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Connecting to the Spirit Through Dance

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One day in November 2017, I had decided to participate in a meeting and dance workshop offered by the Sacred Dance Guild, an international non-profit organization dedicated to promoting dance as a sacred art and as a means of integrating the physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental aspects of the self. I had researched and written about sacred dance but had never experienced it physically. I was curious.

It was a rainy, icy cold evening in New York City. Beating the wind and the rain, I rushed to the meeting point, the Roman Catholic Parish of Saint Monica on the east side of Manhattan. A storm was happening in my inner world as well: I'd been wrestling with big questions about my life path and the next step. As I was walking down the 5th Avenue next to Central Park, my thoughts went to the Sacred Dance Guild event: "Will they ask me about my beliefs? Will they advocate a certain religious framework? Will I feel alienated?"

It turned out that the answer to all of these questions was "no." One of the moments I remember from this meeting years later is a dance we did. There was an inner circle and outer circle. Facing a partner, we performed a series of simple movements – arms lifting toward the other person, arms lifting up toward the ceiling, walking around the person, and ending with the gesture of the hands on the chest. We were looking into

the other person's eyes as we moved and sang a simple melody with these lyrics: "You are the face of God. I hold you in my heart. You are a part of me. You are my family. You are the face of God." At the end, we bowed to the partner and turned to the next person in the circle and repeated the movements and the words.

Tears started to flow from my eyes as if by themselves. I had never met these people before. I had never even exchanged any words with most of them before we started dancing. Looking into their eyes for the duration of the dance and being held by their gaze, I felt a deep release and a sense of lightness. I felt "seen" by my dancing partners. My inner turmoil started to dissipate. Simple movements and other people's kind presence and full attention calmed me. I felt moved, centered, taken care of, protected, and guided by some power larger than me.

In this article, I explore possible interconnections between sacred dance arts, wellbeing, and somatics – mind-body practices that focus on developing physical awareness and connection to the inner world through movement.¹ Discussing a couple of examples from the field of sacred dance, I show how the connection to the inner self and physical awareness through movement, a principle that somatic practices foreground, is often present in sacred dance forms as well. In somatic dance classes, participants frequently note that dancing "elevates the soul" or "touches" or "moves the spirit." What is it about the embodied experiences that give rise to these responses? Dance and movement impact physical and cognitive wellbeing and can lift the mood: might dance and movement also give us insights into our life path and help us make important choices, face challenging transitions and losses, and find our mission and place on earth

at different stages in our life – aspects that are integral to a holistic sense of the self, wellbeing, and satisfaction in life?

Sacred Dance

Hearing the words “spirituality and dance” or “sacred dance” might make listeners think of dances of different faith traditions, performed in the context of worship. Christian liturgical dance, Hindu temple dance, Tantric Buddhist dances, Sufi whirling, Native American ceremonies, Hawaiian Hula Kahiko, Jewish sacred dance, Japanese Shinto, African ritual dances, and Tibetan sacred dance, among others, come to mind. “Sacred dance” can refer to a range of movement based rituals and ceremonies undertaken to mark transitions in life, such as birth, marriage, and death; to heal from illnesses and relieve hardships; or to commune with natural powers to pray for rain or an abundant harvest.

“Sacred dance,” however, does not necessarily need to refer to dances used for religious observation. The Sacred Dance Guild, founded in 1958, is one prominent example of a spiritually diverse organization that welcomes all types of dance forms and experiences from any part of the world: their mission is to “honor and celebrate the sacred in dance and movement across all cultures, faiths, and beliefs” and “envision a world community committed to living life with compassion, creativity and in service of a greater good.”² In this organization, dance is seen as a force that allows people to build more harmony, peace, and justice across cultures, languages, and faiths.

From an early focus on creative movement and modern dance choreography, the organization moved to exploring a variety of dance techniques and traditions beyond

modern dance, such as ballet, jazz, Yoga, African dance forms, Indian temple dances, Sufi whirling, meditation, Jewish mystical dances, and Tai Chi, among others. This list of dance forms shared during the festivals and workshops has expanded in recent years to include workshops on somatic dance, dance and disability, dance and social activism, dance and ecology, and the work of dancers and educators from diverse cultural and movement backgrounds. Discussions and interview series on topics such as “Is this sacred dance?” incorporate movement segments and a ritual dance called “Dancing Mysteries” in which participants honor people from the east, west, north, and south of the world through simple movement gestures and words.

