

RUNNING FROM CONSCIENCE:  
THE COMPLIANT INDIVIDUAL

by

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## ABSTRACT

My research deals with the complexity and ambiguity of the choices we make, and the physiological factors that often influence our decisions. Why do we follow, why do we conform, and why do we comply are questions that I researched, and these complex questions served as an impetus for my creative work. Through the creative process I explored power, weakness, guilt, living with guilt and coming to terms with accountability and responsibility. Ultimately I realized that the human race often longs for the security of being in a group, or the simplicity of following an order. This dependency makes for a grey area in trying to discern *right* and *wrong*, *good* and *bad*, as from this conflicted *grey place* many choices are made, some which are extremely difficult to confront and ultimately accept.

This thesis is dedicated to my son, Zachary Eric Womack, who made his debut amid long rehearsals, countless variations of one Led Zeppelin track, and then very interrupted writing sessions. Zachary, more than any book or theory, you have given me hope in the impact that one individual can have.

*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*

*If I am for myself only, what am I?*

*If not now-when?*

Talmudic Saying

Mishnah, Abot

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## INTRODUCTION

I was initially drawn to this research through a fascination of World War II, and questioning how the Holocaust, with all of its atrocities, could occur. Although Judaism is not my faith, it is my heritage, and the backdrop of my adolescence was Old Testament stories and World War II movies. My father instilled a love and respect for my roots and ancestors. I came to this research with an almost child-like questioning: *Why did so many good and innocent people have to die in the Holocaust?* Wanting to cling to my belief that people, for the most part, are good, it was very hard for me to understand how multiple nations, made-up of hundreds of thousands of people, assisted in exterminating six million people.

In the after-math of World War II many asked variations of this same question, as the entire world was left to grapple with the horrors that had just occurred. For this reason, there was no shortage of research material, theories, and social experiments to draw on. My research distilled down to looking at how groups, authority figures, and one's desperate desire to belong, can influence individuals to act contrary to their conscience and better judgment. We humans are a curious race. We speak of wanting freedom, autonomy, and individuality, but yet are often lulled into the security and safety of the masses, or are content to be told exactly what to do.

It was through the choreographic process that I came to a deeper understanding of my research. I used relevant theories, experiments, and my own personal experiences with the research to inspire my art making, and by doing so was able to form my own

opinions and theories. In essence, my choreography was my own social experiment. When I saw certain sections of my piece as powerful and provocative, it was because through physicality they were communicating thoughts, emotions, and theory that I not only studied, but also came to believe. When certain sections did not feel right, it was evident that I needed to investigate deeper and travel beyond the surface of my research, or the cliché. The choreographic process allowed me to actually experience theory on a visceral level. Not only do I understand this research intellectually, but also I know what it feels like in my muscles and bones. It has become a part of me.

## CHAPTER 1

### COMPLIANCE

It is the dreaded phrase for dancers all over the world: “*Now let’s do it on the left.*” After repeatedly dancing a combination on one side, it is challenging to reverse every movement to the other side. Sequences that felt smooth and intuitive become awkward and unnatural. We heard these words one day during technique class, and we all did an internal collective groan.

We were given time to practice the combination, and then we split up into groups to perform it. Thankfully, I had done this combination in a previous class and felt relieved that I already knew it on both sides. The first group went, and I watched closely. Not surprisingly, one dancer, who happened to be front and center, failed to reverse one part of the combination. Her name was Mara and she was dancing beautifully. Except for that one move, she had performed the rest of the combination correctly. From what I could see, all the other dancers in the group performed the sequence perfectly, without making Mara's mistake.

The same group went a second time and this is where things got interesting. Although most of the dancers had performed the sequence correctly the first time through, this time, those dancers closest to Mara copied her mistake. By the time this group had gone four times, the entire group had been converted to the incorrect way. Why was Mara able to exert great influence over her group?

