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Dance and Healing

by Jane Farrelly

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO I HAD A FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE of the miraculous healing power of Jesus Christ over malignant cancer. This encounter was life changing for me. Now I constantly strive to find ways of sharing my Christian faith in the world of dance performance, teaching and choreography. Restoration from cancer also inspired me to study alternative medicine. I qualified as a homoeopath and for the past eleven years I have worked in part-time practice. There is more. In March 2003 I concluded three years of post-graduate research into the healing properties of dance at the University of Western Sydney. The Healer set me free and I cannot forget the wonder of His mighty love. I want to dance about it, write about it and shout about it. Jesus turned my "wailing into dancing" and "clothed me with joy" (PSALM 30:11). The following extracts are from my thesis *Dance and Healing*.

Acknowledgements

Dance and Healing is informed by practical dance explorations conducted within two tertiary Christian arts education communities where I am currently employed part-time as a lecturer in dance. I wish to thank all the dance students, my colleagues and friends who participated in the project. Thank you to each student who gave permission for their photograph, drawing or journal entry to be included in the research. Thank you to my employers - Wesley Institute, Drummoyne and The School of Creative Arts, Christian City Church Oxford Falls, Sydney, Australia - for approving and supporting my research. In order to formalise procedures for research involving human participants protocols were applied throughout the study via the University of Western Sydney Human Ethics Review Committee (*Protocol No. HEO1/021*). Thank you to the University of Western Sydney.

Introduction

Today the healing properties of dance so commonly experienced by those who love to dance operate within a variety of frameworks. Dancers, teachers and choreographers often pass on concepts, theories and findings specific to healing and dance unconsciously (Friedler and Glazer 1997 p.2). Formalisation of the processes of healing in dance appears to be overlooked. The mentoring and discipleship of healing dance knowledge moves through dance creation processes in subtle, spoken, spatial, musical and embodied textual forms (Albright 1997 p. 152), sometimes undeclared and rarely written down. These concerns reflect my interest in generating research activity into dance and healing practices, literature and education. To explore for the healing properties in dance I select the medium of contemporary improvisation.

Embodied Dance Languages

Embodied languages in exploratory contemporary dance improvisation are found in communications that reach beyond the range of mimicked language (Grieg 1994 p.3). In contrast with other popular styles of dance, a formal glossary of terms cannot be found for contemporary improvisation. Imitation is not the given norm in performance of this "here and now" dance style. Dance forms such as classical ballet, modern or jazz and ballroom require set terminologies and vocabularies and programmed training methodologies.

Contemporary dance improvisation speaks through spontaneous physical expression about the life experiences of the person who is improvising. Human movement flows through each dancer's uniquely formed body into dance improvisation. The patterns of each person's fingerprints are unique. Similarly the patterns of embodied communications find a unique blueprint in dance improvisation. There may be not so much as one spoken word, yet so much is said.

State of the Heart

Because embodied languages in improvised dance do not have the particular literal complexity of spoken or written language the visual impact of dance material can move outside any conscious use of conventional, literary boundaries. Free from rules akin to literature, dance improvisation creatively embodies languages coming from somewhere deeper (Thomas 1995 cites Williams p. 168).

While in a state of absorption in the act of improvisation, the intellect of a dancer is more towards a state of suspended disbelief (Schneer 1994 p. 109). Therefore the embodied languages of dance improvisation are seen to by-pass the rigors of a doubting intellect. Perhaps another part of the mind becomes

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operable?



Dance improvisation describes and conveys not only a dancer's outer life but also more importantly that dancer's inner life (Ullman 1992 p. 19). Between this inner life and contact with the movement of healing there may be healing for both the person who is improvising and an observer of the dance (Hanstein cited in Overby and Humphrey 1989 p. 139).

