

Dancing on Behalf of Companionship by Kathy Tobias



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Last Monday night, members of the Artists Mission Group who were present for the weekly meeting stood at the back of an ambulance as the EMTs worked around Alan Dragoo. His head was bleeding and bandaged where he had hit it when he tripped over a hidden fault in the sidewalk. He was lucid, if a little shaken. I grasped his ankle to wish him well before the doors closed and the ambulance pulled away.

Thinking of Alan now in the midst of this community, after the sad news of this week, his lapse into unconsciousness on the eve of his daughter Kyrie's wedding...It's one of those times when the most appropriate thing seems to be to cancel everything you had thought of preaching about.

And yet...

As a member of the Artists' Mission Group, I can testify that Alan has always been among the first, if not the first, to

recall us to our purpose, not so much in words, but by example. In the Artists Group, that purpose, for me at least, has been about art and connection-companionship. It has meant accompanying each other in our daily lives, our journeys of faith, and our calls to authenticity as dramatists, dancers, composers, painters, potters, and poets. Alan has faithfully brought to the group his life journey, and his considerable poetic gift, which is indeed a gift for connection. How many poems have we heard from Alan for and about members of this community and the community beyond-at times of loss, joy, baptism-even this week, a wedding?

So let me get back to purpose-what is our purpose today?

Stepping into today's Gospel, we find Jesus telling the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." Meanwhile, the tax collector, standing far off, was beating his breast and saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" And then we hear the familiar lines, "I tell you, this man-the tax collector-went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In this context, I find myself wondering if the fault of the Pharisee was not so much that he was a goody-two-shoes and knew the righteous way of the law-but that he was too haughty to connect, to recognize the tax collector as his brother, like him in pain and joy. He stood alone in his self-righteousness. The humility of the tax collector brought him to ask for mercy, and, I think, for companionship.

The Artists' Group's members have been companions and guides on my own journey-leading us in so many fruitful paths. Roy Barber, with his passion for music, drama, and justice, led me and so many others to a love of South Africa, specifically of

a group of young people in South Africa who are gifts to us as well as looking to us for help and guidance and friendship. Jean Adams, an artist who has a great gift for gently teaching others, has been a part of that South African journey along with Jackie McMakin. She has also been part of the journey that found all of us teaching an energetic group of young people in the Art Camp the past several years. Sue Johnson, with her love of dance, stumbled onto InterPlay-a way of moving, dancing, singing, and storytelling together, of integrating body, mind, and spirit toward more community and grace. She embraced it with her whole being, bringing it to us as a great gift of embodied wisdom. And Billy Amoss, with Kate, has also embraced and gifted us with the subversive grace of InterPlay-"sneaky deep," as Kate likes to say. Billy has also offered his composing talent, collaborating with Alan to make a song of one of Alan's beautiful poems, about loss. It has been Alan's gift to carry on the Artists Group tradition of honing his art-his wonderful poetry-and sharing it regularly with the group. We have been so blessed by his company on the journey.

So how does all this come together for me? It seems to be about how the arts in their fullest sense-InterPlay being one-bring us to community and deepen our sharing with the Other, the one we might never have met, our sister and brother, the South African, the lost youth, the tax collector, the Pharisee.

Specifically this summer it came together for me in an InterPlay trip led by Masankho Banda to his home country of Malawi in southern Africa between Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Malawi is among the poorest countries of Africa, much more rural and dependent on subsistence farming than I have experienced in South Africa. But as in South Africa-perhaps more so-there was a kind of community spirit there, a love of music and dance-and a familial bond with the beautiful Lake Malawi, their "lake of the stars." We had been invited to

come and dance and share stories in Masankho's small rural hometown. Two of us from Maryland joined 40 others from more than a half dozen states and as far away as Australia. And we sat and ate and danced together and heard stories and songs- and learned something about Malawi, about the sense of community that allows them to carry on, carrying each other, against all odds. I met Tina and Bridget and Sarah and Pink Floyd. And as Americans we learned some things about ourselves.

My roommate toward the end of the trip was Jane, from Wisconsin, who was dealing with the loss of her husband last February. After we returned, we met again at an InterPlay event in a convent near my parents' house in Wisconsin. We were both part of a threesome with Sister Ruth, whose calling was to lead spiritual retreats. But Ruth was feeling burned out, empty, and in need of spiritual nurture. We were given the opportunity to dance on behalf of each other in pairs-two would dance together for the third, taking turns until each had been danced for.

The "dance on behalf of" is one of my favorite InterPlay forms, described this way in a book by the founders of InterPlay, Phil Porter and Cynthia Winton-Henry: "We are not meant to carry or personally transform the burdens of others. This requires too much energy. Bringing our concerns out into the active play of the Great Body helps move and change the concern. In creative play, anything can happen: humor, vision, answers. We are not required to suffer in the dance or come up with answers. Just dance. Best of all, the dancing we do on behalf of others works on our behalf as well. Things that need healing in us rearrange themselves in surprising ways."