This occurrence in a Salt Lake City dance studio may not have global implications, but the personal effect was powerful. That day I witnessed my research firsthand. Why did so many dancers model themselves after this one particular dancer? Was it because of her location (front and center)? Perhaps it was because she is a skillful dancer and performed the movement, correctly or incorrectly, with authority and grace? Maybe these dancers personally knew her, and based on previous knowledge, trusted that she had correctly switched the combination? It could have been that this particular group of dancers, minus the center one, felt secure and comforted following, versus seeking out individual knowledge? Or the answer could simply be that to follow someone else was the path of least resistance. These issues: following, leading, wanting to be part of a group, and acting contrary to conscience in order to be part of a group, are social behaviors that have survived through the ages, and continue on in today's world. After witnessing these behaviors in a dance studio, it brought to life the readings that I have been doing. Although the dance studio incident had benign consequences, the possibility of outcomes for group behavior and complacency can be horrendous.

Consider a seemingly unrelated event: A train scheduled for January 1943 details a transport carrying Jewish men, women and children from Berlin to Auschwitz. The transport must be scheduled; it must pass by many train stations. The schedule is not a secret, and these trips happen at various times during the day and night, passing through many towns and cities. It is obvious from this schedule that the train will turn around once it has reached Auschwitz, and return, now empty. This trip will happen for millions of Jewish people living in various parts of Europe. The fact that these trips were openly

documented raises questions about what people knew, and about what they did with that knowledge. (Smith, 2002, p.2)

What role did the conscience play in the actions, or in this specific example, the inactions of these people? Why did so many “good” and “ordinary” people participate in such a catastrophic event in history? If at least some of these people intellectually knew and emotionally felt that what they were doing was wrong and destructive, what made them continue? Why do some choose to follow orders and group behavior, while others, risking everything, refuse?

## CHAPTER 2

### DOES EVIL EXSIST?

Hannah Arendt, who coined the phrase “the banality of evil,” suggests that evil acts are generally not executed by fanatics or sociopaths, but rather by ordinary people who accept the premise of their state and therefore participate with the view that their actions are normal. When Arendt went to report on the trial of Oto Adolf Eichmann, who was accused of crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, she observed that Eichmann seemed to be a common, mediocre man, and while his deeds were monstrous, he was quite ordinary, and neither monstrous or demonic. She observed that he obeyed unthinkingly. He was simply following orders, efficiently carrying them out without any consideration of their effects (Arendt, 1978). Her work complicates, and perhaps even prevents us from dismissing certain people and their actions as “evil.” Her work also suggests a separation between a person and their acts. Can a “good” person do monstrous things? If so, what makes them still a good person? Are we not defined by our actions? If not, what are we defined by?

Before this research I clung to the belief that good people predominately do good things, and bad people predominately do bad things. It was clear. It was simple. I could comfortably put myself on the *good* side because after reviewing my life, I concluded that I did good things the majority of the time. I still want to cling to this belief, but

whereas before the line was clear, I now see a grey area. I have a clearer picture of the complex psychological factors that can influence one singular choice. I also realize how frightening, yet also empowering, it can be to take responsibility and ownership of our actions. This could be because of an intimidating authority figure, or because to admit responsibility would mean dealing with an overwhelming amount of guilt and regret. What happens when *good* takes courage, and is a path of risk and complete uncertainty? How do you judge your actions when an authority figure is influencing your actions? Is it still your choice? Is the responsibility yours? Do you own the bad/good label, or does the accountability reside with the person in charge? And perhaps most frightening or disturbing of all; do we sometimes do monstrous things in the name of doing good?

Arendt's theory paints a human race that is passive, complacent, and unable, or simply unwilling, to make personal decisions and take personal responsibility. Possibly because of this bleak outlook on humanity, David Cesarani challenges the idea that simple ordinary people are often the perpetrators of inhumane crimes. He meticulously studied Eichmann's life, and came to the conclusion that Arendt's analysis of him was naïve, ill informed, predetermined and mythological. He asserts that this is partly because she only attended the start of the trial, and during this time Eichmann worked hard to undermine the charge that he was a dangerous fanatic by presenting himself as an inoffensive man who was following orders. Had Arendt stayed throughout the remainder of the trial she would have discovered that Eichmann was a man who strongly identified with anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology, and did not simply follow orders, but pioneered creative new policies of torture, murder, and control. According to Cesarani, Arendt would have discovered Eichmann was well aware of what he was doing and was proud of

his murderous ‘achievements.’ He also believes that Arendt wanted Eichmann to fit into her own theory of totalitarianism, which was the subject of her first book (Cesarani, 2004).

