

BETTY BLOCK and JUDITH LEE KISSELL

THE DANCE: ESSENCE OF EMBODIMENT

ABSTRACT. An analysis of movement, and particularly of dance, helps us to see in an extraordinarily effective way the meaning of embodiment. This paper then looks through the eyes of dance theorists and at philosophers who consider dance and movement and their meaning of embodiment. A study of movement and dance encompasses the fullest meaning of embodiment: that the embodied way of being-in-the-world is also an embedded way of being in a world of others. Dance has critically important social ramifications. In our own and other cultures, dance plays an important role in healing and in health enhancement.

KEY WORDS: dance, effort, embodiment, movement

I know not what the spirit of a philosopher would be like better than to be a good dancer. For the dance is h[er] ideal . . . in the end, h[er] sole piety, h[er] "divine service" . . .

Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*

The dance is the richest gift of the muses . . .

Lucian, *On the Dance*

INTRODUCTION

The search into 'embodiment' is, on the one hand, a debate about philosophical anthropology or perhaps even metaphysics – do we understand ourselves better from a dualistic or a monistic point of view? Do we better grasp our own complexity as body-substance and spirit-substance or rather as more integrated beings? From the perspective of the philosophy of medicine, envisioning ourselves as 'embodied' is a way of penetrating more deeply into our understanding of health and healing.

In this paper, we – a dancer and a philosopher – explore dance as embodied way of being-in-the-world. We do this for two purposes. Most important, an analysis of dance is a profoundly enriching way to better understand embodiment itself. It provides a uniquely powerful insight into what it means for us to be 'body-subjects' – body knowers and body-expressers – wholly human. But also, dance, especially from the viewpoint of the dancer, is health-enhancing,¹ and thereby pertinent to the matter of healing.



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First, the understanding of embodiment. We in the West have long been conditioned to regard ourselves as bodies *and* spirits, bodies and minds, bodies and souls. Much about our culture affirms Plato's notion that our true selves are trapped in these bodies of ours. We are apt pupils of Descartes' idea that we are spirits in a machine. Even when we try to overcome this dualism, we often fall back into speaking of the *intimate connection* between these polarities, as, for instance, when we discuss 'psycho-somatic' illness. If we are asked where our true self lies – in our bodies or in our minds, we most probably respond: in our minds – failing to recognize that to put the question in this way is already to make a false assumption. We need therefore, not only to get a grip on our essential unity but to immerse ourselves in concrete instances of what embodiment means.

As members of our highly rational, highly technical society we often fail to value the decisions that our bodies make for us. Bodily impulses are hidden inside us like shameful relics of our humanity because those humans who have the capacity for high level verbal thinking processes are more highly valued. Embodied knowing is the ability to interact with a thought or an experience holistically that involves the integrated power network of the total person. The integrated power network includes neural elements, efforts, memory, language, perception and attunement and are found integrated throughout the body, not just in the brain. It is the way we process the experience of life and select or reject others.² Those of us who are more physically attuned see our bodily being-in-the-world in this way. Consider these words of a dancer: *I not only think or know something cognitively, I also know it neurally. It is a complete memory – almost a complete re-enactment of it. I use this ability in my dance. Knowing, for me, is more than a mere linear verbal thinking process: it is a holistic process that involves an integrated power network that translates and interacts with life. I will explain what I mean by sharing a vivid personal experience that demonstrates attunement.*

I was with my father the morning he died. His body felt cold, no moisture. His green eyes turned a light blue. Neural energies were flooding through him as he spoke to me. Neural memories of a lifetime – complete memories embodied. Was he conscious? Yes, I believe he was more conscious than he had ever been. He told me that he was very hot, but his body felt cold. He could see everything perfectly without his glasses. He held my hand and looked into me, not through me, and not in a panicked or regretful manner, but into me. He looked into me like he could see into my soul. We connected at every level at that moment in time we were fully

attuned with one another. I did not speak, but let his last words flow through me, fill me like pure sensation. At that moment I could know his soul.

I knew that my father had died as I watched my mother and sisters come into the room. I heard them talking to him and crying. I wanted the last experience of him to continue its flow through me. I quietly walked to the waiting area where a wall separated the hallway from the room where waiting people sat. My body usually carries itself with the typical posture and poise of a dancer, but in this moment in time my back wanted to feel the strong support and cool smoothness of the wall against it, and my legs did not want to stand. So I slid down the wall and sat on the floor. I felt grounded with my back against the wall and my knees next to my chest. My body choose this unconventional mode of sitting, and it felt good. One of the waiting people said, "Go get a nurse." I ignored them all, and closed my eyes. I could hear the television around the corner high on the wall to my right, and whispering voices. I chose to ignore the television sounds and block out all thoughts that I might have of the waiting people and the nurse that I knew would come.

