

BREATHING SPACE – ARTISTS EXPLORING HEALTH

In November 2004, Falling Wide hosted a project at Chisenhale Dance Space in London exploring the relation between artistic practice and well-being. This was an extension of their Breathing Space programme, which started in 2002 with a series of movement workshops for people living with life-changing illness facilitated by Helen Poynor.

Here, in an extract from a presentation, Poynor makes a personal response to address two questions: Why is arts participation so often experienced as profoundly healing? Does the process of the artist hold keys to our understanding of well being?

I am an independent dancer who works with non-stylised movement, a process orientated approach to movement based on the natural structure of the body rather than a stylised vocabulary. I run the Walk of Life public programme of movement workshops on the World Heritage Coast in West Dorset and East Devon and specialise in movement in natural environments and working with creative process. As a performer and director I create site-specific performances and cross art-form collaborations often with visual and installation artists.

The Breathing Space workshops were initiated by Joe Moran inspired by the work of Anna Halprin with whom I trained. Anna has worked for more than 20 years with people living with life changing illness, specifically HIV and AIDS and cancer, having survived cancer herself. She remains an enduring influence on my work because of her understanding of the inter-relationship between personal process and artistic expression, her holistic approach to the body and her inclusive approach to dance.

The other major influence on my evolution as a mover is Suprpto Suryodarmo from Java with whom I studied over several years in the late 1980's. From this work, I came to value, among other things, the notion of

practising in any condition - that is one's personal condition (physical, mental and emotional) - and the conditions in the environment in which one is working.

There are three interwoven strands in my work that all connect with the sense of well-being: working with the body, working creatively and working in the natural environment. Before looking at each of these I would like to address what 'well-being' means for me because I think that our notions of this are in some respects personal. Well-being is more than simply being physically well, although undoubtedly this helps. I believe that it is possible at least in theory to experience well-being in any physical condition. When I experience a sense of well-being I feel whole, as if my being (body, mind and feelings) is aligned, with no internal distractions, and my awareness is completely absorbed in the moment in stillness or in movement. This is closely connected to following one's own internal rhythm and in a larger frame to following one's path in life, a sense of self and of being aligned with a sense of purpose.

Movement for me is related to embodiment. By which I mean an ability to incarnate fully in a physical body in a material world in order not only to be able to function effectively but also to be able to fulfil our life's purpose. Working with and through my body in a holistic

way has been essential for my personal well-being both physically and existentially because I needed to find my own way to inhabit my body and to express myself through it. I see this same desire in people who come and work with me, often not in a way that can be readily articulated, but something is touched and validated as a result of moving in an authentic way in a non-judgemental environment. The ability to simply follow the body in motion, circumventing all the interfering voices that criticise and inhibit our desire for movement, our desire for life, is supported.

This relationship between movement and life is at the core of the equation: all life is in a constant flow, even in stillness the body breathes. Movement offers us a unique possibility to feel whole: body, awareness, feelings and imagination all engaged in the moment in the same activity. When this happens I know who I am: I have a clear sense of self, and I know where I am: I have an intuitive sense of my place in what the poet Mary Oliver calls 'the family of things'.

It is difficult to find words to express these experiences that are both, paradoxically, intangible and physical. It is difficult to find embodied language. It is precisely because language is not enough, because the attempt to understand our >

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'CROW-NE' COLLABORATION BETWEEN HELEN POYNOR & ANNIE PFINGST 2005 PHOTO: ANNIE PFINGST

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humanity solely through the sense of logical reasoning so fundamental to and highly valued by western culture ultimately fails us, that we need to turn to the body in order to experience our wholeness. As movement artists both the strength and underlying challenge of our artistic practice is that our primary tool is ourselves, our physical body. There is no intermediary tool, potentially no gap between our impulse to express and our expression.

Why as an artist do I believe that creating artistically can contribute to a sense of well-being and how do I experience this?

Working creatively relates to a basic human urge to play. Play is of course a part of a child's developmental journey, part of the way they learn about relationships and the world around them. This process of creating continues to have a major function in our adult lives and plays a part in our sense of self and of our place in the world, whether it is creating a garden, a home, a company or a teaching programme.