In this situation, my Malawi roommate Jane and I were the first of the three pairs to dance, and Jane immediately leaned against me and I leaned back, and we danced that way, sharing each other's weight, trading the carrying back and forth while moving through space, arcing up toward the ceiling and down to

the floor, up and down and around, always giving each other our weight, trusting the other not to let us fall. When the music stopped we looked up to see Ruth, her eyes full of tears. She had been given the gift of our weight sharing and it was exactly what her tired spirit needed.

But what if what needs healing seems much bigger than the dance?

Another connection for me began with a Seekers trip to El Salvador some years ago, a time when friends in the Lutheran church urged us to pay a visit to the Lutheran bishop of El Salvador, Medardo Gomez. He has since become one of my personal heroes, a saint and accompanier of the poor in El Salvador, one who has carried on the work of the martyred Roman Catholic Bishop Oscar Romero.

As part of a celebration in the Washington, DC, area earlier this month, Bishop Gomez came to visit. He told us of the worsening economic situation in El Salvador, thanks to shifting markets brought about by the globalization of resources. I was reminded of a visit to El Salvador several years ago, when our delegation drove through a beautiful forest of coffee trees, loaded with ripe beans. But sadly, the coffee grove was silent-there were no workers preparing for a harvest. There was no way the ripe beans could be sold for enough money to make a profit that year, we were told. We began to ask, why not? Who were the coffee trees planted for, and why wouldn't they pay enough to make the cost of harvesting the beans worthwhile? What was different about that year and who would be out of work and going hungry as a result? What are the effects of economic globalization on our friends in El Salvador?

On his trip this month, Bishop Gomez joined us for a presentation by Ulrich Duchrow, theologian and author of a

number of books on globalization.

Aristotle, according to Duchrow, distinguished two types of private property: *oikonomike*-supplying households and the broader community with the goods needed to satisfy basic needs; and *kapilike*, increasing monetary property for its own sake or buying and selling as part of the artificial form of acquisition, *khremastike*. The latter reflected a human desire for the accumulation of money, to create the illusion of infinite means of sustenance and pleasure and the illusory ability to live forever. Later, Roman law made private property absolute in a system based on a pyramid with the divine emperor at the top, and slaves, women, and children subjugated at the bottom.

Over against this imperial world, Jesus offered an alternative-the manna model of sharing so that each would have enough. Jesus took the side of the poor, knowing that if the poor were taken care of, all would be able to live. Whoever wants to be the first must be slave of all, he said-we are bound to serve one another.

What does this radical departure from *khremastike* mean for us? We move by asking questions, Duchrow said. Should churches be involved in speculation or are we called to nurture life? Are we on the side of the needy? Do we embrace a theology of prosperity or the one that Christ exemplified in siding with those who suffered injustice-a theology of the Cross?

In response to Duchrow's presentation, Bishop Gomez said, "Thank you for giving us alternatives. They are difficult to carry out, especially among the poor...A week ago Sunday I was in Costa Rica for the referendum to say yes or no to the Central American Free Trade Agreement. The people said no, but the powerful said yes. In the struggle between David and Goliath, David doesn't always win. . .Globalization appears to be light, but it is not light...We're attracted to that world. How can we liberate ourselves from the spirit of oppression? I

believe that we all have to respond to God. But God is going to ask more of you as North American Christians."

I hear this and think, yes, but how? Where do we start? How do we begin a dance on behalf of-across borders that are being strengthened every day by our own government?

This week I received an email from friends in Milwaukee who are, in their own way, dancing on behalf of the poor in El Salvador. Their book of meditations from Reformation to Advent, in English and Spanish, begins with our reading for today and ends with the words of Oscar Romero: "The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God-for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God, Emmanuel, God with us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God."

Embracing companionship with God and the poor-it's a hard charge for us, in one way, but not so hard when we realize how much we need it. We continue to ask questions, to struggle, to connect through dance, to write a poem on behalf of.

Thursday, Mary Carol told Billy that Alan had asked, if he were ever incapacitated, to have poems read to him, so Billy and Kate and Jean and I agreed to meet at the hospital for a reading. I went looking for one of my favorite Alan Dragoo poems and came across so many others in the web archives-not the one I was looking for, but so many...like this one, published a few years ago in Faith at Work. It could be a poem on behalf of companionship with all of Jesus's favored hungry and thirsty ones. It's called...

New Wine

Between the red wine

that you poured

and the rising vapors

crowds coalesced

and broke apart –

though you spoke of all of us and why,

and not of them and ought,

some said, "He isn't of our kind,"

and went home to drink their tea,

yet in your time's sanguine ferment

we tasted

what our kind could be.

A final note: for some time Alan has been writing a long poem, I think in honor of his friend Nelson Good, about Nelson's final journey. It was that poem Alan had finished on Monday and was rushing to share with us when he fell. Mary Carol said completing the poem left him as happy as she'd seen him about any accomplishment since completing his Ph.D. It's called "Dead Sea."

Now in our hearts, could we do a virtual dance on behalf of Alan and his family?

And then let's dance again for Kyrie and Darin, celebrating the beginning of a wonderful new life together.

Amen.

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