So often, our piety and preconceived notions prevent us from genuine communion with God. How can we possibly know God if we aren’t open to what God and the possibilities of God are?

DANCING WITH THE SACRED

Phyllis Barber

SHALL WE DANCE? OR SHOULD I SAY, “MAY I HAVE this dance?” But first, a poem for you. A poem by Hafiz, a Sufi poet born in the 1300s in Shiraz in southern Persia, rendered by Daniel Ladinsky:

I have a thousand brilliant lies
For the question:
How are you?

I have a thousand brilliant lies
For the question:
What is God?

If you think that the Truth can be known
From words,
If you think that the Sun and the Ocean
Can pass through that tiny opening
Called the mouth,

O someone should start laughing!
Someone should start wildly Laughing—

Even though I attended The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regularly for forty years, almost never missing a Sunday and serving in administrative, teaching, and music capacities since the age of seven, and even though I’ve borne my testimony countless numbers of times and attended seminary and Brigham Young University, I confess I now speak in a voice which is not purely Mormon, whatever a pure Mormon sounds like.

Possibly, my voice has been corrupted by my love of dancing with everything—people, ideas, sunshine, and sacred cows. Or maybe it has to do with being human. Maybe insatiable curiosity has been the corrupting agent, or maybe it’s the fact of loving to read any and every thing. Or could it be a fatal attraction to mysticism or my fascination with Taoism, Buddhism, Judaism, and the beliefs and practices of native peoples?

And then there’s my love affair with Rumi and Hafiz, thirteenth and fourteenth century Persian poets influenced by Sufism—the inner heart of Islam—and always informed by an ecstatic relationship with God. These poets speak of being so much in love with God that all they can do is forever dance. The ecstasy of their writing speaks across the centuries and fills me with incredible joy—the same joy I’ve felt in spontaneous moments in my life: singing with the Las Vegas Stake Youth Choir in the sixties, introducing the Valley View 8th Ward choir to a Dave Brubeck mass at Christmastime, joining with the gospel music and the “Hallelujahs” at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Denver, Colorado, or at the Second Baptist Church in Columbia, Missouri. I can feel God dancing everywhere, all around me. He is not somber or pale or aloof. He moves with the music that’s always playing. He shimmers.

Therefore, rather than speaking with an untainted, well-modulated Mormon voice, I speak as an ecstatic woman who loves music and dancing, who loves abandoning the punitive “shoulds” and engaging with the boundless beauty of God. It courses through my veins, this mainline beauty of God. Direct to the heart. Just as there’s a difference between knowing the definitions of health and having a healthy body, there’s a huge difference between knowing what is sacred and holy and experiencing the divine spark of God that can fill each of our beings if we allow it.
In April 2000, I flew into Miazal, Ecuador, which is located in the rain forest of the Oriente (the Amazon Basin). We flew in a single-engine plane past clouds of gray, volcanic material spewing from the center of the earth into a sky filled with white, insubstantial clouds. Because of torrential rain at our original destination, we were diverted to a military airstrip. After waiting an hour, we finally skidded onto an almost underwater, field-of-grass runway, our plane plowing the mud. Members of the Shuar tribe—a head-hunting tribe until thirty years ago—ran out to greet us.

My six-week journey to Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador had been undertaken for the purpose of meeting with shamans from the indigenous tribes of the Andes as well as the jungle, to participate with them during their healings, to be taught by their five-thousand-year-old ancient wisdom. Not only are these people knowledgeable about plant wisdom that can help save lives, they also have a knowledge of how to retrieve the lost spirit or fragmented self in ways not practiced or known by contemporary technicians of western medicine.

One night in the jungle, some members of the tribe came to our lodge to demonstrate the old ways of the Shuar people, some of which are continued today, though mainly by those who wish to preserve tradition. Dressed in wrap-around cloth rather than the bare-breasted jungle wear often seen in National Geographic, they showed off some of the tribal customs: how they used to visit their friends’ homes, how they greeted each other with spears and complex choreography and chanting, and how they entertained each other with a brew called chicha made by the Shuar women from manioc root and saliva which they spit into the mixture and allowed to ferment. They carried chicha with them whenever they went for a visit, and they expected us to enjoy with them this sour delicacy, served in a half coconut shell.

