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Healing Performance and Somatic Choreography

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My bare feet firmly pressed against the grass, I was standing next to a graceful pergola on a spacious lawn in the summer of 2016, about to perform my first piece of choreography. Sitting on the ground in front of me was a group of attentive audience members. A friend of mine was standing a few feet to my left, holding up a large paper, almost the size of my whole body, with a drawing that I had been working on for the last few days. In a strong, deep voice, he started to read a haiku-like poem that I had written a couple of days earlier. I started to slowly move my head, spine, torso, and legs. Through a sequence of steps and body movements, I was telling my story of the challenges I was facing at the time and the healing I was looking for. My dance was about my head: the mental exhaustion I had been feeling over the last year due to the constant precarious situation as a foreigner abroad.

I felt slightly nervous. How will the audience members respond? I took a deep inhale and exhale and continued. I drew my attention toward the body, the ground underneath the feet, and the sensations in the spine, in the back of the neck, the warmth of the sun on my face, the brush of summer air against the arms. I

sensed my friend's deep voice and leaned onto his energy and strength. I felt the attention of the audience, their care. They were right there with me.

When I completed the performance of about 20 minutes, I felt a sense of accomplishment. A deep sense of calm came upon me. I felt seen – I felt like I had been able to speak from my soul and to say what I wanted to say, through movement. The audience members handed me their feedback on sheets of paper, like little gifts. I still remember some of these words years later. “Your feminine movements inspired me to express my femininity as well. Your dance awakened the sense of deep femininity in me,” one of them said. “I was moved by seeing you in your full authenticity,” another one noted. “I love your self-portrait. It has such uplifting energy and force!,” yet another said.

This experience comes from a weeklong workshop of the Tamalpa Life/Art Process©, led by Elisabeth Osgood-Campbell, at Earthdance, an arts and retreat center in Northampton, Massachusetts. This practice, combining different art forms, culminates in an opportunity for the participants to perform in front of the group¹. Studies have discussed the impact of dance and movement on physical and mental health, cognition, and attention, in various populations². However, potential health benefits of making dances and performing movements in front of others have been less frequently explored. In what follows, I will discuss the role of performance and “witnessing” or observing in somatic practices and their potential impact on holistic health. I will then draw attention to possible therapeutic effects of making dances. I will set this discussion in the context of non-professional dance makers and non-

professional dancers, to show that the acts of performance and dance making can be of relevance for general audiences.

Somatics and Performance

Somatics is an umbrella term for a number of movement practices such as the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method©, Continuum Movement©, Body-Mind Centering©, Nia, 5Rhythms©, SuryaSoul©, Biodanza©, and JourneyDance™, to name a few. Their origins, teaching methods, and emphases differ but all prioritize inner connection to movement, the tracing of physical sensations, awareness of subtle physical shifts inside the body, and a therapeutic approach to movement³. The emphasis is on an individual's sensations and explorations of movement rather than on copying an instructor's steps.

In somatics classes we learn to see the body from within and value our *own* ways of moving rather than regard the body from the outside – what it should look like in the mirror and which movements look “pretty” – or demonstrate physical skills. Somatics classes eliminate the pressure to perform, to compete, to show your movement skills, grace, or mastery of choreographic sequences to the outside world. For example, unlike modern or contemporary dance classes, somatic dance classes do not use an “across the floor” component – a section of the class where dancers move diagonally across the floor, one by one or in pairs or groups of three or four, with the aim of learning to use the space, practice choreographic moves, and “perform” or be seen by the teacher and fellow dancers. Nor do we prepare

choreographic sequences as a type of “mini-dance,” another traditional component of dance technique classes.

In somatic dance classes, movement serves as a way to connect to the body and the joy of movement, to gain or release energy, to de-stress, to feel well, and to find movements that feel good physically and emotionally and nourish the soul. Professional performers – dancers, actors, and musicians – may find somatics classes therapeutic because a deep connection to the body from the inside rather than through the eyes of an observer might be lacking in their professional training. Somatic dance practices dismantle one of the prevalent preconceptions about dance – that dance is mostly for the stage, for performance purposes, and for people trained in dance techniques. An emphasis on performance is rare in somatic practices because focusing on an external gaze and the presence of the audience seems to go counter to their goals.

