

In my earliest memories of God, she is wearing a red dress, and dancing in an overgrown garden. She's beautiful and entrancing, in a wild, glorious, untamed way. She would invite me to dance too, in my imagination. And I longed to, but I was a little shy. She was so alive. She *was* life. Glorious, rich, feisty. God.

I don't know where she came from in my imagination. Unsurprisingly, she bore no resemblance to the God of my Sunday School teachers or of my parents. I knew enough not to talk about her, and after a while she was overtaken by the sensible, rational, and somewhat more prosaic version of God who was the subject of much more domesticated analogies in the Sunday School class. She never disappeared though, she was just relegated to a back cupboard in my imagination, to appear and be dusted off years later when I found Anna Oneglia's painting of a woman in a red dress, dancing, in a London gallery. I recognised God immediately.

In my meanderings through Christian theology, it was a relief to discover this statement from Sallie McFague: "There is a power at work in the universe, on the side of life and all its fulfilment". It was the first theology I'd read that made sense of the God I knew - God wearing a red dress, dancing in the garden. It's the God whose presence I recognise in the world - and even in the Bible (though sometimes cunningly disguised in the Sunday School curriculum of my childhood) - a power who is on the side of life. Irrepressible, relentless, unstoppable.

It makes me wonder whether this is why this world exists - because this power at work in the universe simply cannot exist without creating life. Bringing life into existence is not an act of will for God, it's an act of being - as much as breathing is innate to our existence, so creating is to God's. And when you make something, as part of your very being, you love it to within an inch of your life (and if God, even more). You'll invest everything in its well being. Even yourself.

Christians believe that Jesus personified this life, the source of all that brings life to its fullness - love, grace, healing, justice. He breathed redemption into worthlessness, forced chaos into the systems that oppressed, flickered hope into despair. In the celebration of Jesus' ascension this week, we remember that this divine embodiment of life was not confined to that time in history, but that it reaches across time and space, forwards and backwards, into every moment and every place.

The choice we face, in response, is whether to embed ourselves in this life, and to put ourselves in the places that give life a chance. We can decide to wait in the moments of despair, trusting that they will not be the end of the story. We can choose to put ourselves in the places where we can dismantle systems and structures that oppress, and to proclaim against all structures that diminish the worth and life of another. We can decide to live in a way that means all might live.

We lose ourselves when we embed ourselves in this life, but it's the kind of losing that means we're found: like lovers whose bodies tangle together, not knowing where one ends and the other begins, but knowing themselves, completely, for the first time.

There's nothing new in this, of course. This power of life is what many religions point to, stumbling and searching to find words and images to describe. But it doesn't need a name or a religion to exist. This power is at work in the world, within and beyond the religions that call on its name - abundant, overflowing, searching for

space to do what life does. Sometimes in spite of us, sometimes because of us. It's the relentless, irrepressible power of life in the universe. A woman in a red dress, dancing wildly in a garden, inviting us to come and dance too.

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