After this demonstration, musicians began to play music from the Andes and some of the Shuar came over to ask several members of our group to dance. One caution we’d received was that we weren’t to look into the eyes of the opposite sex as this meant an invitation to passion in the jungle. So, when an older gentleman came to me and asked me to dance, I followed him to the dance floor and concentrated on his feet. When he later asked me to dance a second time, I was getting a bit bored counting his toes, so I thought maybe we could clap hands together or something like that. I tried to get him to clap right hands with me, and at first, he was confounded by the business. But after a few of my own demonstrations, he finally clapped my hand, both of us laughing like children, and then the music ended.

After the dance was over, the leader of our group said with a slightly amused expression on her face, “Did you know who you were dancing with?”

“No,” I said.

“Tonk is one of the most powerful shamans in the Shuar tribe.”

“Oh,” I said, unable to think of another response, suddenly pulled into a strange vacuum where I wondered if I’d offended in some way.

Only in recent years have these South American shamans consented to interface with North Americans. According to our group leader, the shamans feel that the Land of the Eagle (North America, where the eagle is a bird of prey) and the Land of the Condor (South America, where the condor only eats carrion) have much to teach each other. In the last ten years, they’ve had visions wherein they were told it was time to break the silence and allow an interchange with foreigners. Before that time, they were unwilling to share their ancient knowledge with those outside their tribe. Admittedly, I went to South America with a great respect bordering on reverence for shamans—for their primitive connection to the Divine and for their willingness to share their wisdom.

If I had known who Tonk was before the dance, I would have worried about protocol. I might have done something false or possibly unnatural, like kowtowing, to pay my culturally-expectected respects. In truth, had I known his title or position, I would have missed an amazing connection with another human being. I would have let my thoughts, my notions, my expectations of what a shaman is, interfere.

Talking with Tonk through a translator the next day, I told the translator to tell him he is a good dancer. The translator laughed and said, “He was just telling me what a good dancer you are.” I looked at Tonk, (maybe at Tonk’s chin rather than his eyes,) and he smiled back at me.

The habit of being respectful is valuable. It is good and fine to have respect for each other, sensitivity, caring, respect for leaders, elders, traditions. But when do we cross that dangerous line of putting something on a pedestal and making it into a statue that can’t smile, bend, or stretch? Do we truly respect something or someone if we put them above us or in a greater position? Is that false? A pretense? Something we think
we should do? When do sacred words become stones on the lips because they’ve been repeated so many times that they’ve lost their essence? Do we think about the words and familiar phrases we speak? Do we have our own connection to this customary language, or have we borrowed it for comfort’s sake?

How do we keep ourselves from a habitual, unthinking response to the sacred? How can the sacred remain fresh, a new spring from which to draw, full of endless possibilities rather than circumscribed and fenced in?

Hugh Nibley writes that “All systems are ‘go’ for the expanding mind,” and quotes Brigham Young from the Journal of Discourses, “Let us not narrow ourselves up, for the world, with all its variety of useful information and its rich hoard of hidden treasure, is before us; and eternity, with all its sparkling intelligence, lofty aspirations, and unspeakable glories, is before us.”

CONNECTING WITH THE SOURCE
Western and shamanic healing come together in Peru

When I arrived in Cuzco, Peru, a month before my time in Ecuador, I had just finished my menstrual cycle. I was happy to have that behind me. Or so I thought. But every day for the six following days, I bled heavily, unusually heavily. At first I thought it was the change in altitude or problems with menopause, so I disregarded it. But each day the bleeding was heavier, and on the third day, bordering near hemorrhaging, I consulted one of the doctors who was traveling with us. He said it wasn’t unusual with the change in altitude, so once again I disregarded this abnormal reaction of my body.

We were traveling with a Peruvian shaman named Theo Paredes, and on the sixth morning, on the day we left for Machu Picchu, I said something to him as well. He said it was the change in altitude or problems with menopause, so I disregarded it. But by the time we got on the train for Machu Picchu, I was forgetting my luggage, my purse, and my traveling companions were picking up after me. By the time we reached the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, I was totally disoriented. I don’t remember how I got to my room, but when I got there, I told my roommate she’d better send for the doctor. I was in trouble.