After that, I was transported. I allowed neural elements stored within my body that housed his touch, his opinions, his smell, the sound of his voice to be released. Embodied thoughts as images and sensations came flooding into my awareness. The very feel of his hand patting on my back as he often did when he said "I'm proud of you, Bettyanny," (his nickname for me) came to me. Then I could feel myself holding his rough finger over my head while trying to keep up with his pace. Cool wind was blowing in my face and I could feel the stretch of my triceps muscles as I followed along. "You'll be a big sister," I heard him say as I felt the warm sensation of his arm around my shoulders when my baby sister came home from the hospital (some 30 years before). Then an unfamiliar voice . . . a blanket thrust upon my memories – a whisper, "She's in shock, see her tremble?" A loud, "You're OK, you're just in shock." Another whisper, "Her father just died, she's in shock." I was sitting, they made me walk . . . walk away from him.

I was not in shock. My body was remembering my father. Didn't the nurses know that? I was immersed in embodied memories of him. How dare they interrupt this wonderful experience in such a careless way? Would the waiting people have been concerned if I had only sat in a chair? My body made a bad cultural decision for them. It was an embodied value judgement, and it was the right decision for me. It sat me on the floor against a wall and allowed floods of his sensations in just when I needed them to comfort me. Yes, it was the right decision for me, but was a trou-

bling display for the waiting people and the nurses. They misinterpreted the effort actions of my body without being attuned to me.

I know that every proprioceptor in my body remembers, ligaments remember, ears that reacted to the sound waves of his voice remember, smell receptors remember him. Yes, I could repress these sensational awarenesses if I wanted to, most people do. But why would I want to do that? He would not truly be remembered as he was if I repressed or blocked parts of the total experience of him.

From the philosopher: Our strong tendency to think of the body as some scientific entity, as we find in medicine, or alternatively, as the medium through which the mind discloses itself, disregards this notion of embodied knowing, and by extension, embodied saying. Yet dance, perhaps more than any other experience captures this rich embodiment of knowing and of expression. Merleau-Ponty tells us:

... the body's gesture toward the world introduces it into an order of relations of which pure physiology and biology do not have the slightest idea. Despite the diversity of its parts, which makes it fragile and vulnerable, the body is capable of gathering itself into a gesture which for a time dominates their dispersion ...³

Moreover, dance captures an essential element of embodiment that profoundly involves community.

EMBODIMENT MEANS EMBEDDEDNESS

The notion of embodiment is a fully and totally human notion. That is, being *embodied* implies being *embedded* as well – embedded in a society, a culture, a language. While embodiment is in one sense a refutation of the Cartesian mind/body polarity, it is more than that. We are not merely embodied as individuals. Our culture, our language and our art tell us that our way of being-in-the-world means being with others. To be human entails existing in a world of symbolization and meaning that is essentially tied to the material, the physical, the kinetic, the spatial, the temporal. Dance captures all of these ideas.

Richard Zaner,⁴ building on ideas of Erwin Straus,⁵ talks about the “gestural display” of the upright body, the nature of which is to literally *con-front* the other, and whose every aspect expresses the self to the world. Marjorie Greene claims that:

... mental existence can be achieved not through neurological forces and processes alone, or even bodily forces and processes in general, but only through the complex interplay of the person's bodily being and the artifacts: family structure, social and political institutions, languages, art forms, rituals, that have both permitted his development to take the shape it

has taken and prevented it from taking any of an indefinite number of alternative, but no less human, forms.⁶

And George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,⁷ in a more extreme claim, contend that, because of its dependence on the neurological system, the reasoning process is itself essentially embodied. Furthermore, reason, as well as language, is not only embodied but – necessarily – socially constructed. We shall see later that group dance experiences relate profoundly to health in certain cultures.

