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Connecting to Nature with Dance and the Imagination

Hiie Saumaa, PhD

Research has shown that natural environments are restorative to the nervous system and contribute to health and wellbeing. A large body of literature argues that exposure to the natural environment is perceived as more restorative than exposure to built or urban environments and physical exercise is associated with improvements in cognitive performance and increased levels of energy.¹ In a study that examined whether activity and the environment in which it occurred were related and influenced perceived restorativeness, Kimberly Breitenbecher and Kathleen Fuegen claim that "individuals should be encouraged to engage in physical activity, even if such activity is light activity such as walking, and even if this activity occurs in the presence of simulated (as opposed to real) nature."² They further suggest that architects and designers should aim to incorporate effects of the outdoors into indoor environments: large windows, atriums, and breezeways would give individuals who rest in these spaces "experience of restorativeness similar to those who rest outside."³

In this article, I will discuss how somatic movement methods – mindful practices that emphasize inner perception, physical awareness, and improvised, freely emerging

movements – engage natural environments. I approach this topic from two angles: firstly, I look at how somatic tools can be used in natural environments for the purposes of awakening the senses, of connecting to place, of releasing and rejuvenating, of feeling healthy, whole, and alive. It is important to note that somatic movement can be vigorous dance improvisation, gentle movement, or contain very minimal or no outward movement altogether. Secondly, I explore whether somatic practices can help us stay connected to natural elements when we are unable to go outdoors due to illness, impaired mobility, a lack of parks and natural environments in the near vicinity, or some other reason. How do we keep the connection to nature alive during times when access to natural environments is limited or impossible? I suggest that somatic practices have the potential to awaken our senses to a deepened connection to nature and the Earth. Connecting to nature through somatic movement in actual natural environments *or* in the imagination can have a healing effect for the body, mind, and soul.

Somatics and Nature

Somatic practices are firmly rooted in the experience of an individual and his/her perceived sensations through movement. However, somatics is not only about the individual's inner experience of movement: somatic tools can also be used to experience and understand, through embodiment, what it is like to be mindfully, empathetically connected to another human being, a community, nature, and the environment. Several somatic practices invite participants to actively engage with the natural environment. Methods like Tamalpa Life/Art Process and Continuum Movement foreground nature explicitly in their teachings.⁴ The emerging interdisciplinary fields of ecosomatics and

nature-based expressive arts therapy link embodiment methods such as dance improvisation with ecological awareness. Ecosomatics looks at how humans can use movement, sensory perception, and embodied empathetic practices to develop their environmental consciousness and sustainable ways of interacting in and with nature. Nature-based expressive arts therapy employs next to movement other modes of artistic creativity such as writing poetry and drawing.⁵

Andrea Olsen, a dancer and writer who has worked extensively on exploring the links between embodiment and nature, reminds us: “Body is earth. Our bones, breath, and blood are the minerals, air, and water inside us. When you arrive in a new place, in just a few days, the 70% of your body that is water is now from that watershed. The local eggs, milk, and greens that you eat shape your muscles and bones. Humans are nature too, not separate but same.”⁶ Dance and movement play an important role in experiencing the interconnectedness between the human body and the natural environment. Olsen notes, “Rather than superficial, peripheral or extraneous, movement is central, essential, and core to what it means to be human in this time. Bodies have intrinsic intelligence formed from over three billion years of evolutionary history since the origins of the first cell. Rather than seek control over the body and the places we inhabit, we develop practices of deep attending.”⁷

