

What If the Hokey-Pokey Is What It's All About? – January 12, 2014

by **David Green**

It's nearly impossible to grow up in our culture and avoid dancing the Hokey Pokey. At least, when I was young it was a staple at birthday parties and summer camps and school events.

The great thing about it is you don't really have to know how to dance in order to participate in the Hokey Pokey. It was made for people with two left feet and no sense of rhythm, like me.

My favorite piece of verse from the Hokey Pokey is the refrain, "...and that's what it's all about." As a kid I believed "that's what it's all about" simply referred to the dance itself. The Hokey Pokey is so simple and straightforward, so when you sing, "that's what it's all about" it's refreshing.

It just is. Nothing major is required of you. No fancy footwork. Have fun. Lose yourself in the silliness of it; even the pointlessness of it. Or the absurdity of it. Just follow along putting one thing in and one thing out, and you're fine. That's the "all" of it.

But some years ago I was standing on the sidelines watching a group of young children dance the Hokey Pokey, and I must've been in a philosophical mood, because I began to wonder, seriously, if something as simple as a children's dance *could* be what it's all about. And I do mean all there is, everything.

I watched the fun, the joy, the silliness, the pointlessness, even the absurdity of the dance. I watched the smiles on the faces of the children and listened to their laughter and witnessed their eagerness to cooperate in a dance just for the sake of dancing together.

And it occurred to me, "What if this *does* represent what life is all about?"

Like a lot of you, over the years I've studied philosophy and religion. And sometimes it can get pretty dense. Theories attempting to explain things like why we're here, why we exist, the meaning of life, how and why the universe came into being, can be rather heavy reading.

It's interesting to study ancient philosophers like Socrates and Plato, who pondered things like goodness or virtue, and the nature of evil.

They asked questions we're still asking: what is justice, what does it mean to live in community with others? How does knowledge differ from opinion?

Is something "real" only if we can see it or measure it or hold it in our hand? Is the world itself real, or is it merely a form or a shadow of the true reality?

When I was in seminary part of my required reading was the theologian Karl Barth. Barth could take a question, like, how can anyone really say anything definite about the nature of God?

And then 900 pages of very complex ideas later, I'd have to re-read the whole thing to even begin to grasp what he was saying. And then, attempt to write a 40-page paper on it and hope the professor didn't discover I was still clueless.

There's a story about Karl Barth that probably falls into the category of myth, but it's a good story. He was known as *the* pre-eminent and most prolific Christian theologian of the 20th Century. In his lifetime he'd literally written well over six million words.

On his deathbed, as the story goes, he was asked by one of his students to sum up all his vast knowledge. The student was prepared with a tape recorder – and a lot of blank tape – to catch every drop of complicated wisdom Barth might offer. But instead, Karl Barth simply replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so." And then he died.

Like I said, that story is probably more of a fable than reality. But the reason it resonates so well – whether you agree with his religious ideas or not – is that even someone who came up with probably the most complex theories of faith than anyone who's ever lived, was able to cut to the chase; to get to the heart of the matter, to boil everything down to one essential idea. In his own way he was saying, "For me, this is what it's all about."

At the heart of what any philosopher or theologian is usually trying to express, or put out there for discussion, is the question of what is ultimate.

What is ultimate reality, and why does it exist? And since human beings are the ones asking that question – as I said – you can't really talk about that without also asking "Why are we here? What's the point of our existence? What's the meaning of life, anyway?"

Most religions try to answer that with supernatural concepts and sacred writings that point to something beyond ourselves as the source of meaning.

A creative and life-giving force that on the one hand is knowable. And we hear that when someone says "Can I talk to you about my personal Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?" with an emphasis on the personal; I know him. And at the same time, that source of life and meaning is ultimately beyond our full knowing, and we hear that when someone says, "I don't know why this thing happened. So, it must be God's will."

But a lot of us have either rejected or moved beyond those kinds of religious ideas – or we're exploring how to blend different beliefs together to create our own personal recipe. It's an old metaphor, but we may be on a journey of discovery.