Artists are not different from other people but perhaps at a different place on a continuum, whether by choice or necessity. Since romantic notions of an artistic life rarely compare with the reality

of trying to survive as an artist I think many do what they do because it satisfies a need to explore, to express or to respond to something, either in their internal landscape or in the world around (or in the relationship between the two), because it helps them to make sense of what it means to be alive or because it gives them pleasure.

I have puzzled over the fact that while I whole-heartedly disagree with the notion that suffering is necessary for the creation of art I have made some of my most significant work at times of extreme personal difficulty. It has taken some time to understand that at these times it becomes even more essential to work artistically. It is the process of creating in the midst of difficulty which allows me to get through, often by translating the issues into another form, converting personal struggle into artistic material, transposing it into a wider context which makes it possible for me to breathe more easily through the challenges. Anna Halprin speaks of a two-fold spiral; a spiral towards the centre representing deepened personal experience interlocking with an outward spiral of broadened artistic expression. For her the two work together.

When Anna's husband and life-long

collaborator Lawrence Halprin, ended up in intensive care in his 80's in 1998 after a minor surgical intervention went wrong, she did what she has always done in periods of crisis and made a piece of work about the experience. The resulting performance Intensive Care drew on her own experience of cancer over 25 years earlier, twenty years of working creatively with dance with people with HIV, AIDS and cancer, and the life experience of her co-performers Jeff Regh who was in the later stages of AIDS and David Greenaway who had worked for several years in a hospice. The performance courageously confronts the theme of death and dying. The most recent version performed at the Festival d'Automne in Paris in September 2004 incorporated images of people dying in the Iraq war and was a powerful emotional experience.

This goes beyond therapy, using art to transform personal experience into an exploration of the human condition. An exploration that may provide us with some of the courage and understanding necessary to survive and grow as individuals and as a community, and which has the potential to distil form out of chaos, speaking from the core of one human being to another.

It is possible to work artistically with >

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material that is 'too hot to handle' in any other way, even in personal therapy. We seem to get caught up in emphasising the difference between art and therapy, the term therapeutic being used to denigrate the artistic validity of a piece of work. Clearly art and therapy have different forms, functions and criteria for success but it is not necessarily true that they have different motivations. Most things that make us feel good or give us a sense of purpose in our lives can be seen as 'therapeutic' in the widest sense of the term but this does not invalidate them. What is powerful about making artistic work is that it combines expression with the crafting of form and the making of meaning. If these three processes take place within the intimate space of our body and are witnessed by others it is hard to imagine a more powerful crucible for change.

Moving in the natural environment is integrated with this process of working creatively through the body. I live and work by the sea, being out in nature contributes significantly to my sense of well being, restoring my balance, my perspective and my belief in life. However grey the weather, however low I may be feeling if I go down to the beach there is almost always a sliver of light on the horizon. If I am feeling unsettled the movement of the water calms me, the solidity of the rocks supports me, the flight of the cormorants delights me. I regain a sense of something greater than my personal concerns, a breathing space which is nourishing and helps get things back into proportion. After working intensively with people time alone in nature replenishes and inspires me. There

is an intimate relationship between my body and the environment which I find hard to articulate. As I travelled through the countryside in the UK after a prolonged period of living and working in Australia I felt as if my bones fell back into place, I had a sense of understanding the landscape kinaesthetically.

Working with movement in the environment not only offers a clearer a sense of self but also radically changes the sense of relationship to the environment. The environment and our bodies mirror each other, different elements in the environment teach us different possibilities: rocks speak of bones, endurance and clarity of form; trees teach us about verticality and the connection between earth and sky, the dual possibilities of stability and movement, the cycle of life; the rhythm of the sea mirrors the rhythm of our breath, the tides speak of change and the wind awakens vitality. Moving in response to these elements I discover new possibilities within myself, my body finds itself in unlikely positions and moves in non-habitual ways, my imagination is ignited and I find myself inhabited by creatures and characters outside my usual repertoire. Artistically and personally I am re-invigorated, in dialogue with something I can neither control nor subjugate. This dialogue between the moving body and the natural environment at the core of the artistic process is an inspiring combination.

