

TO DANCE WITH GOD



Family Ritual and Community Celebration

Gertrud Mueller Nelson

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**FAMILY RITUAL AND
COMMUNITY CELEBRATION**

Gertrud Mueller Nelson
with illustrations by the author

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In Appreciation

This book came into being because of the sustained good will and the cheers of encouragement from many people who believed in the effort. Without their confidence, the effort would have remained a pile of disjointed ideas and experiences.

I am grateful to my parents, Therese and Franz Mueller, who raised me in a household with an unusual awareness of the richness of the life of the Church. Their gift that could connect the sacramental life of the greater Church with the sacramentality of the “little church” has stood me, my own family, and many other families who were touched by their gift, in good stead. I am grateful also that they wisely extended to us the folk stories and customs out of their national heritage. These lent me a richness and a grounding that added meaning to the important issues of growing up.

I am indebted to many whose writings clarified, ratified and expanded the insights and experiences that are mine by inheritance and good fortune. Readers will recognize my great indebtedness to the psychological work of C. G. Jung and the liturgical inspiration of Romano Guardini. The works of Mercia Eliade, Josef Pieper, Gerald Vann, Aidan Kavanagh, Rosemary Haughton, Eugene Kennedy and others have lent insight and inspiration over many years.

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may not even guess. To them, I am especially grateful, because through the warmth of friendship and community, through our worship together, we are sustained and carried through the experiences that are a part of every life.

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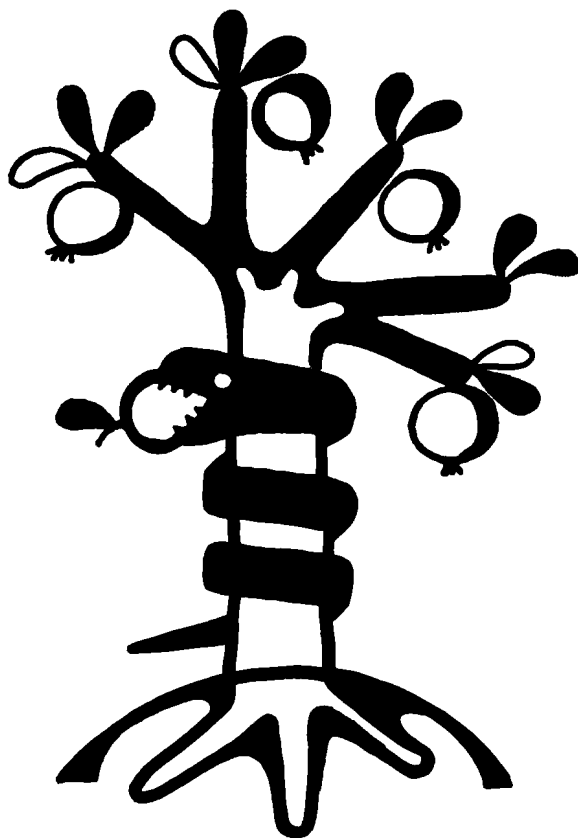
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Part One



CHAPTER ONE

To Dance with God

Some years ago, I spent an afternoon caught up in a piece of sewing I was doing. The waste basket near my sewing machine was filled with scraps of fabric cut away from my project. This basket of discards was a fascination to my daughter Annika, who, at the time, was not yet four years old. She rooted through the scraps searching out the long bright strips, collected them to herself, and went off. When I took a moment to check on her, I tracked her whereabouts to the back garden where I found her sitting in the grass with a long pole. She was affixing the scraps to the top of the pole with great sticky wads of tape. "I'm making a banner for a procession," she said. "I need a procession so that God will come down and dance with us." With that she solemnly lifted her banner to flutter in the wind and slowly she began to dance.

My three year old was not a particularly precocious toddler. I think, rather, that she was doing what three year olds do when left to their natural and intuitive religious sense and I was simply fortunate to hear and see what she was about. Mothers are often anthropologists of sorts and their children the exotic primitives that also happen to be under foot. This little primitive allowed me to witness a holy moment and I learned all over again how strong and real is that sense of wonder that children have—how innate and easy their way with the sacred. Here, religion was child's play. And of course I had to wonder what happens in our development that as adults we became a serious folk, uneasy

in our relationship with God, out of touch with the mysteries we knew in childhood, restless, empty, searching to regain a sense of awe and a way to “dance with God.”