The language communicated through dance creation is of the whole person from the inside to the outside. This embodied dance language is capable of a full and complete emotional range. From a place of internal states in the core of a dancer, communication moves through the body (Todd 1959 p.281) to a place far beyond the level of usual linguistic constructs (Blom and Chaplin 1942 p. 126). Improvising dancers speak, sing and whisper clearly into and across the dance space in the silent embodied languages of dance improvisation (Hanstein cited in Overby and Humphrey 1989 p.141).

DANCER'S COMMENT

Journal entry September 2002

It was my turn to move and initially I experienced terror. Then something happened, something took over. I truly was not moving, I was watching myself move. I stripped myself of negativity, this grief - I felt tender toward this negativity, soft about it knowing that it brings me light without the darkness there would be no light. I was deeply moved by this experience so much so that I needed to support myself on the wall. Towards the end of the session I chose to sit in the center of the room rather than to dance. On a conscious level I did it for my dying cousin. I did this not for myself yet it was where I needed to be. Perhaps the grief I had just danced was all poured out in the physical movements because now I felt safe and held as the others improvised. Perhaps it was collective grief? It was an overwhelming experience - lightness followed.

Embodied Prayer

When an atmosphere of prayer is prevalent, the language of dance improvisation finds another level. In short the deeper feelings about God and the greater truths that are perhaps beyond verbal language are communicated in prayerful dance improvisation. The dialogue of embodied prayer in dance improvisation allows for a complete connection to be made with God through creative process (Schroeder 1995). Prayerful dancers and their dance improvisations are conduits for the healing power of God.

DANCERS' COMMENTS

Journal entry April 2001

We watched improvisation. Dancing with God - it was a beautiful sight, the passion behind the movements and the expressions of love all came out in the dance. To watch dance in God's presence with simple movements was a moving sight. There was so much love pouring out of the bodies dancing. It was amazing.

Journal entry September 2002

Improvisation is spiritual and reveals what is in one's heart and how we relate to God. When a person dances the way they are is expressed. When I am improvising I express my deeply hidden emotions. When I improvise I come into one mind, one place and emotion with the other dancers to be overwhelmed and know God and his gifts for us.

Generally speaking spiritual teachings give a seeker of truth certain keys to the spiritual path. These keys have various names - stillness, peace, faith, hope, love, revelation and connection. Could access be found into the field of healing dance by application of these seven keys in practical improvisation sessions? (Gaynor 1995 p.222) Commonly known spiritual practices and pathways such as prayer, reflection, meditation, praise, worship and pilgrimage may be found with these keys (King 1995) (I. Gawler 1997) (Sanford 1990) (Mother Teresa 1992).

Perhaps spiritual healing comes from a place of stillness within the dancer? Does spiritual healing then lead to physical and emotional health? If this is so, could such a source of healing always be present and available for a dancer via stillness?

The notion of stillness, an inner stillness, may be a welcome relief to the physically driven and often exhausted dancer who is constantly training to develop techniques and performance works outside the practical research sessions. Crossing cultural and religious borders by way of the intelligent simplicity of stillness or inner peace seems too good to be true. T. S. Eliot *mBurntNorton*, (1958 p.9) writes, "Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance".

The tried and true spiritual practice of stillness is obviously an ideal place to begin an investigation into spiritual healing and dance improvisation.

Is the stillness associated with dance and healing a stillness of the dancer's mind? When the dancer's awareness of all that is within and without becomes finely tuned and balanced perhaps a centered inner stillness occurs. Maybe the place where passive observation is initiated is a place of stillness? Perhaps stillness occurs when passive observation merges into simply being in the moment? Is the stillness of time or space? Could stillness be a way for dancers to come to knowledge of God? Psalm 46:10 reads, " Be still and know that I am God."

The dancers in this project appear to approach stillness of the mind via analysis, passivity, yielding, impartiality or the practice of simply being still and relaxing physically into the moment (Gawler 1987). Therefore it seems reasonable to suppose that what occurs for the dancer before and after an experience of stillness in dance improvisation sessions will be useful in understanding the relationship of dance, healing and stillness.