The movements in these workshops are gentle and appropriate for people from different ages and a variety of movement backgrounds. Participants feel connected to their own body and emotions, rather than follow steps that might create frustration and cause discomfort or injury. The goal is to help participants feel connected to their life journey, to their individual experience of the soul, spirit, or the heart, to a sense of community, to the Earth, or to a larger consciousness. The President of the Sacred Dance Guild, Wendy Morrell, described her experience with dance as a means for connecting to the spirit:

As a young child I had a feeling that there was this spirit energy everywhere and that we were all ‘bigger’ than what we appeared. I also knew that when I danced that feeling seemed to become clearer ... there was no longer an individual – there was simply a whole that you were part of ... that great mystery ... I still have that experience. So – what makes dance spiritual is attaining that sense of connectedness – I actually don’t think of it as dance but as being danced. Your

body is simply a vessel and you are surrendering to the mystery in mind, body and spirit.

Sacred dance can be a group practice or an individual experience. In her *Sacred Dance Meditations: 365 Globally Inspired Movement Practices Enhancing Awakening, Clarity, and Connection* (2020) and a series of accompanying videos, Carla Stalling Walter offers sacred dance movements, meditations and contemplative questions for daily practice and reflection. Here, too, the approach to what is sacred dance is diverse: the book brings together dances from ancient Egypt, Native America and Mesopotamia, Austronesia, Iberia, Tibet, Greece, India, the Andes, and Israel, among others. “The commonality of these dances is that they were accessible for people in need of love, support, hope, and, most important, connection to their Higher Power,” the author writes.³ She points out, “Each month, I present dance meditations that allow us to remember Spirit and make new moves toward it and toward one another. [...] You will have a connectedness to Spirit with you all day, so that you listen, hear, act, and speak from the amplified messages carried within the body temple.”

The reflections and meditations that Walter offers are intended to help readers with their life path, values, intention, integrity, and well-being, rather than suggest particular ideas of what the divine is. In one of the meditations, for example, Walter writes:

What I focus on multiplies; what I speak or think influences my family, friends, community, and the earth itself. Much of the focus is an internal one, not intended to magically change my external circumstances. While not falling into denial or acceptance of unacceptable behavior as I am being clearly authentic, manifesting

Spirit, provoking spiritual experiences, and being a magnet for others, I express gratitude for all my blessings, realized and yet to come. I also express gratitude for appropriate reactions and clarity to see what I need to do, in moving upward on the path. I encourage others where I have gratitude, and it can be infectious, eliminating unnecessary criticism, needless judgments, anxieties, fears, and depression.

The dances and daily reflections are meant to help readers create a life that makes them feel purposeful, in good health, and connected to what is important to them. Through dancing and contemplation, readers can develop their awareness and become more active creators of their life's journey. "Being present every day affords us many benefits, like the opportunity for small course corrections, letting go of expected outcomes, making apologies, and refraining from judgments," she says. Sacred dance, as this book shows, is not only about physical movements or one's beliefs about the divine but an inner journey and a constant engagement with one's values, needs, strengths, and challenges.

Afro-Butoh Dance

Tebby W.T. Ramasike, choreographer, performer/dancer, and researcher of dance, born in South Africa and based in Luxembourg, combines Butoh dance – a form of Japanese dance theater – and African ritual dances, particularly ceremonial dances.⁴ His Afro-Butoh dance examines the spiritual rather than ethnic-cultural qualities of these dances. "For me, spirituality is the healing aspect of dance and movement. You do not have to be a professionally trained dancer to experience this," Ramasike said. "We all have different ways of understanding spirituality in life and in dance," he notes. For him,

spirituality is a form of upliftment, “a heartbeat of the soul.” “Spiritual journey can connect to different experiences – just sitting or listening to music can be a spiritual act,” he notes.

For Tamasike, what makes dancing spiritual is connecting to the self and finding balance – feeling strong, quiet, comfortable in the body, relaxed, and accepting of the self. The spiritual takes clients toward their own comfort and inner selves, a view that a somatics practitioner would share. As a starting point, Ramasike asks participants to close their eyes and feel what is inside their body: “Look into yourself and listen. Breathe deeply. Feel how the breath is traveling down from the lungs to the diaphragm, pelvis, legs, and feet. Allow yourself to be you. You do not have to be anything different. Allow the feelings that are communicated to you manifest from moment to moment.”