While it was natural for us at one time in our lives to be at ease with God, it is also natural to the human condition that our connection with the transcendent become complicated and precarious. Life’s tasks of learning to think and compare, to sort and choose began with our taste of “knowledge of good and evil” and for that fruit we have developed a great appetite. That knowledge changes our innocent relationship with God. And we spend the rest of our days circling the garden of our original innocence, yearning to find our way back in. The route we choose is marked with the mysteries of the human condition: peak experiences and pitfalls, births and deaths, joys and sufferings.

Our “fall” from innocence is double edged; it is both our sickness and our salvation. It is our painful, guilt-ridden split and separation of what is human from the divine. But it also sets us forth on the natural and saving journey of the human process to ultimate wholeness. Our way back to a connection with God is through the profound experience of our humanity and the discovery of meaning. When we are struck with the meaning of our most human experiences, we are most closely connected with the divine.

Knowledge and Belief

We are the children of the Enlightenment. The fruit of knowledge continues to be our value. We have come to prize it as never before. We have become the most intellectual and scientific society, profoundly proud of our thinking skills. We have developed these skills to such a degree that we can penetrate life’s mysteries from its most basic molecules to all of outer space—and we proceed to demystify them. We can manipulate molecules and probe and even people that mysterious moon.

Science changed our views, improved our condition and redirected our hopes to such a degree that every problem and even every mystery became an issue which science would solve. Even while the great scientists themselves, with a growing humility, see that every question answered only reveals more and terribly complex ones, we develop a view that a continually

advancing science will provide all the answers. It will bail us out of one crisis after the other, and it will produce thinkers to answer all questions even in terms of meaning and the quality and condition of our lives. So seductive is this hope and this fantasy that the general population still clings to this new faith and chooses not to question its validity or truth even as they proceed to search for meaning.

While science pulls us out of our original religion, the churches have done their share to push us out. We became particularly vulnerable to the lure of scientism because the churches, resisting the same intellectualizations, entangled themselves in self-preserving apologetics, dogmatics, and morality. They created a heavy overlay, crusting over religious mystery, losing touch with their own meaning. In the Catholic Church, the profound mystery of dogmas was distorted by rules and the mandate to believe them on a literal level, because the understanding of the truth of myth was lost. In some churches, religious rituals were abandoned because they reeked of popery, and they were left with an anemic expression. In many Catholic churches, the rich heritage of symbol, of ritual and ceremony, degenerated into dry, mechanical rubrics which were followed by the book and returned little or no meaning to the people.

While some closed their eyes and tried to believe the dogmas of the Church literally and avoided the use of their intelligence, others were able, with some grace and wisdom, to translate the truth of dogma into a living language and integrate it into their understanding and experience. But many people, armed with a desire to be reasonable, learned to protest any belief or any mystery that could not be scientifically proven. Science and the value of knowledge became the enemy of religion. Because churches, for all their apologetics and application of reason, celebrate mysteries and espouse dogmas that a purely intellectual approach will seek to refute or dismiss, many people were left without a faith, and without the resources that help one find meaning. But this did not eliminate the continued search for meaning. We found we could not intellectualize our way into faith. Rather, many found that they had “thought” their way out of faith and out of a religious system, a system of being which nourished them in ways that they never knew, until they left it.

Years ago, Carl Jung warned against our heady application of the intellect to mystery. He said that we make a big mistake if we try to rationalize dogmas and if we tamper too much with our ancient traditions. Our intellect, he said, does not understand the secrets of religious mystery. “We are not far enough

advanced psychologically to understand the truth, the extraordinary truth, of such ritual and such dogma.”

Jung said these things in the 1930's. And, of course, we went ahead and applied massive intellectual arguments to our beliefs to shore them up or to talk ourselves right out of a system of meaning.

