

Chapter Title: Earth Within

Book Title: Why We Dance

Book Subtitle: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming

Book Author(s): Kimerer L. LaMothe

Published by: Columbia University Press. (2015)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/lamo17104.12>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Columbia University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Why We Dance*



## *Earth Within*

The brain is an introjected earth.

—DAVID ABRAM, *BECOMING ANIMAL*

*I walk down to the pond* and pause in a clearing along its edge where we keep our canoe. The smooth face of a big rock beckons. I crouch upon it, eyes skimming the water. One duck and then another burst into and out of my view in a frenzy of splashes. As the excited waves in me and before me settle toward a flat horizon, one large round of ripples does not. It persists.

I don't recognize the pattern. What movement is making that shape? Is it a school of fish? A beaver? I attend more closely. The ripple-round is not singular. It is made up of many ripples bent in half. At the arrow tip of each, a lone black beetle chugs along, pulsing to a silent chant: burst and glide, burst and glide, burst and glide. My jagged surprise settles into awe. A moment ago, gazing at the same section of surface, I saw nothing. Suddenly I see hundreds of things—hundreds of movements in the making.

I am hooked, stirred, and drawn in. With each chug, a bug pushes up a rib of water that wraps around it. The rib catches the bug in its crook, yet never breaks. As the bug thrusts again, sometimes in a straight line, sometimes in circles, the wake of each wrapping ripple pushes other bugs away. There are no crashes; no beetles bash. There is only one massive teeming, a dynamic array of trajectories crossing and recrossing each other's tails and trails.

As if pulled by a magnetic force, my eyes follow one bug and then jump to another. I yield to the pull and then forcibly yank my focus back, wanting to take in the whole watery patch. As I do, the patterns of movement I am seeing

trace themselves in the watery depths of my own sensory world. I move with the waves, because of the waves, rippling with delight.

Why? Why do I even notice this bevy of bugs? Why do I care? Why do I find their patterns of movement beautiful, even enlivening? I wouldn't want to eat these bugs. I can't use them for clothing or tools. Nor do I fear them as predators. They have no obvious use or value to me. With a pass of my hand, they would be gone. Yet I am so vulnerable to being moved by them. Why?

Because I am human born, with an acute capacity to move and be moved by any movement around me, coursing through me, happening to me, with or without me. Who my bodily self is pays attention to rhythms of coming and going and consciously and unconsciously seeks to recreate them. This responsiveness has little to do with rational thought or with a desire to control, measure, or test. It has everything to do with the fact that I cultivate it. It has everything to do with my need to dance the earth to life within me as a guide to letting others live.

• • • • •

The shift in the value humans accord to bodily movement in general, and to dance in particular, that I envision in these pages is already happening. If it were not, I would not be writing this book. As we have also seen, movement as an idea is already making its way into the theoretical bulwarks of nearly all disciplines. Thinkers and researchers across the board are reconfiguring basic notions of being, becoming, and knowing so as to privilege bodily movement as the medium of human existence. Myriad humans around the world are already reshaping their actions in response to the patterns of pain that are occurring as nature flows and overflows current cultural situations.

Meanwhile, dance on concert stages, on screen, and on the streets thrives as an ideal to which we aspire, a source of pleasure to which we turn, a sign of hope that springs eternal. Dance is appearing in TED talks and alternative Christian liturgies; Buddhist ceremonies and new age raves; in proliferating movement practices such as 5Rhythms, Nia, Zumba, TheGroove, Continuum, not to mention classes in yoga, tai chi, or aikido. Once we look we see it nearly everywhere else—in the cracks, at the margins, at the bottom. We see it in music videos and reality television; in rediscovered rituals and folk events. We see it in political movements and in the persistence of dance schools and companies, even when financing is hard to secure.

*Why We Dance* aims to speed along this imminent shift by helping people to perceive these nascent movements, from the philosophic to the personal, as necessarily related. *Why We Dance* is itself a branching of movement patterns. It enacts possibilities for thinking about dancing that are intended to stimulate more thinking along the trajectories they describe. Its movement patterns exercise the kinetic-sensory-conceptual muscles scholars and researchers will need to design projects whose driving questions allow the significance of dance to emerge—questions that presuppose and seek to illuminate the rhythms of bodily becoming and their vital, constitutive importance for human life.

These directions for the future emerge out of each chapter. The first three chapters delineate the principles with which such projects should begin in order not to foreclose desired understanding from the outset. These chapters lay out loops of critical self-reflection so that a researcher can check that her approach remains open to being moved by the appearance of new movement patterns and new clutches of meaning. Any attempt to do justice to the experience of dancing must shake loose models and methods based on the assumptions that matter is real, matter evolves, and knowledge about what matters can be written down. While the philosophy of bodily becoming presented here represents one way to find this freedom, there will and must be others that arise and remain accountable to other trends in philosophy, theology, and theory.

