

Environmental Movement At Dunmoran Head, Co Sligo.

by Barbara Collins

*" When we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here---time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat.....the tree and the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat ..that became his daily bread....And the logger's father and mother are in it too. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper....You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to **inter-be** with every other thing. This sheet of paper is because everything else is." Thich Nhat Hanh (1988).*

The inter-beingness in this quotation in some way sums up my embodied experiences of environmental movement both in my personal process and in my work with clients.

Introduction

I am working as a psychotherapist and in the past twelve years have been involved in movement and dance (5 Rhythms, with Caitriona Nic Ghiollaphadraig, in Ireland, and Move into Life, with Sandra Reeve.) In the past year I completed a Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Training for Trauma Treatment. The Hacomí principles of Organicity, Non-Violence, Unity, Body/Mind/Spirit Holism and Mindfulness underlie my life and my work practise.

I first heard of Sandra Reeve and Move into Life in 2000. I was attending a dance workshop in England and for me, this was a deeply bruising and traumatic experience. I was told that Sandra Reeve facilitated deep movement practise in a very gentle way. There and then I promised myself, as part of my healing process, to attend the next Move into Life workshop in Ireland. I went to my first workshop in Ballydehob in Cork later that year. I was so taken by this work that I invited Sandra to offer a Move into Life workshop in Dublin during the following year.

I immediately loved the gentleness, the deep respect and encouragement, and the mindfulness with which Sandra facilitated and guided, through movement practise, deep physical, spiritual, psychological and emotional processing and growth. Since then Sandra has been offering regular workshops in Dublin and during the past two years in Sligo, as well as her ongoing work in Cork. In the past two years she has facilitated two environmental workshops in Sligo.

Sandra Reeve describes 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." (2003)

In this article I would like to describe my experiences of Environmental Movement in relation to my own personal healing and growth. I think that it is worth noting that in the process of writing this article I constantly had to remind myself "*to lead with the back leg*" (see below) rather than allowing the back leg to hold me back and move back from writing this.

Personal Context for the Environmental Movement Workshop in May 2005.

This workshop took place two days after my second grandchild was born. I have been surprised by the intensity of the feelings around the birth time of my two granddaughters. At a *physical level* I have found that my body has been tight and in a braced position, particularly my shoulders; I have had constant headaches which I never have; I have been holding my breath and noticing a pulling in of my belly and a tension in my solar plexus and chest: at an *emotional level*, I've been on high alert, watchful, fearful, anxious and excited and at a *cognitive level* my thoughts have been preoccupied with birth. I notice that in this situation I become very busy, trying to get everything done/finished, as if there is no tomorrow. I realise that there is a connection between the birthing process of my three sons and also to my own birth. I feel that these memories are encoded in my body at a cellular level and are remembered and reactivated by the birth of my grandchildren.

Background to the Environmental Movement Workshop.

Therese O' Driscoll and I had organised the first Environmental Movement workshop in Sligo in May 2004. The weather was glorious and moving in the environment was so satisfying that we decided to organise another in May 2005. Many of the previous group were able to attend this year and we also had five people who were new to working in the environment.

When we arrived in Sligo the weather was inhospitable raining heavily and a gale blowing. We started the workshop in the local community hall. Sandra asked all of us if we had any intention for the weekend. I knew immediately that my intention was to express my gratitude for the safe arrival of Sorcha, my beautiful two day old granddaughter. I had spent some time sitting quietly with her during the previous two days observing and witnessing her settling in process into the loud, busy world she was now to live in. I had no idea how my *felt sense* of gratitude might express itself except that I knew from experience that nature would provide a safe womb for it to unfold.

The workshop began with the usual grounding and warming up exercises. Sandra brought in a few new exercises based on the feedback of the group during the check-in, for example, noticing whether our walking pattern emphasised "*landing*" or "*taking off*", "*leading with the back leg*" and "*the pelvic roll*"

As I began to walk I noticed that the emphasis/destination of my walking was the landing. I noticed, almost immediately, that I began to feel nausea and sick in my stomach when I practised leading with the back leg. I knew from my

movement experience that my body was either using a new movement or remembering something and that it was important to move with this and witness the process. I took to the pelvic roll exercise like a duck to water feeling the energy flowing freely through me with my spine warm and tingling.