Performance in the Tamalpa Life/Art Process

However, some somatic practices do use performing or dancing in front of an observer or a group of spectators for therapeutic purposes. The Tamalpa Life/Art Process is one of them. In this therapeutic expressive arts method, developed by the late dancer, performance artist, choreographer and author Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin, participants write in different genres, draw, make sounds, move, and perform. Each art form reveals new layers of the self and helps participants connect to, understand, heal, and change some aspect of their lives.

One of the culminating experiences of a Tamalpa Life/Art Process workshop is drawing a life-size self-portrait. Participants perform next to their portrait and include in their performance elements that they have discovered throughout their creative process. These elements could be excerpts from their writings, snippets from movement explorations, or particular words or sounds that seem resonant or meaningful, or images, insights, ideas, and emotions that have surfaced throughout the creative process. Participants create a “score,” an outline for an improvised performance, interweaving the elements that they have discovered throughout the workshops.

A solo performance allows participants to bring new visions of themselves and their intentions in front of a supportive audience. Elisabeth Osgood-Campbell, a licensed practitioner of this method, recounts her memory of performing her self-portrait in 1999. “In this piece,” she said, “I discovered the power of anger and the need for me to express anger to set boundaries with people who’d harmed me in the past. I had the opportunity to embody my power, to say ‘no,’ and to use my voice. The audience supported me by being present, by hearing. They affirmed the new capacity that I was developing.” Performance allows people to embody different parts of their personality and life story that they might not have a chance to express and make public otherwise, she added.

In the Life/Art Process, performance is a tool for individual and communal transformation. “When we are in front of a group of witnesses, we get to practice new resources, new parts of ourselves that have emerged through the creative process,” Osgood-Campbell said. We might learn to make peace with a traumatic

event in the past, connect to a new sense of self after a painful process of separation or loss, find a powerful voice after decades of an abusive relationship, or release a draining or harmful habit or addiction. To ease participants into performing, Osgood-Campbell uses “stepping stones”: she includes exercises where a participant is witnessed by another person, then two people, then three.

Performance offers a way to share one’s creative process and, through the ritual of being witnessed by a community, to strengthen the intention to integrate new insights into one’s life. Being witnessed magnifies the performer’s own experience: “The witness holds the space of potential so that newness can emerge,” Osgood-Campbell said. “Rather than leaving those insights and resources in the art studio, there’s a conscious choice to apply them to daily life. Performing in front of witnesses is a way to make your creative resources more public and to bring your creativity into community,” she commented. Parts of this creative process will be unique to the individual; parts of it will be transpersonal – they are about being human. “By sharing your creative process you offer a gift for others to potentially see a part of their experience reflected back at them,” Osgood-Campbell noted.

Witnessing in Authentic Movement

Witnessing is a core principle of Authentic Movement, a practice founded by dancer and psychotherapist Mary Starks Whitehouse in the 1950s and later developed by her students Joan Chodorow and Janet Adler, among others.⁴ This method includes elements of Jungian philosophy, psychotherapy, mysticism, Buddhism, and mindfulness. Authentic Movement is a self-directed, improvisational

movement practice, where participants move without any outer guidance or directions. An Authentic Movement session typically starts with participants in a comfortable position, eyes closed, sensing their body from the inside, and waiting for a stimulus to rise inside of them. They start to follow and respond to the movement impulses and bodily sensations, as well as images and memories. Moving around in the space, eyes closed, they allow the movements to unfold organically. The word “authentic” refers to the idea that a movement that emanates from the mover, and is not changed or shaped by someone else, is genuine, belonging to that person, authentically his/her.

The moving participants are witnessed by a compassionate, mindful witness. This witness observes the movers with full attention and without judgment, criticism, projection, analysis, and interpretation. The witness is not passive but pays attention to the sensations, images, emotions, and impulses that arise within him/herself in response to seeing and sensing the movements of others. “The mover and witness together can achieve a level of perception of self and other that evokes deep respect and empathy,” the developers of the practice suggest. At the end of the session, the movers and witness reflect on and share their experiences of moving and seeing.