In the article “Questioning the Banality of Evil,” S. Alexander Haslam and Stephen D. Reicher re-examine the established view that tyranny triumphs either because ordinary people blindly follow orders or else because they mindlessly conform to powerful roles. They contend that by studying the Nazi regime we can see that the Nazis engaged creatively and actively with their tasks. Haslam and Reicher state:

...very few Nazis could be seen as ‘simply following orders’- not least because the orders issued by the Nazi hierarchy were typically vague. As a result, individuals needed to display *imagination* and *initiative* in order to interpret the commands they were given to act upon them. Nazis didn’t obey Hitler; they worked *towards* him, seeking to surpass each other in their efforts. (Haslam & Reicher, 2008, p.17)

Contrary to the picture that Arendt paints, these men contend that the majority of the Nazis cognitively pledged their allegiance to a cause they strongly believed in, and did not mindlessly follow orders, but rather were very aware of what they were doing, and the consequences of their actions. Wolfgang Sofsky adds that this is what made the Nazi system so dynamic. Even in the most brutal of circumstances, people did not have to kill and only some chose to do so. Far from simply finding themselves in inhumane situations or inhumane groups, they actively committed themselves to such groups.

Sofsky states:

Individuals demonstrated commitment by acting, on their own initiative, with greater brutality than their orders called for. Thus excess did not spring from mechanical obedience. On the contrary; its matrix was a group structure where it was expected that members exceed the limits of normal violence. (Sofsky, 1993, p.228)

I also have difficulty with Arendt's assessment, and the belief that specifically Eichmann, and humans in general, act with a mechanical obedience. Although it is true that we sometimes act as unthinking robots, performing tasks with little thought of consequence and effect, ultimately humans are much more complex and multi-faceted than this portrayal. We have the capacity to feel guilt, to feel shame, to feel responsibility, in short, to feel *consequence*.

## CHAPTER 3

### BREAKING GLASS: A STUDY OF THE PASSIVE INDIVIDUAL

In my duet *Breaking Glass*, I initially set out to portray two polar opposite characters. Sarah Reynolds was to be domineering, manipulative, and malicious, while Shih Ya Peng was to be passive, unthinking, and weak. In essence, Sarah was portraying a “Hitler-esque” character, and Shih Ya was portraying the “Eichmann” that he tried to convince the jury he was. As I progressed in the creative process, I began to have problems with these very one-dimensional characters. I felt blocked, almost like the piece would not allow me to continue with my initial intention. Through the choreographic process of this duet, I gained a deep conviction of the complexity of each and every individual. Although Shih Ya did remain the more passive one, and at times was manipulated by Sarah, she developed a quiet, yet strong resistance as the piece progressed. Yes, she was greatly influenced by the authority figure, but ultimately she developed the resolve to impact her surroundings and situation.

While Shih Ya gained a resolve and conviction, Sarah began to expose her vulnerabilities. It is as if Shih Ya becoming a stronger character resulted in Sarah becoming weaker. This equation occurred because Sarah’s power was not self-sufficient or autonomous, but instead was based off of Shih Ya’s lack of power. Without her compliance and submission, Sarah is left vulnerable, lacking and insecure. These more

dimensional renderings of these characters seemed more authentic and real to me as a choreographer. Realizing the depth of these two characters helped me acknowledge the complexity of some of the seemingly all-powerful men and regimes that I was studying. I discovered that I tend to look at people, especially those that hold great power, as unstoppable and in a sense, immortal. I fall prey to the thought, *what can I do to change anything? They are in control and I am not.* This mentality does not acknowledge that every human has vulnerabilities, weakness, and is susceptible to loss and change. Sarah is only powerful because Shih Ya allows her that power, just like leaders can only lead because others follow. The control that Sarah exercises seems impenetrable, but is a façade. Sarah eventually is broken. She moved with confidence, control and great precision. However, by the end of the piece she has wilted, breaking at the joints as if burdened by a heavy weight, and exited the space by crawling on her hands and knees.

