

Psalm 30 is a song of thanksgiving, a psalm of *re*-orientation after the crisis has passed. “I cried to you for help, and you have healed me.” The psalmist reflects on their previous complacency: “As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved,’” but they now realize the precariousness of life. Tragedy can strike, and we find ourselves powerless against it. Only by the hand of God was the psalmist renewed.

This psalm, like Psalm 23, is not innocent or naïve. It does not claim that good people, or people of faith, are impervious to disaster. It acknowledges that disaster comes and it passes, and life goes on. Weeping lingers for the night, but joy comes with the morning. All of us know this fact, and we know it from experience, not from being told. But as with Jesus’ parables, there’s something about stories that opens up the layers of truth in a fact in such a way that it’s more than just a fact. And that’s wisdom, that’s what we really want.

So here’s a story. Paula Cooley of Trinity University in San Antonio grew up in northern Georgia in a working class community in the 1950s. Her mother, Polly Cooley, had been an accomplished dancer before she married. In the late 1940s she began to teach dance and baton twirling as an itinerant teacher in the public schools. That is, she persuaded school principals to let her pull students out of class and teach them ballet, tap, and acrobatics. For private lessons, she charged \$2 for half an hour. Every spring she held a recital, and all the students performed.

Polly Cooley believed that every child deserved to learn to dance, whether they were talented or not. Even a clumsy child could gain greater physical confidence and self-assurance from dance practice. Her daughter writes,

I grew up pirouetting, tapping, tumbling, whirling, and twirling to all kinds of music, while immersed in frothy nets, satins, taffetas, laces, tassels, and feathers. I grew up surrounded by children, some of whom could leap through the air like gazelles and whirl like dervishes; others lumbered and flopped about like beached whales, with big toothy grins on their faces.

These were not children who were living enchanted lives of privilege. They came from working class and rural families—all white until the 1960s. Although most had two parents, some came from single-parent households—but even the two-parent households had little money to spare, and most mothers did some kind of paid work to help make ends meet. So to make dance lessons possible, Polly Cooley worked out a lot of barter arrangements with her students' mothers, trading home grown produce, transportation, hair care, and an array of other services in exchange for lessons.

The most elaborate barter arrangement was with Ola Thomas and her four children. Ola was married to an independent truck driver who was often out of work. Ola herself worked as a seamstress on the assembly line for the Lovable Brassiere Company in Atlanta. Ola wanted dancing for all four children and baton twirling for three of them; she further wanted private lessons as well as classes. Polly and she worked out a deal whereby Ola fed Polly's daughters one night a week, supplied them with "seconds" in undergarments, and on occasion made the two girls beautiful party dresses from undergarment taffeta and satin out of remnants. In exchange, Ola's children received both private and class lessons in dancing and baton, and Ola also made many of the costumes for Polly's recitals. Without such a barter system there would have been far fewer, sometimes very talented, students taking lessons.

Now, what is it about dance lessons that was so compelling that women would work out elaborate barter systems in order to provide them to children who might or might not have had any talent? Paula Cooley, the daughter, thinks that those mothers understood that children needed confidence and that confidence could be acquired through physical exercise, regardless of talent. They also understood that movement itself can bring joy—moving in a patterned way, in response to music and the movement of others. Children love to perform, and they love to see their parents enjoying them. The joy of one party calls forth the joy of the other party, mirroring and multiplying the joy. Paula Cooley says, looking back on it,

What makes this story more than simply a nostalgic memory? I have no doubt that the collusion of these women around dancing lessons for their children, a collusion of joy, was necessary to their own survival, as well as for the future betterment of their children. Furthermore, this community of women, conspiring to link children's bodies to dance, food, and clothing, in its own small way and in its own small location, temporarily subverted oppressive social structures.

She, like many of us, has spent her adult life working to diminish injustice and human suffering, and of course analyzing the causes and the structures that perpetuate suffering. She points out that “for ethically mature adults, if not for everyone, joy cannot be experienced innocently. It is experienced instead against the backdrop of the knowledge of the suffering and violence that characterize much of human life. Thus, while one can imagine . . . what it might mean to experience sustained pain in the absence of joy, it is almost impossible to imagine experiencing joy while ignorant of . . . suffering. Tragedy and joy coexist.”

So Cooley says that the activity of dance took place within a context of pain: there was gender bias, there was homophobia, there were drunken fathers and hungry bedtimes. But joy—whether experienced through dancing or otherwise—is inherently generous. Joyful people want to share, to reach out and connect. Joy expands us and gives us partners. And then, she says, it turns upside down the assumed order of things. Against a backdrop of poverty and family tragedy, for which all the dancing lessons in the world cannot compensate, the felt experience of—in this case dance—says that tragedy isn't all there is, doesn't have the last word. Dancing reveals the party that was always possible: it shows us God in our midst.

Let me quote at length:

To my mind, the narrative of my mother's career as a dancing teacher performs as a parable. It reveals God's grace at work in the details of mid-twentieth century southern U.S. rural and working class life, sustaining an oppressed people who sought to be faithful to a vision for their children — a vision that in its execution subverted some of the economic and educational structures of oppression. Their joy, moreover, in all its corporeality and generosity, shared in the midst of an often-grim existence, discloses a deep and abiding good will that identifies their work as *God's* ongoing work in human existence. It reveals God repairing a world through human joy — God's love compounding itself from the bottom up. (Paula M. Cooley, "That Every Child Who Wants Might Learn to Dance", 1998)

It is foolish to say in our prosperity, "I shall never be moved;" we know that. But the fragility and precariousness of the human condition cannot exclude at the same time the availability of joy. There are miserable times when you cannot connect with others, or you cannot imagine connecting with others. But I think what the parabolic aspect of Paula Cooley's true story tells us is that whether we realize it or not, there is always a party waiting to be enfolded. Wherever people are, God is, and wherever God is, there is generosity and connection and joy.

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy does come with the morning.

One thing is certain Lord, never is your love for us exhausted, and never does your love for us fail. You are the God of all conditions; our companion through both night and day, darkness and light. Help us survive the night; thank you for showing us the way to morning. Amen.