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## To Dance Again

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### **Text: Exodus 15:1-11, 20-21**

The moment Miriam picked up that tambourine and began to dance, that's when I crossed the waters.

For the others, the most important moment was the parting of the sea and the miracle of dry land beneath our feet and arriving safely on the other side, free of the slavery that had held us, and free of the terrifying pursuit of the chariots of the oppressor. But for me it really happened when Miriam danced.

She picked up her tambourine and her song split the silence as Moses' rod had split the sea, and her voice rose and fell like waves. And she began to dance. 'Round and 'round she danced, singing praise and thanks to God. And one by one the others joined her and it seemed as though it were a sacred circle and we were all being gathered into it. But I held back ... afraid.

Maybe it was because all I had known since I passed out of the innocence of childhood was slavery. I was born a Hebrew in Egypt, and brought up there. My mother named me Dinah after an ancestress of our people who was brave and free, but all I really knew now was slavery.

But you know, when I was a very little girl, I loved to dance. I used to dance while waiting for my breakfast, then dance as I helped clean up and watched my parents go out to work so hard making bricks for Pharaoh. I'd dance in the fields during the day to the tune of a bird's song or to a melody that was inside me but seemed to come from somewhere else. I'd even slip out of bed at night, sometimes, whirling in my nightdress and delighting in the way the lamplight cast the shadow of my swaying and twirling body on the wall of the room.

Have you ever seen lambs leap in the field, suddenly, without warning? Or puppies chase their tails? Or kittens spontaneously jump

and whirl? Have you seen babies pull themselves to their feet and bounce to some secret music? Do they dance because it feels good? Do they move to the ingrained rhythm of their mother's heartbeat? Or is it to the stars and the moon? Or perhaps to the hum of God?

The answer is yes and yes and yes! And that's the way I danced, and *why* I danced, when I was little. The feeling was one of trust. Perhaps you know that feeling, too, that kind of confidence that lets you leap and whirl knowing the earth will catch you, and someone under the earth will catch *it*, and that everything – including you – is OK.

I remember the day I stopped dancing. It wasn't much – just a snicker from an older child as I spun about, and a comment from another. They laughed at me. They called me clumsy, a fool. They laughed at my body. I'm too ashamed to tell you the words they used ... but it was enough. They made me feel my body was not my friend, that it was something to be ashamed of. I was embarrassed. I believed them. And I never danced again.

Has that ever happened to you? When was the last time you danced, or knew for certain the promise is true, or leapt into your life, into ethical action, into ministry of whatever sort is your passion? Leaped and whirled into it, knowing the earth will catch you, and someone will catch the whirling earth?

When was the last time?

What happened to make you stop ... becoming measured in your actions, rating your performance, watching your feet, as it were, and so self-conscious that it made you stumble? When did you begin to notice the snickers of those who say you're wild, a fool, no good ... and then begin to plot your life to avoid those giggles and sneers? When did you stop dancing, start doubting yourself, and doubting the hand of God to catch you as you come down from a leap in the air, whether you land gracefully or fall?

And what would it take to make you dance again?

Those years after I stopped dancing were hard ones. I became old enough to work and I, too, had to make bricks. It was back-breaking work, and I hated it. And I hated worse the stares and lewd comments of the taskmasters that all Hebrew women had to bear. They made me feel all over again that my body was not my friend – that it was something to be ashamed of – and drove away any remaining thought of dancing, or any desire to dance. It was as though my soul had

stopped dancing, too, and everything conspired to tell me that what those children years ago had said was true. I was no good.

My only relief was the water. On the rare occasions that I had time to myself I'd go to the water, and rushing in quickly so the others wouldn't see my body (which I believed was ugly, unacceptable) I'd feel the freedom of the water and I'd move all I wanted there. For me there was freedom in the water.

