

Why do we dance during times of pain and stress?

By Sue Hodson

'It is good to dance when you are happy, but it is better to Dance when you are sad.'

(Richard Wurmbrand, Romanian Pastor and author)

I sat listening to this venerable father of the faith as he shared a little of his experiences in jail. He had been imprisoned in Romania for 12 years for his faith. We were at a dance conference in Maryland, USA and he had been recognized at the hotel and asked to address us. As he spoke, tears streamed down my face. He had used his chains to make music, had danced on mangled feet, had prayed for those of us living in the West and had ministered to me through his books. He had learnt the secret of the sacrifice of praise.

'**Dance in the Rain**' was not just a quote for him. It was a life principle.

2020 saw the world change as we know it and all over the world, people reacted. A little-known song, "Jerusalema," was composed by South African DJ Master KG and singer, Nomcebo from his Johannesburg recording studio in 2019 and became a popular song in South Africa during that summer. You will be forgiven if you did not know it then, as its popularity only began to spread when an Angolan team of dancers videoed themselves dancing to it while they ate lunch. To their surprise, it went viral and for the rest of 2020, it became the inspirational Lockdown dance challenge all over the world.

Sung in Zulu, the song's lyrics are gospel-esque.

Jerusalem

My place is not here,

x 2

Jerusalem, my home.

Rescue me,

Join me,

Don't leave me here!

x 2

**My place is not here,
My kingdom is not here,
Rescue me!
Come with me!**

**Save me, save me, save me,
Don't leave me here,
Save me, save me, save me,
Don't leave me here!**

<https://lyricstranslate.com/en/jerusalem-jerusalem.html-0>

Many churches and denominations have taken to the dance, but it has not been limited to Christians. Zimbabwe's most renowned human rights lawyer recorded a version of the dance; so did a team of Romanian firefighters, and many dozen socially distanced flash mobs around the world.

To date, "Jerusalema" has been streamed more than 96 million times on Spotify and is one of the top searches globally on the music identification application, Shazam. It hit the top five charts in Belgium, France, Hungary, Netherlands, and Switzerland and was No. 1 on Billboard's world digital song sales chart in mid-September. Our South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, urged South Africans to celebrate their South African-ness and take up the challenge to do the Jerusalema Challenge on Heritage Day in September 2020. And we did!

From Angola to Zermatt, everyone's dancing to the addictive beat. But there is more to it than meets the ear.

The neuroscience of dance is growing and although it is a relatively new field of research, there have been a number of articles written about how dance helps us and wires our brains. In an article by Aili Breshahan, Associate Professor of Philosophy, University of Dayton, she states:

'Dance is good because it expresses human nature – it's not just fun, ...It's not just exercise, either. At its best, dance is an extension and expression of who we are as human beings in ways that can allow us to share emotions that increase our sense of community and connection. Therefore, in good times and bad, in times of war, slavery, fleeing homelands and during pandemics, (people) still bounce, leap and spin.'

Many people are 'zoomed out' and feel isolated and stressed. On the one hand, it has been wonderful to connect with others via Zoom and other online programs. On the other hand, we have been left with online fatigue and possibly even more of a sense of isolation. The need to connect physically and emotionally with others is human and according to dance philosopher, Kimerer LaMothe, it is the beginning point of all human life. It is not only a physical need, but the psychological benefits are important too. Dance is one way to beat the feelings of isolation, stress, and depression that many of us feel.

Aili Bresnahan states:

‘My daughter, for example, belongs to one of Dartmouth College’s dance teams, Ujima. She and her teammates have kept up both rehearsals and flash performances through social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube. Rehearsing, she tells me “is one of the few things keeping me sane and connected to my friends right now.”

Of course, dance helps our physical bodies by improving joint mobility, fitness levels, balance and helps to keep our weight down. Whether you are able to spend an hour a day or 20 minutes a day- every bit helps. (Especially with Lockdown nibblitis!)

Parkinson’s patients are experiencing the benefits of movement on their bodies and minds. Even sitting down, the repetition of moves, the music and the physical movements all work together towards keeping the neural pathways open and muscles working.

Dancing is a release – physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It is an escape, yes, but escaping is not always a bad thing. Retreating into those things that make us more human enables us to face the difficult times in our world. Dancing provides a way for us to figure the world out, by allowing us to wrestle with difficult topics through the most basic of means: movement.

Movement pre-dates language and the written word. Our (common, shared) ancestors danced to relate to one another and figure out the world around them. They danced to celebrate the good things, such as a successful hunt or a good harvest, or the changing of the seasons. They also danced to keep the bad out of their lives.

We first move to engage with the world around us. Babies, for example, root for their mother’s breast. As we grow, so do our movements such as pulling, creeping, crawling, and walking. We connect with others as we move, outside the pretexts of coded language and conduct. We reach another’s heart through moving together. For thousands of years, Dance has been a universal aspect of the human existence and is part of our collective DNA. Dancing on a regular basis seems to change the way we think and interact with one another.

