



**Polly Burns** shares how being dedicated to a daily dance practice has influenced her relationship with God, her work as an equine facilitated psychotherapist and her physical health

**W**hen you hear the phrase 'contemplative prayer', what words or images immediately spring to your mind? When I put this question to a couple of online communities I belong to, replies flooded in. The same words and images were repeated over and over again: stillness, silence, calm, openness, awareness, solitude, yielding, surrender, and many more of a similar vein. I resonated with all of them and until a few months ago probably would have thought that was it; that was what contemplative prayer was all about.

To be fair to my online respondents there were hints of something other than the peaceful and serene imagery, including comments like 'holy discomfort', 'confronting darkness' and 'awe is not very far from terror'. But there were only two words that were linked to the body, and they were 'breath' and 'dance'.

A lot of dance I have witnessed and taken part in within the church has been of the liturgical kind. Like Lesley Orr, writing in *Wrestling and Resting*, I have to make a confession that 'sometimes, whilst participating in earnest and meaningful liturgical movement, a wee voice pipes up from either my feet or my gut: "Yes, but when will the real dancing start?"' I have always loved to dance. My father taught me to ballroom dance as a little girl and the popular song *Dance with my father again* can still reduce me to tears. Whilst involved in a Charismatic church, I led a children's workshop where mime clowning and dance were integral to the way we expressed our worship, and in the intercessors group, dance was used to pray for others or to interpret scripture. But to experience dance as a contemplative

prayer? I had no idea that it was a possibility. It would take a call to pilgrimage to change that.

Three months ago I walked out of my physiotherapist's office feeling a little stunned. I had gone to see him because of recurring neck pain and difficulty opening my jaw. After a brief examination he was blunt: no horse riding, no mucking out, no lifting hay-nets, no sweeping... all this to a woman who earns her keep as an equine facilitated psychotherapist and spends her days on a farm with four horses to care for.

It appeared that the spondylitis in my spine, connected to an autoimmune disease I have had since teenage years, had deteriorated. That afternoon I sat on a hillside, watching the girl who works for me ride my horses in the sunshine. Across the valley, the ruins of Buildwas Abbey were just visible through the trees. Buildwas, home to Cistercian monks centuries ago, had been a source of inspiration to me through the long hard winter as I struggled to care for my horses in difficult conditions. The Cistercian emphasis on being close to the land had led me deeper into the writings of John O'Donohue, who says: 'Landscape is the first born of creation. It was here hundreds of millions of years before the flowers, the animals or the people appeared. It is the most ancient presence in the world, though it needs a human presence to acknowledge it?.'

Now it seemed that the landscape I was being called to was my own physicality. Historically the body has had a hard time in the church. Like many others growing up in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s, I was steeped in the doctrine of

# Dance, therapy and spirituality

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original sin. Philip Newell, writing about the tension between good and evil humans find within themselves, describes the attitude to the physical body that has stalked churches for centuries:

'Our Western Christian tradition often has given the impression, and at times has explicitly taught, that this tension is primarily between the soul and the body. The result has been a denigration of the human body and a distrust of our deepest physical energies. The biblical term "the flesh" which refers to the sinful tendency in us to disregard our inmost self, incorrectly has been equated with "the body". The flesh and the body in the New Testament are different concepts. The consequences of the confusion have been disastrous<sup>3</sup>.'

It is not just the churches that have been affected. In my work as an equine facilitated psychotherapist, I see clients from all backgrounds who are distrusting of, or disconnected from their bodies. They walk into a round pen and are faced with a 600 kilo sentient being, a mammal like them, who shares a very similar emotional brain. The horse, a prey animal, has survived for thousands of years by being able to accurately read the emotional states of their herd members so as to be able to flee at the first sign of danger.



One of the exercises I do with clients involves getting them to establish a rapport with the horse, and then, but using only their body language, intent and energy, asking the horse to move around. People often find it frustrating, and sometimes scary, going into their mind and trying to think of ways to make the horse move. But again and again we bring them back to their breath, asking them to follow the impulses of their body and intuition in order to find relationship, rather than trying to control and dominate. When people are able to stay with the process and begin to focus on their breath and navigate the relationship by feel, rather than by thought, a magic seems to happen. The horse begins to respond, and before long, we see a dance taking shape. At that moment the round pen stops being just a fenced-off piece of grass in a field and becomes a liminal space: a place of transformation. At such times I am reminded of another circle, one that is formed week after week in Iona Abbey where there is the 'laying on of hands' during the service of prayers for healing. We see joy and tears in the Abbey; people talk of deep connection and of feeling held. And so it is in the round pen: healing happens as people find themselves moving as one with the horse, twisting and turning with rhythm and grace. Folk who have never set foot in a church talk of such experiences being 'sacred' or 'special'.

Following the meeting with my physiotherapist I committed to a period of intense rehabilitation. As well as regular hydrotherapy workouts prescribed by the clinic, I joined an online dance sadhana at Girl on Fire Movement Studio<sup>4</sup>. This dance practice, based on yoga, teaches you to 'breathe and wait' before executing any movement. Christine Claire Reed, from Girl on Fire, describes this daily dance as a 'spiritual practice'. She talks about the discipline of showing up, even when we are tired, in pain or just plain busy. Reed says that a human being coming deeply into connection with their body is intrinsically a sacred act<sup>4</sup>.

John O'Donohue is even more explicit: 'The body is sacred... The body is a sacrament. The old traditional definition captures this beautifully. A sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace<sup>2</sup>.'

The human brain is the master of storytelling, able to fabricate reasons

for all manner of behaviours. However, as O'Donohue goes on to say: 'The body is... very truthful. You know that your body rarely lies. Your mind can deceive you and put all kinds of barriers between you and your true nature; but your body does not lie. Your body tells you, if you attend to it, how your life is and whether you are living from your soul or from the labyrinths of your negativity<sup>5</sup>.'

This has been my experience with people as they allow themselves to be fully in their body, and connect both with the struggles in their life and also with the image of God that may have been covered up or masked and long forgotten. In my own journey of recent months, alongside the 260 others in the online community I am part of, dedicated to a daily dance practice, the result has been a deepening of my awareness of God's presence in my life, a releasing of stuck patterns of thinking and a vast improvement in my physical health.

As George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, states: 'We have been given union with God, whether we like it or not, know it or not, want it or not. Our flesh is His flesh and we can't jump out of our skins... It is a free spontaneous gift of the living God. And it happened for everyone<sup>7</sup>'.

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## Biography

Polly Burns is an integrative psychotherapist, working in Shropshire. She incorporates equine facilitated psychotherapy and environmental arts therapy into her clinical practice and into the retreats and workshops she runs. Polly is also a member of the Iona Community and holds the role of Prayer Circle Co-ordinator. Email [polly@paton-brown.co.uk](mailto:polly@paton-brown.co.uk)

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