Stillness of Mind

Reflective concentration and inner observation are seen to be prerequisites in revealing the stillness of the mind. It is worth stating that in this study the mind of a dancer seems to be softly focused, calm, quietly engaged and not at all empty. The dancers experience a stillness of mind that may be likened to a calm sea. They create and perform improvisations in a harmonious environment without mental resistance. Admittedly the dancers in this research are people of faith and faith is known to make quiet the mind like no other form of belief (Benson 1996 p.203).

Stillness of Being and Authentic Movement

I perceive the dancers to be passively attentive as though watching from within. They appear to be silently seeing all that is to be seen prior to the stillness of being in the moment. This experience is soon followed by varying degrees of wonderment, intuition, fulfillment or insight (Fraleigh 1987 p.26).

Stillness in this context appears to be a place of origin and authenticity. I conclude that the still place from where authentic dance springs up is a womb-like environment in that it is fluid and supportive in nature.

Findings

Inner stillness comes to the dancer through soft concentration, self-observation and absorption. These three form a triangular base to support the improvisation process. It is of some importance to note that stillness presents as an outcome for the dancer rather than a goal or intention and authentic movement is a by-product.

Stillness of Being



Stillness of being spontaneously occurs in this study in various ways. I observe a certain steadiness as dancers become aware of the inner world of dance. The steadiness is a defining moment with a calm decisive quality evident in the dance movement. There is an obvious point of connection being made. The connection is clearly meaningful and absorbs the dancer completely in the dance creation process. Perhaps the inner stillness evident here is the connection referred to by J. D. Blackmer(1931 p.26):

Quiet is needed to bring one's scattered thoughts to a still, introverted point of focus, to make a connection with the other world.

Acrobats of the Gods, Dance and Transformation

Another Dimension

The stillness of being in contemporary dance improvisation has yet another dimension. There is the very real sense of another. That is to say both dancers and observers are seen to experience the presence of something greater. Is this the presence of God? The presence of God could account for the sense of eternity, timelessness and time travel (Morris 1986 p. 122). All ordinary sense of time is lost in a research session where stillness is part of the experience. The effect of stillness impacts on all those present in the session. They appear to be completely at ease and reluctant to leave the session even when it is way past the time to go.

Most important is a tangible atmosphere that surrounds the dancers. The atmosphere affects my observation and transforms the dance space into a place of infinite possibilities. I am at one with the process in this atmosphere from stillness. Respect and awe for the order of all things great and small is a simple way to describe my experience of this atmosphere. The following words are my considered response after reflection on notes taken during research sessions.