Environmental Movement in the Forest

The weather cleared somewhat in the afternoon and we headed to a wooded area in Lady's Brae where we were greeted by a dense cloud of midges. The forest was divided into two distinct parts. One area, which was full of dappled light, had a mixture of deciduous and evergreen trees surrounded by a fast flowing river, contained by large boulders. A carpet of bluebells covered some of the ground under the trees. The other area was full of mature evergreen trees, planted in rows, and was dark and regimented and I felt it had an ominous feel to it. However on the edge of the dark forest there were a few truly magnificent hawthorn trees, traditionally known as the fairy trees in Ireland.

Having lathered ourselves in insect repellent we began to walk slowly around the area we were to move in, delineating the *boundary* and creating a *safe* container. Continuing the *safety* theme, we began moving in positions we choose within the area and the theme was *transitions between staying and going*. As I played with the *transitions between staying and going*, I noticed that as well as creating a container and safety they also provided a *gateway to a deeper level of involvement in nature*. As I came to a gnarled, lichen and moss clothed Hawthorn tree, I felt drawn physically, emotionally and spiritually to *staying* with this tree. All my senses were wide awake. Moving in nature seems to awaken my senses in a way I rarely experience indoors. My sense of sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing were involved, as well as my body sensations and movement and my emotions and thoughts. All were congruous, alive, open and responsive to the moment by moment changes that were occurring in me and in the environment. I was aware of both my inner reality and my environment. It was as if I had *landed*. I felt embodied. I felt drawn to *staying* here. My journey was over. I felt a deepening connection and a sense of peace and harmony within myself. I *savoured* a sense of oneness with the Hawthorn tree and a sense of community with nature. I felt a deep sense of *inter-being* with my environment.

In the forest the following day we worked with the exercise of *imitating, absorbing and dialoguing* with nature. Again I found myself physically drawn to another magnificent Hawthorn tree on the edge of the dark forest. As I began imitating this tree in my movements, stretching my limbs and movement, I noticed that the arms of the tree stretched back into the dark forest. In stretching back into the dark forest I felt I was connecting/ *inter-being* with my ancestors and the theme of gratitude emerged into my consciousness again. I had a *felt sense* of gratitude to all my ancestors back to the hunter gatherers and forest dwellers. I became aware that this tree was very old and had witnessed many of the events in my history and culture and the tree became for me a sacred tree, perhaps a fairy tree. I remembered as a child passing a tree covered in "rags" while driving with my mother. My

mother called it the "purty bush" (pretty) and she told me it was a "fairy tree". These rag covered trees are also called "wishing" trees and occur all over Ireland and around the world. It was a Hawthorn tree known locally as the May bush. My dance of embodying and dialoguing with the tree became a light, flowing and deeply satisfying movement. I felt earthed with a deep sense of *inter-being*, deeply connected, present, and absorbed in this process. It was as if my perception and experience embodied the personal and the transpersonal, the known and the unknown, my personal history and the history and culture of my ancestors, the past and the present. It had a timeless quality.

Movement on the rocks at Dunmorán Head

In the afternoon, with the sun shining and a big blue sky, we moved to the extraordinary rocky landscape of Dunmorán head. We had moved in this amazing landscape the previous year and we were excited at the prospect of returning there. On our arrival one member of our group noticed a beautifully camouflaged nest of a ringed plover, with four speckled eggs. This connected me back to my birthing theme, at an unconscious level, and transformed my later work on the rocks. We began moving with *near, middle and far view exercises*, noticing the different experiences in each of them. Then we worked in pairs witnessing each other. On the rocks area there are some giant rock formations which look like they were scattered there by Fionn McCool or Cuchullán. I was drawn to explore these monoliths when I was being witnessed in my movement

As I came closer I noticed there was a cave underneath these rocks. I crawled into the womb like cave and rested there. Then I began to explore the cave dragging myself around on my belly and back. I noticed at one end a very narrow exit. I wondered if I could fit through it. I felt a rising sense of fear and excitement and my breathing became shallow and fast and I also began to hold my breath. I could feel my whole body trembling. I slowly inched my way up the cave, hands first, having to take frequent rests and deep breaths to help me relax and contain my fear. I could see the light at the end of the tunnel and my hands finally reached the exit and I pulled my head out. The excitement and fear grew as I wondered if I could squeeze forward or even if I could go back or if I was stuck. At this stage I needed to connect with my partner as I knew I could not do this on my own. I needed reassurance and support. My partner immediately offered to be my "mid-wife" and with her help, support and encouragement I inched myself forward and birthed myself through the narrow exit. When I landed I felt tired, vulnerable, young and everything felt new and very bright. I needed to rest.