MOVEMENT AND DANCE AS EMBODIMENT

Rudolf Laban, the Hungarian dance theorist and one of Europe's most important choreographers during the early third of the twentieth century, believed in the spiritual and emotional importance of dance for 'the person on the street.' In his later years, he often choreographed for large groups of amateurs. As a young man, he traveled often with his father, military governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina at the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, observing and being fascinated by the folk dances and songs and religious rituals of the different regions they visited. His detailed and painstaking surveillance and analysis of everyday movements alerted him to the relationship between the actions workers performed in their every day occupations and religious observances and the structure of their dance. Nor do his observations pertain only to European culture. The Bhangra, a folk dance originating centuries ago in the Punjab of India and Pakistan celebrates the beginning of harvest time. The dance mimes the sowing, harvesting and culling of wheat. "It is said that the wheat fields blowing in the breeze invited farmers to copy their movements and express their joy at a good harvest."⁸

Laban recognizes the mechanical aspects of movement and dance in a way that would resonate for Descartes.

The *weight* of the body follows the law of gravitation. The skeleton of the body can be compared to a system of levers by which distances and directions in space are reached . . . the Flow of motion is controlled by nerve centres reacting to external and internal stimuli. Movements take a degree of *time* . . . The driving force of movement is the energy developed by a process of combustion within the organs of the body.⁹

But movement becomes *agency* with what Laban calls *effort*: "the inner impulses from which movement originates . . ."¹⁰ At this point, movement, with its inner impulses and the emergence of value, becomes embodied and thereby fully human. Laban's reflections led him to believe that dance

flows as embodied thought from the ability of human beings to reflect on their lives and their striving for value.

... [movements] of man are charged with human qualities and he expresses himself and communicates through his movements something of his inner being. He has the faculty of becoming aware of the pattern which his effort impulses create and of learning to develop, to re-shape and to use them.¹¹

Indeed, for him, movement becomes “movement-thinking,”¹² an idea familiar to those of us who live fully in our bodies.

Again the dancer: *Most people do not allow their bodies to think, in fact, we are trained from childhood to repress embodied knowing. We are taught that it is not culturally acceptable to release embodied memories or allow the whole body to decide. We value intellect and conventionality above all else, and train ourselves to repress the experiences that our bodies wish to experience. We are not attuned in an empathic way to the embodied knowing of others. That is why they failed to see that my body was remembering my father.*

And sometimes when I dance I embody in an effortful way the attunement I had with him, and of others I want to remember in a complete way. Therefore, for me, communication through dance can be both artistic and personally transformative. I interpret embodied memories into dance: the weight of my heart when a friend moves away; or the lightness and warmth of my husband's breath on my cheek as he sleeps; my mother's hands gracefully attending to me. I create the dance by identifying the inner impulses and matching appropriate efforts and movement qualities with them. For example, the embodiment through movement of something personally tragic can be transformed into a contracting torso, spiraling downward movements, and heaviness.

Conversely, meaningful dance can also come about if I arbitrarily move using different weight, shape, time, and space qualities. I equate this improvisational form of dance to verbal brain-storming, where verbal associations elicit ideas. Movement of this type awakens my body as knower and enables me to transform the movement into dance through elicited images, sensations, and thoughts. “HOW,” you might ask, “is a body awakened as knower?”

Generally, for me embodied knowledge comes into awareness during movement transitions while moving improvisationally. A transition is a connecting movement that occurs because, for one reason or another, I cause it to occur. An example of a transition that shows a dramatic causation is a fully extended, upward reaching for the sky with light weight, and then a heavy collapsing fall to the ground. That impulsive decision to fall to the ground occurs in an infinitesimal moment in time. It is

during the transitional moment that embodied images and sensations of my memory are elicited. I am aware of the embodied images and sensational associations because I am kinesthetically aware (attuned to myself).

I am kinesthetically aware, but I am not governed by impulsive sensational drives. I may or may not allow impulses to surface. Sometimes I choose to repress movement memories because they are too painful to relive. I may repress others for the sake of artistic balance. I may perform a movement and choose not to think about the associated experiences that go along with it. And sometimes I just think about moving. I am forever aware that all of these opportunities to know are there. Every memory, all knowledge is embodied. My body can think, and my brain can move – they are inseparable. Now you ask, “HOW can your brain move?”