Dancers move into stillness

Listening to the body Waiting

Dance begins from within

Dancing from stillness

Dancers follow

Watching the dance with inner quiet

From a still place the spirit moves

Being still Eyes settle in

Dancing free

Body settles down Breath

Dancing up a storm

moves out and in Bodies

And seeing from the eye of the storm

become quieter Looking

Mind is a wave less ocean without a ripple

inward

Knowing

Jesus walks on water

Watching as stillness moves into being

With god

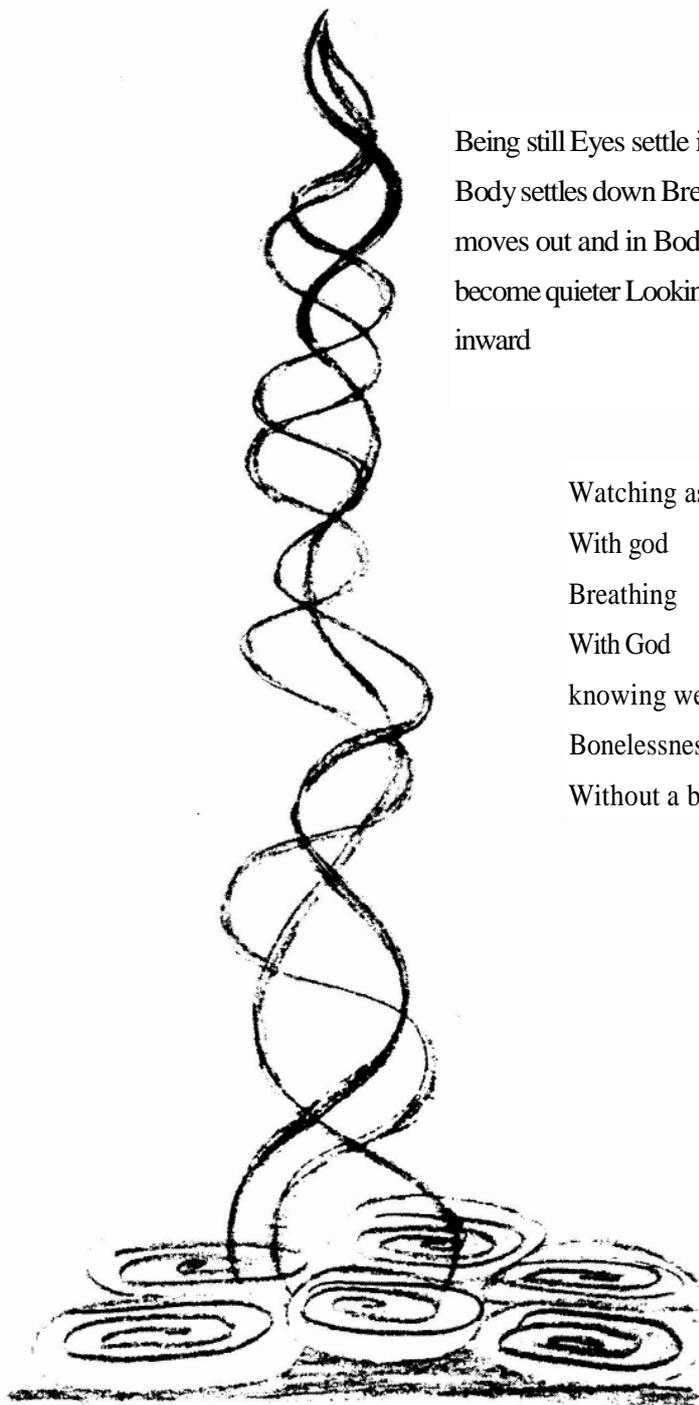
Breathing

With God

knowing weightlessness

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Without a boundary

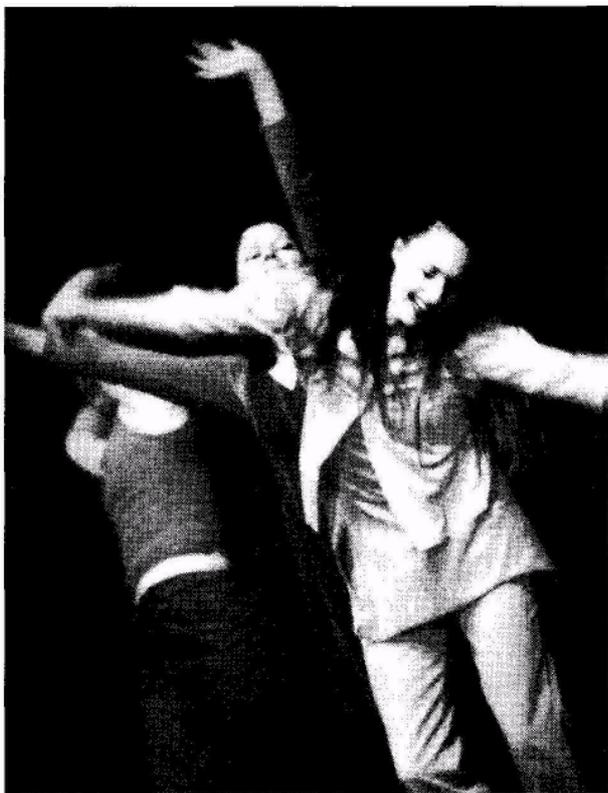


Spiritual Considerations

Within structures governed by style and technique a trained and accomplished dancer is capable of demonstrating flexibility, balance, virtuosity and artistry. Techniques that condition a dancer over many years of training in highly refined and specific movement vocabularies and clearly identifiable styles - such as classical ballet and modern dance - develop a conditional freedom for that dancer. In contrast the dancers of this research are exploring in a transformational space and their dance vocabularies are light, easy, melodic and safely supported within the prayerful research environment.

