

## Dancing in Fields of Grace

by Shannon Shogren

I recently entered a new season of life: I became a grandma on January 1, 2007. My grandson, Kadaj Braedon Johnson, arrived almost six weeks early, but he's managed to catch up fairly quickly. He looks just like his father did at that age, with a big, bald head, café-au-lait-colored skin, and chunky ankles. He has my son's disposition, too, and is pretty mellow most of the time. They came to visit us in Minnesota last month. It was nice to be able to hold him rather than just admire him over the iSight webcam. They got to stay for a nice long eight days, and it was hard to take them back to the airport; but it was as I was driving home afterwards that I was inspired to write this. It takes about one and a half hours to get from the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport to my house. I took the opportunity to leave my children at home with their father so I could have some rare alone time in the car.

Spring and summer in Minnesota are so worth the harsh winters for me. Shortly after moving from Las Vegas, I discovered what a boost to my daily mood living in a place with four seasons was. I just love watching the land green up when the snow melts and the first rain falls. So, as I was driving home from the airport, I just soaked in all the green fields and trees surrounding me while I surfed radio stations. We used to have a really cool independent alternative music station, but it couldn't survive in a market dominated by the ones owned by Clear Channel and the other big corporations. Even though most contemporary Christian music nauseates me, I stopped on a Christian radio station to listen to a song because it was by someone I knew from Sacramento.

Anyway, as I listened awhile longer to this station, I heard a song called "Fields of Grace" by the timeless and highly-celebrated Big Daddy Weave. The name of the group notwithstanding, it was the hook line that caught my attention: "Dancin' with my Father God in fields of grace." You know when you're alone in the car and you can actually hear the lyrics, so you don't embarrass yourself later by singing "Dancin' just to bother frogs in heels and lace?" I just happened to be driving through field after field of corn and beans at the time which magnified the imagery of this line immensely, and I couldn't help but relate this phrase to the utter joy we have in the fullness of salvation. Yet how many of us are missing the dance in the name of piety?

There's a song in the Stephen Schwartz Broadway smash hit musical, "Wicked", entitled "Dancing Through Life." The song is the credo of Fiyero, a carefree college-age hedonist who invites fellow students to party with him. His philosophy is "live for the moment and have fun." He sings these words:

The trouble with school is  
They always try to teach the wrong lesson  
Believe me, I've been kicked out  
Of enough of them to know  
They want you to become less callow  
Less shallow  
But I say: why invite stress in?  
Stop studying strife

And learn to live "the unexamined life":  
Dancing through life  
Skimming the surface  
Gliding where turf is smooth  
Life's more painless  
For the brainless  
Why think too hard?  
When it's so soothing  
Dancing through life  
No need to tough it  
When you can slough it off as I do  
Nothing matters  
But knowing nothing matters  
It's just life  
So keep dancing through  
Dancing through life  
Swaying and sweeping  
And always keeping cool  
Life is fraught-less  
When you're thoughtless  
Those who don't try  
Never look foolish  
Dancing through life  
Mindless and careless  
Make sure you're where less  
Trouble is rife  
Woes are fleeting  
Blows are glancing  
When you're dancing  
Through life

Steven Schwartz' goal is to describe the absurdity of a life without introspection, but for me the song is a better illustration of how we, especially as Christians, have a skewed perception of introspection.

I can recall walking the aisle at the Southern Baptist church where I grew up, on average, about 3 times a month. Instead of listening to the sermon, I would sit in the pew thinking about all the ways I had not lived "the Christian life" during the week. So, of course, I needed to "rededicate my life" so I could "get right with Jesus." I longed to be just like everyone else in that sanctuary, or so I thought. I thought that everyone else lived a perfectly acceptable life outside of the church building, and I was the only one who struggled every minute of the day with sinful thoughts.