We should consider every day that we have not danced at least once...a lost day (Nietzsche).

In a 2017 article, "[A Dancer's Brain Develops in a Unique Way](#)," Poikonen writes:

"In dance, the basic elements of humanity combine in a natural way. It combines creative act, fine-tuned movement and collaboration, much like playing music. The movement involves the whole body, like in sports ... Studies on producing music and movement show how during cooperation, the brains of two people become attuned to the same frequency. This is apparent in how the low-frequency brain waves of the participants become synchronized.

Brain synchronization enables seamless cooperation and is necessary for creating both harmonic music and movement. The ability to become attuned to another person's brain frequency is essential for the function of any empathetic community. Pain, stress, and anxiety often go hand in hand with depression. Dance, music, and related expressive forms of therapy could help lessen mental fluctuations even before the onset of full depression," Poikonen said. Based on a growing body of empirical evidence, she believes that dance-based movement can be used as part of holistic treatment for conditions such as Parkinson's disease, chronic pain, dementia, autism, and mood disorders."

In the research conducted by authors Sabine Koch (Ph.D.) and Robyn Cruz (Ph.D.), they discovered that the effects of dance improve our quality of life, body image, well-being and decrease the effects of anxiety and stress. In hard times, we need to engage in a little rebellion and create instead of bowing down to anxiety and stress.

The Poet Alice Walker expresses my thoughts exactly:

'Hard times require furious dancing. Each of us is proof.'

We know, as Believers, that we cannot separate our Spirit, Soul and Body. We function holistically. A study from the journal *'The Arts in Psychotherapy (2007)'*, discovered that dance therapy had a positive effect on participants experiencing symptoms of depression. In dance therapy, patients are encouraged to communicate conscious and unconscious feelings through dance. Physical expression is used instead of words.

As Christian dancers we have experienced this in workshops, ministry and in our own lives as we have expressed our groanings without words, our joys in movement and our prayers or prophecies communicated in actions. There is power in moving and speaking the Word. There is power in the physical expression of our deepest emotions.

'Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words'

St. Francis of Assisi

Scripture, as we know, uses many dance words to express emotion. For Example:

Psalm 30:11 says, 'You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.'

In conducting a word study on dance, there were several that I found rather revealing:

Strong's Number: 02342

1. to twist, whirl, dance, writhe, fear, tremble, travail, be in anguish, be pained
 - a. (Qal)
 1. to dance
 2. to twist, writhe
 3. to whirl, whirl about
 - b. (Polel)
 1. to dance
 2. to writhe (in travail with), bear, bring forth
 3. to wait anxiously
 - c. (Pulal)
 1. to be made to writhe, be made to bear
 2. to be brought forth
 - d. (Hophal) to be born
 - e. (Hithpolel)
 1. whirling (participle)
 2. writhing, suffering torture (participle)
 3. to wait longingly
 - f. (Hithpalpel) to be distressed

King James Word Usage - Total: 62

pain 6, formed 5, bring forth 4, pained 4, tremble 4, travail 4, dance 2, calve 2, grieved 2, grievous 2, wounded 2, shake 2, miscellaneous 2

These were not the usual words that have been used to describe and justify dance from the Scriptures. These words are uncomfortable. The images produced are not the kind I would normally associate with Christian Dance. There are the joyful words out there, I know, but these stood out to me. Is the Lord showing us something deeper?

We have, in the past, danced joyfully and lifted our bodies and spirits in praise to the One who is Sovereign. During this Covid -time, we have danced out of obedience, we have not done much performing (what's the point- there is no-one to see it) We have danced for that Audience of One. I have observed that there have been many requests for dance intercession online. In the Western Cape, South Africa, members of the CDFSA have ministered outside of hospitals and in other public spaces. I wonder how much of the intercession has been birthed out of travailing and writhing in our dances in our alone time with Father. We are waiting longingly for His intervention and many believe that the time of birthing is upon us.

In conclusion, what an opportunity for us, as dancers, to lead the way to wholeness through our expressions, our prayers and our joyful explorations!

**Lord, I dance because I can do nothing else.
Words are not enough. The emotions are too raw.
When tears dry up and all seems lost, I dance.
When Joy comes in the morning, I will dance.
You have taken off my sackcloth and I will dance.
Your Word says that You order our steps, so I dance.
I surrender to your Sovereignty; I trust in You and dance.**



References

- Hanna Poikonen. ["Dance on Cortex - ERPs and Phase Synchrony in Dancers and Musicians During a Contemporary Dance Piece"](#), University of Helsinki (May 2018)
- Sabine Koch Ph.D., Teresa Kunz M.Sc., Sissy Lykou M.A., Robyn Cruz Ph.D. ["Effects of dance movement therapy and dance on health-related psychological outcomes: A meta-analysis"](#), *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, Vol. 41, Issue 1 (February 2014), pages 46-64.
- Aili Bresnahan. <http://theconversation.com/a-philosopher-explains-why-dance-can-help-pandemic-proof-your-kids-138398>