

Let's Face the Music and Dance

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Life is hard. It is full of danger, and peril. There is so much misfortune, loss, and sorrow. Everyone has to endure hardships of some sort, and everyone has one or more handicaps to live with or to overcome. The good things of life are displayed before us, but many of these we cannot afford or are not allowed to have. What we possess, we own for a few moments and then these things pass away from us. Relationships between people are difficult to maintain and end in tragedy or tears. The living can talk to one another, but true communication between souls is at best uncertain, and often filled with misunderstanding. And as we grow older, we grow more feeble, and life gets harder yet.

I often wonder why so many people attempt life.

Had the Universe offered me, before I was born, a package with my life in it, all nicely described, and wrapped up in a bow, what would have been my response? "That is very nice, Universe, but do you have something a little taller and longer-lived, multi-lingual, financially-astute, not so shy, and with a few less allergies and absolutely no polio?"

Actually, when we are given a gift, we generally take it, and say thank you. So here I am, and here we are, and to help us along the Universe has supplied us with many interesting handbooks—the Bible, the Quran, the Practical Cogitator, the books of Robert Fulghum, Winnie the Pooh, and movies.

In the Woody Allen film *Hannah and Her Sisters*, the character Mickey, played by Woody Allen, is depressed. He had thought he had cancer, but medical tests taken by doctors showed that he was still healthy. The good news failed to cheer him, for it made him intensely aware of how frail life was. "It hit me," he said, "I'm not going to die today, . . . I'm not going to go tomorrow. But eventually, I'm going to be in that position. . . . it just takes the pleasure out of everything."

In the movie Mickey wanders around, trying different religions, hoping that heaven or nirvana or reincarnation, or some other guarantee about the future, might give him the confidence to go on living. Nothing seemed to work. He later told his girlfriend what happened to him next:

"I really hit bottom. I didn't want to go on living. I walked the streets. I walked and walked. . . . it must have been hours! My head was pounding and my feet hurt, and I had to sit down. I went into a movie house. I didn't know what was playing or anything. I just needed a moment to gather my thoughts and, and be logical, and put the world back into rational perspective. . . . the movie was [*Duck Soup*,] a film that I'd seen many times in my life since I was a kid, and I always loved it. I'm watching [the Marx brothers] on the screen, and they're real funny, and what if the worst is true? What if you only go around once and that's it? Well, you know, don't you want to be part of the experience? Just enjoy it while it lasts."

Now if I were in despair I wonder if I could be pulled out of it by the Marx brothers. Or would some other kind of movie work better? It is an interesting exercise to try to think of what film or films might be the best tonic for one's own personal despair. One day a few years ago, turning from news of the latest disaster to the movie channel, I landed in the middle of *Top Hat*, a glossy black-and-white musical from 1935. The plot to the movie is beyond stupid, the snappy dialogue frequently falls considerably short of humour, and the art deco sets look like they were made of cardboard, but when Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers begin to sing and dance, there is magic.

The magical moments scattered throughout the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals redeem the rest of the cardboard and tinsel, just as our often hard lives are redeemed by unexpected moments of magic and grace. The next few days I watched four Fred and Ginger musicals: *Top Hat*, *Swing Time*, *Shall We Dance*, and *Follow the Fleet*. I emerged with my philosophy of life, not precisely changed, but deepened and enriched.

The first moment of grace is the Irving Berlin song, “Cheek to Cheek.” Fred sings, “I’m in heaven,”—a good Universalist sentiment—“And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I seem to find the happiness I seek, when we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek.” Now I’ve never been out dancing, cheek to cheek, or otherwise. What passes for dancing among the benighted members of my generation is definitely otherwise. With my polio disability I was too shy to attempt dancing even when I was young. My motto has been the title of another Fred Astaire song, “I Won’t Dance, Don’t Ask Me.” Once, in Junior High School, when a girl I liked tried to pull me out onto the floor at a school dance, I swatted her away. You might understand my later regret. When I first got a wheelchair I tried learning to move around gracefully and rhythmically. This, for the first time gave me a sense of what it is like to dance.