Moving in natural environments especially by the sea and in the woods touches people in many different ways, some of which are deeply personal and others which strike a common cord. For

many people moving by the sea releases a sense of the freedom and playfulness of childhood, a return to an uninhibited use of their body and a direct physical response to the environment. Other people find this physical encounter with nature inspiring and exhilarating, or healing, allowing them to relax deeply. Visual artists often comment on how they perceive the environment differently after moving in it rather than simply looking at it.

I'd like to end by writing briefly about the experiences of two women with whom I have worked over a number of years and who have agreed to their work being discussed in this context. I will use alternative names to protect their privacy. The first, Sara has muscle dystrophy and now uses a wheelchair. Although she had experienced various forms of movement over the years as a result of her commitment to keep her body mobile, Sara became disillusioned, demoralised by the rigidity of proscribed systems which did not allow her to explore her own possibilities for movement and that engendered a sense of failure, coupled with exhaustion as a result of the sheer hard work required to move in a certain way. So she gave up working with movement and focused on other activities.

Some years later partly as a result of her involvement with singing, Sara's interest in creative movement was rekindled. She felt it was crucial to approach it differently, that she was not asked to perform or conform or to 'work' at it. We agreed to work together one to one but that in order to avoid these pitfalls and to establish an ethos in which Sara could move freely, exploring her



INCUBATION COLLABORATION BETWEEN HELEN POYNOR & ANNIE PFINGST PHOTO: ANNIE PFINGST

possibilities without external pressure or getting undermined by her internal critics, we would reframe the practice. Sara christened it 'melarkie' rather than movement practice. Melarkie is a playground in which anything is possible and in which Sara calls the shots.

We have been working on a regular basis for some years now and I am constantly surprised at the inventiveness and physicality of these sessions with Sara working in and out of her chair creating movements which range from the highly energetic to the subtle and everyday, conjuring unexpected images for us both. Sara sometimes arrives exhausted and leaves replenished, surprised at what has emerged physically. The success of this process is due to Sara herself, since I simply hold a safe space for her to work in, with permission to move in any way she wants, providing a supportive witness for her journey in movement and occasional feedback if requested.

Through this process, which she continues at home, Sara has rediscovered a sense of pleasure in her body, developed confidence in following her impulses, a

finely tuned awareness of her body's capabilities and a playful curiosity about what might be possible, increasing her body's range at the same time. The process reveals what can happen if you work outside the prescribed norms, engaging wholeheartedly, physically and creatively with what you've got, valuing and following whatever emerges.

Alice, the other mover mentioned, was an art therapist and an artist whose experience with movement developed into creating installations in the environment. Alice started working with movement when she was 56 and is now approaching her 70th birthday. About four years ago she had a brain haemorrhage caused by an aneurism, followed by brain surgery and was seriously ill for a long time. She emerged from a lengthy recovery period and decided to return to working with movement since it had been so significant for her both personally and creatively.

This has been an uphill struggle, one in which she has frequently become disheartened but in which she persists. Those of us who have witnessed her over

the last three years hauling herself back from the abyss inch by inch, finding her way of reconnecting with her changed body, grappling with her altered sense of self with occasional glimpses of a renewed appreciation of the beauty of the natural environment can only salute her courage and tenacity. Gradually her movement practice is re-emerging with hints of a new vocabulary, flashes of energy and an increased ability to keep her mind focussed on her body following the impulses to move and allowing them to develop.

I can find no more appropriate way to close this article on the arts and well-being than to salute the journeys of people such as Sara and Alice whose practice indicates that moving creatively is clearly significant in their lives and proves unequivocally that we are all dancers and all have our own way of dancing.

For details about the Walk of Life movement workshop programme contact Helen Poynor on 01297 20624. Anna Halprin by Libby Worth and Helen Poynor was published by Routledge in 2004.