual. The hauntingly beautiful music starts as students change from street shoes into their chosen shoes for dance ... strappy high heels, dance sneakers, patent leather Latin shoes. One by one we start the measured walking around the perimeter of the room. The more experienced dancers occasionally add an embellishment, a quick flick of the foot, a slow circle made on the floor. The steady rhythm and solitary meditation is broken only by an occasional pair - an experienced dancer who is introducing a "tango virgin" to the intricacies of the walk - chest leading, leaning into the movement, leg reaching forward into the step followed by the back foot sliding along the floor to glance the ankle of the first foot ... all on beat of course.

Occasionally Al will instruct us as a unit to move to the next stage of the warm-up - single consecutive steps or walking backward. But most often he examines each of us, making corrections, laying on the floor to determine if our foot is hitting the floor at exactly the right time, stopping us to move our hip joint to show us how he wants our legs to move (what are his hands doing on my hip joints anyway?) The normative personal space boundaries of social interaction don't seem to hold here ... ("Do not come to my house, Lord ... you can heal my daughter from this distance")

Occasionally he bellows, " Tom, you're off the f____ beat. What the f____ are you doing. Who is gonna want to dance with you if you're swinging around like that?" But we know, Al just wants us to be the dancers we were created to be; He has found joy and he wants us to have joy ... to be joy. The pleasure I experience as I am given the blessing to turn around and walk backwards, attending to the details of this step for another twenty minutes, seems excessive in retrospect. One hour into tango class and nothing so far that could really be identified as dancing. But internally I am in a different state - quiet and grounded inside, filled with warmth and good will

towards these other dancers ... er... walkers. This group of people that would be unlikely candidates for occupants of the same space, as diverse a group as I've ever experienced. Different by age, gender, ethnicity, ability ... One in our passion for tango.

So what is it that draws me to this experience twice a week, three times if I'm really hungry. Well, most obvious and concrete, Al feeds us. I'm not speaking only metaphorically ... he feeds us. Each evening, he rolls in his cart laden with, in addition to the music and his dance shoes, food - nuts, candy and fruit all in plastic containers that never seem to be depleted by our frequent trips to them for our handfuls of energy. It calls to mind loaves and fish. At times I think that my small class fee barely covers the cost of the refreshments, especially if I've skipped dinner. But we still haven't gotten to the dancing.

The dancing is a holy experience for me. Let's take a look ... I join a partner. Sometimes it is someone who has been dancing for years and who patiently leads me through the steps, stopping and gently, in words or actions, showing me what he is wanting. At other times it is a new dancer, awkwardly trying to lead an intricate move ...to communicate to another what he is wanting as he tries to make sense of it himself. What vulnerability. Once again I am glad to be a woman. But I am reminded of the interdependence of the dancers.

For both of these men I am filled with affection - for the man who dances fluidly, a gentle hand at my back, shifting his weight in a way that makes it obvious and easy to follow, and for the man, tongue between his lips, brow furrowed, heavy pressure at my back, hoping that I might get the message and know what steps we are supposed to do. What tender, courageous, generous and fragile creature we are. How clearly we need to be engaged with love, acceptance and patience.

Did I mention yet the being held in someone's (or many people's) arms for several hours? In this culture of distance and alienation the physical contact with another human being touches into something primal. It challenges my prissy, keep your distance attitude, rooted in our puritanical fear of physicality gently as we turn with the music, legs twisting in, out and around ... the sexual suggestiveness is not subtle and at the same time inconsequential. This is sensual, carnal, sexual even, but in all the ordinary and glorious ways ... somehow not sensational or exploitative. One might even suggest redemptive.

What I am trying to talk about is generosity and gratitude. I've made several attempts since my epiphany, to describe to Al how I am experiencing the classes. Skillfully he brushes it aside or changes the subject. Yesterday, with some of the students as witnesses, I playfully challenged him about how he doesn't take compliments well. He began to protest, "It's not about me, it's just the tango experience ... Look at Milton, he's an engineer and doesn't need to be here and yet he spends hours helping new students, Yoseff has done acupuncture on tango patients for free ...

...Joined by the others, I interrupted and pointed out, how once again he redirected the focus of the conversation. Al continued, "It's not about me ... it's the tango experience." ("It's not me, but the Lord working through me ... "). See what I mean? Tango ... it's just seeping into every part of my life!!

Thanks Al for the gift.