

Cult
(and other four-letter words)
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Part of a minister's lot, especially in our tradition, concerns the exploration and appreciation of other traditions. What I am about to tell you encompasses what amounts to an anthropological expedition of comparative religion, which brought me to discover first-hand, at great personal and emotional risk, the strange rituals of three spiritual organizations that sing of good news in unusual and unexpected ways.

It was in this pursuit that I found myself wandering into the space of a strange cabal composed mostly of women of a certain age who set themselves up on the floor, looking with reverence upon the image of their founder at the front, and faithfully following the instructions of their leader, who commanded them to carry out several repetitive movements for minutes at a time. The leader gave constant exhortations in the form of time-tested slogans. For about an hour, I followed along, and despite my apprehension, at the end of it I found myself feeling strangely revitalized. People kept coming back to this place regularly, with a zeal that seemed unconventional.

Man, I thought, this sure is a cultish place...
And that is how I found myself joining Jazzercise.

At the front the gym, an icon of Judi Sheppard Missett, founder of the Jazzercise movement, smiled back at us, her youthful smile miraculously preserved through the mysterious power of music and muscular exertion. The leader led us in complex repetitive movements, which we followed to the chorus of classics from the canon of pop, such as *I Want Candy*, Britney Spears, and of course, the Madonna of our times, Our Lady of Gaga.

Laying down on exercise mats, like prayer rugs, we prostrated ourselves in submission to the power of Michael Buble and drew strength from the voice of Beyonce to endure five minutes of an abs routine.

It can be very liberating to dance in this company. In a space where you can be part of something larger, and still be yourself. The leader takes care to give sound instruction and give proper tips on how to stay safe, but the mistakes that inevitably happen when learning new routines to the latest Rihanna release are easily overlooked—everyone else is learning as well, and the instructor knows that with some time, we'll become familiar with these routines.

And it was an inclusive place as well. Despite its silver-lined matriarchy, there were people of several ages, colours, sizes, and abilities. The male minority was also welcome. One time the leader even invited all the men to the front to show off our moves—all three of us came up. It is a place of acceptance, and though I was among the youngest, the people of longer tenure were quick to recognize me as a constant lifelong student... just like them. Lifelong students of different abilities, shapes and sizes, sweaty and smelly, messing up, having fun, healing our bodies and souls.

But of course, it would not do for a devout Unitarian Universalist like myself to draw from only one tradition. In the Sufi practice, whirling is a way of connecting with that which larger than oneself. Experienced Sufi whirlers can spin around on their axis for several minutes, even hours, as they find a centre in themselves that connects them with everything else around them. The transcendent connection they find around this axis is how they enhance their awareness of all that that is beyond themselves. It is what drives their mystical quest.

I am no such whirler.

But I have had the opportunity to appear on the odd Sunday evening at a contradance club, another obscure organization that carries out mysterious rituals led by cryptic incantations. For those of you unfamiliar with contradance it is akin to square dancing, the music features fiddle ‘n’ folk and a caller at the front prompts people to the next step in a foreign-sounding language: “Sashaying”, to the right or left, is the prompt to move along with a partner to either side, “Do-si-dos” entails two partners knocking shoulders in succession, and “to swing” is to grab a partner by the hands and hips, find a mutually-agreeable axis, and spin around until the rest of the world becomes a blur.

Half the time, it looks like half of us don’t know what we’re doing. There is a healthy dose of toe-stepping, arm-tangling, and plain not-knowing-where-the-hell-you’re-supposed-to-be, all the while trying to stay tuned to the caller’s intricate instructions: sashay to the left; sashay to the right, do-si-dos, and swing your partner!