Luckily, Theo’s sister, Dr. Milagros Paredes, was a gynecologist in Cuzco. Their father had started a medical clinic in Cuzco in the 1940s and had decided to raise one child in the tradition of Western medicine and his other child in the shamanic tradition. Theo, who was Castilian, rather than one of the indigenous people, had been trained in the way of the shaman from the age of eleven. After he and the North American doctor traveling with us had consulted Theo’s sister by telephone, they were instructed to administer a shot to stop the bleeding. But the loss of blood had left me in a very dark place. My brain seemed a window of blank white surrounded by a stark black frame.

Theo decided to give me a healing. After using feathers, agua de florid, which he sprayed on me from his mouth, and other traditional shamanic healing implements, Theo asked me to give him my full name. After I gave it to him, he anointed my head, I’m not sure with what, and then laid his hands on my head and blessed me. “Phyllis Nelson Barber,” he said, then spoke in a different language, one I’d never heard from my father or other priesthood holders over the span of my life. But, nonetheless, the words felt familiar.

I felt connected to thousands of years of Spirit being transmitted from the Source to my ailing body. I felt my temporal, biological father with me, the memory of him anointing my head with oil and comforting me with his hands on my head when I had been ill. I felt the Divine Father, too. And an added element: Pachemama—Mother Earth, whom Theo had invoked that day and who he says is our real mother, the one who cares for us above all other mothers and fathers. Any division between the “Heavenly Father” I’d been taught about as a child and Pachemama seemed so very academic and cerebral. I loved that Pachemama had been included. Triply blessed. By the next morning, my strength had returned.

Mystical Play
How can we understand something fully if we cannot dance or play with it?

So how does one dance with the sacred? Maybe by looking for the Sacred in unexpected places. Maybe God isn’t always found in special buildings. Maybe God is not always dressed for church or found through pre-ordained channels. But how can the Divine Presence possibly appear to us when we are blindly fumbling along, not watching for movement in our peripheral vision because of our attachment to notions of who God is and what God looks like?

One day many years ago, after my young children had gone off to school, I felt an overflowing feeling of spirit in my entire body. And then an impulsive thought came to me. “Today, I’m going to dance with God.” I turned on some piano music that has always moved me to the core—Prokofiev’s “Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 10”—and closed my eyes, let the music soak into me, and proceeded to dance in my family.
room as if I were dancing with God. I held out my arms as if I had a partner. I felt divine arms wrap around my shoulders. We whirled in an ecstatic trance, and I felt transported to a feeling of oneness where God and I were each other. I felt moved in a rare way. I'd called God in for a dance, and the Divine Presence had come.

Am I speaking of mysticism here—mysticism being the experience of direct communion with ultimate reality, a spiritual union? Even though many of us experience this direct communion in our prayers and meditations, I think the term “mysticism” is an uncomfortable one in today's Mormondom, this possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge without a middle man or spokesman. Joseph Smith definitely qualifies as a mystic, but is there a place for mysticism in the practical reality of today's Mormonism?

I’ve read accounts of Catholic and Jewish mystics, watched penitents in purple robes and tall pointed hats in processions of thousands carrying crosses on their backs to ask forgiveness of Christ, and I’ve wondered about my ability to keep from erecting a wall between myself and the Divine because of the Mormon perception I have of what is true, what is false, and what is Sacred. How many sacred cows stand in my line of vision when I’m trying to see God? Buddhists say, in their enigmatic way, “If you see the Buddha in the road, kill him.” Another contemporary saying in some spiritual circles is “Don’t mistake the messenger for the message.” The finger pointing at the moon is only a finger, after all. It is not the moon, and it seems to me that I was always taught that the Church was established as a vehicle for this earth life, not as an end in itself. The finger is the finger. The moon is the moon. God is God.

In the History of the Church, Joseph Smith says: “I did not like the old man being called up for erring in doctrine. It looks too much like the Methodists, and not like the Latter-day Saints. Methodists have creeds which a man must believe or be asked out of their church. I want the liberty of thinking and believing as I please. It feels so good not to be trammelled.”

