BEYOND WORDS: AN EMBODIED EMPATHIC PROCESS

by

Belle Baggs

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Modern Dance

The University of Utah

August 2011

The University of Utah Graduate School

STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of **Belle B. Baggs**

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Satu Hummasti	, Chair	**4/28/2011** Date Approved
Ellen Bromberg	, Member	**4/28/2011** Date Approved
Juan Carlos Claudio	, Member	**4/28/2011** Date Approved

and by **Stephen Koester**, Chair of the Department of **Modern Dance**

and by Charles A. Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Today, empathy is repeatedly considered a highly important influence in human interaction, yet our active and embodied practice of empathy seems scarce. Empathy is commonly recognized by many academic fields including philosophy, psychology and biology. In my experience as a dancer, my movement education has had a profound influence on my understanding of others. Teaching and learning movement is an interchange that is inescapably an act of empathy. But what is empathy? What does it require of the body? What is our empathic capacity?

The main purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the relationship between movement and empathy. I will review many scientific models and draw parallels to my creative endeavors by analyzing and reflecting on two choreographic works *Sync* and *Revealing Wavelengths*. I use empathy in the creative process and as the subject and product of my art. How can choreography as a research tool add to the current empathic paradigms?

Conclusively, I determine that human movement and physical experience are fundamental to the empathic process. My choreographic explorations were effective in underlying the complexity and intricate details of this concept of humanity, which will continue to educate me in life and in the field of dance.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The support of many people has influenced and informed my creative research and writing process. I would first like to thank my dancers Laja Field and Allison Spehar, who were willing to explore, risk and play and who in turn taught and informed me about the physical embodiment of the empathic process. Thank you to my thesis committee and the Department of Modern Dance for providing me a place to question, affirm and develop myself as a dancer, an artist, and a human being. Finally, I would like to thank my parents Susan and Williams Baggs, family, and close friends for their unconditional love and belief in me.

PREFACE: STEPPING INTO ANOTHER'S SHOES

We've all heard the expression that to understand someone you must " walk a mile in their shoes." The beauty of this metaphor is that it accentuates the simple power of an embodied way of knowing. However, there are also wide misconceptions drawn from this metaphor. It is as if understanding someone else or their situations, feelings, emotions, motivations, and life is as easy as taking off my old worn-in sneakers and slipping on someone else's shiny red high heels. But in reality, it is not nearly that simple. This process of interchange is much more of a struggle sated with query, discomfort, self-confusion, and doubt. But I value the importance of seeing life from another's perspective. So, how do I begin the process of stepping into another's shoes—like these, shiny red high-heels?

My prejudices, biases and judgments of other types of shoes get in the way of my decisions to remove my own. My shoes fit me; they are comfortable, worn in and molded to my foot size. Once I've made the decision to part from my shoes, I have reservations about putting on the heels, because honestly, I like my shoes better. And let's face it, I'll never be a high heel woman; I look ridiculous walking in them, I feel dreadfully uncomfortable, wobbly like a new born deer. They make my back hurt. Not to mention that I consider them one of the worst female stereotypical gender designs ever invented. There is a moment where I look at the woman in red

high heels and we both stare with bewilderment. How will she like my, grungy, smelly, sole-worn, coffee-stained sneakers?

Finally, handing over my shoes, I attempt to put on the heels. Disaster unfolds! My toes crunch into the narrow crevice and my heel rubs up against the rim in the back; not quite a perfect fit. Now I am stuck with the most uncomfortable and unsuitable pair of shoes. Do I give up and take them off and with a loud "Thank God" and toss them to the floor? Or do I embrace the struggle and do my best to walk in them? My motto in life has always been to show diligence in fitting into other's shoes. However, I have experienced the risks involved with this commitment; adjusting to walking in them may cause blisters, bunions, or many other foot impairments. But I have also felt the exhilaration of an abundance of new sensations and feelings deriving from each step taken inside new shoes with new perspectives.

And so the paradox of empathy continues. After my feet finally adjust to the mold of my newly borrowed shoes, do I want my old shoes back? Do I now see my old sneakers as worthless, dirty, and un-lady like? Have the heels changed how I walk? Do they change the way others see me? What kind of shoe is my kind of shoe anyways? Tennis shoes, boots, slippers; canvas or leather? Can I wear them all? What have I gained from trying on the red high heels? The complexity of this empathic process drove me to research, experiment, and scrutinize the term we define as empathy through the medium of movement and modern dance.

INTRODUCTION

Dance is an art form that communicates qualitatively through the body, which is the vehicle in and through which we express ourselves to others. I find a strong desire within myself to want to understand and listen to others, and the practice of movement and dance has offered me a road to explore this in a unique way. Teaching and learning movement is an interchange that is inescapably an act of empathy. Movement contains sets of values and it requires the body to repattern and adjust to execute phrases set forth by instructors or choreographers. My love for movement drives me to embody new styles of movement that are different, challenging, and physically demanding. There is deep human connection that emerges through moving together and finding ways to synchronize ourselves through the language of the body.

However, a back injury that occurred early in my studies in the Modern Dance Department led me to experience a shift in what it means to embody "others," as my back's physical capacity had been pushed to the limit. By trying on so many shoes, I felt I was becoming destructive to my own body and losing my sense of self. I began to ask: How does embodying others' movement serve us? How can I continue to be open to others' movement styles without compromising my own integrity? Experiencing directly the movement consequences of the empathic experience, including the synchronicities and relatedness between bodies and

injury repercussion, fueled my desire to explore the empathic process through movement more deeply.

My overall goal for this thesis is to elucidate and comprehend the relationship between movement and empathy. What is empathy? What does it require of the body? What is our empathic capacity? I have used all of these questions as springboards for my research content, which contains a survey of scientific models and my own creative and choreographic endeavors. I first aim to challenge the dominant views on empathy and dispute the popular model of empathy as an overtly cognitive process. I then use choreography as a research tool to make new discoveries about the embodied empathic process. Why is empathy important?

In the face of economic disasters, war, policy failures, educational crises, and health care problems we are often reminded of how shallow our views of human nature can reach. Our technologically advanced culture requires less face-to-face interactions and lived experiences, because we depend upon instantaneous images and rapid-fire information. It leaves us over saturated and emotionally distanced. We no longer always necessitate our physical experiences and instead designate ourselves as passive viewers of the terrain that lies beyond cyberspace. As Carol Press (2002), dance educator, eloquently states "To nourish our being and our relations, each of us needs to experience, express, elaborate, and share with competence and meaning, the dancing self within" (p. 205). Have we forgotten the power of the metaphor, "take a walk in my shoes." Empathy is repeatedly considered a highly important influence in human interaction, yet our active and

embodied practice of its nature seems scarce. Human movement and physical experience are fundamental to the empathic process.

Our corporeal knowledge, visceral awareness, and physical sensations are too often negated or replaced by pure folk psychology. Empathy is a term commonly used in the theories of the social sciences, philosophies of the mind and cognitive functioning, but kinesthetic or bodily knowledge is less recognized as the main source of empathy. Western cultural roots and Cartesian values have placed the mind as superior to the body. Some of these values stem from the dominant views dating back to the Greek philosopher Plato, Christianity, and the French philosopher, Descartes, with his famous quote, "I think, therefore I am." In the 21st century we still hold this mind/body dichotomy. Because of these historical foundations of honoring the rational and intellectual mind, the process of empathy is often considered as solely residing in the middle of our cerebral lobes, as if we are only capable of understanding others through mind reading and brain probing.