Somatic Movement In Nature

A somatic awareness exercise in nature does not need to consist in a vigorous dance but could be something simple, such as focusing on the act of inhaling and exhaling. Embodied movement educator, writer, and dancer Susan Bauer points out that

each breath is an opportunity to feel the connection to nature: “The very air we breathe is part of our outer environment, becomes us, and sustains us. Simultaneously, our exhaled breath sustains the life around us, feeding trees and plants with carbon dioxide. We receive and give, millions of times a day, in this interconnected web of life. We can experience this dynamic exchange within our own body, and reflect on the reality of our interdependence with each other and with all of nature.”⁸ In one exercise, “the Breath of Life” exploration, she invites participants to either find a spot outdoors or to imagine lying in a forest with trees shading them from the hot sun. If outdoors, they can listen to the sounds of the leaves in the wind or feel the bark of the tree against their back and the sense its strong support. She guides the participants to notice that “as these trees ‘breathe in,’ they take the carbon dioxide from your exhale – it is the substance they need to live, like you need their oxygen. And as these trees ‘exhale,’ they give off the oxygen you need to breathe. [...] Take a moment to feel yourself breathing in coordination with the trees and plants around you. You can even take a moment now to appreciate them for this gift, and appreciate your lungs for accepting this gift, and working so well to release the carbon dioxide you no longer need, while ‘feeding’ it back to the plants.”⁹

Walking is another example of an everyday act that we can easily infuse with somatic awareness. You could start in a standing position or pause if you’re walking, and relax your knees and lower back. Feel your feet on the ground. What does it feel like to stand on the Earth today? Can you sense your toes, your heels, the inside and outside edges of your feet? As you start walking, turn your attention to the soles of the feet every now and then. Can you sense how the earth is supporting you from underneath? Perhaps imagine how each step is like a caress that you give to the earth through your feet. As you

walk, move your attention to different parts of the body – sense the pelvis over the anklebones, the ribcage over the pelvis, the head over the chest. Relax the shoulder blades and feel your chest lift and open slightly. Do you sense the crown of your head reaching toward the sky? Are there any sensations that you notice in your body? This type of somatically attuned walk can be done at any time and is a good way of developing physical awareness and staying in the present moment.

Somatic dance practices, such as Nia dance and SuryaSoul, are adaptable to outdoor environments. In these classes, participants explore a range of movements in easy-to-follow choreography alternating with free dance. The classes are suitable for people with different movement abilities and needs and previous background in dance is not required. Being in a group can motivate staying with the exercise program and foster a sense of connection and community. These classes guide participants to pay attention to physical sensations, release stress, and find joy, pleasure, and self healing in movement. These practices' websites provide information on courses and classes and online options such as NiaTV: <https://nianow.com/>, <http://www.somaranch.com/live-stream-nia>, <https://www.suryasoul.com/>, <https://continuummovement.com/>, and <https://www.tamalpa.org/calendar/>.

In somatic dance classes held in parks, gardens, and other natural environments, we breathe the fresh air and our perception and the senses are triggered by impulses that might differ from a studio setting. Verbal instructions are likely to acquire a new significance. “Let your feet feel the earth underneath” or “drop the weight of the bones and the muscles to the earth as you’re lying on your back” require a certain stretch of imagination when you hear them in yoga and dance studios on upper floors of high

buildings. “Look at the sky above,” “wave to the clouds,” “surrender your weight to the earth,” “open your heart to the energy of the sun” feel like metaphors in an enclosed dance space. In a natural environment, you really do look at the sky; you really do feel the ground underneath your feet when standing or your spine when lying down; you really do feel the brush of the wind against your skin; you really do feel the sun warming your chest. These words cease being metaphors and the language and the movements acquire a new meaning of embodied aliveness.

Outdoor environments present many opportunities for educating the senses. We can feel the touch of blades of grass under the palms, the uneven surface of the ground underneath the feet, the texture of a tree bark, and the movement of the wind against the back of the hand and the cheeks. We can hear the sounds of the environment and smell the qualities of the air. After an embodied dance class in nature, the body is likely to feel invigorated but so will be the senses.