The final four chapters, in turn, sketch flexible arcs along which specific questions concerning various facets of human existence can unfurl. Here we need projects that target the role of bodily movement in the development of our brains and bodies in utero and throughout our lives. We need projects that do not just map the motor cortex or plot the neural patterns associated with particular emotions, nor assess the effects of exercise on regenerating brain cells. While this work is important and informative, in order to get at the important of dance we need to ask how and why the action of making a movement trains our sensory awareness to possibilities of making movements we have not yet made. We have to embrace the idea of our bodily selves as inherently creative and seek to match some of that dynamism in our thinking about them.

So too we need projects that focus on the role of bodily movement in cultivating the ingredients of empathy and mutual understanding among human

young as they mature—projects that acknowledge how the work of recreating (and not just imitating) the movement patterns of others is itself transformative for the one making the movements. We need ways of gauging how various movement patterns serve to cultivate a sensory awareness and what kinds of responsiveness to others that sensory awareness yields.

Further, within the fields of religious studies, theology, and the philosophy of religion, we need projects that attend to the bodily movement extant in all religious traditions as an enabling condition of meaning. We need projects that call us to identify the patterns of movement being made and map the opportunities for experience, belief, and knowledge that the act of making those patterns engenders. We need to develop resources for evaluating the impact of these movement patterns on the ongoing ability of humans to participate consciously in the work of bodily becoming.<sup>1</sup> We need gods who dance and gods who dance through us.<sup>2</sup> For, unless our highest ideals and values acknowledge dancing as itself an irreplaceable, vital art, there will always be some other criterion to which dancing must account.

Finally, we need scholarly projects that assess the degree to which a lived sensibility of one's own movement making feeds a willingness and ability to move with the earth in mutually life-enabling ways. Here the terrain is vast and wide open. There are extensive connections to make between the sensory education we receive at the hands of our technological inventions and our capacity for resisting obvious patterns of self-destruction. My deep conviction is that massive cultural change will not and cannot occur until humans cultivate within themselves the knowledge of their own bodily becoming that they need in order to see, imagine, and act differently. Only when we cultivate this eckinetic knowledge will we be able to understand the persistence, the universality, and the recurring eruptions of dance in human history as a force for change. We will be able to participate in that history going forward.

In addition to scholarly work, there is work to be done by artists of all kinds, dancers in particular. Each of the projects described in the chapters of this book is not only a call for understanding, it is also a call for enactment. In the case of dance the world of intellectual endeavor is dependent for its success on ongoing, in-depth engagement with dancers and their dancing. Scholars will not understand dance unless they participate, in some way, in the process by which others create and perform dance. Scholars need to see dance, study

dance, and participate in dance in order to cultivate the sensory awareness of their own bodily becoming that can support them in understanding dance. Dancers, on the other hand, need to know how relevant the dances that they create are to the cultural process of generating values and ideas. We thus need to encourage collaboration among intellectuals and artists for the mutual enrichment of both.

So too, there is work to be done by all of us—as individuals, families, and communities—in making space for dance in our lives. We not only need to reconceive of dancing as a vital art, a biological, ethical, spiritual, and ecological necessity—we need to give ourselves permission to explore our fundamental sensory creativity, with the support of others, in ways that attune our senses to the enabling earth in us and around us.

In this respect, again, *Why We Dance* seeks to make the moves that demonstrate how. In our thoughts and acts, dancing must be reborn as a practice to which we turn when we are confused, stressed, or depressed as a means of cultivating peace and calm, flexibility and flow; as a strategy of discernment, an instrument of divination, and the movement that completes our nature in human-enabling ways. Dancing must be reborn as a transformative power, ever latent in the moment-to-moment rhythms of bodily becoming. Dance must be reborn as the activity through which we learn to love the life and lives that nurture ours.

We must ask. What would it be like to live in a society where dancing—the act of creating and becoming patterns of sensation and response—were nurtured in every child, integral to every educational system, and expected of every competent adult? What if learning to cultivate a sensory awareness of ourselves as movement and participate consciously in the rhythms of bodily becoming were considered a fundamental human right? What if people grew up believing in the practice of dancing as necessary for their best becoming?

What if this dance was taught as a resource for solving problems, reconciling conflicts, and building relationships? What if people learned to dance as a practice for clearing their minds, opening their hearts, and mending their bodily selves? What if people learned to dance as a means to personal, interpersonal, and social health—as a vital resource for moving in relation to one another so as to catalyze the next generation of new ideas?

