

**Emilie M. Townes excerpts from ‘The Human Imagination: Searching for Grace on the Rim Bones of Nothingness’,**

Plenary paper to the Society for the Study of Theology Conference, Theology and Grace, 2019.

There is a certain kind of peace that is not merely the absence of war. It is larger than that. The peace I am thinking of is not at the mercy of history’s rule, nor is it a passive surrender to the status quo. The peace I am thinking of is the dance of an open mind when it engages another equally open one— an activity that occurs most naturally, most often in the reading/writing world we live in.

Toni Morrison  
*The Dancing Mind*

As we take in this dancing mind, we should do so as embodied people....

this is crucial for me because black bodies are a seething presence in u.s. society ....

we are a society in chaos about many things and black bodies are only one element of this chaos

but we are illustrative of the othering that goes on in the u.s. ....

and if we are not careful, we will develop a haute couture of venom and despair

that may feel like a faithful response to evil

but is really only driving nails into a coffin of bitterness and brine

that is far, far away from the new heaven and new earth that should be the vision that drives us to live a life of joy

that fills our lives and work with vibrant possibilities rather than stultifying realities

so, given the cartel of evil we deal with today

i focus on a troubling something as a window into this cultural production of evil and perhaps one way to eradicate it: the holy and the erotic

i find that it is not helpful to put the holy and the erotic in opposition to each other

the conjunction “and” marks the joining of these two things that i think of as natural dance partners with each other

the holy expresses both radical transcendence and radical imminence in coming to know the power of the divine in our lives

it reminds us that we are held in the grand design of God’s mercy and grace

and rocked with a love that will not let us go

the erotic expresses the passionate engagement we must have with life as disciples of the holy, the divine

it reminds us that we are to live life fully engaged with the world around us—its rhythms, its hopes, its disappointments, its promises

and it sometimes calls us to be downright ornery in working for the new heaven and new earth

which, for me, is another way to say justice and another way to accept God’s embodied grace in life and living...

...it is to move toward intellectually and spiritually dancing into a new future

...a place and space that embodies grace as we live our lives...

... a place and space of deep joy, a depth of which a thin human imagination cannot contemplate or execute

hence, rather than looking for happy, i am looking for joy

happy helps me see that a more robust future is possible

joy gives me the fire and insight to refuse to give up on making that future real

happy gives me a lens into the hope for the world

joy pulls me, gooses me into *not* settling for far too little in my life and witness

joy helps me stretch into the ministry and scholarship that God calls all of us to

to celebrate the spiritual gifts we've been given

to walk around in them

to sit down and play with the holy sand God has given us

joy refuses to let me live my life in the past tense

joy dares me to live a deep spirit and spirituality

joy dares me to live justice

joy takes us out of the folds of the old wounds that make all of us perform unnatural acts like any of the "isms"

joy means creating communities that are bodies of hope and righteousness that spit in the face of the cultural production of evil

...joy—that takes like and turns it into love

takes care and turns into passion

takes concern and turns it into commitment

joy—it's what gets God up doing a standing ovation in creation

because regardless of how tough it gets some days, i am encouraged to live my work with joy that comes from an embrace of the holy and the erotic—in other words, to be washed in embodied grace

and to remind myself that i want to be *very* old black woman when i die

because dying of old age is the ultimate holy and erotic, embodied grace womanist move