It was there at the river I met a girl called Miriam. She was very different from anyone else I'd ever known. She swam a lot, and her movements in the water were graceful and strong. She talked about freedom, and how someday soon *our* people would be free. I'd heard adults tell the old stories, over and over, of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel – and of course their daughter Dinah and her twelve brothers! I had heard them all. But when *she* told them they just came alive and I'd want her to go on and on. Her words seemed to flow and bubble like the river in which we swam.

And she said that to be slaves is *wrong* – that God does not want us or anyone to bow to another or to have rights and dignity taken away. She said that God wants freedom and happiness and peace for all people, including us (she spoke like a prophet, and as gracefully as she moved in the water), and that one day soon God would lead us out of this land where we are slaves into a land where we'd be free. The land promised centuries ago to our mother Sarah and our father Abraham. She overflowed with the history of our people and with hope for the future. "Soon," she'd say, "someday soon." And then she'd splash away like a dolphin, or wade onto the land and dance wildly with her face raised to the sky.

Through her I began to see that what had happened to me had also happened to my people: we had lost the sense of ourselves, we had let others tell about ourselves and had believed it until we became silent partners in our own slavery. We had lost the ability to dance.

That's what happens, I believe, to all people, individuals, and whole groups. Some are told their bodies don't measure up. Some, because of their skin colour or language or religion or gender or class or sexual orientation or age, are told they are not acceptable. *Others* tell them who they are and what they're worth. And so we lose the ability to trust and believe and to live our lives with our whole selves

– body, mind, and spirit. We lose the ability to dance trusting the earth will catch us and someone underneath it will catch the earth.

Well, that's what happened to us. To me. And, I dare say in hindsight, to the Egyptians as well.

Except that through the words and actions of Miriam, as well as of her two brothers whom I heard from time to time, it was as if we began to hear the music of freedom again, and toes gone numb began to tap in time. You could feel it in all our people. Like a river about to well up over its banks, or a trickle of water that swells and grows as it plunges down a mountainside.

We began to tell the stories of our people more and more, and as we did we began to tell our own stories, too, weaving them together until they were one. I began to tell my own story (rather than wait for someone else to tell it for me), and as I did that, and listened to the stories of our people and the mysterious but living God who leads us, those stories merged as when stream meets river and river meets sea. It happened to others, too, and instead of stagnant isolated pools we became flowing and fresh again, even if just a trickle, and found ourselves flowing steadily and surely toward the sea.

We *did* end up – quite literally! – at the sea. You know that part of the story: the plagues, Moses' repeated requests to Pharaoh, our hasty meal the night before our departure, and our desperate run from the chariots chasing us. *That* part was absolutely terrifying! But somehow I knew that, win or lose, live or die, it was what we had to do. When Moses held out his hand and those waters parted and we began to walk across on dry land ... it was like a dream. It happened so fast it seems unreal now, but I do remember this: halfway across I looked back, and what I saw will never leave me.

There were the people of Israel running for their lives – desperately afraid – but helping each other through the sea. Some were carrying babies and toddlers, others were helping the ill and the elderly. An old feeble priest was held up by a prostitute, young and strong. One of our prophets ran back to get a known thief who was hesitating on the shore. One big strong warrior was carrying a box full of newborn kittens and soothing their frightened mother. It was a beautiful sight! As much as we wanted freedom for ourselves, we knew it could never really happen unless and until we *all* were free; that the dance we were beginning to dance and the sacred circle we had begun to form must include everyone.

On the other side we sat silent, gasping for breath, chilled by the sounds of the waters closing over the Egyptians. We did not rejoice in that, and wished with all our hearts it could have been otherwise.

And then ... then Miriam took her tambourine and began to sing and dance. Her song split the silence as Moses' rod had split the sea, and her voice rose and fell like waves. 'Round and 'round she danced, singing praise and thanks to God. And one by one the others joined her and it seemed as though it were a sacred circle and we were all being gathered into it.

I held back, afraid ... hearing again the snickers and sneers of the children from my past. But now hearing the music of Miriam's tambourine, I heard through it the old, old music deep inside me and yet beyond me. I knew it now to be the music of the God of freedom.

And I danced, too.

