

ON FEET KEEPING

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Last night, I sat on the ballroom's hardwood floor and laced up my practice shoes. Their black canvas fabric hugged the contours of my feet as I flexed, pointed, and rolled them out before a long rehearsal. I sat for a while, observing and pondering my rather large, veiny, practical feet. They're not necessarily pretty, but these feet serve me well—they don't often get tired, and they're generally steady. My preoccupation with my feet might seem silly, but perhaps it is not so strange given the fact that I've been a ballroom dancer for so many years and have spent long hours learning to coordinate the movements of my own feet with those of my partner.

In my partnership, I dance the role of the follower (which can be frustrating, especially if my partner leads me in directions with which I disagree). Sometimes, I'd rather be the leader. Wouldn't it feel good to be The Boss? I suspect many people would choose the role of the leader, rather than follower, given the choice.

As I ponder the nuances of leading and following, I recall a few lines from a well-known hymn, written by a man who also had feet on the brain:

*Lead, Kindly Light, amid thèncircling gloom;
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home;
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene—one step enough for me.¹*

1. "Lead, Kindly Light," *Hymns*, no. 97.

These lines were written in 1833 by John Henry Newman while he sailed from Marseille, France, to his native England.² During the journey, he became dangerously ill with fever. Perhaps the physical sickness he felt seemed to him at the time symbolic of some inner spiritual fever too, since his poem reads as a kind of prayer—a plea not for physical healing but for divine help and spiritual guidance.

I wonder when Newman wrote, “one step enough for me,” did he really mean it? Or was that statement an aspiration for meekness and humility he was trying to manifest in writing? I’m not sure we’ll ever know the answer to this, but we can guess that Newman wrestled with pride for several years. Of this struggle, he wrote,

*I was not ever thus, nor prayed that
Thou shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead thou me on.
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears, pride ruled my will;
Remember not past years.*³

Maybe Newman, like me, wanted more control over his own life. Perhaps he wanted to be the boss of his own feet rather than follow his leader’s instructions. Or maybe he wanted to follow those instructions but had difficulty discerning what they were. It’s possible Newman interpreted divine ambiguity as a consequence of his own pride.

No matter the various causes of these feelings, it seems that ambiguity and uncertainty are familiar elements of any follower’s experience. I remember one day when I was a beginning dancer, my coach asked me to close my eyes and mirror my partner’s movements based on the pressure in my hands. So, with my eyes closed, I tried to block out the afternoon light filtering in from the large studio windows, tried to tune out the many voices of other coaches and the thumping bass of the

2. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: Being a History of His Religious Opinions* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1890), 35.

3. “Lead, Kindly Light.”

music, tried to ignore the other dancers passing close enough behind me to brush my ponytail over my shoulder. I immediately noticed that it was harder to balance without seeing my surroundings. My feet felt wobbly and unsure on my three-inch heels. It wasn't easy to be sensitive to what my hands felt. But I did my best, and at first, I could sense what my partner wanted me to do. When I felt pressure on the inside of my right hand, I moved my right hip toward my partner. But when my partner started stepping in different directions, following became harder. Once, he suddenly reversed directions and I stepped back when I should have stepped forward. At this, my partner and coach laughed a "gotcha" laugh and said I should have followed better. I got annoyed that I had missed the lead (it felt like getting an A- or a "needs improvement" on my report card), but I tried to shrug it off and get back to practicing.

I'm not the only one who struggles to follow; Newman took a while to learn this skill too. But in 1848, thirteen years after that fateful boat ride back to England, he seemed to have some of it figured out. Of being a follower, he wrote: "Let us put ourselves into His hands, and not be startled though He leads us by a strange way, a *mirabilis via*, as the Church speaks. Let us be sure He will lead us right, that He will bring us to that which is, not indeed what we think best, nor what is best for another, but what is best for us."⁴ *Mirabilis via*: Latin for "wonderful way." It's a beautiful sentiment. Don't all of us hope that God will lead us to what is best for us?

But I wonder how to put myself into God's hands in a practical sense. Newman described it as a kind of letting go of anxiety, or a choice to trust that whatever happens is evidence of God's plan for you being fulfilled. "God leads us by strange ways," he wrote. "We know He wills our happiness, but we neither know what our happiness is, nor the way.

4. John Henry Newman. "Hope in God—Creator," in *Meditations & Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman*, edited by W. P. Neville (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1893), 397–98.

We are blind; left to ourselves we should take the wrong way; we must leave it to Him.”⁵ I doubt Newman’s spiritual journey was easy, but in the end, it seemed he felt a sense of peace and contentment in following God’s plan for him.

By contrast, I don’t often feel comfortable in my role as a spiritual follower. I have a hard time leaving my path up to divine direction. As a follower in dance, I’m sometimes reluctant or resistant, mainly due to my own pride. I feel that I can lead myself better than the leader can. So too in my spiritual life: as a follower of God, my resistance is sometimes due to pride. Other times, I resist out of doubt or fear, especially if I don’t know what I’m being led to do, and I’m afraid of stepping in the wrong spiritual direction. Sure, I know generally what to do in order to be “a good person”: Love other people. Treat them as I would have them treat me (not stonewalling them, snapping at them for being stupid, or punching them on the nose). But discerning more complicated things, like how to reconcile the tension between my faith and my doubt, is more difficult.

It’s easier to dance than it is to parse the nuances of faith. When I dance, I can clearly identify which foot I’m standing on, measure the tempo of the music, and decide whether a movement should be sudden or sustained. When I dance, I feel lithe, agile, quick to respond, sensitive to the pressure of my partner’s hands in mine. I become more aware of my own embodied weight. My feet push against the floor harder. My skeleton seems to expand inside my body, and I feel my bones almost stretch taller and wider. I become more alert to the physical sensations around me.