He encourages participants to find their own movement styles and voices rather than mirror the teacher. Pushing themselves to execute movements that they are not ready for or that do not feel like their own movements can be harmful and build resentment and struggle. Natural elements and music are important on this journey inward. Observing, moving with, and imagining natural elements – such as the wind, fire, or flowers – allows us to explore what these elements bring out in us. “Music can feed a lot of what can come out of the spirit but silence can be music too,” Ramasike notes. The effects of dancing and the music can last much longer than the actual dance: “It’s not like ‘let’s boogie’ and then it’s over,” he notes.

“This type of movement brings me so much awareness, about who I am, where I am, what is happening in my body and what I need. Teachers of dance techniques do not typically say ‘listen to the body’ but it is essential,” Ramasike said. Dancing with inner

awareness helps shed negativity, anger, and versions of the self that we have kept holding onto for a long time: “It brings a lot of positive energy into the space and the body,” Tamasike notes. He adds, “In daily life people have to stop and listen to the body. We have to be in these moments of listening – what is going on in my body, in my life. This is where the spirit is taking over.”

Spirituality and Somatics

Using dance as a means to build inner awareness and to come to the present moment is a fundamental principle in somatic dance practices. Somatic movement practices -- such as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method®, Body-Mind Centering®, Continuum Movement®, Nia dance, 5Rhythms®, JourneyDance™, SuryaSoul®, Gaga, and Tamalpa Life/Art Process, to name a few – highlight the importance of physical sensations and inner connection to movement. In a somatically attuned dance, Yoga, Pilates or strength training class, participants learn to notice their physical sensations, the state of their mind and emotions, and develop a compassionate approach toward their bodies and their selves. Somatic dance classes are typically fully improvisational – without any choreography – or blend simple choreography and free expression. The intent is to allow participants to find themselves in the dance – to dance their own way.

The relationship between somatics and spirituality can be wrought. Martial arts and Yogic practices, with much older histories, emphasize many of the aspects similar to somatics, such as attention to breath, physical sensations, mindful movement, body scans, and visualizations: however, writers on somatics tend to place the lineage of somatic

practices in methods that refrain from explicit connections to spiritual practices. Somatics has been weary of the spiritual: the intent is to emphasize the body and its sensations rather than particular spiritual approaches.

However, many somatic practices draw upon spiritually informed methods implicitly or explicitly and participants often claim to have experiences that connect them to the spirit in somatics classes.⁵ SuryaSoul, a conscious dance method developed by Sabine Zweig and Philippe Beaufour, includes the ancient wisdom traditions of Tao and the integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo as the foundations⁶. The creators note that their approach “involves the individual and the collective in a movement towards higher consciousness rooted in worldly actions. Dance for us is the actualization of this Yoga or Tao and therefore induces a spiritual evolution and realization.” At the center of the practice is the system of seven chakras of the Hindu or Yogic traditions. Every class starts with moving the awareness inward, for example by closing the eyes and focusing on breathing and inner sensations in outer stillness. During the class the awareness moves toward outside expression, interactions with other movers, and a heightened awareness of what life presents us on a daily basis and how to engage with it mindfully and with inner integrity. The music – ranging from mantras to rap, pop, classic, jazz, and world music – stimulates the mind, body, and emotions and enhances the relationship one can have with the sacred or the divine.

JourneyDance, an improvisational dance practice developed by Toni Bergins, uses elements from shamanic dance, somatics, and dance theater to create a movement journey. Dancing can create an alternate state of mind in which daily worries and anxious thought cycles can be taken over by intuitive, subconscious responses: participants might

start to connect to layers of the self and embodied knowledge which they might not be able to access while doing their daily tasks. Robin Elliott, a JourneyDance facilitator, notes, “I have no doubt that if you were to measure the brainwaves of participants toward the end of the dance experience, there’d be a movement toward brainwave states that map onto feelings of connection, transcendence, joy, peace. This is the feeling of connection to the divine, to the sacred, to our highest selves, to sense of limitlessness, to the conditions for perfect health and healing, the conditions for right relationship, and fearless creation. And we do this through the body first, the body as doorway.”

My students of Nia dance, a somatic dance method developed by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas, frequently note that dancing leaves them more uplifted, balanced, hopeful, energized, and at peace. Writer and publisher Kathrin Stengel said, “I know that depressive moods, anger and sadness often have to do with being stuck in the windmills of my mind. I am stuck, but the mind whirls around [...]. Once I start moving my body, it takes the wind out of the sails of my mind, and I feel liberated and often gain a new perspective on old problems. I think holistic movement is still the most underrated and simple remedy for staying mentally balanced, spiritually rooted and healthy. Dancing connects me to an energy flow that runs through life and all things.”