How can we understand something if we can’t play with it or dance with it or ask it questions or turn it around in our hands? To be mystical is to experience a spiritual reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence. It is being open to the surprise of God. The communion with Ultimate Reality.

In his masterpiece, The Varieties of Religious Experience, William James says: “Mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experience an equally incompetent treatment.”

An anonymous reviewer of my latest book, Parting the Veil: Stories from a Mormon Imagination, writing for a northern California newsletter called the Latter-day Messenger, made an interesting comment: “This is not a book I would want any of my friends to read. I would not want anyone, Mormon or non-Mormon, thinking that this is how Mormons really think and act . . . . Most of these stories seem to deal with obsessions; sometimes sexual, sometimes on physical objects . . . and sometimes on spiritual visitations and messengers, although they are not usually the kind of messengers we hear about in the scriptures. This is not a book I will be keeping in my library.”

These comments made me laugh, they made me wince, and they also made me ask questions of myself and the book. Had I moved so far away from Mormonism that I didn’t understand it any more? Is a Mormon supposed to think and act in an always-predictable manner? Hadn’t I written the stories out of my deep love for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and some of its ironies? Had I been too playful with sacred things and sacred ideas? Had I been disrespectful? I hadn’t intended either to misrepresent or represent Mormonism, but rather to play with some of the theology, even dance with it.

But what about this dancing with the gospel and this asking questions of the givens? What are the givens? Can a writer or a painter or a sculptor play with Mormon notions? Can she approach scripture as a diadem with many facets? Can she hope to find greater illumination? Dancing. Playing. Approaching the old stories with new eyes, new questions, new possibilities. Why not? Like, what happens, as it did in my story entitled “Dust to Dust,” when a rich, rather than poor, person knocks at the door and asks for someone’s last dime? How elegant we
That's a good way to kill a person while they’re alive—not think they are large enough to surprise us.

are in responding to the poor. How self-sacrificing and noble we can be. But aren't the rich sometimes in need as well? God lives in the souls of all people, rich or poor. Or, what happens, as it did in another of my stories, "Devil Horse," when a man’s horse is spooked by the Devil? Isn’t it conceivable that a man might want to protect this horse, even baptize him? Or is it irreversible to think of baptizing an animal? I recall hearing from the pulpit that animals have souls, too.

Dancing with the words. Dancing with ideas. How can we possibly know God if we aren't open to what God and the possibilities of God are? Another way to say this is that if you are my husband or wife and I know exactly who you are and how you will respond in every situation, then I leave no room for other options, no room for growth or change. That's a good way to kill a person while he or she is still alive—not thinking someone is large enough to surprise us.

Is it sacrilegious, irreverent, or of bad report to dance with established notions? How established must they remain? How attached are we to having answers where all the 's are crossed and is dotted, where we can be absolutely sure? How much does one miss when one knows everything beforehand? With so many fences around the answers, how does one remain open for inspiration? Can the sky be the limit or do we need to keep everything in hedgerows, tidy and neat? Brigham Young again: “Let us not narrow ourselves up.”

PERFECTION ON THE FIRE
We must not let our own notions prevent us from hearing God's voice calling us to the dance

WILLIAM JAMES COMMENTS ON THE PROCESS by which first-hand religious experiences become orthodoxy:

A genuine first-hand religious experience...is bound to be a heterodoxy to its witnesses, the prophet appearing as a mere lonely madman. If his doctrine prove contagious enough to spread to any others, it becomes a definite and labeled heresy. But if it then still prove contagious enough to triumph over persecution, it becomes itself an orthodoxy; and when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry; the faithful live at second hand exclusively and stone the prophets in their turn. The new church, in spite of whatever human goodness it may foster, can be henceforth counted on as a staunch ally in every attempt to stifle the spontaneous religious spirit, and to stop all later bubblings of the fountain from which in purer days it drew its own supply of inspiration. 

I've often killed much of what I wish I could express because it doesn't measure up to some standard, because it lacks the perfection I so strive for. But is that not sheer arrogance to think I can't put something on paper unless it is perfect or praiseworthy or magnificent? I am a humble scribe as well as a beautician of words. Curl them. Cut them. Snip them. Tighten them to perfection. But who decides what is perfect, anyway? Is my notion of perfection so far above possible standards that I've paralyzed the life, the creativity inside me? Perfection by the drop-perful, a little bit of poison a little bit at a time. Does my notion of perfection cut me off from God?

