



Margaret Fisk Taylor dancing "Alleluia," in the 1950s. Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA. All images come from Margaret Palmer Taylor Collection of Sacred Dance, GTU 96-7-01. Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley, CA

## A Time for Discovery

Margaret Fisk Taylor, Sacred Dance, and Creative Research.

By Hiie Saumaa

I look at the heap of books on my floor: *Embodied Prayer, Dance as the Spirit Moves, Dancing into the Anointing, Dance as Religious Studies, Introducing Dance in Christian Worship, Moving Liturgy* ... Did I really go through all of these and many other accounts of sacred dance and Christian liturgical dance? Was it really me who wrote a long research article on a liturgical dancer? Me, a mover, yes, a scholar, yes, a writer, yes, but a writer on liturgical dance? Me as someone who has never seen dancing in churches and does not consider herself religious?

The work of Margaret Fisk Taylor (1908-2004), a visionary creator of rhythmic choirs, an educator and mentor, inspired me to undertake this journey. Taylor is familiar to sacred dance circles and readers of the *Sacred Dance Guild Journal*, where she served as an editor for five years and to

which she contributed numerous articles. However, hardly anything is written about her in dance scholarship.

*"Taylor came into my life by accident.  
Or a miracle."*

Taylor came into my life by accident. Or a miracle. One day I was doing a Google book search on the word "healing" and on the famous early twentieth-century dancer and choreographer Ted Shawn. One of the first responses was a page from *The Art of the Rhythmic Choir* (1950) by Margaret Fisk Taylor. That name was unfamiliar. Looking into her books, I became fascinated by her life story and her ideas about movement as a way to cultivate imagination, creativity, and empathy.

I feel comfortable in the world of movement as a practitioner and teacher of sensory-based movement practices, such as Nia dance, JourneyDance™, and a meditative strength training technique called BodyLogos®, and the spiritual dimension does enter my movement classes. Dancing makes me feel in touch with myself



Margaret Fisk Taylor in 1938.  
Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.

and also connects me on a subtle level to my fellow dancers and to something beyond the human realm. When I was healing from Achilles tendonitis on both feet and looking for life direction, my dance classes became a prayer for healing, guidance, greater awareness, and deeper listening in my day-to-day life. Dance classes were, and are, a chance for the soul to speak through movement.

In the realm of liturgical dance, as a practice and as a body of writings, I was a novice. I educated myself. As I went through books and books on liturgical dance, I realized that literature on church dancing is a treasure trove for a mover and dance enthusiast. For example, reading the article "And We Have Danced: A History of the Sacred Dance Guild, 1972-1992" (1994) by Toni Intravaia, I realized that writers were not only or even primarily expressing why and how to praise the divine; they were writing about sensation, movement, imagination, connection, creativity, and nonverbal communication. The body and bodily sensations experienced were not disregarded as shameful, but rather seen as something to be felt, learned about, and intuited. This surprised me.

Taylor left a rich legacy to this field and wrote prolifically for a wide range of audiences. Liturgical dancers and rhythmic choir leaders in search of guidance for setting a hymn to movement and finding an overarching idea for choreography is one type of audience she addressed. Taylor's first book, *The Art of Rhythmic Choir* (1950), was groundbreaking in its historical account of dance in Christianity and is invaluable to a dance scholar. *Time for Wonder* (1961) and *Time for Discovery* (1964), later combined and reprinted as *Dramatic Dance With Children in Education and Worship* (1982), offer movement interpretations based on parables, biblical stories, Christmas and Easter carols, and suggest movement activities for children from five to eight years old and nine to twelve years old. *Look Up and Live* (1953) brings ideas of rhythmic movement to adults who do not necessarily participate in rhythmic choirs. It emphasizes the "need for the body, mind and soul to work cooperatively in helping individuals to meet life with less tension, more strength, less discouragement and more joy" (Taylor 1953:5). In

*Soul to Sole with Seniors: Growing Spiritually*

*Using Symbolic Movement* (2004), Taylor, at the age of 93, stated, "I now realize quite clearly that even though one may be quite limited in moving, one can still involve one's 'whole being' in symbolic movement to music or spoken words" (Taylor 2004:1).

In reading about Taylor, I imagined the seven-year-old Margaret growing up in Oakland, California, wearing a fairy costume and dancing in free movement in a dramatization of *A Midsummer*



Margaret Palmer in 1915 (on the right in the first row) Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.

daughter, and I thought that really, it's a religious experience there" (Hall 1989:6). I imagined her journey to see her fiancé in Berlin where she attended the Wigman School for three months and was touched by expressive, dramatic modern dance. I imagined her a part of the University of Chicago Orchestis Group in 1931-32, where she became aware of "the deep spiritual experience in sacred dance" and started choreographing (1996:8).

I imagined what it might have been like to be Taylor's student at "Camps Farthest Out," a Christian summer program where Taylor led "creative rhythms periods" to participants ranging from twenty to eighty-five-year-olds (Taylor 1953:6). "The formal classroom and the conventional church seem far away. With grass under their feet, arching trees, beautiful sky above them, they experience the elemental feeling of closeness to the rhythm and mystery of their universe," Taylor described (1950:175-76). I readily placed myself into the position of "they" in these descriptions and conjured up in my mind and body what her "body-soul techniques" of relaxation and her "simple rhythms" might have looked and felt like. Taylor noted, "Whatever is taught must be extremely simple and easy so that they will not have to concentrate too hard on the rhythmic pattern alone, but will be able to synchronize it with



Margaret Fisk Taylor in 1969. Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.

