

A Sense of Place: reflections on the role of environment in Dance Movement Therapy

by Sandra Reeve

On the shoreline, a figure crawls along the edge, where the water meets the earth, where waves meet the sand. Her movement is as visible, as striking, as sensuous, as present as the sea, the sand, or as the breath of wind on our faces. My body has chosen a place to sit and I am witnessing the movement. Further inland, a ledge of rocks has been revealed by the low tide, 'sticking out' of the sand- or perhaps 'nestling in' the sand? It is all a question of perception, personal interpretation of the apparent 'fact'. The honeycomb cliffs tower above us, immense and strong - until you notice signs of the steady crumbling away of the cliffs over time, of innumerable landslides. The gulls swoop overhead, the sun is shining, the occasional fossil hunter wanders by, caught up in their own particular version of movement: stopping, bending forward, short sharp movements with the arm, stillness, walking on. A dog dashes past, barking hysterically, unifocus incarnate. People stop and watch for a moment, then wander on.

"Embodied - means to feel oneself through bodily felt responses in the moment...ultimately the embodied life would be one in which the physical body, feelings and mind are being expressed creatively in congruence with each other and with the changing nature of reality. (Halprin,D 1999)

Our culture is becoming more and more disembodied. At a physical level, most work no longer involves much body movement; if it does, then the movement is often repetitive. Travel mainly involves sitting still. In many cases movement has become a leisure activity. With the computer culture, minds float and connect across the globe, young spines bend and distort, hunched for hours over their monitors. The body-life itself is becoming severely stilted and stunted as can be seen clearly in any high street in the country. We live mostly indoors rather than outdoors and this has had visible effects on our posture, breathing, gestures, movements and facial expressions. In a few generations as a culture our bodies have radically changed. In many cases, it is only when we become ill that we re-member ourselves or listen to our bodies' needs at all. Dis-ease itself may often be diagnosed and treated from a disembodied position.

The opening description is of a 'Move into Life' session, taking place on a beach in West Dorset. I describe Move into Life as : 'a distinctive approach to movement and embodiment based on the structure and vitality of the body. Its particular quality lies in how it supports character, creativity and health through non-stylised movement.' My way of working has evolved over the past twenty-five years and includes work in the environment.

In this article I would like to share some of my initial reflections about environmental work in relation to professional practice as a dance movement therapist. Work in the landscape has taught me to pay attention and give value to environmental space as a participant in a creative and healing process, and I begin by outlining some of these gifts. I then share some ideas about the potential significance of the environment in both training as a therapist and in the therapeutic relationship. In terms of Dance/Movement Therapy I work from the assumption that we are our movement, it is not something that we do, and that movement as a medium reflects and reveals an individual's preferences, conscious or unconscious, in terms of how they experience themselves, others and the environment.

Movement Vocabulary

I see that movement practice in a natural environment challenges and expands the movement vocabulary of the participants as they work on different kinds of terrain.

Walking on sand, on the rocks, in the sea, through rock-pools all require different qualities of movement. The senses are wide awake to life, particularly taste and smell which often remain asleep during indoor work.

Environments or tasks are selected according to specific movement profiles, to challenge or support the vocabulary of the students at that given time. I encourage students to develop their kinaesthetic awareness of themselves, of the environment and of the other, in that order. I stimulate them to recognise their preferences and patterns in movement and to embody those patterns as part of the process of acceptance of how they are in the world. Acceptance seems to be a pre-requisite for healing and transformation. The natural environment does most of the work. It provides the physical challenges and situations and calls forth a particular kind of physicality and vitality from the structure of the body in movement.

I may be a witness, guardian, guide, facilitator or teacher within the movement process. I move between any and all of those roles. Sometimes I sit and watch, sometimes I sing or make sounds, I may stand up or move while the student is working, as part of the process of guiding; body speaks to body in the space directly through movement rather than words. This has taught me to be constantly aware of what atmosphere I am putting into the space as a dance movement therapist and to adapt to changing situations from my kinaesthetic sense. It is possible to explore the body systems as they connect to the earth systems, not only psychologically or symbolically through story and image, but also physically by flesh, bone, muscles and organs meeting directly with the elements. This means that, for example, my experience of the Five Elements in Shiatsu (as a "system" which I use as a diagnostic tool with my clients) can remain connected to its source in a vital way and does not become an abstraction or theory of its original wisdom. My body has to meet and dialogue with the physical fact of the environment. My body is in relation. I cannot ignore the environment.

Furthermore, if I return to the same place year after year, to move alone or with a group, I begin to develop a sense of place and to see the progression of one strand of my life-story in movement and transition. The environment and I recognise each other. Both are seen in the process of transformation and healing. I am not just using the land for myself. I am in relation with the land. This becomes an indescribable resource and space of nourishment for me when I am working with a lot of clients or experiencing painful transitions in my own life. I am renewed, refreshed and reminded of the basic sense of goodness in the laws of nature, even if they are not 'fair'. I feel the balance of giving and taking.

'The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it, only differently... One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation- relation is reciprocity.'

(Buber, 1970)

Life Stories in Movement

Nature offers many different qualities of atmosphere and mood. It stirs the memories. It allows the child to emerge, remembering long forgotten gestures. It allows us to discover our personal mythologies for today, alone or together, or to recognise and resonate with past myths. Working in the environment offers such a wealth of material that the inner life responds directly to the space, whereas working in a studio often focuses the work in the human realm.