There comes a moment during each of these sets, when the caller is no longer needed and simply goes silent, the fiddle strikes a solemn tone and the windpipes start doing all the talking, when everyone knows what they’re doing and the whole room moves intricately as if we’d been doing this our whole lives. It is those moments when each person on the dance floor can see just a bit of where the others are at, when each individual knows the collective goal. Each person’s centre is deeper in touch with what is beyond the bounds of their bodies. Swinging with a partner becomes a mystical whirl, and every changing step becomes a clarifying blur. And, for a while, the universe makes perfect sense.

It gets hot and sweaty at these gatherings, people get tired, smelly and messy.

So there are rules to keep people from losing sight of respectful interaction, codes of conduct that keep the ceremony enjoyable for everyone. This particular one is dry, lest the spinning get us to unbearable lacks balance. Well, dry except for water which is available in plenty to ensure that our bodies stay on track. If you need a break, any suitor must respect your declination. Boundaries remain in play, even in a place where hand- and hip-holding is standard.

But perhaps the most intentional code of conduct I’ve seen is when following the ancient mystical order of Slowdance. The idea of Slowdance nights is to go out, alone or with friends, with the expectation of asking people to dance and to be asked to dance.

The liturgical setup of this sect in the dancing world is very precise: with an order of service carefully marking four sets of ten slow songs each, with an interlude of fast music in between to allow for some time of mindless meditation and to shake your arms in the air like you just don’t care. The details are handed out in bright pamphlets at the entrance vestibule, in the form of a type of religious literature marked as a “dance card”.

It is in this “dance card” that their covenant is outlined, very clearly. It is recited at the beginning of their rhythmic ritual ceremony with much solemnity. The agreement is simple, firm, and welcoming. You’re expected to ask others to dance and can expect to be asked. You can also expect to decline and be declined—no questions asked. At any moment, if feeling unsafe, you can stop a dance you had previously agreed on. Anyone who does not follow this is warned that they’ll be taken out back and... consequences will be had. The organizer is very clear: you can be asked to dance by anyone of the same, different, or indeterminate gender. At any time you can say yes; at any time you can say no.

This is an intriguing community. It is a place where people can afford to take some risks, without the potential anguish of total loss. It is a place where one can be refused, without needing to *feel* rejected. It is an opportunity to feel the exhilaration of making bold moves and to feel the flattering sensation of being sought out. It is a place to be able to safely say *yes!* It is a place to be able safely say *no!*

At the end of it all you have met many people, some are a part of your life for no longer than three-and-a-half minutes. Others can become friends for a much longer time.

I have implied a cult labeling to these fine organizations... and perhaps, I am referring to them this way because I have come to recognize an obscure religious significance in what it is that they do. And perhaps the word “cult” is suspiciously reminiscent of that *other* c-word.

Church.

A sometimes problematic word, with varied layers of meaning—sometimes confusing; sometimes offensive. Among other things it is sometimes understood to be a building, or it is used to refer to certain peculiar types of people.

But my personal favourite use of the term is when it used to refer to a bunch of people getting together, usually with good cause to celebrate, and who do that in a place where they can feel that they can be themselves, with each other and with all.

You know, that community that makes covenants to respect each other, to reach out to others while respecting their boundaries, to seek a deeper understanding and growing awareness of what is beyond oneself, and to feel a fuller sense of living, accepting our different abilities and having fun with them.

It is here, in such a place, with such intentions and such commitments, that all who enter can feel they can safely practice that four-letter word:

Love.

The tie that binds us all in a kinship that defies description. It is that connection that allows for the blessing that is that *other* four-letter word:

Hope.

The inspiration to find strength in the face of overwhelming obstacles. The foundation that allows for growth and for that impacting f-word, the grand-daddy of them all:

Faith.

That courage to go forth in the face of previous experience. To trust the dawning future more, and take those vital, if terrifying leaps. Embracing refusal and its apparent rejection; embracing disappointment and its apparent failure. Recognizing the messy, smelly, sweaty reality of the hard work that lies ahead, and the healing, exciting, satisfaction of doing that work together.

So may it be,

Alleluia,

Amen.