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Grace

(EVENTUALLY)



THOUGHTS ON FAITH

Anne Lamott

Dance Class



*See how the fearful chandelier
Trembles above you
Each time you open your mouth
To sing. Sing.*

—DONALD JUSTICE

Dance Class

✱ One night recently, Neshama and I agreed to be helpers at my friend Karen's special-ed dance class. Neshama wanted to go because she is a lifelong dancer—modern, ballet, Bolinas tribal stomp. Perhaps some of you caught her act during the sixties, when she performed at a nightclub doing the Hippie Dance of Love. She is short, sixty-five, with fuzzy hair like mine. We've been friends since I was twenty-one and drinking heavily, in Bolinas, where we both lived. I am forty-eleven now, sober twenty years, and have moved ten miles away, to another small, tie-dyed town closer to San Francisco.

One thing I love about Neshama is that, like Karen, she is willing to try anything that affords you the opportunity to shake up the Etch A Sketch of everything you suppose

is true, a chance to question all your secret opinions: that this thing is good, that one is bad; that this person is better, that one is worse. I truly—or at least sort of—believe that we are all family, created of the same stuff, and that what is true for one of us is true for most of us. I pretend to believe that deep down, Donald Rumsfeld is just as innocent in God's eyes as a newborn: I think my believing in his innocence should count for something—if not for full credit in heaven, then at least a few bonus snack coupons. At the same time I secretly believe that God must love people with developmental disabilities much more than He loves people like me or Rumsfeld, because they are more innocent, and did not bring their problems down on themselves.

And yet, having confessed this, I know that humans want and need exactly the same thing: to belong, to feel safe and respected. I also know that we don't live long. And that dancing almost always turns out to be a good idea. Rumi wrote, "Whatever there is, is only He, / your footsteps there in dancing: / The whirling, see, belongs to you, / and you belong to the whirling." I'm not any good at dancing, but Karen, in Coyote Trickster mode, got me to show up by promising I'd get to be a helper.

So there I was in dance class. There were eighteen adults, of various ages and degrees of disability, in the room at the rec center. I had seen many of them before, at

the Special Olympics, bagging groceries at Safeway, and on the streets of Marin, alone at bus stops or walking together. They wore the most tragically terrible clothing you could imagine, plaids coordinated with paisleys and bright florals, like wild and crazy guys. Karen introduced Neshama and me as that evening's helpers, and everyone murmured and hummed and exclaimed, "The helpers!" They came to shake our hands or to stare at us close-up, with awe. You'd have thought Paula Abdul had arrived. Some of them told us their names, and several asked if we were going to dance.

"Yes," Neshama responded, although I had assumed I might help in a more ministerial way.

Many people with Down's syndrome look like family, like relatives of one another, while autistic people look more like the rest of us, if a little tense. Within ten minutes, I discovered that when I spoke to the people in dance class, the veil of illusion kept dropping—the ones who looked most like "the rest of us" were often the least available for ordinary human contact, while the ones who looked seriously different were often the most responsive and engaged. One of the two prettiest women seemed very high-functioning, in a bossy, controlling way, while another pretty one seemed to be hanging in an invisible hammock strung between here, and, well, there. Karen had warned me that you had to keep your eyes on one very

shy, spherical Down's-syndrome woman, who'd earned a reputation for performing dances that began innocently but degenerated into cartoonishly lewd stripteases. Once, at Christmastime, she'd gotten down to her undies while grinding along to Brenda Lee's version of "Jingle Bell Rock." But hey, who hasn't?

We formed a circle and introduced ourselves again to the people around us, formally, as if we were about to square dance, do-si-do. Handshakes were mannerly and respectful—it was like being presented to grateful visitors from another planet: "You have come all this way. I take your hand, I look you in the eye. We come in peace." One of the men was huge and reminded me of somebody behind a butcher counter: sweaty, with a mustache disorder, a big gut, a baseball cap. Another wore a Giants T-shirt he had obviously mended himself, with a frayed rope over it, like a confused belt. A number of the people reminded me of sober men and women who once helped me, or people whom I've tried to help, but with a lot fewer tattoos.

I'm not comparing the hardship of being developmentally disabled to that of being an alcoholic or a drug addict, but in dance class, I noticed all sorts of parallels: the off-rhythm gait, the language you can't quite catch, the lack of coordination, the odd affects—too friendly or too far

away—the bad teeth, the screwed-up relationships or no relationships at all, the not-fitting-in-ness. It's incredibly touching when someone who seems so hopeless finds a few inches of light to stand in and makes everything work as well as possible. All of us lurch and fall, sit in the dirt, are helped to our feet, keep moving, feel like idiots, lose our balance, gain it, help others get back on their feet, and keep going.

After introductions, we did wiggly warm-up stretches to classic James Brown, and when the music ended, everyone in the circle spun around like the Godfather of Soul, while screaming, "Aaawwhhhooohhh." I was pretty good at this. So was a young woman with cerebral palsy, spinning in a wheelchair, grinning, her twiggy fingers curled into somehow sweet claws. The stretches were hard for the heavier dancers, which was about half the class. They struggled like beautiful, ungainly marine mammals, with short limbs and uncooperative bulges. But in wiggling, all people shine.

Then it was time for sharing.

We sat in a circle and were invited to share only one thing about ourselves: Karen had told me that she'd recently had to add this "only one thing" rule to put an end to long gossipy stories, some of which were hatchet jobs on other people who were present in the room. She invited

los or ensembles in the center. The first solo was by the woman with cerebral palsy, who during the group practice had done great swooping turns in her wheelchair. For her solo, she sat smiling ecstatically and twitched her gnarled hands in time to the music. She was great. So was the music, a Congolese song called "Soweto." The next dancer, an older woman, earnestly counted her every step out loud, evidently unbothered that none of the steps coincided with the music, her jaw set with a determination that bordered on hostility. Then a blonde woman with Down's syndrome performed what I at first thought were gymnastics: a somersault that pretty much got away from her, and a unique cartwheel—palms flat on the floor, then rocking back onto her bottom, then falling over sideways—and then jumping up and down in a one-legged crouch. Karen later told me that this was intended to be break-dancing, a weekly performance by the woman's alter ego, Homegirl from the 'Hood.

After the solos, ensembles of four or five did the Electric Slide together. I joined in with one group. I was great; everyone said so.

And then it was time to go. People shook our hands and thanked us. The gymnast gave me a hug with her head pressed into my waist. Neshama and I left feeling elated and surprisingly tired. It had been only an hour, but it was an immersion. It went deeper than I had thought.

When Karen and I were hiking a few days later, she told me that after class, one of the dancers had exclaimed, "I liked those old ladies! They were helpers, and they danced." These are the words I want on my gravestone: that I was a helper, and that I danced.