When the movement task is completed, participants may share the journey of their movement. People seem to access their stories in different ways. Some work through images, describing their experience of the inner story. They often decipher its personal symbolic significance at the same time. Some describe a sequence of feelings, some describe the thread of their physical actions/activities. It is possible to see in the movement of an individual whether they are more likely to access the world primarily through thought, mind or feeling as their basic

resource. Their preference often reveals itself more clearly when they are relating to the natural environment. I may adapt movement tasks according to type as I become familiar with the world of the mover. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen puts this kind of movement perception into words when she says that her natural skill is that she sees the space between the patterns:

‘There is something in nature that forms patterns. We as part of nature also form patterns. The mind is like the wind and the body like the sand: if you want to know how the wind is blowing you look at the sand ...I think that all mind patternings are expressed in movement through the body. And that all physically moving patterns have a mind. That's what I work with.... Patterns that exist in the world outside the body exist also in the world inside the body.’ (Bainbridge Cohen, 1993)

As a therapeutic tool, it seems to me useful to combine working directly with the elements, with the physicality of the environment, as well as with the subjective imagination as stimulated by the natural environment. The ‘world of dream’ and the ‘world of fact’ (Suryodarmo, 1995) are brought together, creating an experience of embodied inner material and making our ability to respond (responsibility) transparent to the world.

In relation to her outdoor movement work at the Tamalpa Institute in California. Anna Halprin states:

‘Although this work is generated primarily by a kinaesthetic connection, it also includes the feelings, associations, personal and communal images and life-scripts that are part of our human nature. In that way the interface between our human ways and the ways of nature are integrated.’ (Halprin A 1995)

Nature as a Witness

Nature is in some ways the ultimate witness, neutral yet vibrant and alive. The impersonality of nature can help us both to develop our inner witness while we are moving, so that we are not late with our awareness and to perceive and study the ‘how’, the mechanisms which drive us in life, and through which we communicate with each other. Ernesto Spinelli explains that unconditional positive regard may be easier to tap into if we concentrate not on what happened (netic) but on affective components linked to the story, more how it happened (noematic). (Spinelli 1989)

Movement in Change

Nature provides a dynamic situation where we have to work with the changing nature of reality. There can be no illusion of stasis. I begin to perceive with my body that everything in nature is constantly changing, including myself. This is pure Buddhist philosophy at work.

‘It is an exploration of how we are in our present experience, and how this expresses the past conditioning of our lives. A deep awareness of what is happening in the present moment-encompassing sensations, feelings, mental process and their expressions in the body is used to explore our inner process.... Personality is seen as the expression of a continuous process. I become aware how my attitude to the present moment is creating the conditions for my future. Awareness in the present is inherently integrative and healing’. (Sills,M).

Nature in itself may be seen as a healer. Essentially we may recognise that nature is a living being and that we are part of nature and not in control of her. We can choose to surrender and be a vital part of the situation. These words could equally apply to the environment of a dance movement therapy session.

David Abram argues a strong case for the dependence of human cognition on the natural environment in his book: ‘The Spell of the Sensuous’

'Human persons, too, are shaped by the places they inhabit, both individually and collectively. Our bodily rhythms, our moods, cycles of creativity and stillness, and even our thoughts are readily engaged and influenced by shifting patterns in the land. Transfixed by our technologies we short-circuit the sensorial reciprocity between our breathing bodies and the bodily terrain. Human awareness folds in upon itself, and the senses-once the crucial site of our engagement with the wild and animate earth- become mere adjuncts of an isolate and abstract mind bent on overcoming an organic reality that now seems disturbingly aloof and arbitrary'. (Abrams, 1997)

Applying the insights I have had from working in nature to therapeutic work, it is clear to me that an embodied awareness of environment should be developed in any therapeutic practice. 'Therapist' originally derived from the Greek word meaning 'attendant'. A therapist should be a specialist in attentiveness and awareness. Most therapeutic models emphasise the importance of being present, and of various skills which require a certain level of attention and awareness. In my experience **embodied awareness** as distinct from mental concentration or feeling empathy naturally includes the environment or what could be called 'the third space'. Embodied awareness does not just involve human dynamics; it includes and values the participatory dynamic of the environment.

Winnicott's attitude to play, applied to context/environment is helpful here. i.e. it is not only the content or interpretation of the context that is important, nor just the dynamics between the humans involved, but also the physical environment which plays a significant part in the co-creation of reality and can have a profound effect on communication.

'In playing the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling.'

'The precariousness of play belongs to the fact that it is always on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' (Winnicott 1971)

It may be important to invite clients to work with their environment, as a tool for revealing their process (active/structured) or it may simply be helpful to observe what is already happening in relation to a given environment and naming it (passive/non-structured). My sense of environment is totally inclusive, for example if I am working in a school, I may need to be aware of the whole situation from the moment I walk through the gates, through to the immediate people and events within the therapy session. I need to practice the skill of anticipation as I become aware of how various factors are merging to create a potential situation, just as on the beach I need to be aware of the rising tides, the slippery rocks, the approaching storm, the call of a bird. In therapeutic models that emphasise the importance of context, such as systemic and family therapy, value should also be given to the part played by the physical environment within the therapeutic process. I also believe that it is an essential component of working with people from other cultures as displacement is often such a strong element in their reality.

The continuous development of embodied awareness needs to be included as part of any therapist's training, but particularly for those who have chosen dance movement therapy as their way of being with people. Otherwise there is No-Body there.

For further information

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