To consider the term empathy as only a cognitive function or a telepathic connection diminishes the possibilities of human relatedness we can experience. Interpersonal encounters make up the social fabric of our everyday lives. We are social creatures and expressive beings and our bodies engage ourselves in relationships with others, whether we are conscious of this process or not. It is false to always assume that our thoughts, feelings, motivations, and experiences are locked away in the intracranial spaces of our brains, as if buried inside of a cave. In actuality, our emotions, moods, and feelings ripple across and through our body's terrain unremitted and can be perceived by others. We may interpret others' states

automatically through their gestures, facial expressions, body postures, and movements. With the mass amounts of technology and nonphysical connectedness, does our relatedness diminish? If we can tune into our bodies, we may be able to gain an intrinsic understanding of how to build deeper, more compassionate relationships and to bridge the gaps of indifference.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I inspect and explore scientific constructs of empathy. I first follow the evolution of the definition of empathy to gain historical knowledge of the term's roots. Moreover, I draw upon biological and philosophical views of human nature aiming to understand our needs to connect to one another as humans. Specifically, I look at the field of humanistic psychology identified by theorists Carl Rogers and Heinz Kohut. This field gives special attention to the link between empathy and the client-patient relationship. Lastly, I use the most recent neuroscience research—the mirror neuron system— to highlight the connection between brain functioning and motor/somatic activities associated with empathy. My ambitions were targeted to gain broad scientific perspectives of the empathic process.

In the second chapter, I track my creative process inside of two choreographic works. I employ empathy as inspiration for the choreographic process and as the subject and product of my art. The impetus for the majority of my research stemmed from the forming of a dance titled, *Sync*, which was presented in the Graduate Thesis Concert in the Modern Dance Department at University of Utah in November 2010. I also refer to my personal dance experiences as well as my embodied knowledge in an experimental process and choreographed work titled

Revealing Wavelengths, which also aroused my curiosity for this research topic. How can the research of movement inform and add to the current empathic paradigms? Throughout this chapter I refer to my knowledge as a Certified Laban Movement Analyst from the Integrated Movement Studies program to support my inquiry. This work provides me with a strong and organized foundation that is based in the comprehension of human movement. Additionally, I weave in supportive theory from the first chapter, as well as concepts from dance researchers and movement therapists. My hope is to expand my own views of practicing an embodied empathic process, thus also contributing to the field of dance artistically, choreographically and educationally.

SCIENTIFIC THEORIES OF EMPATHY CONSTRUCTS

Research into the constructs of empathy is rather recent and quite complicated, but is expanding and reaching multidisciplinary fields of studies. The term itself has a perplexing history and has been defined in a variety of ways. In this chapter, I review the historical definitions and past theories to provide a deeper understanding of this ambiguous term and a stronger sense of its roots.

The Evolution of the Definition of Empathy

The definition of empathy has changed throughout history. The term has evolved from describing an involuntary process of observing art, into the basis of therapeutic relationships, and also a concept that underlies the experience in the body through which we gain knowledge.

In the Romantic Era the concept *Einfuhlung,* literally meaning 'feeling into,' was practiced by Goethe (among others), who believed that by projecting his being into and vibrating with subjects in nature, such as plants, he could understand their essence. This concept was first applied to aesthetics by Robert Vischer (1873) who noted, "observers of art imitated through involuntary automatic motor reactions the forms and patterns suggested by the art object, merging themselves into oneness" (p. 104). Theodore Lipps (1903) also put forth a mechanistic account of *Einfuhlung* in which the perception of an emotional gesture in another directly activates the

same emotion in the perceiver, without any intervening labeling, associative, or cognitive perspective-taking processes.

The American psychologist E.B. Titchener was the first to use the term 'empathy' in the English language in 1909. He drew from the previously used German word *Einfuhlung*. Titchener seems to have translated *Einfuhlung* into English by also combining the well known English word 'sympathy' with the ancient Greek concept *Empathia*, meaning 'an especially intense state of feeling.' He states in *Psychology of the Thought Process* (1909), "Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness in the mind's eye, but I feel or act them in the mind's muscles" (p. 181). He speaks directly to the ties of feelings and motor empathy. The term gained significance and was taken into further studies.

Founder of phenomenology and philosopher Edmund Husserl, along with his student Edith Stein, in 1917 advanced the method of empathic understanding. Stein states in her dissertation:

> When I am imprisoned within the boundaries of my individuality, I could not get beyond 'the world as it appears to me.' At least it would be conceivable that the possibility of its independent existence, that could still be given as a possibility, would always be indemonstrable. But this possibility is demonstrated as soon as I cross these boundaries by the help of empathy and obtain the same world's second and third appearance, which is independent of my perception. Thus empathy as the basis of inter-subjective experience becomes the condition of possible knowledge of the existing outer world as Husserl and Royce, present it. (pp. 59-60)

Stein highlights this phenomenon of empathy as rich knowledge gained from participating in the views of outside experiences. Further research into the term empathy was conducted and was especially noted in biology and philosophical discourse.

Biological and Philosophical Views of Human Nature

Before language nonverbal communication was our method to understand and empathize with one another. Early evolutionary theorists, philosophers, and scientists have noted our innate needs to connect. These perspectives indicate that all social species rely on each other for survival and that empathy is the root that permits organisms to evolve and grow.

From an evolutionary prospective, empathy is a necessary component to survival. According to social scientists Ross Buck and Benson Ginsburg (1997), "empathy involves a biologically based, spontaneous process that is fundamental to all living things and that includes innate sending and receiving mechanisms"(p. 17). They suggest a 'communicate gene hypothesis' that relates the concept of empathy as an "emergent property of a primordial biological capacity for communication that inheres in the genes" (p. 19). By studying slime mold, they found that even the simplest life forms show signs of attuning, synchronizing, and functioning together to find food for survival.

Humans are social species and our survival depends upon our rapport with our community and the ability to empathize. Our sentiments of the ephemeral nature of life lead us to bond with one another. Early philosophers David Hume (1739-40) and Adam Smith (1759) believed that, "vicarious feeling through empathy was one of the bases of mortality" (Cited in Nakao & Itakura, 2002, p. 43). Charles Darwin, evolutionary theorist, also considered the importance of nonverbal communication and the emotional communication process in interpersonal

interactions. He went so far as to speculate that this "empathic connection demonstrated a biological basis for ethics and provided a foundation of the emergence of religion in humans" (Ickes, p. 23). In short, our experiences and our physical bonds sustain our existence.

Humans are endowed with a motivation to form and maintain strong interpersonal relationships and we have a need to belong. According to plenty of the psychological studies as referenced by Cacioppo et al. (2010), "Humans fare poorly both mentally and physically when they are socially isolated" (p. 679). "Individual members of social species do not fare well when living solitary lives. Social isolation decreases the lifespan of social species" (p. 678). Our existential crises motivate us to use empathy and enlighten humanism in our quest for survival and moral aptitude.

Empathic Relationships in Psychology

In psychology discourse, empathy is commonly defined as intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. The term is at the center of psychology and therapeutic practices when referencing the creation of relationships. In this field, empathy is commonly mentioned as a crucial tool to form client-patient bonds. Carl Rogers and Heinz Kohut are most often identified with, and thought to be most responsible for, initially popularizing the term in psychology, refining it, and placing it at the heart of the therapeutic process.

Early in the 1950s Rogers, a personality theorist, noted the need for a more humanistic approach to psychology practices. Later in his educational journey,

Rogers exhibited concerns that humanistic psychology had not had a deep or significant impact on mainstream psychology in the United States. He bluntly notes the absence of considering the whole human person and the living and acting person inside of therapeutic relationships. He was fighting for new models of therapy that did not regard humans or patients as merely charts or problems to be fixed. The goal of his therapeutic approach was to prepare a growth promoting climate (Henderson & Kirschenbaum, 1989).

To Rogers (1980), empathy means, " temporarily living in the other's life and moving about in it delicately without making judgments" (p. 142). This kind of understanding is sought out as a condition that constitutes growth in relationships and is necessary and for therapeutic personality change. Additionally, Kohut, as cited by Cushman (2009), defined empathy as "the capacity to think and feel outside oneself into the inner life of another person"(p. 126). The interpretation of empathy still permeates the education of therapists and plays an important role in developing healthy human relations throughout this field.

Mirror Neuron System (MNS)

Intriguing research is being done in the neuroscience field that supports the correlation between empathy and movement or motor activities. At the forefront of this investigation is the mirror neuron system (MNS) that, according to results of many studies, highlights the inherent biological arrangement we have that supports our interconnectedness. This scientific evidence undoubtedly provides, for the first time in history, a credible neurophysiological explanation for complex forms of social cognition and interaction including empathy.

