

Michiana Chronicles

Friday, February 09, 2007

http://www.mchron.net/ee/radio/dancing_for_our_lives/

Dancing for our Lives

Could the news cycle get any weirder? I'm already longing for future historians' analysis of what the heck was going on in the middle "aught" years of our 21st century. Global warming and gas-guzzling. A murderous astronaut. Lying Libby. Contested surges and presidential urges. And in the midst of all this, an obsession with ... ballroom dancing?

What explains our fixation on TV shows like "Dancing with the Stars" and "So You Think you Can Dance?" Just as scholars analyzed the quiz show craze in the dark McCarthyite 1950s, I'm wondering – What gives with our fixation, now, on the tangled legs of the tango? Are we watching dance so we don't have to watch Baghdad burn?

I highly recommend the latest book by Barbara Ehrenreich to puzzle this through. Ehrenreich – of *Nickel and Dimed* fame – has just published *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* about the world-wide power of dance to move people to action. She traces the historical cycles of flourishing festivals followed by crack-downs against merry-making whenever authorities find the communal ecstasy of the common folk just too threatening. So, for example, in late medieval Europe, the Christian church suppressed Pagan rituals, and it was "So, long!" to May poles; "Bye-bye!" to carnival. Ehrenreich urges us to revisit what she calls "techniques of ecstasy" – the practices of celebration that fuel us with collective power. Mass spectacle binds cultures. In an age when our spectacle mostly comes from war, I wonder if our latest fascination with dance means we're trying to recall those old steps of eros, since thanatos, it's clear, is a truly dead end?

I've been trying to learn some of these "techniques of ecstasy" myself, with my beloved and a group of friends who take weekly lessons in what I privately call "ballroom stumbling." On my best evenings, I'm a remedial fox-trotter, and my swing doesn't fling. But even if I have to count under my breath to pull off a basic grape-vine to Lawrence Welkian music, the pleasure of dancing with someone I love in the company of friends is a tiny taste of that collective joy. Every time we clasp hands and position our toes, I think of the joke my friend tells about why Baptists don't have sex standing up. Because – it could lead to dancing! Oh, yeah, I think, while twirling – just imagine if we could harness this power for political good.

In fact, folks in our area have done just that. An inspired group of former refugees from Rwanda in South Bend have formed the [BERWA Organization](#), dedicated to the preservation and practice of Rwandan music and dance as a method of reconciliation and harmony – making peace through shared rhythms. I saw their troupe perform recently, and was completely caught up in the ingenious combination of percussively stomping

feet with gorgeous, liquid arms. Watching the grown-ups lead dozens of children in these beautiful, powerful dances about birth and bravery and love, it was impossible not to feel the joy of collectivity. At the evening's end, the audience joined the Rwandans – and, frankly, we were no better at movements – part water, part earth – than I am on the ballroom dance floor, but it didn't matter. Laughter, risk-taking, giddiness – that's the collective joy of dance.

As we advance toward Mardi Gras, I want to remember the unsettling power of carnival – the power of the people to get up and shake our groove things, to dare to speak ill of the powerful, to over-turn the status quo. I don't want to forget dear, recently departed writer Molly Ivins, who titled a book, *You Got to Dance with Them What Brung You*. A few weeks ago, just before she died of breast cancer, she called for public demonstrations against the escalation of war-making. She wrote: “We are the people who run this country. We are the deciders. Every single day every single one of us needs to step outside and take some action to help stop this war. We need people in the streets banging pots and pans and demanding, ‘Stop it now!’”

The numbers are behind her. It's way past time to strap on our dancing shoes, to grab every noise-maker in our kitchens, and raise a ruckus. There's a reason authorities fear the power of the people; there are a lot of us. This isn't a call to arms, it's a call to link arms. It may be cold outside, but it's time to turn up the heat.

Broadcast by April Lidinsky on February 09, 2007

Michiana Chronicles airs on Fridays at 7:35 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. on WVPE (88.1 FM), the home of public radio in Elkhart / South Bend, Indiana. Powered by ExpressionEngine.