



De Sola dancing the Beatitudes at Pacific School of Religion Chapel. Influenced by participation technique from Doug Adams, she invited people stand on the Beatitude that was significant for them. (GTU Archives)

19. “The Beatitudes” Dances

CDS: I am going to talk about my dances based on the Beatitudes. The first time I ever danced the Beatitudes was an improvisation in a barn somewhere in Ohio at a spiritual center called the Grail. I was on a pilgrimage with a friend, and passing through, we were given hospitality for the night. In exchange, they asked us to dance the litany of the Beatitudes in their barn—I think it was part of a liturgy. I knew the scripture passage, but I had never danced them. The person I was with was not a dancer, but loved to move, and his deep spiritual connections when moving were astounding. He stood by one barrel of hay in the barn and I stood at another. He came forward on the first Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor . . .” and extended open, empty hands in need of God. Then I came out on “Blessed are those who mourn . . .” and perhaps wept (I don’t really recall), and so on, alternating. This improvisation in the barn left an indelible imprint on me.

Fast-forward to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. As I mentioned before, we were in residence, and the Omega Liturgical Dance Company was part of a night vigil on Maundy Thursday sometime after their liturgy. I created for these occasions a formal Beatitude dance, using music from a Russian Orthodox chant that was sung in English! It was always a special and beautiful evening of dance, chant, darkness, and light. Fast-forward again to the

1990s and the Pacific School of Religion classes in Berkeley, California, for which I created another version of the Beatitude dance, which we did in the chapel.

This was influenced by a wonderful man out here who had invited me to come and teach, Professor Doug Adams, who had created the Arts and Religion program out here at the GTU. Once in his class on worship, he invited the class to stand on the part of the hymn that they really approved of! Maybe everyone doesn't approve of every line. Please stand when you approve. This is a Protestant interdenominational seminary [and this experience] sparked me to create another Beatitudes dance. Reciting the litany beforehand, I asked [each person in] the congregation to rise when I came [to] the Beatitude that "you are drawn to, that you feel called to live in your life." This has turned out to be a wonderful ritual, introduced in a fuller way than I am relating now.

A very significant time for me was offering this dance at Grace Cathedral for a celebration of the life and death of Oscar Romero. The music I chose was from Sweet Honey in the Rock's version of the Beatitudes. In this service, there were also beautiful photographs of El Salvador as well as specially created paintings. It was a wonderful setting for the dance, and I felt honored to have presented it.