The mirror neuron system was discovered quite recently by happenstance. Giacomo Rizzolatti, a neurophysiologist from Parma, Italy, first identified mirror neurons in the 1980s while working with a specific kind of monkey, the *Macaca nemstrina*. Rizzolatti and his team were interested in studying the brain area labeled F5 or the premotor cortex—that part of the neocortex concerned with planning, selecting, and executing actions (coding for actions of the body). One of the scientists, Vittorio Gallese, was moving around the lab during a full day's experiment when an astonishing discovery was made by accident (Iacoboni, 2008).

The groundbreaking phenomenon happened when the activation of the monkey's brain electrodes fired simply through the perception of another's actions. Gallese reached for something on the counter when he heard a burst of activity from the computer system indicating that the monkey's motor cells were firing, although the monkey was sitting quietly in the chair, waiting for the next experiment. Although there was no motor action involved at all, the monkey was processing the action of another as if it was himself executing the action. Together Gallese, Rizzolatti, Fadiga, and Fogassi, considered the "Fab Four," continued to experiment with the discovery of mirror neurons. (Iacoboni, 2008) This development changes how we understand the function of social animals.

The most basic property of the mirror neurons is the firing action that occurs while we witness the actions associated with emotions and sensations of other individuals. This type of mirroring process can often be unconscious or experienced as a contagious behavior. When we see someone cry, we want to cry. When we see somebody laugh, we laugh. Our brain creates patterns of neural

activities that code to resemble similar actions and lead to similar sensations and emotions. Further scientific work has shown that humans appear to have a system that also matches goals or intentions of observed actions onto matching motor programs. For example, if one observes a person grasping a cup of water one's neuronal firing is different in the case of grasping-to-drink versus grasping-to-water a plant. This suggests MSN is extremely helpful for recognizing both the actions and intentions of other people (Iacoboni, 2008).

These studies show the extraordinary fact that we are interconnected through our biological and psychosomatic composition. Vittorio Gallese was the first to propose the role of mirror neurons in both understanding and empathizing with the emotions of other people. Neurologist and neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni also couples the evidence of MSN to empathy. Currently at UCLA, he has pioneered further brain imaging studies that explore the mirror neuron system in humans. Iacoboni states, " Empathy plays a fundamental role in our social lives. It allows us to share emotions, experiences, needs, and goals" (p. 108). Not surprisingly, there is much empirical evidence suggesting a strong link between mirror neurons and empathy.

The mirror neuron system has dramatically influenced how we understand the human condition. Research is growing and many diverse studies show interesting statistics on how we perceive the actions of others. The process of empathy and achieving intersubjectivity through the MSN system by way of imitation or mirroring will be further discussed in a later chapter. The main point of this summary is to reinforce that our human biology has equipped us with the

capabilities to understand others. We now know that we have a predisposition to have empathic experiences, but our biology is only the genesis to the road of understanding.

EMPATHY: A CREATIVE PROCESS

My creative process in both choreographic works *Sync* and *Revealing Wavelengths* was focused on probing the intricate details of forming empathic movement relationships between dyads. Drawing on the above context and the constructs of empathy inside of our psyche and biology, I chose to assess this knowledge through the body. I held this intent and set out to experiment with the shaping of movement relationships through the use of empathy.

In my thesis proposal project, *Revealing Wavelengths*, I designed a project that would affirm the basic idea that the body knows how to communicate without words. I invited Rachael Shaw, another graduate student in the dance department, to rehearse in the studio with this theory as the basis of the creative process. Our only rule for creation was to eliminate any spoken dialogue and to rely only on our own sensations and reactions to one another. The setting of our material was seeded from improvisational conversations with our bodies. We would basically just move and be aware of each other and react with either unison movement or complimentary phrasing. Then we would use gestural nodding or facial expressions to reward or endorse things we felt worked or oppositely reject them. To assist in our process we used video to record each of our rehearsals and granted ourselves permission to view the dance recording, as a guide to keep us on track. The objective

was to use solely our bodies to communicate, to allow a physically empathic experience to lead us through a journey of dance making.

This duet encouraged me to research empathy in a new context. I was fascinated with many of the concepts of bodily communication that surfaced during these silent rehearsals including mirrored responses, intuitive decision making, and partnering complications, so I wanted to magnify them. Mainly, I wanted to first experience for myself what it meant to feel empathic and communicate to another strictly through the use of the body before I set this exploration on other dancers. I will continue to render more information about this process throughout the next sections. For the next stage of my research, I was interested in stepping out of the action and becoming the director, to watch a new relationship unfold and to explore the empathic process in an alternative way.

My graduate thesis concert dance, *Sync*, was choreographed with the intent of tracing the stages of forming an empathic relationship. I cast a duet between Laja Field and Allison Spehar, two undergraduate women. We rehearsed 2 days a week during the fall semester of 2010 and tracked our experiences in journals to highlight the journey of the process. I also chose to hire and work with a composer to create a sound score to match the tone of the dance.

As an artist, I honor my dancers as individuals and respect what they bring to the creative process. I first and foremost wanted them to have a connection to this work, beyond just learning material and regurgitating motion. So, the invention of movement for this work was generated by myself and by the dancers. At the beginning of the process of *Sync*, each dancer created a movement phrase based on

something personal from their lives, with the hope of sharing themselves inside of the choreographic process. I asked them each to create their own unique movement phrases that remained true to how they like to move and how they felt about their lives at that moment. I did not ask them to write anything down, but instead, asked them to physically embody their responses. I wanted to get out of our heads and into our bodies, to draw knowledge from our physical, not pure intellectual resources.

Empathy is a bodily skill that emerges from within the situated dynamics of our concrete encounters, and I wanted to harness this process with authenticity. In the following sections I will discuss the many stages of my creative process, which include: letting go of biases, tuning in, sharing our uniqueness, the art of communicating, mirroring, core/ self awareness, and synchronization, referencing both *Sync* and *Revealing Wavelengths,* while also linking supplemental supportive theory. Additionally, the performance of *Sync* will be spotlighted at the beginning of each section to ground the theory in specific representations.

Letting Go

The presence of loneliness is apparent in the vast black stage; Laja stands solo in the space. She is alone, contemplative, irritated and anxious, not knowing how to connect. What does it feel like to stand on the stage of life alone and isolated? What does it feel like to have everybody watching you, but not truly understand how you feel and who you are?

"Here is the immense paradox: that, with the being of others, there appear in my world worlds alien to me as such, worlds that present themselves to me as unpresentable, that are accessible to me as inaccessible, that become patent as essentially latent" (Ortega y Gassett, p. 120).

Our first impressions, prejudices and biases can block the impetus to engage in the empathic process. So often we can be quick to judge others based on our fears or feelings of being threatened by that which is alien or foreign. Accepting the unfamiliar and embracing diversity can be an arduous task, because it requires the body to move out of the comfort zone of one's reality and let go of preformed ideas, beliefs, and expectations. As dancers we are constantly facing this challenge physically by working to live inside the values and movements of others—the choreographers and teachers who often dictate our steps.

Our first impressions can often taint our projections of a moving body. When we watch others dance or move, it is easy to base our critiques on how we like to move and what we value aesthetically or artistically. For example, generalizations may surround certain kinds of dance forms. In particular, I have heard women make statements such as, "hip hop is dirty, obscene and too masculine." Observing other movement with empathy is more complicated than one may think, because it requires us to see, feel, and think the way another person does without judgment or censorship. Unless one genuinely commits to trying the movement on oneself, one will never know what it feels like. For me, it was not until I took a hip hop class and embodied this dance style that I found it to be truly optimistic, expressive, and empowering as a female. So, how can we move past first impressions to deeper understanding?