Connecting to Nature in the Imagination

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, a large number of people were in quarantine and deprived of access to natural resources. Living in a small space, perhaps with roommates, family members, or children, under the conditions of stress, insecurity, and instability is challenging for mental, physical, and emotional well-being. My tiny studio apartment in Paris became the center of my life – in one square room, I worked on my writing, taught online dance and stretching classes, cooked, ate, slept, and socialized with friends over Zoom. In France, we were allowed to exit only under specific circumstances. We could jog and walk for health purposes between 7-10am and from

7pm onward, for one hour per day and within a one-kilometer radius of our lodgings. We had to carry with us an ID and a printed or handwritten statement where we chose one of the permitted reasons for exiting the house such as buying groceries or seeing a doctor.

From mid-March until mid-June the parks in Paris were closed, next to restaurants, cafés, libraries, and other institutions. Unlike the natural areas in many big cities, most of the parks in Paris have gates around them and it is possible to keep the natural areas closed. During the confinement, my “one hour” outside of my apartment consisted of walking and jogging back and forth along one edge of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont close to my building. Through the gates, I was looking at the trees, bushes, and flowers coming to life in the early spring in the park. I kept my gaze at the trees to take in the green color and other hues, as opposed to the most of the rest of the day that I would spend behind a computer screen or with my phone. I made sure to look at the sky and notice its colors.

Somatic techniques can help during times and under conditions like these. Elisabeth Osgood-Campbell, a Tamalpa Life/Art Process and Continuum Movement facilitator, based on the East Coast of the United States, offered a series of online classes titled “Nature Nurtures” during the pandemic. The course was based on the resources of Tamalpa Life/Art Process, developed by choreographer, dancer, and writer Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin in California, combining improvisational movement, drawing, writing, and sharing. The focus was on using natural resources as allies during the uncertain times of the pandemic when access to nature was restricted for many.

From the space of their own homes in different parts of the world, the participants set on a series of imaginative journeys exploring the elements of water, air, earth, and

fire. For the exploration of the element of air, for example, Osgood-Campbell asked us to bring to the session an object that has a lightweight quality to it, such as a scarf or a tissue. In a somatic warmup, we chose a comfortable position and sensed the air against the skin and noticed the qualities of the air in the space where we were. The participants started to then interact with the air around the space, also using the prop to enliven the dance. We then proceeded to an embodied drawing, a continuation of the movement and sensation experience on the paper. We chose a few elements of the drawing to “move” them – for example, a circle of green or dots of orange or the shape of a flower blossom on the drawing could be a source for a brief movement improvisation. We then proceeded to write about our experiences, responding to the prompt, “What does the element of air have to offer you during this time, through your dancing, drawing, and writing?”

In other classes, Osgood-Campbell asked us to imagine our favorite body of water, remember a particular tree that has meant something to us or is close to us now, or connect to the energy of fire and sun. These classes evoked a connection to nature even if we were not in natural settings. Through spoken instructions, props, movement, drawing, writing, and sharing the imagination was enlivened. The classes were a testament to the power of imagination to refuel and help counter anxiety, stress, and burnout.

Andrea Olsen provides useful resources and creative ideas to connect the self and the environment in *Body and Earth: An Experiential Guide* (2002) and *The Place of Dance: A Somatic Guide to Dancing and Dance Making* (2014, co-written with Caryn McHose), among others, and through “Body and Earth: Seven Web-Based Somatic Excursions,” available on body-earth.org. Seven visually stunning videos featuring movers in natural settings, cities, and indoors, accompanied by instructions for

improvisational dance and somatic embodiment, guide viewers through an inspiring journey to greater connection to the body and the earth.

There is no “correct” way to move on these videos. The movements emerge in response to the spoken instructions which are suggestive, not prescriptive, of movement. “Notice any impulses for movement. Let yourself follow these impulses. Move while being moved. Rather than doing exercise or patterned movement, listen to your body. What feels good is right,” the voice says.¹⁰ Watching the videos and listening to the instructions can be inspirational in their own right – to see female and male movers of different ages and ethnicities move the way their bodies are guiding them can create a yearning for a similar movement experience in the viewer. The movers are rolling on the sand and meadows and the shore with gentle waves touching the body. We feel and see how the bodies are becoming one with natural elements.

In “Day Two: Refreshing Fluidity” in the “Body and Earth” series, the participants lie comfortably on the ground, eyes closed. The spoken instructions encourage the participants to visualize the body as a giant water balloon and begin rolling the balloon by pouring its fluid contents. “Now imagine being moved by a fluid context, an ocean wave or river current moving the volume of your body from outside – propelling, rolling your skin through space. Now move from the skin itself – the mutable membrane. Shape-shift your body through the container of the skin,” the voice says.¹¹ The speaker guides the participants to roll on the ground sensing the three body weights – the head, the ribcage, and the pelvis. The movements are interspersed with moments of pause to sense or to imagine. The speaker guides us to move the body, with eyes closed, into a seated position: “Pour the pelvis first, then the ribs, and the head is last. Can you

retain fluidity in verticality? Slowly open your eyes. See or imagine someone seated across from you. Sustain the inner sea of your fluid body as you add vision and relationship to other.”¹² The session ends with a free dance movement: as you dance, you hear the words, “Fluidity underlies all styles of movement. Any reach in space is a stretch, connecting fluidly through your fascia to the entire body. If you move one part, another responds. Flow through the weave of your structure. Every quality found under water is found in us.”¹³ Participants could watch these videos and listen to the recordings at home, try them out at home, either physically or in imagination. When and if possible, these inquiries could then be taken as a base for a continued somatic inquiry on their own in a natural setting.

Inspiration for a dance exploration in dialogue with nature could also come from other sources, such as the work of Alonzo King, artistic director of Lines Ballet in San Francisco. King choreographed a series of five videos of solo dancers performing in outdoor environments in response to the pandemic. “I’m interested in what we can tap into. [...] You want to listen and say, what is potent here? What is being said in this environment?” he notes, explaining his choreographic ideas.¹⁴ On these videos, the dancers interact with, become one with, and derive movement impulses from being in forests, on meadows, and on beaches, among other environments.¹⁵

Conclusion

Somatic dance and movement explorations are likely to have a positive effect on physical and emotional health, increase our awareness of the senses, and widen our perception. These methods would be of potential interest to practitioners of

ecopsychology, a therapeutic technique that attempts to treat people psychologically by bringing them closer to nature spiritually. Somatic techniques remind us of the connection between our bodies and nature – the water in our bodies and the bodies of water in natural environments, the bones of the body and the minerals in nature.

Moving and exercising in the fresh air is beneficial for holistic health – somatic movement adds an embodied education in understanding how humans are a part of nature, how nature can nourish and impact us physically, mentally, and emotionally, and how we can take steps to become more conscious inhabitants of the larger ecosystem. Somatic practices give us tools to walk more mindfully on earth and in greater harmony with it, and to live in the spaces we inhabit with fuller awareness and a sense of attunement.

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¹⁵ See for example Alonzo King, “There is No Standing Still”:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC67mWXKW5w&feature=emb_rel_pause

and “There is No Standing Still, Refraction”:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=336&v=0jmAa-

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Hiie Saumaa, PhD (Columbia), is a dance writer and movement educator. She writes about interconnections between dance, language, somatics, embodied knowledge, and imagination. In 2018-2019, she was an inaugural fellow at Columbia University’s Institute for Ideas & Imagination in Paris, France, and in 2017, she was a fellow at the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. She has taught at Columbia University, New York University, the University of Tennessee, Paris College of Art, Emlyon Business School, and the Catholic University of Paris. Dr. Saumaa is completing a book on the multi-artistry and creativity of the choreographer Jerome Robbins. Her publications have appeared in *Dance Research Journal*, *Dance*

Chronicle, The Journal of Dance, Movement, and Spiritualities, Somatics

Magazine/Journal, and Routledge Companion to Dance Studies, among others. She is a certified instructor of Nia dance, BodyLogos©, and JourneyDance™, and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, creative movement, expressive arts, meditative strength training, and somatic awareness.