“Authentic Movement can help us recover forgotten, denigrated, and repressed aspects of the self, which often remain buried until conditions are safe and nurturing to allow them to surface, heal and grow,” Tina Stromsted, a teacher of Authentic Movement, notes. As she points out, Authentic Movement can help counter addiction, anxiety, neglect, and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. The

practice is not recommended for people who are experiencing crisis, are in altered states of consciousness, or seek solutions for schizophrenia and manic depression: in these cases, directed dance or structured interventions from dance therapy are more appropriate to create groundedness in the body. In Stromsted's words, Authentic Movement "helps give you access to body experience, emotions, imagery, your inner life." As she points out, we sometimes lose the sense of our inner felt sense, an inner compass that guides our life decisions: this practice can help us return to this inner felt sense of what feels good or true to us. "This practice also teaches you trust in another person, the witness, and as you learn to trust in the intimacy of a relationship that's non-judgmental, that really experiences and is open to and accepts who you are – that can begin to generalize into other parts of your life, that sense of trust and openness," she said.

Therapeutic Approaches to Making Dances

Not only dancing and performing but creating a dance can be empowering and healing. Many somatic dance practices rely on improvisational, non-directed dance movements: the idea of structured improvisation or choreography becomes relevant when the goal is not only to improvise but to come up with a piece that can be rehearsed and performed, potentially in several subsequent performances.

Wendy Morrell, sacred dance practitioner and president of the Sacred Dance Guild, is not a formally trained choreographer but often makes dances in sacred dance contexts and works with children and adults with Down's syndrome and other impairments. She remembers one experience particularly well: she had

suggested to one of her special needs students to write, draw, or reflect in any shape about the dance that they were making with a group of children. The boy, who had always been seen as a “problem boy,” started to draw stick figures, wrote out the ideas about what they could do in the dance and which emotions they could convey. Seeing himself as a creator of a dance and taking on some responsibility in front of the other movers helped him develop fully formed thoughts, something he had difficulties doing in other contexts. He got immersed in the process and found a new sense of confidence through envisioning a dance for others.

In another instance, a dancer was unable to do a particular movement in a session that Morrell directed: the movement combined with the story line of the dance made her anxious as it reminded her of her precarious status as an immigrant. Instead of insisting on the choreography, Morrell asked the dancer to tell her more about this feeling. They then integrated this element into the dance. In a rehearsal for a performance that featured a scene from the Scriptures that involved judgment and rejection, an adult with Down’s syndrome announced, “I am not going to be rejected; I refuse doing these movements.” Instead of holding on to the “accurate” story, Morrell said, “Okay. Maybe your character’s part has been left out of the story. Let’s see whether we can develop your idea and include it.”

As these examples show, making dances can have an ethical dimension and sensitize the dance maker to other people’s perspectives and suffering. “When you’re open to what people bring you – when you do not firmly and only and always insist on your vision – then you change. You change your perspective. It opens up your imagination,” Morrell noted.

Marilyn Green, visual artist, educator, musician, and director of the Trinity Movement Choir at Trinity Church in Manhattan, recommends making dances as a way of healing and feeling spiritual connection. With a background in ballet and modern dance but not formally trained in choreography, she has been making dances since she was a child. Her thinking about dance has been influenced by her studies of Butoh, a form of Japanese dance theater that often features slow, intense meditative movements. Green's slow, dreamlike choreographies for the Trinity Movement Choir are based on Butoh, "with its focus not on dance as a display of what the human body can do, but on producing transformation, both for the dancers and the audience."⁵

"All art is the quickest way to be in touch with the divine. There has not been a single dance rehearsal where I haven't felt the spirit present," Green describes her experience with making dances. The connection to something higher creates a connection among the dancers as well, Green notes. "When you're in that state of creating and dancing everything aligns. So many things are healed. Going back to each trauma to heal them becomes unnecessary: you take a shortcut by connecting to something divine through the creative process," Green opines. Making dances is available to anyone. Sharing dances with others, for example via social media, has never been easier: "You don't need a stage; you don't need financial backing," she notes.