The recognition of our own partialities is the first step. Dance researchers Carol-Lynne Moore and Kaoru Yamamoto (1988) contend, "The body knowledge we have regarding movement meaning is based upon generalizations drawn from our

own embodied experiences. Our body knowledge becomes the guidebook we use to organize the world beyond words, to judge actions, and to gauge our reactions to the movements of others" (p. 88). Moreover, "a movement may have different meanings in varied situations, while a given intent may be embodied in differing ways from culture to culture" (p. 123). In the case of hip hop, I first had reservations about participating in this particular form, because it was forcing me to confront my own issues of linking power, strong weight, and force to the female image.

When we approach others or different cultures with our own prejudices, holding an enclosed presence and bound skin walls, nothing is gained or learned. However, we do not have to always abandon our discriminatory logic, because it may serve us for protection in certain circumstances. But, when we open our pores and our hearts to see beyond our biases, we become vulnerable to change, thus allowing ourselves to embark on a new journey. It is important to note that this task also requires a delicate balance between embodying with the other and not abandoning the self. I will discuss this concept further in a later section.

In my first rehearsal with the cast of *Sync* I wanted to examine the idea of first impressions. I developed a series of movements that felt true to how I like to move and what feels good in my body. I asked one of the dancers, Laja, to observe my phrase. She was only allowed to watch me perform the dance material three times in order to retain the movement. Next, I had her make a phrase of her own that was similar to my phrase. The projective method is a natural extension of the dance experience; the instructor shows material and then students try to copy the material with their bodies. It requires the body to repattern and adjust to execute

the phrases set forth. Not surprisingly, her phrase was quite different, because she is not able to break her own movement patterns immediately and create an exact replication.

Although Laja knows me as a person and as a dancer she still only selected a few parts or pieces of my phrase. Though she was genuinely trying to copy me she had to modify the material to fit her body, retain it, and make it easier for herself. She left out my details, my initiations, and only caught pieces of what was mine. If we base our knowledge of someone on assumptions, we never get to fully understand and contextualize our information.

To understand someone else we must not look only at the parts, but the person as an entire being. We often split the paradox of "other" and me so reflexively. Then people and movement become stuffed and organized into tight categories with qualifiers. For example, generally women's movement is often indexed as light and delicate and men's movement is connected with strength and power. This kind of dividedness keeps us from cultivating the capacity for interconnectedness. It also reduces one's potential. As a woman I can be strong and powerful and it is imperative that I am able to explore all of my movement capabilities. We are all people who are becoming. Approaching movement from this perspective permits one to see others and oneself as processes of shaping not shaped individuals.

The beginning image of my piece, *Sync* (described above) represents an inception of an empathic relationship. The first concept I wanted to manifest was the reality of segregation. I was not asking Laja to "perform" this feeling, I was

asking her to be aware of what it feels like to be alone on stage. It is a vulnerable place to be when all eyes of the audience are on one performer. She stood in the dim spotlight in her own world, yet seeking and yearning for the comfort of another body.

The seed of empathy is the moment of consonance between both humans in a relationship. This is a simple moment that requires bravery, strength, and courage in order to let go of fears and connect. When Allison enters the stage and witnesses Laja's agitated and sensitive state she tries to cultivate a warm and accepting presence by softly imitating Laja's shake of the head. It is clear that Laja is looking for help or the support of another as she alternates between extending her limbs into space, as if they are antennae, and collapsing to the floor. By developing a more capacious habit of mind and body when encountering others, we can lead ourselves down the empathic road to tune in together.

Tuning In

As Laja shakes her head violently Allison gently offers support with a small gesture of wrapping her arm around her waist. She listens with her body. She feels Laja's shallow breaths creating vibrations and as she rests her heart next to Laja she can feel the trembling in her own body. She merges their kinesphere's and risks….."I am here."

Tuning into another's point of view starts from the very essence of life, breath. Breath underlies all that we do and how we move. It has a natural rhythm that flows inward and outward and this cycle is something that we share with every human being. Although breath is not something we have to think about to survive, it is important to recognize its associations with feelings and thoughts. Whether one is

stressed from one's job, in pain, feeling under pressure, excited, or exhausted, one's breath patterns changes simultaneously. Peggy Hackney (2002), renowned researcher of movement and scholar in the Laban/ Bartenieff work, refers to breath as the 'primal pattern of connectivity'. As breath brings life to movement it also opens portals to enlivened relationships.

This natural pattern of filling and emptying or growing and shrinking connects us to others. Hackney (2002) states, "tune-in to another person's breathing and you know something about that person and are able to be with them at a core level" and "the connective power of breath is so strong that even when consciously attended to, the connection feels magical" (p. 55). When one is able to ride the breath and feel this magical feeling with another, one's system can be open, free and willing to reorganize and surpass one's usual boundaries to gain an empathic understanding of another. Many other researchers note this primal pattern, which relates to tension and the flow of one's bodily movement, as a relationship building block.

The Kestenberg Movement Profile is a system that recognizes the empathic processes via movement. This system has proven to be a successful model for establishing movement therapy relationships with clients, empathizing, and providing a vehicle for transformation and healing through the use of the body. Dr. Kestenburg is a psychoanalyst and has done an incredible amount of research in child development and movement. She claims (1989) "insofar as the organs through which we perceive are functional before birth, we can assume that a sensor-motor apparatus is available from the start that permits the transmission of movement

qualities and underlying feelings such as changes in the degree and type of tension" (p. 137).

Kestenburg recognizes that movements, specifically tension changes, are the first empathic process felt between two individuals—mother and child. Parents continue to adjust and attune their flow according to their child's needs. The use of the term attunement identifies the process of responsively duplicating changes in muscle tension, which is based on mutual empathy. If a baby is uncomfortable or irritated by their environment he or she may tense up, condense the breath flow, and then burst out into a cry. Then the mother responds accordingly by matching the baby's flow until finally together they settle. Rocking a baby is an example of how the mother matches the calming free flow of a baby who is yielding and falling asleep in her arms. Tuning into each other's breath and tension changes can be the starting point.

In my rehearsals with Rachael in *Revealing Wavelengths*, I found that breath and tension changes were the first things we clung to in order to make connections. It helped us initiate movement together, it assisted in changing our dynamic relationships, and it supported a more natural surrendering of weight in the moments of contact or touch. To fully give one's own weight to another requires that the breath be present and constantly adjusting. As one's skin melts and pours into another, one breaches the boundaries of the body walls and instinctively gains more trust for others.

In the rehearsals of *Sync*, I did not necessarily guide the duet through a journey associated with breath; this was something that happened naturally. It was

clear at the beginning of the dance that the two movers were on different wavelengths and breath patterns. At the beginning of the dance, Laja was guided by her anxious and skeptical breath and was often more bound and rapid. Allison remained calm and collected with slow and deeply comforting breaths. Their attempts to connect depended upon their attunement and I encouraged those moments to be fully lived. On the stage and in life, breath connections support empathy.

Sharing Our Uniqueness

Allison peers into the spotlight which Laja occupies. Laja is not just moving, but storytelling and expressing her unique movement voice. She ripples her body in the space as if sending out radio frequencies from her skin. Allison listens not with her ears but with her viscera. Laja lifts her hair from her face, glances back at Allison and mutely says, "Did you hear me?"

Sharing movement and expressing uniqueness is an important part of living, and is a thoroughfare to empathy. We are all unique and individual movers. In dance there is something very satisfying when you can give a movement phrase to other movers. By sharing your movement you are sharing a part of yourself. It is a gift. Yet the rewards of gift giving are also embedded with roadblocks on the path to empathic understanding.

As distinct individuals and dancers we yearn to share our world, customs, and cultures. Our movement is shaped by many factors and we are complex and socially constructed beings. To fully embody another's movement signature is like learning a foreign language. In fact, Moore and Yamamoto (1988) claim that movement is a 'foreign language' in and of itself. They note, "It cannot be assumed that the ability to comprehend movement is innate. Rather, one must learn to decipher movement

meaning, just as one learns to speak a language" (p. 121). Because of this, learning and teaching new patterns and movement material can be arduous and must be handled with sensitivity, similar to the experience of interacting with peoples from vastly different cultures.