I now trust Fred when he sings, “I’m in heaven and the cares that hung around me through the week seem to vanish like a gambler’s lucky streak, when we’re out together dancing cheek to cheek.” Such a moment of bliss as he experienced redeems the whole week, with all its cares. Fred can’t be happy all the time, but to find happiness sometimes, that is a great thing. And being happy, being in heaven, the cares fall away. Dancing, one lives in the moment and in that moment one finds meaning in life.

Fast forward one year to 1936. *Swing Time*. The music this time is by Jerome Kern. Ginger Rogers is in her bathroom, washing her hair. In the next room, Fred Astaire sits down at the piano and doesn’t dance. But he sings plainly and sweetly,

Some day, when I'm awfully low,
When the world is cold,
I will feel a glow just thinking of you,
And the way you look tonight.

In “Cheek to Cheek,” a night of dancing redeems the whole week; in “The Way You Look Tonight” the magic of one moment casts a spell over a whole lifetime. It shows that we have the power to frame moments of rapture in our minds, and the ability to bring these moments back to mind—not in regret, comparing the wonder of then with the misery of now—but to bring the moments back to life, to live in them, to hold them as a lasting treasure, “to feel a glow just thinking,” that is a key to remaining in heaven.

This is even more poignantly expressed in Gershwin’s “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” sung by Fred Astaire in *Shall We Dance*.

The way your smile just beams
The way you sing off key
The way you haunt my dreams
No they can't take that away from me

Within us all there is a treasure that cannot be taken away. These precious things are moments, moments spent with one another, or alone in bliss. Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is your heart will be also.” Your best treasures are the things that cannot be destroyed by time, or taken by others, they are the times, as Fred sang, that they can’t take away from me: the memories, the dreams, the moments that we take with us into a heaven transcending daily life. And, even more important, our treasures are the things that make

us who we are, our talents and character, our families, friends, and vocations, those abilities and partners that enable us to live our lives engaged in an intricate and elegant dance.

In the Astaire and Rogers movie *Follow the Fleet* there is a little scene that forms a story within a story, a story entirely told in dance. A debonair gentleman, played by Fred Astaire, has just lost the last of his money gambling. He now has nothing to spend, and all the other characters, who used to flock around him, snub him when he tries to greet them. Without resources, and spurned by society, he goes out onto a rooftop, takes out a gun and thinks of shooting himself. At that moment he spots a woman, played by Ginger Rogers, who is climbing up onto the railing, intending to hurl herself over the edge. He rushes over and pulls her back from the brink. She reaches for his gun, but he snatches it away, then hurls it into the night. Then he begins to sing,

There may be trouble ahead
But while there's moonlight and music and love and romance
Let's face the music and dance

We all have much trouble to face in our lives. There is inevitable death—what Woody Allen worried about—that will come at some uncertain future time. There are the cares of the week, that Fred Astaire escaped while dancing cheek to cheek. Then there are the special and spectacular disasters—to our finances, to our relationships, to our pride—that plague us, that make us wonder if life is worth continuing. But one only has to watch Fred and Ginger facing the music and dancing to realize that whatever the price of our lives, however much it may cost us in suffering, that short dance is worth it. And the grace they eventually show in the face of the “trouble ahead,” gives us pride in being human, even with our limitations. We are given so many gracious gifts of the day and night—including moonlight and music and love and romance—so much with which to lay up a heaven on earth, giving us the internal resources to “face the music,” and, facing that music, not to shrivel up and perish, but, in spite of everything, to dance.

Jesus prayed, “give us this day.” This is our gift, the day. Not an eternity or even an eon, but a day. It is, granted, a short time, but let us see what we can make of it. And he said, in that day, “do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat and what you shall drink, nor about your body, and what you shall put on. And which of you by being anxious can add to his span of life? Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.” And Fred Astaire sang, “There may be trouble ahead, but while there's moonlight and music and love and romance . . .” “the cares that hung around me through the week seem to vanish . . . when we're out together dancing cheek to cheek.” “Let's face the music and dance.”