On Monday three of us returned to Dunmorán head to move on the rocks again. I noticed that I was reluctant to move that day. The sea was rough and I was drawn down towards it. I noticed a large flat rock at the sea's edge and felt myself drawn there, to stand and look out at the sea. The sounds of the sea were loud, strong and full of energy and I found that my body remembered the pelvic roll and I found myself doing the pelvic roll in harmony with the ebb and flow of the sea. This was very satisfying for me and I could

feel my energy rise with the sea. My arms were drawn into the movement and at times it felt as if I was conducting the cacophony of sounds and the energy of the sea and the wind. At other times I was imitating the movements of the sea. Then I found myself absorbed by the sea and also found my breathing was deepening and was in harmony with the rhythms of the sea. I wanted to deepen my connection and my voice joined the sounds of the sea. My whole body was alive, vibrating and full of energy .

After some time my body wanted to lie on the rock. As I lay there at the sea's edge I had an embodied sense that I was one of the first sea animals to arrive on land. I felt as if I had only very tiny hands and feet and that I had to push, shove, slither, slide and roll to move. And so I began my earth journey. As I slithered slowly along I became aware of the heat of the sun, the feel of the earth under me, the sounds of the sea and I could feel the wind on my face. And although all of this was very satisfying I found my body heavy and awkward and longed for the fluidity of my movement in the sea. It was a long, slow, painful journey and I found myself needing to take many rests and to bask in the energy of the sun. After a while my arms and legs became stronger and I was able to get up on my hands and knees and then to move forward, sideways like a crab. I found the crab-like movement very satisfying and in the doing this movement I realised that I walked sideways rather than forwards because of my reluctance to leave the sea and face land! Slowly I found a way back into an upright position. I still could not face onto land and found myself struggling, my right arm and the right side of my body drawn to the sea and my left side drawn to land. The struggle was so strong at this stage that a lament poured out from deep inside me. I allowed this lament to complete and then I was able to move again. I had to remember the exercise of " *leading with the back leg* " and to constantly re-mind and re-member this as I made my way up the rocks and away from the sea.

This experience felt so deep and strange that I was unable to talk about it for several hours. When I described what had happened later to Sandra she simply said "this is the work".

Discussion

I believe that as Jon Kabat- Zinn says in *Coming to our Senses*, (2005) we are "in intimate relationship with the world in all our moments. The give and take of that relationality is continually shaping our lives. It also shapes and defines the very world in which we live and in which our experiences unfold." However, because of our life style and the speed at which we move and live in the western world and because of our mechanistic world view we have forgotten " the symbiotic dance of reciprocity and interdependence on every level." Movement in the environment re-minds me of this interbeing.

The landscape and the elements were central to my movement in the environment. I was able to access this level of ancestral experience in *relationship* with the environment. This deepens my *felt sense of my inter-being* with nature. This is a powerful *resource* for me. When the mechanistic world view takes me over again and when I feel disconnected, isolated and

alone I can re-mind myself and re-member my felt sense of interconnectedness and I can *resource* myself with this. I have also found this to be a powerful resource for many of my clients.

I notice that I frequently use the phrase "drawn to" in this article. I find this a little perplexing. Perhaps it is the wisdom of my body and its organicity that draws me towards my healing and growth, towards giving the long ignored parts of myself a chance to open to the sunlight, to be seen and heard and felt.

And there is something deeper than what I have described so far and it is hard for me to find words for it. Nature has always been a resource for me. To be present at the dawn or the setting sun, to hear the dawn chorus, to feel the wind flowing through my hair, to touch the bark of a tree and to smell the sea allows me to be present and embodied and at peace with myself and the world. Movement in the environment is all of this and more. I am fascinated how my conscious theme to express gratitude became embodied and expressed in relationship with the environment. And how the largely unconscious theme of birthing found expression through the generosity of the environment by providing the ringed plover's nest and the four speckled eggs and the birthing cave.

For me moving in the environment is a deeply enriching and multi-layered experience. It is as if nature provides me with opportunities to creatively and imaginatively explore the issues/concerns in my life. This happened again and again throughout the workshop, and always when I move in the environment. When I step out of my own way and allow and trust the process to unfold, nature provides the *resources* I need to express gratitude, to work through birthing issues, to have an embodied sense of *inter-being*.

Environmental movement is a re-cognition and a re-membering, an embodiment of my inter-being and the recognition of all life on earth. It has a sacred and ritual quality.

Moving in the environment brings me to my senses and to being present and awake in the here and now. It brings me to embodied mindfulness, to open-hearted, moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness. And it helps me to access the timeless quality of every moment.

References

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