*Night's Dream*, her first exposure to dance. I imagined her dancing barefoot with her friends outdoors in Honolulu, where her family moved in 1917. I imagined her back in the United States, as an English major at Oberlin College, attending a performance by Denishawn Dancers in Cleveland in 1929. She felt, "Here I was a minister's

the mood or idea that they may be interpreting” (1953: 6).

I decided to try out some of the exercises she mentions in her books. In *Look Up and Live*, Taylor included instructions for releasing muscular and emotional tension. For example, a set of movements titled “Creative Laughter” or “Humor Rhythm,” accompanied by participants’ laughter, was meant to help “the body and soul to shake off frustrations” (Taylor 1953:72). Following the verbal instructions and the illustrations, I lifted my arms overhead, fingers extended, and let out a groan. I then sank my torso, my arms shooting downward, and imagined that I was dropping troubles, mistakes, and irritations. I then reached up and imagined the presence of a supreme power. I tried to sense “a flood of light and inspi-

*“Using movement to develop empathy for other people is one of Taylor’s most urgent pleas.”*

ration” shine down on me (1953:72). I stretched out and let “heaven-born laughter drip off my relaxed fingers,” shaking them lightly (1953:72). I then let my arms swing like a pendulum. Finally, I clasped my hands on the back, said a “hum,” and smiled, my chest wide and open. Indeed, I felt better.

Taylor encouraged her readers to develop their imaginations by looking at photos and sculptures and imagining what the figures on them might be communicating through movement. She emphasized, “The sculptor caught this person in the midst of action. Let’s see how that position feels. How did he get into that position? Why do you suppose he is in it?” (1961b: 7). She asked readers to physically take on the same positions, intuit the figures’ inner feelings, make sudden changes in these poses, and imagine how they would move next. These mental and physical acts are meant to train participants’ sensitivity toward others’ inner worlds and nonverbal communication.

Using movement to develop empathy for other people was one of Taylor’s most urgent pleas. In her *Creative*

*Movement: Steps Toward Understanding* (1969:3), Taylor suggested that movement can be used in groups for “clarifying problems, enlarging understanding, exploring new possibilities and relating to others” and for seeking reconciliation in “our fragmented, agonized and hostile world” (1969:2). She thought that movement can awaken people to “dramatic conflicts that verbalization may have obscured” (1967:47). In order to prepare a participant to understand another person’s feelings of alienation and fear, Taylor created a set of movements to release fears. She asked participants to evoke some emotional tension or fear that affects them and then to dramatize this tension physically, as if they were “a piece of modern metal sculpture – angular, distorted, twisted” (1969:4). Movers intensify the feelings of strain, the sense of contraction emanating throughout the body. They then feel how the body demands

release and starts to let go in the tensest area. After an individual experience, students work in pairs and groups. Taylor maintained that the identification with another person should take place not just mentally or verbally, but “through muscular contraction, twisted bones and agony embedded into the marrow of being, so that we feel a pulsing identification” with another being who is going through a hardship (1969:2).

In a 1989 interview Taylor mentioned that writing did not come easily for her. She commented on how John Scotford read the drafts of *The Art for*



Dancing “Job,” 1948.  
Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.



*Hanover Rhythmic Choir, 1944., Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.*

*Rhythmic Choir* and encouraged her to keep writing:

He would say, "Oh you just write like you're translating Latin. You've got to make it more interesting." He would give me books to read like *The Art of Beautiful Writing* and I would work on that. My first book, I would get up every morning at 4:30 before the children had to be gotten up to go to school, and spend two hours working on that. Just real discipline to try to write. To get the material and try to write it in an interesting enough form. That was a great accomplishment. (Hall 1989:15)

Publishing was also a challenge. In the same interview Taylor talked about how she carried *Look Up and Live* around with her for at least three years and *Dramatic Dance with Children* for about three to four years, since different publishing houses and denominations "just wanted stuff that would go in their curriculum," or said that they didn't have "anything to tie it in with" (Hall 1989:15-16).

Taylor's determination to write – and to write a lot – and to not give up on finding a publisher in the mid-twentieth century makes our engagement with her ideas possible. Perhaps Taylor and I had a creative collaboration of sorts. My hope as a writer is that I have represented her ideas truthfully and have contributed to her voice living on. What did she give me? So much. New knowledge, yes. But also new colleagues who granted access to archives, sent copies of her articles, and loaned their own out-of-print books. It nourished my imagination. It showed me an approach to movement as a way to cultivate empathy and "increase understanding" of other beings, as Taylor put it (1961a: 13). And, above all, it gave me a sense of research and writing as creative, magical, perhaps even sacred, processes.

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## About the Author

Hiie Saumaa (Ph.D.) is a lecturer at Columbia University, her alma mater. Her work explores interconnections between dance writing, somatics and imagination. She is currently working on a book project tentatively titled *The Dancing Mind: Somatic Imagination, Language and Twentieth-Century American Dance*. Her articles have appeared in *Dance Chronicle: Studies in Dance and the Related Arts*, *Dance Research Journal*, and *Somatics Magazine/Journal*. She has contributed to *The Jerome Robbins Newsletter* and *Hybrid Pedagogy*. Her article on Margaret Fisk Taylor was published in *The Journal of Dance, Movement & Spiritualities*. Saumaa is a certified instructor of Nia dance, The BodyLogos® Technique and JourneyDance™ and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, creative movement, expressive arts, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness.

"Working on this project strengthened my trust in scholarly intuition and gave me confidence to take on something seemingly daunting."



Margaret Taylor in 1943, Courtesy of Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA.