

DAILY ACTS OF CREATION:

Art, imagination, and hope in the 21st century

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If we were in a theater waiting for a performance instead of listening to a lecture, the curtain would be closed and you would have a printed program, where I would be able to thank the institution – this amazing place – and my students who gave me an incredible ride last Fall.

Then you might get a kind of prologue for this theater experience: Last year I was asked to come before the American Bankers Association to do a session on creativity. Over 40 bankers showed up, and I asked them what they think about creativity. It turns out that their idea of creativity is really narrow. To them, it means wild abandonment, total uncontrol, everything going berserk. I left them with a list of my ideas about creativity, a little less narrow than their definition.

Rattle around in other people's universes. Embrace paradox. Hold two ideas in your head at once, and find something to respect at both ends of the spectrum. Don't confuse originality with creativity. Creativity is thou-

sands and thousands of variations and is at the tip of our fingers every single second. I can't say the same about originality. Learn how to frame things really big and how to frame things really small. Frame things big and you can get out of the personal and your problems. You can find amazing ways to connect. And frame things small, because nothing is too small to notice.

Finally, turn discomfort into inquiry. I'm just finishing a project working with geneticists. At one point I spent an hour with Eric Wieschaus, who is a Nobel Laureate, looking at flies through his microscope. I asked him, "How do you come up with the question that you want to spend the next bunch of years of your life on?" And he said, "I am fueled by my ignorance." Isn't that beautiful? Because there are many ways to deal with ignorance, one of which is to feel humiliated and to go about trying to chase away that feeling. Whereas there's another way, which is to use it as fuel for what you want to come to understand.

So, that's the prologue, the amazing potential in creativity.

Next, the curtain would open, and if I were giving you a dance and not a lecture, you would see three pools of light on the stage, and three little stories going at the same time. And you could be picking up images from each story. You would be able to stir them up yourself just by watching, and you would be able to make something of it. Try to imagine the possibility that the stories that I will tell you are all simultaneous.

Here is the first pool of light: I just got back from Japan, where I met with one of the chief corporate funders of Japanese art. After we said hello and exchanged our cards, he just lit

into me: "We do not want American artists here. Go away. We do not want to be influenced by you." Well, because of years of working on negative feedback in the art world, I have learned to listen for the question I wish he'd asked me and respond with that. So I said back to him, "What an interesting question, the issue of influence." And then I said to him, "I'm Jewish. The thing about the Jewish people is that we have allowed ourselves to be influenced for thousands of years. We understand the hyphen better than anybody. We know how to take in glorious pieces of information and beauty from other cultures. But we also know when to halt, put a stop to it and say, no, that's far enough."

It led me to a very long and still involved meditation on what does it mean to be influenced. And what does it mean to be influential, and what of my own tools do I want to impart, and when is it too much? That's one pool of light on stage.

The second pool of light: When I left for college in 1965, I left Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and a beautiful tree-lined street with the elms arching gracefully over the center. One year when I came back for winter break, all the trees were gone. Dutch elm disease had ravished the Midwest. That spring, my mother told me over the phone that Milwaukee Public Works had planted a city full of new trees - all maple. She said, "What do they think is going to happen in 25 years? There's going to be a maple disease, and all the trees are going to go. When are they going to understand diversity?"

The third pool of light: I spent ten years teaching dance in a retirement home a couple of miles from my house. One day, early on, there was a little lady sitting in the back who always had on a big, big coat, no matter how warm it was, and the place was often overheated. I was just getting to know the place, so I went up to her and said, "You know, it's

really hot in here. Why don't you just take your coat off?" And she started to take it off, but the nurse who was nearby said, "Oh, no, no, she never takes her coat off," at which the woman immediately put the coat back on. The nurse felt terrible. I mean the minute it was out of her mouth, she knew she'd lost a great opportunity. I was struck by the role of the outsider in this scenario. I didn't know this woman. I had no idea what her patterns were, and sometimes that's really good. It's really good to have outsiders in your midst.

I'll bring the power of the outsider a little closer to home. Through my work with Synagogue 2000, I was able to make some wonderful visits to synagogues. One day I was a guest at a synagogue in Boston, where I was leading a group of traditional scholars. We were sitting in the little library, and the group had just finished praying, and when it was my turn to begin, I said, "Well, let's put our prayer books on the floor so we can start moving."

"The books on the floor?" (Telling the lady "take your coat off" is fine. But "put the books on the floor?" Not so fine.) But I didn't know that that was a bad thing to do then, so they explained to me that you can't put God's name on the floor. I said, "Well, you know, I'm a dancer. And when I teach, I always start everybody on the floor. And I always say to them, 'Let the floor support you. Let the earth come up under you and hold you. Just let go for a minute and feel that support.'" So I said to the group, "Don't you think God would like that just for a minute?" And then I gave them the choice. An interesting moment around innovation and tradition.

So, in our dance so far, we have three pools of light. And we have three stories laid out. And we have three ideas. As the choreographer, I'll start pulling these together.

To do so I'm drawn to yet another story. I was in Hawaii to do a project, and I met a

woman who is a Kuma Hula, a hula master. I went to her school so that we could teach a class together. She started chanting in this incredible language and this beautiful voice. And what she said was "bring your ancestors. Bring all your ancestors. Bring them into the room. Bring them, all of them, everyone that you've ever loved or who's loved you, bring them all." It was incredible. I had the room filled with my Jewish ancestors. I had the room filled with all those old pictures from my wall at home, family members I had never met. And then she said, "You're not alone. You never were." Isn't that beautiful?