The Dance of Freedom

The freedom in dance that I witness in this research is a release from tradition and training, conditioning and habitual patterns. The dancers of this research move in the creative and atmospheric conditions of a presence that is simple, free and wonderful. Healing happens in free dance of this nature. The dances are full of amazing movement that emerges without pain, strain or stress on the dancers.



Spiritual considerations come to mind when freedom takes the dancing space and effortlessly dismantles the stresses and strains of technical, artistic and physical accomplishment. The dance of freedom is of a genre other than one acquired through the physical effort of dedicated training in a specific dance technique. This free and healing dance, happening in a spacious place, is referred to in PSALM 18:19:

*But the Lord was my support.
He brought me out into a spacious place
He rescued me because he delighted in me*

Is a dance of freedom in this research the same as dance in the Spirit? CORINTHIANS 3:17 provides an answer. *"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."* How does the Spirit of Lord come into the practical sessions of this research and how does the Spirit bring about the dance of freedom and healing?

Within the context of this project when I witness an impartation of spiritual healing there is release for the whole person from everything that binds and hinders. Physical tensions and life-long patterns of habitual postures and movement are released from the dancers' bodies. Mindsets and attitudes that previously prevented a person from exploration and creativity are no longer active in that dancer. Freedom is a clearly visible and tangible factor of the dances that are performed in a movement of the Holy Spirit.

Dreams Come True

Dance in the Spirit is truly beautiful to see because it is easy for dancers to perform. Filled to overflowing with wonder I watch the power and beauty of men and women as they embody and create dance that is purposeful and edifying (De Sola 2001 v75 112 p.62). The depth and meaning of communication in the content of these improvisations is timeless and delightfully human. This is the dance I dreamed of as a child long before I saw a dance performance or knew about dance improvisation.

The Holy Spirit moves in the improvisations of this research and inspires and blesses those who dance and those who observe. Dance improvisation in the presence of God is dance that heals.

DANCER'S COMMENTS

Journal entry July 2002

We then went on to dance in the Spirit. This was an amazing experience. I felt such freedom. I allowed my body to move with the Spirit. I was able to really let go and just move, I didn't have to think which step to do next: I was able to just keep going. I really felt the presence of a God and was filled with such a joy. Really free! Praise You, Father.

Journal entry August 2002

Today I closed my eyes and danced with the Spirit inside of me and it was so freeing. I felt incredibly present, alive and especially peaceful. Like there was just the Spirit and myself and although I was aware of the music and the other people in the room they were a long way away. This was like dancing with love and light pouring into and out of my heart. A very moving experience today. I had the best class. Free! Free! Free! God and I danced together. So grateful I am to have this. I love God and God loves me just as I am.

Journal entry July 2002

As I danced spontaneously in the Spirit the love of God poured into me. Yet I knew there was hurt and pain that I had been ignoring for so long because I wouldn't let it go. It was a reminder to me from God that in order to give up everything I had to give up that pain in my life to Him so that He can heal me and bless me. His love for me was falling down like rain. All I had to do was release my pain and accept His rain



Author's Notes



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Jane was born in Sydney, Australia in 1946. Dance is Jane's first language and from age sixteen it has been her profession. Performance, choreography, teaching and learning are equally important to her. As time goes by Jane's journey in dance is enriched more and more by her relationship with Jesus, the Lord of the dance.

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