Unique movement patterns are knitted with our internal sense of self. Moore and Yamamoto also claim that movement is a private code; "each individual is seen to construct his or her own private lexicon of movement meaning. Accordingly, through familiarity with the given person and the situation, in which a particular action occurs, will allow an appropriate deciphering of the message of the movements" (p. 124). According to the model offered in the Integrated Movement Studies (IMS) Program via dance artist and theorist Rudolf von Laban, movement is categorized in four sections: Body, Effort, Shape and Space. It is not my purpose in this thesis to analyze or interpret my dancers' movements, but rather for the sake of this research it is just important to note that we all combine these categories of movement in diverse ways that make us unique.

In addition, movement patterns are directly tied to our emotions and feelings and they determine how one interacts with the environment. This fact is evident in our everyday lives. If someone is sad or depressed another may notice his or her drooping appearance, slouched spine, the retreating of their chest inward or the slow pace of their walk. Even some of the most researched neurological studies reveal the parallel between emotions and movement. Neurologists including Iacoboni (cited in Cacioppo & Semin (2009) found that the brain region responsible for action representation such as the superior temporal sulcus (STS) is functionally

connected to the insula and amygdala, which are regions in the limbic lobe that are involved in emotions. This suggests that the observation of another person's emotional state recruits structures in the brain which are also involved not only in the interception, but also in the representation of our own somatic states (p. 111). It is important to acknowledge these correlations when exchanging movement with one another. I truly believe that no movement is without meaning. So to purposely ignore or reject the details of someone's movement signature is, in a way, like dismissing their values and emotions.

In *Revealing Wavelengths*, I experienced the complex circumstance of sharing unique movement. Because in dance our bodies are the tools or instruments to create our art, every rehearsal presents unexpected challenges to overcome. Each day we have a new body with new needs, feelings, and moods. Rachael and I invented and shared movement based upon spontaneous creation, which was inspired by the music in the background and the motions that each of us had affinity for. Through the elimination of words, each shift, gesture, or line of energy became precious, because there was no other way to assume that Rachael understood what was happening inside of my body. I enjoy moving with an expressive torso and I often lead from the curiosity of my head or lower spine with an abundance of free flowing energy. Because I usually focus on the momentum of my body, like the rush of spiraling my body to the floor, it became difficult to translate. So I had to be particularly clear about my body intentions. Sometimes it required that I slowed down and exaggerated each of the movement ideas with details followed by many sets of repetition.

Similar to *Revealing Wavelengths*, I also asked for the dancers in *Sync* to communicate without words. Laja and Allison tried on each other's movement by physically communicating and guiding each other to move with accuracy inside of their embodied expressions. Each of their phrases required different control and dynamic energy of the body. Laja's phrase contained tensile reaches of the limbs and a backward plummet to the floor. Allison had many soft gestural components of both the arms and legs. I directed the dancers from the outside only to highlight and harness the authenticity of the "how" process. Eventually the dance material included not only the unison phrases that Laja and Allison constructed, but also the step-by-step processes it took to work through their misunderstandings.

The dancers comprehended each other in an organic or pure bodily way and translated their own bodily language like compassionate tour guides. As I watched this process unfold I was blown away by the beautiful unspoken transmissions that took place. This was portrayed in the performance. Their eyes would meet with translucency as the learner observed the leader with curiosity and innocence; eager to understand each shift and pattern. With tenacity, Allison followed Laja's elastic and indulgent torso as it stretched and contracted like a rubber band. Laja had to negotiate the specificity of Allison's arm gestures by asking physically, "Is the hand here or here?" They would pause and repeat the gesture. Then Allison assisted with touch the correct placement of Laja's arms.

In the words of psychotherapist and author Rosalind Pearmain (2001), "When I live more from my heart as a centre of awareness, I find that I am naturally more in tune with others and have far more inner space in which to receive and

welcome them"(p. 125). However, being brave enough to share our uniqueness can be a bumpy road that needs to draw upon the art of communication.

The Art of Communicating and Perspective Taking

Laja flips her body and looks at Allison from upside down. With this slanted outlook Allison was seen in a new light. Laja, for a change, swept Allison up in her arms and gained a revelation of the weight Allison had been carrying on her back…"Wow, I never knew."

Empathic relationships require copious communication skills. Similar to the foundations of contact improvisation, dancers learn how to communicate with their body weight and touch. Both of my choreographic works included partnering work. This kind of intimacy requires yielding to new experiences, merging spaces, and changing perspectives to improve the empathic connection.

The lessons of contact improvisation or any kind of physical partnering quickly teach one the responsibilities inside an empathic relationship. Contact improvisation is a dance technique in which points of physical contact provide the starting point and basis for the dance. The dance progresses by making kinesthetic choices on how to follow rolling points of contact and/or how to give and receive the weight of the body. Engaging in this activity extinguishes the notion that one person is always active and the other always passive in a relationship. For a contact dance to 'work' there must be equilibrium between moving and sensing, much like an ideal healthy relationship that balances talking and listening. An empathic bodily relationship should be thought of as an ongoing conversation where both individuals are engaged and participating fully.

Listening can often be the hardest part about being in an empathic relationship. To empathize sometimes means to stop always trying to fix a situation or forcing conversation. Sometimes it just means to listen. In IMS one of the most powerful touches is what they refer to as the "being with" touch. This is a touch that provides the body with a signal that matches another's surface as if saying, "I am with you." Pearmain (2001) says, "the heart is the most important thing we have, because if we think and approach a person with our head, it is a mental approach, but if we approach with our hearts, it is a real approach, because the heart is really what makes us understand" (p. xiii). Our kinesthetic knowledge helps us attend to each other's adaptations and needs more deeply.

Neuroscientists Semin and Cacioppo (2009) allege that much of the neurological research occurring today only focuses on the passive observer and neglects the reciprocal nature and coregulation of social behavior. They duly note and reference Gallese's model of social cognition, which is specific to an active and aware empathic process. They state, "Social cognition consists of a dynamic, unfolding process that takes place between two or more agents, who are engaged in action and reaction, and the shape of this interaction takes a multitude of forms…" (p.112). When participating in movement relationships it is obvious that an empathic relationships require active and embodied input and output by both parties.

In *Revealing Wavelengths,* Rachael and I felt visceral rewards and somatic challenges when engaging in contact improvisation. There are no rules, or leaders and followers in this dance. It is a proprioceptive challenge. Empathic listening

requires comprehending the subtle nuances of another's movement, which necessitates that our cells be permeable and keenly aware in order to be ready and willing for anything to happen. Although Rachael and I have both practiced this form before, the merging of two new bodies is always disparate. Rachael is shorter and smaller than I, so we had to find new ways to negotiate our merging kinespheres. Of course we had many mishaps, falls, and miscommunications, but we kept pursuing a balance between our two bodies, alternating between giving and receiving, bending and folding, or shaping our bodies to accommodate weight and to fill the empty spaces between us.

Another protocol we used to communicate while setting choreographed partner work in *Sync* was the power of exchanging roles. Biological evidence points towards the soft-wired capabilities of our brains to be able to react to others actions, but unless you follow through with action, you cannot sense what it really feels like "on the other side." It is easy to make passive assumptions. When rehearsing, if I noticed that something did not work for one of the dancers, I asked them to switch roles to feel what each other feels like in their situations. For instance, in a particular moment in the dance Laja was to fling her leg into a bent position and lean into Allison's arms while balancing. Then Allison was to absorb Laja's force and send her leg soaring back in a semicircle, which caused her body to unspiral. I noticed the difficulty of this undertaking for both positions. So they swapped roles to gain each other's perspectives. They learned new things about each other's positions that in turn helped them be more supportive and understanding to one another in their original roles.

Likewise, as a choreographer from the outside one learns a lot about what their dancers are dealing with when one has the humility and capacity to jump in and try it on oneself. Similarly, I stepped in as one of them from time to time, so I too could feel what they felt and receive a better perspective of the task I was asking them to accomplish. "Perspective taking" is often used by psychologists when referring to a concept that assists the empathic process. However, they usually only mention the capabilities of the mind and rarely talk about the actual physical embodiment of another's perspective. They discuss visual and emotional understanding, but they fail to mention the intuitive and tangible essence of our existence, the body.

