

Journeying from Sensation into Words:

Dancing Language in the Tamalpa Life/Art Process

By Hiie Saumaa, PhD

The arms reach into an uneven horizon. The torso begins a roundward journey. The gaze softens to connect to the inner eye. Sitting on the studio floor at Earthdance in Plainfield, Massachusetts, I watch an experienced Contact Improvisation dancer move in front of my eyes, this time in solo form. His dance is a response to three elements in a drawing that he completed ten minutes ago. The drawing, now in front of my toes, with its squares, lines, and hieroglyphic shapes in vibrant orange, black, and purple, grew out of a movement exploration of the question, What are your legs and feet telling you right now? He immediately places the body in contact with the ground, as if in love affair with the earth, and moves on low and high planes with such ease and relaxed alertness—I can see the aesthetics of Contact Improvisation here, I notice, giving this dancer my full attention. Many of his movements during these five minutes communicate something quite different, however. A yearning, a struggle, a pushing through, tension, a range of different feeling states. Having finished, he comes and sits in front of me. I clear my throat and carefully start, hoping

my words will strike a chord: “When I saw you hold your elbows like this, physically I felt ‘held.’ Emotionally I felt safe. Mentally I saw an image of you embracing yourself or someone else.” Growing more confident, I proceed: “When I saw you thrusting your right arm vigorously forward and turning side to side, I physically felt energy coursing through my torso. Emotionally I felt agile and present in the moment. In my mind’s eye, I imagined a skilled martial artist moving with a sword.” Responding with a nod of acknowledgment, he takes his turn to speak, conjuring in words a snapshot of his own movement: “When I did this move with my head, physically I felt . . .”

This scene describes an exercise in partnering and expressive embodiment in the Tamalpa Life/Art Process, developed by the legendary choreographer, dancer, and performance artist Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin, who have been carrying forth the practice at the Tamalpa Institute, in existence since 1978. What is noticeable in the above encounter is the fact that both the mover and the movement witness speak and use a particular formula for rendering their emotional,

imaginative, and physical responses to movement and sensation. While some practices, such as Authentic Movement, include verbal articulation, in many somatic methods, particularly those practiced primarily in group settings, participants’ opportunity to articulate their movement experiences, either in written or spoken formats, remains limited. The scene above brings to light an aspect that is frequently overlooked in somatic approaches to movement—the exploration of language in the experience of the mover.

Language is a crucial tool in somatic education: the instructor’s or facilitator’s words—in the form of instructions, questions, or guided meditation—can lead a participant into deeper levels of inner sensing, alignment, and relaxation. Somatic instructors’ mindful use of language shapes a space where sensations and varied movement options can be explored. However, what is the participant’s, not the instructor’s, experience with expressing his/her sensations or visual images in words? Somatic educators might share a set of questions around the use of language:

1. Are language and speaking necessary components in the practice one

teaches? Is it important to create a space where students can speak and relate their sensations as words?

2. What potential for growth would result from verbalizing one's movement experience?

3. If rendering movement experiences in words is a value in students' self-growth, how can one make verbal expression of bodily feeling more precise, considering that for many participants putting movement sensations into words can be challenging?

4. If the practice includes witnessing, how can one translate this experience into a safe, respectful, yet impactful verbal encounter?

In what follows, I discuss Tamalpa Life/Art Process's approach to some of these questions. I offer a brief glimpse into this practice's main ideas of expressive embodiment and somatic inquiry. Then, I examine a few different ways in which the practice employs written and spoken language. I aim to highlight the need for a deeper investigation of the dynamics between movement, physical sensation, imagination, language, and verbal expression in the experience of a somatic practitioner across different somatic methods.