It's ironic that it is generally easier for unbelievers to admit their failures than for Christians, especially to one another. And don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating gossip. I have seen firsthand how destructive that can be. No, what I mean is that we ought not to be afraid to tell our brothers and sisters in Christ when we're struggling with sin, and I don't mean just the stuff that's easy to admit. My Baptist church had frequent prayer and praise nights where we shared the wonderful things

God had been doing in our lives, but the "prayer" portion was limited to requests for prayer because of illness or financial strife or traveling mercies, all of which are certainly deserving of prayer, but I never once heard anyone stand up and say, "You know, I'd like y'all to pray for me because I'm unkind to my wife;" Or, "I was disrespectful to my husband this week;" Or, "I swore at my kids today;" Or, "I'm addicted to pornography."

Galatians 6:1,2 says:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

The "law of Christ" is not ostracizing a person who struggles with homosexual thoughts. The law of Christ is coming alongside that person and confessing to them that you've had those same thoughts at least once in your life and asking, "How can I pray for you?" The load is always easier to bear when there are others sharing the weight of it with you. We are a covenant community; we exist in one Body. When we injure a leg, the rest of the body compensates and carries the weight until that leg is restored to full function.

There's a wonderful young man in our homeschool co-op who was the model of homeschooler perfection on the outside. He was a 4-H ambassador, he volunteered hours and hours at the nursing home, and he even knows how to can applesauce: the true test of a homeschooler. But he's now away at boarding school because he was struggling with homosexuality. Nobody took that young man aside and told him that Christians everywhere struggle with these very issues. No one stepped up to the plate to bear his burden because nobody knew about it.

My best friend in high school was a choir nerd just like me. We were even choir nerds together in college. While I was away at law school, my friend started dating a guy and after about six months, discovered she was pregnant. But because she knew I was a Christian and had very strong opinions about abortion, she wouldn't tell me about her predicament. Instead, she sought advice from all sorts of people who told her a baby at that time in her life was a really bad idea. So, she had an abortion. Although it saddened me that she took the life of her child instead of allowing another family to provide a home for the baby, I was hurt that she thought I wouldn't want to be her friend anymore if I found out what she had done. When she did finally tell me about it years later, I assured her that just because I didn't choose abortion when I found myself in similar circumstances did mean I wasn't tempted by it. She was shocked! She couldn't believe a Christian would actually admit to being tempted in such a manner. It's just more evidence that we're so caught up in being exemplary Christians in our communities that we're not allowed to confess our shortcomings to one another, lest we be found imperfect. We can't let on to the unbelieving world that we fall prey to the same temptations they do.

We've all been witness to the media's coverage of public figures in the Christian sphere, especially when a particularly juicy scandal is uncovered. But what makes it so juicy? Why is the general public so eager to crucify these people? Could it be our rampant hypocrisy? Make no mistake: Christians aren't fooling anyone. People can

see behind the mask of piety. We may not admit our shortcomings, but they are far from secret. The public is more than able to recognize the hypocrisy of our lives and is very reluctant to forgive. And who can blame them? Why would anyone want to forgive someone who spews condemnation from their mouth week after week on television, demonizing people for their sin? Making them feel different, ashamed, humiliated? It's no wonder so many Americans are unwilling to accept the invitation to the dance. Why would they when it's been described for them as a list of rules they must keep once they join the club instead of an intimate relationship with Someone Who is able to identify with their inability to keep even one of the rules?

If you've never read Ward Fenley's article on Psalm 69, please do so at your earliest convenience. It's entitled, "[The Sins of Christ](#)." Now, before you run outside to find suitable projectiles for the stoning, listen to Ward's words from the article, for I could say them no better than he:

"Of course we believe that Christ was the Lamb without spot and without blemish, perfectly holy in every thought and action. He was not cursed while He lived His life. He was not dead while He lived His life. He was not made sin while He lived His life. Yet upon the cross He became every terrible and unholy thing we ever committed. Not only that, but He underwent the punishment due unto us. He became dead. My contention is that in Christ's immeasurable love for His children, He actually became everything we were in such a real way that He would go so far as to even pray to the Father, 'Thou knowest My foolishness; and My sins are not hid from Thee.' What could be greater and more unconditional love than Christ actually humiliating Himself as to say 'My foolishness' before His Father, with whom He lived in eternity. He made our foolishness His foolishness. Christ wanted the Father to look upon Him as sinful instead of us. He wanted the Father to look upon Him as foolish instead of us. He, 'for the joy set before Him,' which would be the deliverance of His bride, 'endured the cross and despised the shame.' This is not a slander against the holy Savior. Actually this passage simply illuminates the magnitude of the love of Christ in becoming what we were to the extent that He would confess 'His' foolishness and sin before the Father."