What would it be like if there were spaces and places to dance in houses and hospitals, in churches and office buildings, in airports and bus stations,

beaches and parks? What would it be like if people everywhere danced alone and with others, for themselves or for others, on the field or along the sidewalk, waiting for a plane or bus or bank machine, as a way to relax, recoup, or rev up? What if we fed ourselves a daily diet of inspiring movement patterns—putting ourselves in situations where we could move and be moved by the dancing of others?

What would it be like to live in a society where people of all ages dance everywhere and anywhere for the pleasure of it, the health of it, the healing, pain-transforming power of it? What kind of humans would we be? How would we think and feel? What would we want? How would we relate to the earth in us and around us? What kind of worlds would we bring into reality?

It is worth finding out.

• • • • •

In a world according to dance, where movement is perceived as the source and telos of life, the great drama of existence entails learning how to discern and align our bodily selves with this movement's ongoing pulse.

While every culture provides some inspiration, no one is an exclusive model. What dance can become has not yet been realized. Even so, there are resources for imagining that future everywhere. The need for dance reaches forward along every trajectory of unmet human desire. Just as our biological form harbors genetic patterns whose lineage reaches back through every human act and every creaturely move to the first inklings of life, so too do our cultural forms of dance. We will move to where we need to go by being where we are.

We will not fix the world simply by devising rational responses to perceived problems. We will not achieve peace by imposing our ways on others. We will not end climate change by adhering to goals of energy use and conservation. However, I firmly believe that we will make progress on all registers if we can cultivate a sense of bodily selves as earth, as related to earth, as the continuing life and presence of earth, fully responsible for every move we make.

If we practice dance, we may come to love the earth as who we are. And if we are willing and able to fall in love with a more-than-human world, then we will orient ourselves within it differently. We will want and need to let others live for our own good. We will lose our desire for activities that dull our senses or destroy the patterns of nature that might educate them to their acuity. In all

settings we will work to ensure that others receive the support they need to participate consciously in their own bodily becoming. We will cultivate a sense of the pain that our movements are creating—the destruction and waste—as a guide to moving differently. We will advocate for the ongoing health and fertility of the earth, in all its aspects and dimensions, as best as we can imagine. For it is only when movement comes to life as fully as possible in moments that sustain our human lives that the movement of life will continue to express itself in human form. As long as we are living, nature is creating through us.

Of course, we humans kill to live. We must. Yet, once we cultivate a sensory awareness of ourselves as dancers, we do so differently. We can reject any killing that fails to preserve the ongoing integrity of the myriad interlocked and overlapping ecosystems in which we live and from which we have so much to learn. We will ask, regularly and insistently: what are we creating?

Humans need not survive on this plant. There is no guarantee that we will.<sup>3</sup> We may become one more species that dwindles only to make room for others who can move in a world that our movements have rendered inhospitable to us. Regardless of whether or not humans endure, movement will.

• • • • •

I walk down toward the pond where, months ago, I first saw that bevy of bugs. I fan my mind open to the infinite movement around me. Cloud tufts dot the bright blue sky. Grass blades cross and hum in the late summer breeze. The ground beneath my feet springs back at every toe touch. Everything today is soft, feels soft, smells and sounds and tastes soft. Everything is urging me to move freely, joyfully, as I stride along.

The opening to the pond appears. I slip in between the trees, over the rocks, and make my way to the edge. Six feet from it I pause. The surface of the pond is as still and flat and clear as a mirror, yet something is moving. I know it, but I cannot yet see it. The rays of my gaze pierce the glare. Feet below, a dark stripe flickers. As I wait, the shape of a fish comes into view around its black band. Twenty inches long, the bass is wary, waiting, softly undulating. The feathers of its fins twist and pulse. I adjust my weight. A twig snaps. Instantly the fish disappears. Moments later it is back, waiting. For what? To hook me?

It does, with the movement of its delicate fins. Kinetic images of movements I have made and seen vibrate within me—the torso undulations in



Haitian dances for the serpent god, Yanvalou; the serpentine hands of the goddess dancing Bharata Natyam; the sinuous pulses of break-dance masters on the street. I muse. We humans think we are so original. Every move we humans make has been made before. To practice dancing is to cultivate the sensory awareness that enables me to move like a fish, feel like a fish, even become a fish—a sensory awareness that distinguishes me as human. Dancing, I hone my ability to move with cloud, bug, or blade of grass and so learn from it secrets of my own movement-making potential. Dancing funds my desire to let these moving others live as the enabling condition for my best becoming.

As I turn from the fish and walk back up the hill toward home, it comes with me, swimming in my sensory awareness. I feel its patterns within me, waving as I walk. I feel its calm, cool, floating, hovering being. I am its pond, its nature, its enabling condition. And it is mine.

May the dance continue.