Tamalpa Life/Art Process and Movement Language

The Life/Art Process is "an approach based on working with people's own life experiences as the utmost source for artistic expression" (Tamalpa Institute, n.d.). The practice stems from experimentation and fascination with improvisation in the 1960s and 1970s. Anna Halprin's students included dancers, choreographers, and contact improvisers such as Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and Robert Morris, among others. Cynthia Novack (1990) has noted, "The relationship of Halprin's work to Contact Improvisation is clear: it involved improvisation, lessening the control of the choreographer; it emphasized kinesthetic awareness and moving in a 'natural' way; and it occurred outside of New York" (p. 30). From workshops for dancers, poets, musicians, and artists on the West Coast in the 1960s, Halprin's work gradually moved away from training artists and "toward finding the artist within ordinary people" (Banes, 2011, p. 9). She started creating movement experiences and dance rituals for communities and used life situations as a basis for movement ceremonies. Since then, Halprin's and her

daughter Daria's work has moved in the therapeutic direction.

Tamalpa practitioners use expressive arts—movement, visual art, sounding, and writing—to improvise, gain insights into the inner and outer world, and acquire tools to live life creatively and in constant awareness of one's embodied state. During trainings and workshops, the goal is not to come up with polished choreography, artistically skilled drawings, or publishable writing, although a foundation for such work might be laid. Rather, the aim is to create an environment in which participants can explore and express themselves kinesthetically, verbally, visually, and aurally, as individuals and as members of a community. The practice emphasizes curiosity about the potential of movement and art to unlock creative or healing powers.

"Movement is the first language" is a primary tenet of the Life/Art Process. Movement and nonverbal expressions of the body in the form of sensations are guiding forces of this practice, a feature shared across a range of somatic practices. Elisabeth Osgood-Campbell, of Tamalpa Institute's teaching faculty, has noted that she is very careful with how much language she uses when facilitating Life/Art Process workshops and classes: "Our culture is language and text heavy. There is too much reliance on words" (Osgood-Campbell, personal communication).¹ She creates a space where the mind does not lead or direct the body but can listen to and observe physical experience. Heavy use of words in instructions or in students' responses can lead participants to mental analysis, intellectual processes, and the thinking mind rather than connect them to their actual physical sensations.

However, verbal language is not at all ignored in the Life/Art Process. This modality offers several ways in which a somatic practitioner can connect deeply to language and through language gain more awareness of his/her physical intelligence. The practice starts with movement, a gentle warm-

up dance, connecting participants to their felt sense, followed by a focused movement exploration of a body part or an element in their surrounding environment (see Figure 1). After that, participants segue into drawing, responding to a question such as, "What is it like to arrive in this dance space?"



Figure 1.

or "What are your feet telling you right now?" Only then—after moving and drawing—is verbal language evoked. For example, students can be asked to write a journal entry on the question, "If your drawing could talk, what would it say?" or "How would it like to be titled?" On the basis of these writings, participants could be asked to step into creative forms of written expression, such as composing improvisational poems or fairy tales.

Two points are important to underline here: first, there is a range of written genres that participants can explore through free-flow, improvisational writing: journal writing as well as more narrative and poetic forms. The options of writing reflectively versus writing artistically or aesthetically, writing from the position of the "I" or creating a fictional story or a haiku-like poem based on elements from journal entries, allow the person to relate to written language and to the self differently.

Second, the sequence of the tasks places movement and drawing ahead of writing—participants thus do not turn to their perhaps more habitual ways of relying on language first. Rather, movement and visual arts pave the way for language (see Figure 2).



Figure 2.

Physical and visual expression create a space for imagination to emerge from perhaps more subconscious parts of the self that might be more difficult to access in language. This feature aligns the Tamalpa Life/Art Process with the Jungian theory of “active imagination” in which clients bring unconscious impulses into a creative form (see Jung, 1997).

Spoken forms of language come into play most expressively in partner work. While the content of the spoken language is not determined, of course, the formula for it is. As in Authentic Movement, the reason for employing a particular linguistic framework is to assist participants in “the challenging task of differentiating clear perception from projection . . . [The] purpose is the creation of language that is neither judgmental nor interpretive” (Stromsted & Haze, 2007, p. 59).² In a duo, partners might be asked to do an improvisational dance in response to a few elements that strike their attention in their partner’s drawing as well as respond, via movement, to the drawing as a whole. Partners then talk to one another about their witnessing experience (see Figure 3). They use a model of three levels of awareness: awareness of the physical self, the emotional self, and the imaginative self. The linguistic framework is: “When watching you do this movement, physically I felt . . . emotionally I felt . . . in my imagination, I saw . . .,” the model that I evoked at the beginning of this article.