That's how I view my own belief system, and I'd hardly dare to call it a system at all. When I was a kid there was a big wooded area not far from my house. It was between two meadows – cow pastures, actually – and there was a well-worn path that more or less cut straight through from one end of the woods to the next open pasture.

But all along that main path were several smaller paths branching off of it, winding around trees and taking you to a stream or a boulder or a small patch of grass in the sunlight.

Every time I took a walk in those woods I preferred to take one of those less worn paths because they exposed me to places I never would've seen if I'd stayed on the main trail.

Eventually I'd need to find my way back home. But I never got tired of exploring, and I didn't want it to end. I wasn't searching so much for a destination. Finding the end of the trail – or ending up in the next cow pasture – didn't matter to me.

What mattered more was the path itself. And I suppose that's been my approach to a lot of things: faith, what I know about life and people. It's my belief system.

That kind of ambiguity is not for everyone, and it might not work for you. Being okay with not knowing absolutely what the ultimate is can make a lot of people uncomfortable, and I can appreciate that.

Because we value certainty and absolutes. I think one of the reasons people turn to fundamentalist religion – really of any kind – is because fundamentalism tells its followers that there are rock-solid answers. And that there is an ultimate goal, an end to the pathway, and it's best not to stray off the path but keep going straight ahead so you're not distracted from the prize.

If you do head off down a side path it can lead to danger. But of course, that's assuming the end of the path is the goal in the first place. When I would argue the path itself is the point.

My grandfather was a Southern Baptist minister, and he once told me something you've probably heard before:

Why do Baptists frown on premarital sex? Because it might lead to dancing.

That old joke doesn't deserve to be analyzed it to death, but I think it's interesting because it points out that a lot of religious groups emphasize not being led astray. Not taking any side paths but staying on that one straight path that leads to the ultimate goal.

It's also an interesting joke because it specifically uses the old traditional Baptist prohibition against dancing.

And if you think about it, dancing – like a lot of art forms – really does not have a particular goal in mind; an ultimate end. Whether you dance on stage or you dance with a partner, the point of dancing is not reaching the conclusion of the dance. The point is the dance itself.

Even if you're dancing solo – let's say you're a ballerina – you are expressing something beyond words in the act of dancing. If you're by yourself, dancing in a studio or dancing while you're at home vacuuming the carpet, you're dancing because it feels good and right it's the dance itself, not the end of the dance that you're focused on.

If you're dancing in front of an audience, you're sharing that expression with others, and every person in that crowd will see and interpret your dance and take in their own meaning.

If you're dancing in a different way, with a partner at a party, you're finding symmetry and a rhythm and movement you're sharing with that one other person.

I can't dance to save my life – especially if my knee is acting up – but in the past couple of weekends, Ellen and I have attended weddings – she's a very good dancer – and at the receptions we've watched the bride and groom dance and other people dance, and it's irresistible when you're with the person you love most in the world not to get up and take a whirl around the dance floor.

In that moment, dancing with that one special person, forgetting everything else and everyone around you, is what matters most, not the end of the song.

From a practical standpoint, dancing serves no purpose. It's not a way to arrive at a destination. Usually, you're just turning around in circles, not going from point "A" to point "B." The movements you make are the result of the joy of the moment, working in harmony with your partner, dancing for its own sake.

And the same is true if you find yourself in a situation where you're invited to dance in a group. The Hokey-Pokey, for instance.

In any group, I would say, any organization, even in our Fellowship, a kind of dance takes place. A process of give and take, of mutual respect and grace, of understanding that how we live and work together, how we worship, how we learn, how we serve others, and how we grow matters as much as any end result.

I'm not suggesting that as a Fellowship, we have no goals. Or that what we're doing together serves no practical purpose. We absolutely have goals, a vision, a mission, and a shared purpose. And happily enough, we're achieving those in ways that sometimes surprise us.

But I think we are doing so much precisely because we understand that the pathway we take – how we dance together – matters.

The writer Barbara de Angelis has said, "The moment in between what you once were, and who you are now becoming, is where the dance of life really takes place."

The life and the love we share, this dance right now, in this moment, *is* what it's all about.

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