And when I dance, I have a partner with whom I can play, brainstorm, and argue. Take yesterday’s practice, for example. We practiced a small piece of our waltz, a series of steps—*tumble turn*, *swivel*, *telespin*, *swivel*—which takes less than ten seconds to dance but warrants hours of repetition due to its complexity. We pushed and pulled each other

5. Newman, “Hope in God.”

over those same floorboards dozens of times as we practiced keeping each other's feet:

Can you wait for my lead here?

What lead do you want me to wait for?

Wait at least until I've shifted my weight to my left foot.

*That means I'll have to hang at the edge of my
balance and wait for you to catch me.*

Don't worry, I'll catch you. Let's do it again.

How was that?

And so on, until we both agreed to

put a pin in this until tomorrow.

Dancing is not easy, but in some ways, it's a simpler arena in which to practice leading, following, and feet keeping. If I were to practice leading and following with God, I would ask for clearer instruction on how to move forward on my spiritual path (*What lead do You want me to wait for?*). It is not my place to tell God how to lead me, but communicating with heaven is so often abstract, confusing, and frustrating.

Some questions I'd like to ask God:

How can I dance with an immortal Being?

How can I trust You with my weight when I can't feel You?

How do I know if I'm moving in the right direction?

What if You're testing me, and I'm getting it wrong?

Is there even a lead at all, or am I straining at empty air?

I kneel beside my bed before I go to sleep each night in search of a heavenly lead. I stay there for a time, feeling my heart throb in my ears, feeling my feet start to go numb and tingly. I offer up my own muddled mess of doubts and hopes and feelings, straining to feel any communication from heaven. I remember what Dylan Thomas wrote and try to follow suit: "I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept."⁶ I try to discern the spiritual leads

6. Dylan Thomas, "A Child's Christmas in Wales" (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1954).

prompting me toward my own *mirabilis via*, and I can almost sense the rhythm and hear the music playing. I can imagine the kinds of steps I might possibly take. But I can't feel a lead—an impulse or indication of when or where to start. The only thing I feel is a general sense that God wants me to be happy and to use my agency to make choices that result in happiness for me while also helping those around me. That's like the leader saying, "I want you to dance."

I recall one recent dance class where I felt particularly stumped by the intricacies of leading and following. It was early fall, and the mid-morning sunlight shone in through the large east-facing windows in the dance studio. The other dancers in the room and I were slightly sweaty and out of breath from our efforts to improve our rumba technique all morning. After watching us dance the routine, my coach turned off the music and asked us to gather around him. He then started explaining the concept of leading and following in a way I hadn't heard before. To the leaders in the room, he said, "It's not about trying to trick your partner. Instead, you should be making it as clear and easy to follow your lead as possible."

He then turned to the followers and said, "It's not about trying to read your partner's mind. It's not about trying to guess the right steps. Instead, you need to maintain your internal rhythm. Continue moving to the music, and don't anticipate the lead that is coming. Live in the moment."

Finally, he addressed us all as a group: "Leading is about listening. The leader offers a lead like a gift to their partner but can't dictate how that person receives it or interprets it. Both partners need to be sensitive to each other." As I stood there in my high-heeled shoes, shifting my weight from foot to foot, I felt relieved that I could stop the futile exercise of trying to read my partner's mind. Relieved that I could stop worrying about what step would come next.

As I write this, I realize that my conception of my role as a follower might have been lacking in imagination. I used to think that all a

follower had to do was trust the leader to dictate what they should do next. I thought obedience was the only required skill, and an easy one at that. But through time and practice, I've learned that being a follower doesn't mean waiting for my leader to tell me what to do, like a soldier waiting for orders. Quite the contrary.

Being a follower means taking responsibility for the presentation of my craft. It means revising my own artistic choices: to reach for my partner's hand as slowly as a sloth reaches for the nearest branch, or to jump faster than a tightly wound spring; to stretch all my muscles and bones as high as possible, almost becoming weightless, or to pack my bones and muscles down tight until I become heavier than the mountains. Being a follower means claiming my own identity as a dancer as something that is nuanced, complex, and unique—something that cannot be reduced to a set of instructions my partner gives to me through pressure in my hands.

But here is where I must confront the limitations of my metaphor. While thinking of God as my partner—a person with whom I can play, brainstorm, and argue—is freeing, it is also limiting. In real life, I don't get immediate feedback on how well or poorly I followed a spiritual lead, nor can I dictate which kind of lead God gives me. Real life is more improvised than it is choreographed. So, as I write this, I start to question the ability of a single metaphor to describe the nature of an infinite, inscrutable God. Metaphors are certainly helpful in conceptualizing certain elements of my spirituality, but they will always be limited. In short, God will always be bigger than my metaphors.

As dumbfounding and frustrating and mind-blowing as it is to recognize God's bigness, it is also liberating and empowering. If I accept that there are some things about God I will never understand in this life, then I can stop trying to read God's mind. I can stop worrying about what comes next and instead take ownership over my spiritual steps in this present moment. I can choose to put my feet in God's keeping.

Because, God, we both know that I'm using synecdoche here, and when I say keep Thou my feet, I'm really saying, keep Thou my soul. Keep me company. Keep me safe. Keep Thou my dancing and my essays. Keep Thou my faith and my doubts. Keep Thou my plans and hopes and dreams. I'll try not to anticipate or second guess but keep dancing to my internal rhythm.

Lead Thou me on.

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