My brain cells are part of the holistic process of knowing that I have been explaining. It is part of the integrated power of inner impulses and neural memory. Sometimes my brain is the primary modality of knowing and sometimes it is not. Often, for me, it has to be stimulated in some way – usually through movement. I can dream while I am awake, and I can think when I am asleep. This brain, the part of me that has so many concentrated neural memories in one place, can transport my awareness to other worlds and other times. It can move me from one awareness to another, in and out of consciousness, from rationality to irrationality, from repression to indulgence. Yes, my brain can move. Sometimes the results of its movements are observable and sometimes they are not. Every once in a while (since there is so much neural energy there) it has a mind of its own, and wanders away. But the rest of my embodied self is aware and always brings it back.

I am capable of dancing out fantasies created by this mass of neural networks. I do it first by embodying known associations. Then I create streams of consciousness while I am dancing that call upon impulsive sensational drives that I probably would not normally release. I will use an example of an unreleased drive given by a friend of mine. He told me that he had made a huge commission on a business transaction just before I came into his office to take him to lunch. He said that the stockbroker in him calmly made the transaction from his seat and shook hands with his client, but the kid in him wanted to tap dance on the desk! Normal civilized adults, like my stockbroker friend, do not usually run leaping through the air when they are happy or fall to the floor in a tantrum – but dancers do. The body knows what it wants to do, it senses and feels our impulses. However, most people repress those inner impulses to action, succumb to conventionality, and over time, lose the awareness of the embodied self. Have medical ethicists lost this awareness?

DANCE AND PHILOSOPHY

Laban, the dance-master, is not alone in realizing a profound meaning in movement and in dance. David Levin goes so far as to call movement an “ontological attunement,”¹³ for he recognizes that few human experiences are as profoundly oriented to our way of bodily being-in-the-world as that of movement. Dance incorporates, on the one hand a physical environment bound by space, time and gravity. Furthermore, it is essentially tied to the senses, including the kinetic, with its dependence on vision, touch, sound and rhythm. But most significantly movement, as a bodily way-of-being is fundamentally connected to meaning, either on a personal/private or social/public level. Movement is inextricably tied to language, to work and to worship. According to Straus¹⁴ and Levin, movement inevitably becomes dance.

Levin parallels Heidegger’s argument that poetry “grants language its possibility.”¹⁵ Dancing, Levin claims, does the same for movement.

As poetizing, dance is the founding measure (beat, or rhythm) of Being and of the essence of all things – no arbitrary or willful movement, however, but that, rather, whereby there first comes into the open all that which in everyday movement and actions we find ourselves concerned with. Poetizing dance accordingly never takes a movement or motion for granted as an already completed basis; rather, dancing itself first grants motion and movement their very possibility . . . Thus, in reversal, the essence of movement must be understood starting from the essence of dance.¹⁶

DANCE AND WELLNESS

Dance has a long history of being related to health and healing.

The use of body movement, particularly dance, as a cathartic and “therapeutic” tool is perhaps as old as dance itself. In many primitive societies, dance was as essential as eating and sleeping. It provided individuals with a means to express themselves, to communicate feelings to others, and to commune with nature. Dance rituals frequently accompanied major life changes, thus serving to promote personal integration as well as the fundamental integration of the individual with society.¹⁷

Consider the Zar, an ancient dance performed expressly for the purpose of healing, by Moslems, Christians and Jews in Egypt, the Sudan and Ethiopia.¹⁸ The dance is performed especially by women who are said to be ‘possessed’ by spirits. It provides a sense of community and support to those whose status in the society often causes them to have low self esteem and to suffer from emotional and psychological disturbance.¹⁹ In most cultures, throughout history people have embodied their inner-most

thoughts and feelings in an outward expression of joy, sadness, celebration and other intense emotions through dance. The dance has served as a type of ritualistic passage from one stage of life to another through the embodied expressions of a people. Dances of fertility, healing, coming-of-age, war, spiritual praise, and death have been danced for ages. In sub-Saharan Africa, Bantu-speaking 'wounded healers' dance to mend themselves so that they might become the conduit of the healing spirits for others of their people.²⁰

T'ai-chi is an ancient form of Chinese exercise that aids in fundamental awareness and integration of the body. It is another method that is being used by Westerners to achieve 'physical freedom' and integration. T'ai-chi evolved from a Chinese philosophy meaning 'supreme ultimate' which represents the yang and yin concepts of opposite attributes. The exercise is named after an "ultimate philosophical principle because its early proponents felt it expressed an ultimate physical principle" that is the embodiment of the integrated self.²¹