When the heart becomes the compass of listening, more intuitive decisions can be offered to communicate with one another. Having empathy for another does not mean that one has to be the therapist, the healer and the knower of all things. There is no concrete scheme to follow when it comes to communicating with others. We cannot simply "fix" people. We may find that we just have to listen, stop coercing immediate change, and leave sewing needles behind, because forcing thread to stitch up what is perceived as the "unwoven," is not always the most beneficial decision to make.

I admit my instincts often drive me to be quick to offer support to others, whether I am attempting to help remove them from a hard situation, catch them when they fall, or offer solutions to their problems. But I have learned that this is not always the best action for an empathic relationship. I continually have to ask myself how is my support serving them? Is my support asking the person to stop feeling

what they are feeling? Am I catching someone because I want to be the hero? Am I catching that person because I do not want them to feel pain? Removing one from an emotional or physical experience might be asking them to ignore a potential to feel, thus encouraging numbness. Feeling is pain. Or should I say, I fear to feel? I would argue that our society in general tends to numb feelings and shy away from full-bodied experiences. But, sometimes people need to fall. Sometimes people need to find their own strength to recover and pick themselves back up. What if one falls with them?

During the performance of *Sync*, Allison demonstrates that her first impulses when seeing Laja struggling in her own skin are to extract her from her situation, pull her off the floor, and hold her tightly upright. As their relationship progresses in the piece Allison begins to shed her perceived "hero" image. Finally, about half way through, she gives up trying to drag Laja around and instead lies down on the floor, curls up in a ball, and goes where Laja goes, to be with her whole-heartedly. She becomes her parallel occurring and existing in the same time and space. Side by side she has something even more powerful to offer Laja: a mirror.

Mirroring

Laja's dancing image was reflected by Allison. As she barreled her body though the air her face was fixated on her replica. Gazing back, Allison's magnification told her many things that were truthful, including her perceived flaws and errors.

As a newborn, Harold, like all babies, was connecting with his mother. He gazed at her. He mimicked. His brain was wired by her love. Harold's mother, in return, read his moods. A conversation developed between them, based on touch, gaze, smell, rhythm, and imitation. When Harold was about eleven months old, his mother realized that she knew him better than she'd ever known anybody, even though they'd never exchanged a word (Brooks, 2011).

Mirroring and imitation are a means for learning about the world, a form of social interaction and a crucial facet for bridging the empathy gap. The act of mirroring movement provides a shared experience between two individuals, thus bringing them closer to a shared understanding. Imitation provides a map for the visitor that directs behaviors, cognition, and feelings. Many developmental and social scientists see imitation as a basic driving mechanism by which we learn, move, develop, and think.

Vivid ways of seeing mirroring relationships unfold are captured in interactions between mothers and babies. Scientists Decety and Blackmore (2001) record, "Very young babies can imitate facial gestures, which indicates an innate or early developing system for coupling the perception and production of human actions" (p. 566). Mom smiles and baby mimics her smile. Research on neonatal imitation has emphasized its role in nonverbal communication and indicates links between actions and mental states. We first come into knowing the world, others, and ourselves through movement and mimicking movement.

Strong correlations between the degree of imitative behavior and tendencies to empathize are also reinforced by neurological and therapeutic research. Iacoboni (2008) points to many well designed and convincing studies that strongly support that through imitation and mimicry, we are able to feel what other people feel and respond compassionately to their emotional states (p. 114). I especially understand this notion when considering a dancer's balancing efforts. By emulating a balancing act on one leg myself, I can feel my body struggle, shake and sweat. So when I witness a body negotiate this same balancing endeavor I feel clearer about the kind

of concentration and efforts it demands. According to researchers in the field of dance/ movement and psychology, mirroring is a tool used in therapy. Dr. Kestenberg notes, "one of the basic tools for nonverbal intervention utilized by dance/movement therapists is mirroring, a global term referring to the therapeutic movement relationship between therapist and client" (p. 37). Through a mirrored embodied practice one gains a fuller understanding of another's experience.

Some biological conditions such as the Moebius syndrome and Autism call attention to the ramifications from the inability to use imitative behavior. Moebius syndrome is a congenital inability to move the muscles of the face and has social consequences. According many neurologists, patients with this syndrome report not only the altered ability to communicate emotions, but also the inability to read others' emotions. It is inferred that children with Autism who have a difficult time imitating behavior (mirror neuron defects) also have difficulty connecting emotionally, socially, and empathically to others (Bernier & Dawson, 2010). Gallese, as referenced by Rochat and Passos –Ferreira (2009), argues that the mirroring process enables individuals to bridge their subjective experiences via embodied simulation. He notes, "Human intersubjectivity properly develops from reciprocal social exchanges"(p. 193). Imagine not being able to react, respond, or connect to others through these kinds of simulations. If one is so lucky to be afforded the capacity to 'feel with' why not welcome the chance to do so in a profound and heartfelt way?

For *Sync*, we used mirroring in a variety of ways. First, we used it as an obvious technique to learn from each other in rehearsals. But, we also found

mirroring to a powerful teacher in our own self understanding. Laja and Allison often became more responsible for the clarity of how they were moving when they had someone copying their exact motions. Although one may sense how a movement feels in their own body, a mirror can give the mover a glimpse of what it looks like on the outside. Each mirrored dancer was provided insightful manifested portrayals of their inner reality, which proved at times to be both illuminating and discouraging. When seeing one's movement reflection one may ask "Do I really look like that?" Recent studies by Decety and colleagues determined that "mirroring fundamentally affects the self by inducing an interdependent self construal and self construal adapts to the quality of social interaction in which we engage" (Ashton-James, et al. p. 532). To come into a relationship with both inner and outer reality and share that with another is a potent experience.

Sync included many mirror sections. Early on, the dance displayed Allison's sincere efforts to recognize and become Laja's reflection. They found solid moments of concurrent understanding when Allison was able to match each of Laja's movements. In one case, their foci remained deeply concentrated on each other as their arms sliced and arrived abruptly in specific points in the space. However, their proficiency and desire to copy one another started to unravel later in the dance. In one particular section, Laja and Allison alternated between mirroring each other and running in an out of their shared corridor of light, as if the mirroring was also infiltrating confusion in their relationship.

There may also be a danger in merely relying on the mirror image or imitating others. In dance we train by constantly copying the movement of our

leaders. This leads me to question who exactly we are training in the dance world. Are we training others to be our looking glass? As a movement educator, it is worthwhile to reflect on how we are choosing to share our embodied experiences and guide our students in an articulate and secure way, thus allowing them the trust they need to risk being in an empathic relationship. Likewise, it is valuable to risk as a student and fully live in others' movement signatures, which is asking one to experiment and seek new embodied possibilities. However, without movement guidance that also gives merit to the inner individual experience, we may turn out to be identical nondiverse dancers and hold confusion about our movement identity. One's own dance educational journey should include continually asking sophisticated questions of oneself such as: What is "me"? What is "not me?" And it is of utmost importance to consider the capacity to imitate and to still move safely as prescribed by one's own body.

Me and Not Me

Laja's arms fly like helicopter wings searching for her identity. She needs that moment to herself— to feel that she can launch and fly from her own core and grounded feet. She is reminded by Allison's touch that she is not alone in this search. Their chests collide and from that jolt they both realize that their hearts can still have separate homes while continuing on their empathetic journey together.

The attention, vulnerability and emotional density of engaging in an empathic relationship can be risky. Our capacity to resonate with another should always be taken into account or destructive behavior, injury, and harm can occur to the body. This was a lesson I quickly learned after becoming injured early during my studies in the dance program. After dealing with the pain of my back injury, all I could do was silently scream. I felt raw to the bone, broken down, and with no core

support. My capacity to move and feel what others feel had been pushed to the limit. Had I lost my movement identity? Empathic relationships do not have to be thought of as the loss of oneself, but rather require the maintenance of a distinction between the self and the other.