This format trains one’s eye and

makes one more perceptive of the other’s and one’s own movement on multiple levels. Answering the question of “what did I feel physically while watching this movement?” directly engages one’s kinesthetic sense. By asking the viewer to track his/her sensations while watching the other move, this question connects the viewer to his/her own inner, felt sense. “What did I see in my mind’s eye?” deliberately expands and trains one’s imaginative faculties and highlights the

idea that movement is an important source for nourishing imagination. “What did I feel emotionally?” invites one to record verbally one’s own feeling states in response to movement. The participant can thus learn a lot about movement and inner sensing in this practice not only through his/her own movement but by observing others’ movement and making these observations concrete by articulating them aloud.

Spoken language also becomes a source for improvisation, artistic exploration, and performance. As I discussed earlier, journal writing can lay the foundation for a story or

a poem. Working with partners or small groups, participants can also be asked to do movement explorations in response to specific words that their partners are simultaneously vocalizing. At other times, words might be done away with altogether, and participants use only their voices and different sounds, pitches, and vocal registers to guide their partners’ improvisational movement. In solo embodiment rituals in which each participant’s improvisational movement is witnessed by the entire group, participants can include language, for example by asking a partner to speak particular words while the performer is moving or to read out loud a piece written by the performer him/herself or by another author (see Figure 4). In these cases, language stems primarily not from movement—language does not come after movement—but rather gives rise to, shapes, inspires, or supports further movement. Language here moves out from the participant’s inner world to group settings, into the context of a somatic performance experience.

Conclusion

Dance scholar Helen Thomas (2003) has pointed out that dancers have “great difficulty in translating their experiences of dancing into verbal language” (p. 88) and that “the difficulty of translating dance practices into verbal language is a perennial one for dance scholarship and cultural criticism” (p. 87). In the Life/Art Process, the invitation to clothe movement experience in language exercises the



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



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skills of finding words for movement sensations, both as movers and observers of movement. This, as Thomas notes also, is not necessarily an easy task. Martin Keogh (2001) has said of Contact Improvisation, “This dance form puts an emphasis on our developing ability to be lucid in the moment, and the capacity to articulate that lucidity to others” (p. 6). Similarly, in the Life/Art Process, articulating movement experiences is important because it brings sensations and physical insights into cognitive awareness and allows for a further layer in exploring the dynamics between the body, the mind, and imagination.

The Life/Art Process thus creates a synergistic dynamic between verbal and nonverbal aspects of the self. It honors the idea that language is an important means through which to bring nonverbal signals of the physical self into cognitive awareness. By exploring the use of language in practices such as the Tamalpa Life/Art Process, movers and researchers of movement can gain insight into how language can illuminate movement and movement can illuminate language. In the Life/Art practice, not all movement insights and sensations stay as felt experiences in the inner world, but many of them become articulated and available for further reflection. Instead of staying latent or inchoate, movement sensations and their verbal expressions have a potential to act as a source of knowledge of the self as well as to guide artistic and creative expression in somatic performance. This “wisdom of the body” can thus become more easily and powerfully communicable to the self and to others. Dance in this practice is not

a nonverbal act only; movement and words might be dancing a more intimate dance than one thinks. ☺

Notes

1. Notes from the Tamalpa Institute workshop “Creative Embodiment Exploring the Landscape of the Body, Nature, and Imagination,” at Earthdance Retreat Center, Plainfield, Massachusetts, 2016.

2. For an insightful account on the relationship between physical movement and language in Authentic Movement practice, see Emma Meehan, 2015, “Speak: Authentic Movement, ‘embodied text’ and performance as research,” *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, 7(2), 313-329.

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– Definition –

SOMA:

The body experienced from within.