Approaches in dance therapy have demonstrated beneficial effects of creating dances for the purposes of finding new narratives for one's life. The creator of this practice has developed a creative psychotherapeutic technique of narrative

dance theater that incorporates elements of dance movement therapy, narrative therapy, and ideas of self-object experience.⁶ In this practice, participants take on the roles of a script writer, actor, manager, and director of the story that they are creating in a rehearsal-like process. The facilitator offers questions to search for new perspectives and story lines. “Through the use of movement, dance, acting and other expressive methods, Narrative Dance Theater offers an experimental platform for individuals to explore their story in a non-judgmental manner,” the author explains. Kai noticed that her adult clients’ self-agency improved and they were able to initiate active change in their lives as a result of this practice. “These clients have reported feeling empowered by taking up the director’s role and by exploring alternate narratives in their stories. Younger clients seem to enjoy exploring the variety of expressive elements offered in Narrative Dance Theater to translate their unarticulated feelings, experience and desires. They enjoy creating imaginative characters, enacting the script they created and revising them,” she noted.

Therapists and educators Steve Harvey and E. Connor Kelly have developed a method of Physical Storytelling in which a small group of dancers present a dance improvisation in response to a verbal narrative provided by a client in a therapy context.⁷ They use different “scores” or ways to organize dance improvisation to better fit the initial verbal story. This practice integrates dance and verbal storytelling to develop a performance episode in response to a verbal narrative. Movement adds to the verbal material alternative aspects, new metaphors, danced images, and a physically felt sense that might not be present or is difficult to express in the verbal story. Within the structure of particular “scores,” such as the “Journey

score” and the “Fairytale score,” participants develop new meanings that emerge from the interaction of narrative and kinetic aspects. According to the authors, Physical Storytelling helps clients access, express, and organize elements of their lives that are emotionally charged, confusing, and initially disorganized.

Conclusion

Medical professionals might encourage their clients to explore somatic practices and methods of dance therapy that incorporate performance and compassionate witnessing. Receiving the gift of someone’s full, supportive, open attention while we expresses ourselves nonverbally through movement can improve self-confidence, support us in creating new habits and hope for the future, and help us feel whole, fully heard and seen. These experiences of performing and being witnessed can be profoundly somatic and connect us to our physical sensations. “Dancing in front of an audience makes me feel my body. I am more aware of every part of my body when I perform, while habitually I am more aware of my thoughts than my body,” as visual artist Alexandra Deutsch commented.

Last but not least – why not explore some aspect of our life by making a dance about it? Choosing a theme, memory, life event, question or image and holding it in our mind’s eye as we allow the movements and physical sensations to guide us while we move is a good starting point. We might then gather some of these movements that feel “right,” “resonant,” or “intriguing” for us and play with them some more to give the dance a beginning, middle, and end. Once we start to listen to

and notice the movements and impulses that come to us in movement, we begin to intuit the insights that arrive to us as we dance.

¹ <https://www.tamalpa.org/about-us>. Accessed on August 19, 2021.

² Saumaa, H. The Dancing Brain: Attention, Cognition, and Somatic Movement. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies 2021* (upcoming issue).

³ Saumaa, H. Dance Therapeutics: Movement as a Path Toward Healing. *Alternative and Complementary Therapies 2019*; 25; 5:238-240.

⁴ <https://www.authenticmovementinstitute.com/authenticmovement>. Accessed on August 19, 2021.

⁵ <http://marilyngreenart.com/choreography/> Accessed on August 18, 2021.

⁶ Tsz Kai Lau, C. Narrative Dance Theatre: Creating new narratives for the *self* story. *Dance Therapy Collections Number Four*. Dance Movement Therapy Association of Australasia. Melbourne, Australia: Dance Movement Therapy Association of Australasia, 2017; 36-42.

⁷ Harvey, S. and Kelly, C.E. Investigating the Fairytale Score used in Physical Storytelling. *Dance Therapy Association of Australasia Journal, Moving On*; 2018; 15; 1&2: 2-12.

Hiie Saumaa, PhD (Columbia), is a dance writer and movement educator. She writes about dance, somatics, embodied knowledge, health, creativity, 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, the Catholic University of Paris, Emlyon Business School, and L'institut Mines-Télécom. Dr. Saumaa is completing a book on the creative process 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, The BodyLogos© Technique, and JourneyDance™, and teaches classes and workshops in sensory-based dance modalities, mindful strength training, and somatic awareness.