

Let it Be a Dance
Embracing Our Core Values in the Year Ahead

By
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“Let it be a Dance” is a pleasant-sounding phrase and the title of a favorite song in our Unitarian Universalist Hymnal. “Let it be a dance we do. May I have this dance with you. Through the good time and the bad times too, let it be a dance.” But dancing has historically been more controversial than romantic. It comes from the Middle English word *daunce* meaning “the whole business.” When “the whole business” was discovered, they would say “the daunce is don,” similar to what we mean today by “the jig is up.” *Daunce* referred to somebody getting caught going about something unseemly or crooked and leading someone else in a *daunce* was to lead them astray.

This may be why some conservative religions still consider dancing a “sin.” There’s the old joke about why Baptists don’t have sex standing up. Because someone might think they’re dancing. Most dances, even some of the tamest by today’s standards, were once considered lewd. The Waltz, for example, a form of 13th century folk dancing that originated among German peasants, finally made its way onto the ballroom floors of high society in the 18th century, when it became highly controversial and was condemned by many for being scandalous and immoral.

Prior to the Waltz, even among the common folk, the only physical contact made between dancers was the brief touching of hands at arm’s length, while moving from one partner to another. But the Waltz required just two dancers, male and female, to hold onto each other closely in a sustained embrace of the waste and shoulders while gazing into each other’s eyes, a posture that was considered sexually suggestive by public standards of the time. By the mid-20th century, the Waltz had become popular all over the world and soon lost its social edginess.

The famous pop star and composer of his day, Johann Strauss, once despised by many a parent for the sway his Waltz music had over their impressionable teenagers, became boring and passe, eventually making way for the even more sexually suggestive undulations of Elvis Presley’s hips, along with the Rocking and Rolling rhythms and motions of other popstars that drove teenagers crazy. Moshing is about the most controversial form of dancing in recent history, also called slam-dancing, in which participants, usually at Heavy Metal concerts, really do slam into each other, full frontal, with their bodies.

So, dancing has long been an expression of generational contention between new generations attempting to shrug off some of the oppressive cultural mores of the past and those wishing to maintain them.

But this isn’t so only of sexual mores. The most popular dances, like the Waltz, often originated among common and rural people—folk dancing—who did not rank themselves according to class. As members of the same class, they danced together as equals. But as

this particular folk dance finally made its way onto the ballroom floors of high society, threatening to replace the Minuet, it symbolically threatened to replace the Upper Middle and Ruling classes of the day with Democracy, which they considered a “dangerous” idea. Remember, the French Revolution and the abolition of feudalism would occur until near the end of the 18th century. The Minuet, on the other hand, which had been popular throughout Europe since the 17th century, and was particularly popular in the court of France’s King Louis XIV, began only after the dancers involved were organized according to their social rank. But a dance originating from the common folk that did not recognize such rank, threatened the social order itself. When it came to radically bucking the system, Elvis’s 20th century pelvis had nothing on the 17th century Waltz.

Disco dancing, which emerged in the 1970’s as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights movement was also despised by the old guard. The Disco dance floor resembled the diversity of society itself: integrating races, allowing men to dance with other men, and women with women, and it was where people of all races and genders could use its music medium to hit the big time. Along with those famous white bands like the Bee Gees and ABBA, were black artists like Gloria Gaynor, Donna Summer, Kool & the Gang, Earth Wind & Fire, and integrated groups like KC & Sunshine Band, and gay groups like the Village People.

John Travolta’s hit movie *Saturday Night Fever* may have made Disco seem like the latest craze among a generation of rebellious straight-white teenagers, but it was the dance of a promising new society in which all people, black and white, male and female, gay and straight held equal footing and interacted together. It represented a threat to the old order, including to the Rock ‘n Roll scene, which birthed an anti-Disco movement fueled by popular slogans like “Disco Sucks” and “Death to Disco.”

Such animosity culminated with Disco Demolition Night on July 12, 1979. Begun by Chicago Radio DJ Steve Dahl, and promoted by Major League Baseball, more than 50 thousand people showed up Comiskey Park, 30 thousand more than were expected. The price of admission to the doubleheader was only 98¢ for those who brought a disco record for demolition. So many turned out that Park officials had to close the gates before everyone could enter. Thousands of them stormed the field, preventing the second game from happening, which had to be forfeited by the White Sox, even as Dahl blew up the thousands of Disco records he’d promised to destroy.

Let it be a dance we do. May I have this dance with you: A sweet request, but there is much more to dancing than swaying or grooving to the music for a few minutes with someone we like. When we are invited to dance, it may be an invitation to buck the system. It may be an invitation to help widen our circle of inclusion. It may be an invitation to join in the struggle to make the world more just for everyone. It may be an invitation to move forward together, even if we’re a little out of step with our dance partners, and even an invitation to get our toes stepped on by a few of them.

As sweet as it sounds, as much as we might romanticize it, dancing is serious business. Agreeing to do so shouldn't come easy to us. We need to think about who we're willing to dance with and what kind of dance we're willing to do. Our Generosity Team has made "Let it Be a Dance," the theme of this year's stewardship campaign, during which we ask you to continue your financial support of our church by considering what it means to you and to our greater community. This year they are asking you to do so by inviting you to dance and it is my task to kick it all off with what we playfully call our "Sermon on the Amount." I'm guessing, so far, I've not necessarily put you in the mood for dancing, but I trust we'll get there.