A student of Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese discipline of meditative movement, might watch the teacher demonstrate a form a thousand times. This student might think he or she knows what the teacher is doing. But one day, after seeing this movement a thousand times, the student gets it that she's never really seen the movement for what it is. She's observed the exterior movement but never seen the interior moves—the way the instructor moves an arm from the center of her being, not by moving or waving an arm by itself.

A year before I went to Peru and Ecuador, I suffered a serious breakage of my heart—a shattering into pieces so small it seemed I'd never find my heart again. Over the year, I'd paid much attention to healing myself physically, emotionally, and mentally, but I still carried the vestiges of sadness with me like dried glue on paper.

When I first met Alberto Taxo, a shaman near Otavalo, Ecuador, his retreat nestled in the valley surrounded by Imbabura, Mojanda, and Cotacachi, I saw a man gifted with the light of Christ. Light radiated from his face as well as his entire being. I decided this was a man who could be trusted and decided to allow myself to have a healing from him.

As I waited for my turn in a round adobe room with an open fire in the middle of a hard earth floor, I asked in prayer to have my sadness, depression, embarrassment, and shame removed from me. As I prayed, I symbolically threw these things on the fire where they could be altered, transformed, and purified into something new. I'd spent enough time with those painful teachers.

As my turn came to stand in front of Alberto Taxo, he didn't look into my eyes or even directly at me, but rather at the whole of me and the extension of me—the energy around my body. We exchanged no words. I didn't ask for what I hoped to receive. Using large condor feathers, hawk feathers, carefully chosen herbs and incense, he began a very ritualized healing, as he had done with the others, circling me and humming quietly as he did. Then he set the large feathers aside and returned to stand in front of me holding a handful of baby feathers. As he worked in an extraordinarily gentle way around the perime-
ters of my heartspace, the tears began to flow from me and I surrendered to a total state of feeling. No questions. No analysis. No comparisons of this and that. My feelings have always frightened me because they run so deeply and feel so dangerously vulnerable, but I stood there, openly in front of Alberto and several members of our group, and wept. He blew on my heartspace slowly with his breath and then tossed the baby feathers into the fire.

God, the Other, Higher Power, the Magnificent, whatever one wishes to call The Divine, attended us that day. Burning in the fire. Rising out of Alberto Taxo. Encircling my body and bearing witness to my belief that God is in everything everywhere. And that, if we keep our eyes open, we can see God with arms outstretched, calling to us, asking us to put our cares and ultimatums aside and join in the dance.

A benediction from Hafiz:

Start seeing everything as God,
But keep it a secret.
Become like a man who is Awestruck
And Nourished

Listening to a Golden Nightingale
Sing in a beautiful foreign language
While God invisibly nests
Upon its tongue.

Hafiz,
Who can you tell in this world
That when a dog runs up to you
Wagging its ecstatic tail,
You lean down and whisper in its ear,

"Beloved,
I am so glad You are happy to see me.
Beloved,
I am so glad,
So very glad You have come."

To comment on this essay, or to read comments by others, visit our website: <www.sunstoneonline.com>.

NOTES


6. James, 337.


WHEN THE NUNS CAME INTO TOWN

They always came to town in twos, figuring that woe is to the solitary who if she should fall has none to raise her up.

And when they walked they did not move like you and me in jointed steps and strides but flowed within the cloisters of their robes.

I wonder now, what did they see, I mean as you and I see time in the worn places on the bannister, despair in the stains on wall paper, defeat in the threadbare tie, the curled collar of a gray-white shirt.

Did they see drunkards in the park, stricken flies in the drug store window, the burned-out day dropping ashes on the somber men and women and on children who reverently hissed their greetings on the street?

Perhaps not.

Perhaps within the cavern of their veils they saw upon the walls the shadows of these things and thought, this is what we left, this is what we could not grieve for in our leaving.

Perhaps they saw beyond the shadows and the shadowed to the darkest point of their unknowing, guessing that to be loved is not all, guessing that to love is not all, guessing that to love to love is the measure of the soul's grandeur

—FRANK L. RYAN