Even today we dance the passage of life's happy stages at bar mitzvas, proms, and weddings. And although we seldom dance ceremoniously at funerals and divorces, our bodies react by perhaps becoming numb or doubled over in grief; this is the 'essence of dance.' Dance therapy has become a way for the 'essence of dance' to become 'a healing art,' a way for natural movements to emerge spontaneously and creatively. Halprin, a dancer and choreographer of transformational dance, says, "Just as someone who has never seen the color yellow has no way of conceiving what the color is like, people bound into specific body controls cannot experience the vivacity of physical freedom until they break those controls."²²

CONCLUSION

Few human experiences express so vividly and so totally the meaning of an embodied being-in-the-world as does dance. Increasingly, modern western medicine has come to acknowledge that the Cartesian understanding of ourselves as bifurcated body/spirits falls short of a comprehensive understanding of health, disease and wellness. One medical anthropologist,²³ in her study of African healing, no longer speaks of 'illness,' but rather of 'affliction,' a concept that far better expresses the all-encompassing experience of what we usually term 'illness' or 'disease.' Indeed, far from being merely a physio-chemical alteration in the body, we have come to better understand illness as being sometimes *caused* by events that occur in our lives and most often *result* in often near total disruption of our

lives, as happens in any major illness. Moreover, as cause or as result, only rarely does affliction not ‘incorporate’ the others with whom we live. Affliction is an experience of bodily being-in-the-world in all the ways we have described above. A full-bodied intellectual, emotional and physical grip on embodiment thus becomes all the more compelling for us – the place of dance as an intellectual, emotional and physical mediator for understanding our bodily way of being-in-the-world.

Both literally and metaphorically, dance embraces what it is to be an embodied subject, what it is to know the world and to express our own presence here in the only way human beings can. Dance captures perfectly the physical universe in which we live and which we must spend our days mastering – that of gravity, of space, of time. Dance takes our ability to take proprietorship over our universe through movement, and makes of it agency, or effort to be fully human. Moreover, in various cultures, including our own, dance plays a central part in health enhancement and healing affliction. Thus . . . the essence of movement must be understood starting from the essence of dance.²⁴

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ See Lennart Nordenfeldt, On Medicine and Other Means of Health Enhancement – Toward a Conceptual Framework, *Health Care and Philosophy* 1998; 1, pp. 5–12.
- ² The reflections of the co-author and dancer, Betty Block.
- ³ Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence, *Signs*, Richard McCleary ed. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 68.
- ⁴ Richard Zaner, *The Concept of Self*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981.
- ⁵ Erwin W. Straus, *Phenomenological Psychology, Selected Papers*, New York: Basic Books, 1966.
- ⁶ Mind and Brain: The Embodied Person, *Philosophical Dimensions of the Neuro-Medical Sciences*, Stuart F. Spicker and H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., eds, Boston: D. Reidel, 1975.
- ⁷ *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- ⁸ From Roots to Shoots: The Evolution of Bhangra in the United States, National Museum of Natural History, May 21, 2000.
- ⁹ Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, Plymouth: Northcott House, 1988. Note that Laban does not argue that dance is symbolic, that certain kinds of movement carry with them certain meanings; but rather that dance movements are meaningful, as in any work of art, both for the dancer and for the audience.
- ¹⁰ *The Mastery of Movement*, n. 9.
- ¹¹ *The Mastery of Movement*, p. 68.
- ¹² *The Mastery of Movement*, pp. 15–17.
- ¹³ David Michael Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 295.
- ¹⁴ *Phenomenological Psychology, Selected Papers*.

- ¹⁵ Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being*, p. 295.
- ¹⁶ *The Body's Recollection of Being*, 295f.
- ¹⁷ Levy, Fran J. *Dance Movement Therapy: A Healing Art*. Reston, VA: American Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, 1992.
- ¹⁸ See Howaida El Guindy and Claire Schmais, The Zar: An Ancient Dance of Healing, *American Journal of Dance Therapy* 1994; 16, pp. 107–120.
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- ²⁰ In personal communication with Sue Schuessler on healing in Africa as part of her work on her dissertation research, unpublished.
- ²¹ Man-ch'ing C, Smith, RW. *T' Ai-chi: The 'Supreme Ultimate' Exercise for Health, Sport, and Self-Defense*. London: Prentice-Hall, 1982, p. 3.
- ²² Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*. Edited by Rachel Kaplan. London: Wesleyan University Press, 1995, p. 112.
- ²³ Personal communication with Sue Schuessler on healing in Africa as part of her dissertation, unpublished.
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