Today there is evidence of a new search for faith and meaning. I meet many people whom I would see as intellectually honest, in search of meaning, seeking ways to make sense of, engage and celebrate their human experience. Often they are young couples, their first child is just born, and both mother and father have been fully engaged in the wonder of every stage of this child's coming into being. I have seen these people seek out and even renew their commitment to the Christian heritage and to a Church community after years of non-commitment to any formal religious expression. Their faith, with regard to certain primary articles of doctrine, may still be “lost” because they could not give you a rational argument about what is “really true” and how that might be. But can anyone ever pick up an old faith of years ago like some slipped stitch and continue in the same old pattern as before? Can we read Jung's warning and turn the clock back to the good old days and simply reconstruct “that old time religion”?

Most of us would agree that we cannot go back to where we once were. Individually and collectively, new experiences change the way we understand the world. Perhaps these experiences have even made the search for lost faith and meaning more poignant. We do not grow without increasing our convictions and beliefs, but neither the blind, unthinking faith nor the faith which was shored up with intellectual arguments seems to speak to this new, accumulated awareness. Indeed, our new consciousness has a feeling and a knowledge which is emotional and intuitive.

It may well be that we are entering an age where we are willing and ready to allow our scientific knowledge and understanding to exist in concert with our need for a symbolic life. New and fresh approaches to what is old and primal in human religious expression will emerge from our increased understanding of human nature. The sciences of psychology or anthropology can illuminate and breathe new life into fundamental Christian concepts. Mythology and liturgics are enhanced and revitalized by our increased understanding of the human condition. This new development will help us to heal the rift we have suffered for so long between knowledge and belief.

The Poetic Church

Perhaps the Church which Jung and others recognized as vital to the life and richness of our humanness and our wholeness is about to be rediscovered. What we have lost touch with lies in the poetic aspect of the Church which has always been there for us, which has always been centered in the cycles of our human development and which has nourished us through rite and symbol, through rhythmic repetition. This Church celebrates our cycles and seasons, inviting us to see and engage and feel and touch and be aware and grow and be transformed. Through myth and symbol the experiences which make up our daily lives are affirmed and made sacred.

This creative and poetic Church helps us to pay full attention to what we might otherwise deem ordinary and commonplace. Rites and symbols use the ordinary and earthy elements of our existence and, by encircling them, ratify, sanctify, complete. The ordinary becomes the container for the divine and safely holds what was uncontainable. The transcendent is disclosed in what is wonderfully familiar: bread, wine, fire, ash, earth, water, oil, tears, seeds, songs, feastings and fastings, pains and joys, bodies and thoughts, regressions and transformations. It draws its action more from what is most human in us than from theology. In its creative function, the Church speaks directly to the heart, a heart which hears symbols, not rational vocabulary.

The dawning of a renewed faith to which I see people striving to go forward is one which connects us to our forebears, to our ancient roots, to all those who went before us and to all who will come after us in the development of our human existence. Celebrating together binds us together with a common symbolic form, a unique identity and a tradition in which to be founded. To celebrate as a Church community, to commit ourselves to the realities in its history, to its traditions, to its forms, to its leadership, is also to commit ourselves to its reformation and growth. We are this Church. As its people we know that the mysteries of the human condition never change, but our understanding, our growing awareness, our expressions, need our expanding and changing insight and creative efforts. Our renewed faith will intersect the theological issues and the historical facts of the Church and speak to what is our common human experience.

Through this book I hope to underscore the forgotten values of myth, ritual and ceremony as a vital expression of our experience. I hope to return to

individuals, to families and to worshiping communities the resources that help us find meaning. In the first part of the book I explore that yearning for transformation that we know as part of the human condition and the ways in which we look for the touch of the transcendent. In the second part of the book I review the seasons and feasts of the Church year. I have included family and folk traditions to jog imaginations. Given the paradigms that create ritual, translate myth and celebrate our daily lives, readers will discover the tools that can return meaning to simple life issues as well as to the major issues that make up our experience. The creative function of the Church's heritage is reconsidered as a rich fund for family and community expression. I hope to encourage an openness and another way to see the mythic truth of dogmas—a way to honor the wisdom that lies at the heart of religious mystery. For the ritual expression of mystery is an expression of our most fundamental human condition.