I love Ward's treatment of that Psalm. After reading those words, I understand better why the writer of Hebrews said, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who [not just in *some* respect, but] in *every* respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Jesus knows our every weakness because He owned our sin. The Reformers call it "the great exchange." I love that phrase. He took our sin; we receive His righteousness. So why do we keep going back to our list of rules when we stand spotless before the risen Savior?

Hebrews 12:22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

We have been the recipient of the greatest one-sided deal in history, but you'd never know it by looking at modern Christianity. We're so caught up in our appearance.

There was another line in the song I heard on the radio that caught my attention: "There's a place where religion finally dies/There's a place that I lose my selfish pride." Now, I've tried to write songs, but most of them are fairly lame. I just don't have enough creativity to write anything really meaningful. So, when I hear a new song, I often analyze it, trying to uncover the secret of why the composer chose this particular way of saying what he said. Why in this song was "religion" equated with "selfish pride"? As I pondered this idea of "religion dying," it occurred to me that the antithesis of "dancing in fields of grace" would be "toiling in fields of law." And the sad thing is that many professing evangelicals out there today are wallowing in this field. They believe the only way to enjoy communion with God while on this earth is to engage in pietistic pursuits. Their "religious obligations" become a quest for them. They preach grace but not for the Christian, only for the unbeliever. "Sinner, hear the call and accept the free gift of God, but Christian, don't you dare break one jot or tittle of that law."

I'm in charge of our local homeschool co-op, and we've been working this year to put together the classes we're going to offer in the Fall. And we had an opportunity to have someone come in and teach a ballroom dance class, but silly me, I should have known: "Christians don't dance." I also volunteered to teach a class using team-building exercises. For example, we would give a group of four or five kids some Ziploc bags, drinking straws, and mailing labels to build the tallest free-standing tower they could in six minutes; but let's not do that one where you build houses out of cards. I keep forgetting: "Christians don't use playing cards." Because everybody knows the Joker is Satan, right? Futurism is such an assault on the fullness of grace. These women in our homeschool co-op are so caught up in outward perfection that they've totally lost sight of what grace has done for them. They take pride in being models of perfection in their "religious" practices. Their obsession with appearances requires them to decline the invitation to the dance. Instead, they're sitting at home on Friday night combing through their cupboards making sure there are no Proctor and Gamble products there; or making sure there are no "Little Mermaid" movie jackets with their phallic castle spires sending subliminal messages to our brains about sex.

These women probably would not have approved of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who in joyous thanksgiving for being delivered out of the hands of the Egyptians through the Red Sea, took a timbrel in her hand and lead the Israelite women who also took timbrels in their hands and went out and *danced*.

King David, himself, the man after God's own heart, known for his praise and worship, danced before the Lord, when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. He was even so bold as to refer to dance as a form of worship in some of the Psalms he wrote. For example:

Psalm 149:3 Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp.

and

Psalm 150:4 Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.

These women wouldn't have rejoiced with King David; they would have looked on with scorn just as David's wife, Michal did. They would have reckoned him a fool for his utter delightful expression of praise to the Almighty. They would have totally missed the dance because their set of rules would not permit them to join.

Either we live because we were crucified with Christ and He now lives in us, or we're dead. Either we've been set free, or we are sentenced to condemnation for our guilt. If we have been raised to walk in newness of life, then we are, right now, at the dance. We are living "the abundant life." We are in the harvest. We get to feast on what has been sown for us. We're not just nibbling on appetizers waiting for the main course. We are seated at the banqueting table with those festal angels in Hebrews 12:22, breaking bread with the Body of Christ. *That* should cause every one of us to jump out of our seats and *dance* in the Spirit of the Living God.