Admittedly, I'm not much of a dancer. Frankenstein's monster has better moves than me. So, I could just be the last person who should pitch our pledge campaign based on a dance-metaphor. Poor as I am at it, however, I think "Let it be a Dance" is one of the better themes we've had in a while and I'm delighted to reflect upon its implications for our congregation and our ministry.

Again, before accepting such an invitation, we have to consider who is asking us and just what kind of dancing are they asking us to do. Are we being asked to dance only with those who think as we do, or who want to convince us to think like them? Are we being asked to dance a minuet or waltz? The minuet, from the French word for "minute" or "small," requires only small steps and no serious connection with others, especially not with those we consider less than ourselves. The Waltz, on the other hand, require us to embrace others and to look them in the eyes, the sort of gaze that can only occur among equals, a relationship with neither shame nor dominance. Or maybe we're being asked to Disco dance by helping to make our society and world a more open and inclusive place where those of many diverse backgrounds are free to express themselves by cutting loose.

For me, when Unitarians sing about dancing together, we're singing about working together to take on some of life's greatest difficulties and challenges and moving together toward our highest aspirations, even amidst our own imperfections, difficulties, and differences. For some religions, and, sadly, some in our own religion, its but an invitation to get into a line dance, with everyone moving in the same way and direction. I'm sure line dancing can be fun, but as a metaphor it's not how Unitarians express our values, not by getting into line. Nor can our religion be likened to slam-dancing. Of course, we sometimes clash with each other, but as Unitarians our disposition should be to cope with our conflicts in ways that are honest, but never violent, forceful, or cruel.

Nor, as a nontraditional religion, do we engage in traditional ways of dancing during which someone leads and others follow. Ours is a liberal religion that is supposed to be free of authoritarian leadership at every level. Through our democratic processes we relegate certain limited authority to those we have asked to carry out various responsibilities on our

behalf, but never to make decisions outside the boundaries of the bylaws and policies we have determined together. Our ministers don't govern or congregations any more than congregants govern our ministers. The Unitarian Universalist Association, furthermore, is only our service organization, whether they know it or not, not our liberal religion's theological, ideological, or moral authority. Nor in our congregations is it appropriate for individuals who don't necessarily get their way to go about politicizing their positions behind the scenes in ways that are deceptive and disrespectful. That's not how we dance.

But no community is perfect and none of us is always at our best or at our worst. That's part of what it means to go dancing in a Unitarian church, to put up with our imperfections, with our humanity, and to treat each other with forgiveness and understanding, and to sometimes let go and let others when we don't get our way. Nor do we moralize our opinions so that we begin to think ill of those with whom we disagree. For such behavior is the antithesis of the ideological tolerance Unitarianism is rooted in.

So, *Let it be a dance* doesn't mean we are all moving in lockstep, choreographed by some overarching theology that leads us to all think alike. It doesn't mean we are always moving in perfect unison and harmony. For Unitarians, it means moving toward our common goals even amidst our many differences and working through those differences in ways that are respectful and tolerant.

So, no, our invitation to dance isn't as romantic as it might initially sound. It's an invitation to address our shared concerns together, to help make the world a more inclusive and just place for everyone, and to know you are not alone when you buck the system or challenge the status quo. It's an invitation to be at your best by working together with some you may disagree with, and to learn to let go and let be. But it is also an invitation to be yourself in a place where you are not judged for who you are or how you dance. After all, even Frankenstein's monster can cut a rug in a Unitarian church.

This year, "Let it be dance" is our way of asking you to financially support our church and its mission to the larger community and world. It's not always easy, and is sometimes a real struggle, especially when we're working for positive changes in our world. But, by joining each other on the dance floor of our lives, we are and have been able to accomplish a lot during the past 135 years of our church's presence in Spokane. In recent years, we've often taken on Goliath and proven victorious. I think about our key role in the passage of marriage equality in our state, and of the first law decriminalizing marijuana in our country, and helping to stop new coal and oil export facilities from being constructed off the shores of our beautiful state, and of Washington's moratorium on the Death Penalty. And, these days, I think about the central role our congregation is playing in the preservation of our liberal religion itself, which has fallen under the control of traditional religious authoritarians who are attempting to make a dogmatic, hierarchical religion of it.

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Facing such challenges, achieving such victories, and, sometimes, facing failure together, is what we mean at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane when we invite you to dance. It's not always fun, although it often is. But it is always meaningful and purposeful. So, I thank you in advance for your generous support of our church and its ministry, and for your willingness to join us on the dance floor of life where we move together in our own unique ways, sometimes out of sync, occasionally stepping on a few toes or getting our own toes stepped on, forgiving each other for our missteps and remaining gracious, even if we aren't always graceful to watch. Whether you prefer the Waltz or the Disco, are a ballet dancer or belly dancer, a swing dancer or tap dancer, prefer the Macarena or Hip Hop, *Let it be a dance, we do. May I have this dance with you? Through the good times and the bad time too. Let it be a dance.*