The concept of the Core-Distal pattern in Bartenieff Fundamentals highlights the importance of supporting oneself while also being able to come into empathic relationships with the others. This inner and outward pattern is important, because it sets up a theme of "twoness" in a relationship. One needs to develop support from the internal core of one's body and a sense of what is valued in their life and movement signatures. This does not mean that one's core has to be stiff and stagnant, but rather that it can me malleable and fluid while still maintaining an engaged and self- supportive awareness. Moving from this recognition allows individuals to nourish themselves, differentiate from and for others, sense their limitations, and also establish relationships with the external environment.

Writing about empathy, Hackney (1998) stresses reciprocal relationships. She states, "It is possible to be truly 'with' someone while also staying 'with' yourself. In other words, you do not have to give up yourself to be with someone else. This has important implications for all relationships, but is especially crucial in teacher/ student interactions"(p. 60). According to Henderson and Kirschenbaum (1989), Rogers notes that "true empathy is needed to sense the client's private world as if it were you own, but without ever losing the "as if" quality— this seems essential to therapy" (p. 226). Self-care maintenance is required in the empathic process.

A mature view of an empathic relationship requires separating one's self from others. Decety and Meyer (2008) state, "Affective sharing must be modulated and monitored by the sense of whose feelings belong to whom"(p.1063). I want to be moved by others and I want to move like others, but I do not need to escape myself. They state, "Self-awareness generally and agency in particular are crucial aspects in promoting a prosocial regard for the other, rather than a desire to escape aversive arousal" (p. 1063). I have often felt, as a dancer, I have been hiding behind the movement of others, escaping my own realities, and not sensing my own grounded core to move from. In retrospect, it is easy to see how my reaching and pulling to be what everybody else wanted resulted in injury, because I cared less about sensing my own safety and empathic capacities.

During rehearsals for *Sync* I noticed moments in Allison and Laja's relationship that needed to adhere to safety and capacity issues. First, it was my priority to make sure my dancers were safe. But, we experimented with many different kinds of weight bearing and sharing relationships to test the feelings of body capacity. During physically compromising positions it was paramount that the dancers were supporting themselves before offering support to one another. To be able to furnish solid foundations for each other they had to move their weight center or core close. If the lifter's weight center was away, then their full self was not available to assist or maintain a solid base. This is a technique that they had to practice. An illustration of this is seen during the dance when Laja launches her body over Allison's back and then twists down to the floor and through the front of her legs. In order for this to go well both dancers had to sense their own body

weight with confidence. Allison had to plant her weight firmly into the ground to be a solid base. In reverse, Laja had to be assertive and use her strength to propel her weight up and forward.

Because I felt that they were being safe, we began to test their thresholds with one another in physical challenges on stage. The more risks they took when falling and catching the more attuned they became. Nonetheless, they were each responsible for monitoring and making choices about their own limits. In one part of the dance, for example, by holding on to Allison's arm, Laja would strain to invert her body as far as she could go and be held upside down until the tension of their hands would break. They were building a relationship of trust, which allowed their empathic relationship to evolve more rapidly.

Tuning and checking in with one's own body is essential to being a productive counterpart in an empathic relationship. Listening to the common expression, "I know in my guts" is key for survival and forming healthy relationships. I need to know how much I can gather and take in versus how much I can scatter and give out. What are my limits of acceptance and when do I feel I need to reject? This salubrious view of empathy allows growth and individual freedom as a mover, which opens the opportunity to become more accustomed to the melodies of others' body languages.

In Sync

By the end of the dance, Allison and Laja were caught up in a whirlwind of movement. Their consonance traversed the space at a hurried pace until they collapsed breathless on the floor. The lasting image is the synchronicity of their rapid breath and hearts beating side by side; their chests pumping in perfect cadence each

other in silence. Soon they began to create their own calming rhythm together as the lights slowly faded.

Synchrony is the cornerstone of empathy essential for the development of relatedness and intrinsic to the creative process. Iacoboni (2008) often thinks of humans as chameleons referencing our innate ability to synchronize with others through our mirror neurons. Dancers are often asked, especially in this generation, to be chameleons adaptable and capable of transitioning between divergent styles instantaneously. He states, "We have an instinct to imitate one another-to synchronize our bodies, our actions and even the way we speak to one another" (pp. 109-110). But, we also have choice and agency.

Throughout the process of creating choreography for *Sync*, I noticed that the more my dancers worked together the more in sync they became. The concept of synchrony has been utilized for many years in the field of nonverbal research and has a specific meaning within that context. Martha Davis (1983), a forerunner in the field of nonverbal communication, defines synchrony as "simultaneous changes in direction or initiations of movements that occur exactly together" (p. 70). The process of representing empathy required that the dancers shared rhythmicity, coordinated movements, gestures and locomotion. The dance grew from synchronizing smaller postural shifts to weaving between varying movement phrases and complex level changes. Toward the end of the dance a longer phrase was developed to challenge them to physically keep up with one another's idiosyncratic movement. There was no leader, follower, or counts; instead they were encouraged to just sense each other in order to progress.

There was no question by the end of the creative process that we all felt closer to one another, but also shared a respect for each other's individuality. Synchrony implies a harmonious event that doesn't need to obliterate boundaries instead it should also intensify self awareness. In their research on authentic movement, authors Brown and Avstreih(2007), claim "Synchrony is a powerful and fundamental force in both the creative process and in the therapeutic relationship and perhaps the single strongest factor in the healing potential of treatment"(p. 103). Although I didn't view this project as remedial, the resolution proved a powerful point in the link between movement and therapy notions.

REFLECTION

As I reflect on the choreographic process and product of *Sync*, I feel rewarded. Having empathy as my research topic narrowed my choreographic choices, but created interesting parameters and concepts that furthered my discoveries.

An essential part of my research was looking at empathy as a creative process. The most revealing parts of the dance making process materialized in the moments when we just "played" or improvised with empathy concepts, such as mirroring. Play and improvisation allows dancers to move and figure things out with ease without the fears of judgment or being "wrong." The most challenging part was figuring out the structure of the dance. What parts go where and why? In the end, the dance found its own path. I learned the journey of choreography and empathic relationships is a spiral that oscillates and shifts that there is no concrete plan to follow.

The most rewarding outcome was watching the growth of the dancers in *Sync* and witnessing their beautifully lived performances. The more Laja and Allison rehearsed together the more flexible, creative and genuine their relationship became; their inner individual senses of identity became transparent to one another. Their chemistry as performers flourished and while I watched them I could feel their paralleled shifts of flow and palpable reactions towards one another. The

process seemed to harness an organic performance as if there was no audience, just the two of them on stage together.

The performance of the dance *Sync* also included obstacles for the dancers. I respected their ability to challenge one another in the moment and tackle real physical problems. Near the end of the dance Laja would toss her body further and Allison would delay catching her, creating precarious moments. However, in time the shaping of their relationship became more comfortable and familiar, which made it easier to anticipate actions, fake the "realness" of a catch/ lift, or forestall their mirroring. In order for the performance of the dance to keep fresh they had to be continually taking chances.

One lesson I learned is that empathy is hard. It is demanding on the body and mind. In the end section, I could feel the dancers fighting for their synchronicity. They were exhausted, out of breath, worn down and eventually they collapsed to the floor. One performance night I was intrigued by audience members laughing at this moment, from what I perceive to be, discomfort. Do we fear that sense of intimacy with the performers, so much so, that we cannot let them be human and real on stage? After all, they are people too—not illusions. Do we fear intimacy with each other? I am now interested in further researching the empathy phenomenon relating to the audience and performer relationships in future choreographic works and performances.

In the end, the product of the dance was less important to me. This project weighed more heavily on the understanding of my own choreographic process. I admit that feedback and the pressures from outside sources took a stronger hold of

my product than I would have liked. But I did hold true to what I needed to explore and this process was something I had to go through to understand my struggles inside of dance. *Sync* was not the most interesting or avant-garde piece of work, but the process was invaluable and will continue to educate me in the craft of choreography. I am still learning about who I am and digging to find the dance that lives inside of me.