Jeanne Berger, another participant and practitioner of several somatic techniques, observed that dancing to slower pieces of music and soulful lyrics lifts her spirits and make her feel inner peace, optimism, and feelings of love and compassion for herself, the teacher, and other dancers in the class and for family and friends. She said, “The dances can transport oneself out of the limits of our current lives to feeling good about what we have that is good, including the dance space that I have.” She said, “I certainly didn’t

choose to do Nia dancing because I saw it as a spiritual practice. But it has me hooked mainly because it does leave one with such a good feeling about oneself and the hope that we can still hang onto in this world.” Scholar and educator Yvonne Zivkovic mentioned that dancing puts her into a type of flow that she doesn’t have otherwise and gives her insights beyond her usual state of consciousness. “But it also throws me back to the body, with all its limitations and aches, and the spiritual experience to me is moving and feeling moved in spite of them,” she said. Actor Tricia Mancuso Parks noted, “Dancing is bliss ... it is love ... it is joyful ... and it is heartbreaking too [...]. As I’ve gotten older and the body changes, dancing is even more freeing and more joyful, more spiritual. I feel more alive.”

In my somatic dance and strength training classes, I offer participants an opportunity to connect the dance practice with their current life circumstances and life path. While doing strength training exercises for the chest muscles, I might invite participants to contemplate what might nourish their heart during that day, that week, or that month.⁷ Doing biceps curls, I might ask them to reflect upon what qualities, opportunities, support, or type of energy they want to pull toward their lives to make the next best step. Doing exercises for the abdominals, I might invite the participants to reflect upon what core values they feel connected to at this point in their life.

At the end of a strength training or a Nia dance class, we take time to connect to our breathing and sensations in outer stillness. I often use this time to guide people to celebrate, admire, and feel grateful – for example, for the gift of having unobstructed inhales and exhales and the fact that we can breathe freely and are free.⁸ We take a moment to notice our heartbeats and send a thank you note to it and to the other organs as

well as the muscles, the bones, and the nervous system. We feel thankful for the fact that we have sensations, that our senses are working, that the mind is able to perform so many different tasks, and the body is able to execute so many different movements. We celebrate the support and stability that the earth provides and the wide vistas and yet unseen opportunities that the sky reminds us of. These moments speak to the soul or the spirit in us: they soften us and make us feel in awe of life. They make us feel – in the body, the mind, and the heart – how special it is to be alive. To me, that is the essence of dance as a spiritual practice.

Conclusion

The discussion of whether and how participants connect to the spirit or the soul when they dance matters to medical and alternative therapies professionals for several reasons. Clients need help with emotional, mental, and physical wellness but they might also need help with finding healthy options for nourishing their soul or the spirit. They might experience a sense of inner emptiness, a lack of joy of life, and a loss of or a weakening connection to their life goals, values, and a sense of purpose. They might experience difficult transitions, loss of loved ones, fragile health, or the nearness of the closing chapters of their life. They might be searching for a deeper meaning in their life.

Dancing with inner awareness or with an intention that feels sacred to them sets their body in motion but also touches inner layers of their being. Dancing can place us into mental and embodied states that feel more expansive, compassionate, and empowered. From that larger, soulful or inwardly connected stance we might be able to see our lives differently: we might notice what makes our lives special and beautiful as

well as what changes we might need to introduce to our lives. Dancing in ways that let us be free, uninhibited, and expressive gives us more strength and confidence in our inner resources and possibly make us feel connected to some larger energy or benevolent force. Dancing with others, online or in person, from similar or different cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds, offers a sense of community and can enhance our respect for and understanding of others and their life journeys.

¹ Saumaa H. Dance Therapeutics: Movement as a Path Toward Healing. Alternative and

² <https://sacreddanceguild.org/about/about-sdg/> Accessed on April 4, 2021.

³ Walter, C.S. Sacred Dance Meditations: 365 Globally Inspired Movement Practices Enhancing Awakening, Clarity, and Connection 2020. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

⁴ <http://www.tbodance.info/> Accessed on June 16, 2021.

⁵ Williamson, A. et al. Dance, Somatics and Spiritualities – Contemporary Sacred Narratives 2014. Bristol: Intellect Publishing.

⁶ <https://www.suryasoul.com/> Accessed on July 9, 2021.

⁷ Saumaa, H. Somatic Strength Training: An Alternative to ‘No Pain No Gain’. Alternative and Complementary Therapies 2020; 26; 1: 19-22.

⁸ Saumaa, H. Practicing Gratitude and Compassion Through Somatics and Dance. Alternative and Complementary Therapies 2021; 27; 2:1-4.

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