My grandfather left Russia, walked across the country, and ended up in Milwaukee. He left Russia because he wanted to avoid the pogroms, and by then he'd also already been a revolutionary in the first revolution of 1904-5. My father was the embodiment of a great Jewish spirit. He lived his Jewish commitment on a daily basis, and he made sure we knew that. We spent a Christmas day, which is my birthday, marching with Father Groppi (perhaps that's a name some of you remember), one of the great civil rights organizers from the Midwest, in the freezing cold of Milwaukee. And my father turned to me and said, "This is what it means to be Jewish." This is what I mean by the embodiment. It was action, doing. My mother used to tell me everyday, "If you want to be an artist, you better learn to stand up for yourself. You better discover your own voice." This is in contrast to my father: "You want to be a good Jew, you serve the world." So with those two influences you can see why I'm standing here.

So far on our stage, we've had three stories, and then we pulled them together. We brought in the ancestors so the dance came to the center. Now we get to the meat of the dance. Spending the semester at this campus, two things came up a lot that I wanted to reflect upon with you. One is the nature of our

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(continued)

identity. We must not base our identity on the fact that bad things have happened to us. It simply doesn't work. It's very powerful to be in opposition, you build up good muscles, but the minute the source of opposition is gone, the weaknesses show up. I don't see how we're going to build our identity on something other than opposition unless we engage in artistic practices and do good in the world.

The second is the idea of innovation in the midst of tradition. When I came here, I thought I was coming to teach three things: how to use the body as a ritual object, where rabbis, cantors, and teachers become vessels; how to explore text through movement; and how to use ensemble and improvisational techniques from dance and theater to help build congregational life. We did all those things. This is a grand set of post-modern tools that I've spent 33 years building in my choreographic world. I love these tools, and it's so much fun to share them. But what we talked about most was dealing with change. What happens when you bring new things into tradition, and all of the discomfort, fear, and particularly loss that accompanies such innovation.

My rabbi, Danny Zemel, once said to me, "I think that God is most Godlike when God is creating. So, if people are created in God's image, then do you suppose people are most Godlike when they're creating?" I liked that, and it made me go back and reread some of the texts on creation. When we first meet God in the Bible, there's all that chaos. I like to wonder how long God was in that chaos before God decided to organize it, because a lot of us, like me, enjoy chaos. And then God begins creating by making distinctions. I think it means that making distinctions is a very creative act. It's also a deadly political act, an act of enormous power. You know how when you pick up something and it belongs in two files, and you wonder what to do with it? Just look at Genesis. Day is

not night, that's clear; but where would you put dawn and dusk, really?

Once you make distinctions between things, for example between ballet and modern dance; between being an artist and being an educator, then you put walls up between the distinctions. Then you build institutions around the walls that you put up around those distinctions. And pretty soon, you can't get between them. At the college level studying dance, if you want to be a choreographer and an educator, you can't. There's probably not a single institution in this country that would train any artist in education. You have to choose between being an educator and being a maker. We are so bereft because of that. Each field is weakened, because choreographers are going to be much better choreographers if they're also teaching. And believe me, teachers will be much better teachers if they're still in touch with that element of making.

So I began to talk of, instead of distinctions, permeable membranes. This allows me, for example, to be involved in a community project in which I can demand incredible artistic rigor from people who may not have ever danced before. And at the same time be in touch with the fact that there may be some healing going on. I can move between those worlds. I have to move between those worlds. I want to move between those worlds.

The second problem of making distinctions is we didn't just put the distinctions down sideways. We actually piled them hierarchically. When we say, for example, ballet is more important than modern, concert forms are more important than folk forms, rabbis are more important than cantors, we're making hierarchical distinctions. I really don't like that very much, because it's just not true. It's not the truth of my experience. In my world, I find it easy teaching dance to old people while at the same time, my company may be performing at the Kennedy Center. I don't want anybody to tell me that the Kennedy

Center is more important than teaching dance to old people. I want to live in a world where I can move between these things. Not just because they're permeable, but because the value and importance of both things matter to me.

This matters to Jews and Jewish leaders. Because if you're going to deal with innovation and tradition, you have to come to a place of understanding. It is not "here's tradition" and "here's innovation." And it is not all about innovation to the detriment of tradition. You have to be able to hold the two ideas at the same time.

We also discussed performance. My students seemed concerned about being able to pray at the same time they're leading prayer. That seemed like such an interesting, curious problem to me. I think if you asked performers of all kinds, you would find many variations to that question from inside the art world. I think what the question really demands is a reexamination of what everybody thinks they mean by praying. My suspicion is that by facilitating the prayer of others, one is in deep prayer, deep. It just doesn't feel the same.

I sense that often Jews are afraid to get into their bodies during prayer because they think if they get into their bodies, they'll lose their minds. It's not exactly wrong because a lot of sacred dance forms are about reaching an ecstatic state. But my experience and what I'm interested in is hardly about losing your mind, but rather some deep connection, where the link between our minds and our bodies is so fast, and the learning is so huge, and the imagination is so animated. That's what I think is really possible.

Let the curtain come down. ■