CONCLUSION

Movement teaches us about our world, who we are, and how to understand others. Our values, our beliefs, and our understandings of our world are inherent in the motions that we practice in life every day. The metaphoric language of dance makes human experiences tangible, physical and real. As we walk into the studio, we have opportunities to discover and embody the practice of humanity and how to connect to others in a creative process.

By using choreography as a tool to examine empathy I was able to heighten, deepen, and lengthen my knowledge (literally, a 3-D rendering) of the subject of empathy. The pure physicality of trying to figure out what something means not only lets an idea surface with full elucidation, but it is understood deeply and internally. That kind of research and knowledge is profound.

The background information I gathered about empathy helped me establish a framework, but the embodied experiences and the journey of creating a dance amplified the ingredients of empathy in each section. Evolutionary perspectives and psychological research point towards empathy as a key element to our social nature. We are not primarily self- contained individuals, but rather social animals that emerge out of relationships and are deeply permeated by and with one another. Iacoboni (2008) expresses, “Our knowledge of the powerful neurobiological mechanisms underlying human sociality provides an invaluable resource for helping

us determine how to reduce violent behaviors, increase empathy, and open ourselves to other cultures without forgetting our own. We have evolved to connect deeply with other human beings. Our awareness of this fact can and should bring us even close to one another" (pp. 271-272). We have the opportunity to take this nascent capacity in hand and develop it into a social craft.

The experience of an embodied practice lends credence to the powerful connectedness we can find through sharing physical experiences. As said in the words of major phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "It is by means of my body that I comprehend the Other, as it is by means of my body that I perceive 'things' "(Zaner, p. 197). At the heart of our sense of humanity is the need to deeply connect to those around us, yet letting go of our biases can be a challenge. To deepen our empathic engagements by tuning into our bodies, listening with the heart, being vulnerable to change, mirroring and synchronizing with others without losing sight of one's core expands our potential to be fully present, sensing, and emotive human beings.

Empathy is truly obtained through the use of the body and movement. It is fundamentally a bodily practice. As technology continues to advance we need to remember that the sharing of inner reactions and feelings through our intelligent bodies reduces distance and distrust more powerfully than just seeing or observing the behavior of others from an outside perspective. To obtain empathy is challenging and a complex process, but consequently there is more of a shared experience and a bridge built to greater mutual understanding. I suggest this extended and integrated view of empathy not only softens our skins, but it broadens

capacities to reach more awareness of our potentials. I want to live fully and I want to live in a world where I can be secure but stirred, moved and affected profoundly by humanness and life itself.

My experience with dance making, the art of movement, improvisation and somatic practices have taught me much about myself. Although I am eager to jump into the movement and the foreign movements styles of others, I have learned the difficult lessons of what results from not taking care of myself and not supporting myself from the core. I have also learned that I cannot hide behind the movement of others and instead I have come into an empowered and self-empathic relationship where I can ground myself in the feeling that "I am enough." What I have to offer as a dancer, choreographer and as a human is enough. Yet, I do not have to let my history define me, but I can let it be a part of who I will become. This outlook allows me more freedom to try on different shoes—maybe even those red high heels that gave me such disquiet before. Empathy will continue to guide me in my own dancing, my teaching relationships, aesthetic views and artistic research.

Dance as an art form is powerfully transformative. As dancers our ability to be receptive, to share our uniqueness, and communicate with a conscious awareness of empathy is key to furthering this field. Besides, the inevitability of change that is ubiquitous in our world calls for a vision of embodied empathy. This subject goes beyond my individual life, beyond the studio, and beyond the world of dance. This is a real and exigent concern of our humanity. It is within these empathic spaces that the real work of compassionate living begins. Our shared possibilities are endless—powerful and precious beyond words.

REFERENCES

Avstreih, Z., & Brown, J. J. (2007). On synchrony. In P. Pallaro, (Ed.), *Authentic movement: Moving the body, moving the self, being moved* (pp. 97-103). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bernier, R., & Dawson, G. (2009). The role of mirror neuron dysfunction in autism. In J. A. Pineda (Ed.), *Mirror neuron system: The role of mirroring processes in social cognition* (pp. 261-286). New York, NY: Humana Press.

Berntson, G.G., Cacioppo, J. T., & Decety, J. (2010). Social neuroscience and its relationship to social psychology. *Social Cognition*, *28*, 675-685.

Blackmore, S., & Decety, J., (2001). From perception of action to the understanding of intention. *Neuroscience, 2,* 561-567.

Brener, M. E. (2008). *Evolution and empathy: The genetic factor in the rise of humanism*. London: McFarland & Co, Inc.

Brooks, D. (2011, January 17). Social animal: How the new sciences of human nature can help make sense of a life. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/01/17/110117fa_fact_brooks?currentPage=1

Buck, R., & Ginsburg, B. (1997). Communicative genes and the evolution of empathy. In W. Ickes (Ed.), *Empathic accuracy* (pp. 17-43). New York, NY: Gillford Press.

Cacioppo, T., & Semin, G. R. (2009). From embodied representation to co-regulation. In J. A. Pineda (Ed.), Mirror neuron system: The role of mirroring a social developmental neuroscience account. *Developmental and Psychopathology, 20,* 1053-1080.

Davis, M. (1983). An introduction to the Davis nonverbal communication analysis system. *American Journal of Dance Therapy, 6,* 49-73.

Decety, J., & Ickes, W. (Eds.). (2009). *The social neuroscience of empathy.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Decety, J., & Meyer, M. (2008). From emotion resonance to empathic understanding: A social development neuroscience account. *Development & Psychopathology, 20*, 1053-1080.

Feist, G., & Feist, J. (Eds.). (2006) Rogers: Person-Centered Theory. In *Theories of Personality*, 6th edition (pp. 307-337). Boston: McGraw Hill.

Fink, G. R., Markowitsch, H. J., Piefke, M., & Schulte-Ruther, M. (2007). Mirror neuron and theory of mind mechanisms involved in face-to-face interactions: A functional magnetic resonance imaging approach to empathy. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, 19* (8), 1354-1372.

Hackney, P. (1998). *Making connections: Total body integration through Bartenieff fundamentals.* New York: Routledge.

Ickes, W. (1997). *Empathic accuracy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Kestenberg, J. (1982). The flow of empathy and trust between mother and child. In J. Call, & E. Galenson. (Eds.), *Frontiers of infant psychiatry* (137-163). New York: Basic Books.

Moore, C., & Yamamoto, K. (1988). *Beyond words: Movement observation and analysis.* New York, NY: Gordon and Breach.

Ortega y Gassett, J. (1952). *Man and People*. (W.R. Trask, Trans.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Passos-Ferreira, C., & Rochat, P., (2009). From imitation to reciprocation and mutual recognition. In J. A. Pineda (Ed.). *Mirror neuron system: The role of mirroring processes in social cognition* (pp. 191- 212). New York, NY: Humana Press.

Pearmain, R. (2001). *The heart of listening: Attentional qualities in psychotherapy.* New York, NY: Continuum.

Rogers, C. (1989). The therapeutic relationship. In V. L. Henderson & H. Kirschenbaum (Eds.), *The Carl Rogers reader* (pp. 63-193). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Stein, E. (1964). *On the problem of empathy.* (W. Stein, Trans.). Washington D.C: ICS Publications. (Original worked published 1916)

Titchener, E. B. (1909). *Lectures on the experimental psychology of the thought process.* New York, NY: The MacMillan Company.

Vischer, R. (1994). On the optical sense of form: A contribution to aesthetics. In F. Mallgrave & E. Ikonomou (Eds., Trans.). *Empathy, form and space: Problems in German aesthetics* (pp. 89-123). Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities. (Original work published 1873-1893).

Zaner, R. (1964). *The problem of embodiment: Some contributions to a phenomenology of the body.* The Hague: Nijhoff.