I drew on several images throughout this piece: The Iraqi people tearing down the statue of Saddam Hussein, Hitler and his wife committing suicide once defeat was imminent, and an ill and elderly Fidel Castro relinquishing his long-standing position as Cuban dictator. At one time, all of these leaders ruled and governed with great power and by instilling fear amongst their people. They seemed unbreakable and unstoppable. For some in their regions they offered a life of wealth and prosperity, and to some they inflicted torment, horror, and death. Regardless of their great power, wealth, and influence, none of them were immune to death, disease, shame, and ultimately, accountability.

## CHAPTER 4

### OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY: AN INTERNAL BATTLE

*It is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he acts.*

*Stanley Milgram*

Is personal accountability is often discarded and forgotten when following a powerful and reputable-seeming authority figure? It seems that many are more comfortable when they are bolstered by masses, being lead by an authoritative leader. In these circumstances the security is so great that many are able to dismiss personal responsibility and accountability. The desire to adhere to a previously implemented structure and to obey authority figures is so strong that it can convince otherwise passive and non-violent individuals to engage in violent behavior. Stanley Milgram, an American psychologist writes:

The essence of obedience consists in the fact that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions. Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred in the person, all the essential features of obedience follow. The adjustment of thought, the freedom to engage in cruel behavior, and the types of justification experienced by the person are essentially similar *whether* they occur in a psychological laboratory or the control room of an ICBM site. (Milgram, 1969, p. xii)

Milgram was moved by Arendt's work, and conducted well-known experiments that influenced scholars to deemphasize the role of anti-Semitic ideology in the "Final

Solution” by emphasizing the ways in which ordinary people, through wanting to maintain obedience to a higher authority, might have been able to help perpetrate crimes like the Holocaust (Milgram, 1969). Between 1960 and 1963, Milgram conducted a series of experiments to try and show that an event such as the Holocaust could not have happened in North America because Americans never would have accepted such an inhumane mission as exterminating an entire group of people. These experiments took well-adjusted men and had them participate in a bogus memory experiment. The results of the experiment showed that the majority proved willing to deliver electric shocks of murderous magnitude to another person who posed as a ‘learner’ when incorrect answers were given and an authority figure demanded a shock to be given. Contrary to what Milgram was trying to prove, the results of his experiments demonstrated that regardless of nationality, social status or any other factors, human beings are an obedient species. In his book *Obedience to Authority; an Experimental View*, he states:

Despite the fact that many subjects experience stress, despite the fact that many protest to the experimenter, a substantial proportion continue to the last shock on the generator. Many subjects will obey the experimenter no matter how vehement the pleading of the person being shocked, no matter how painful the shocks seem to be, and no matter how much the victim pleaded to be let out. A commonly offered explanation is those who shocked the victim at the most severe level were monsters, the sadistic fringe of society. But if one considers that almost two-thirds of the participants fall into the category of “obedient” subjects, and that they represented ordinary people drawn from working, managerial, and professional classes, the argument becomes very shaky. (Milgram 1969, p.5)

Milgram’s experiments suggest that a large majority of humankind is obedient to authority regardless of circumstance. While this is provocative, as well as concerning, what interested me the most from these studies, and what propelled me to create work surrounding this study, is the fact that most of the subjects, whether or not they continued

to the last shock or withdrew from the experiment, experienced great stress and conflict. “In a large number of cases the degree of tension reached extremes that are rarely seen in sociopsychological laboratory studies. Subjects were observed to sweat, tremble, stutter, bite their lips, groan, and dig their fingernails into their flesh” (Milgram, 1963, p.375). Unfortunately, there were some in the experiment, and in the world today, who do not feel guilt, responsibility, or any compassion for their fellow humans, but this is not within the scope of my research. Milgram’s experiment shows that the majority of people do feel great conflict when another human is suffering. While most could not escape their conscience, the actual actions motivated by that conscience varied significantly from subject to subject. I was moved by the inner conflict that we all experience before making a decision; the push and pull between what we feel we should do and then what we actually do, and living, or trying to deny the consequences of our choices. This emotional tug-of-war served as the backbone for the men’s duet in *Running From Conscience*.

I was excited about this section from the beginning. I had never choreographed a duet on two men, and was looking forward to a new experience and challenge, as well as working with two talented male dancers. I knew that I wanted a very physical, even combative duet, and my challenge was to find pure physicality and struggle between the two men, without representing a stereotypical testosterone-fueled man-fight. I also wanted to show tenderness and sympathetic understanding without falling into artificial sentimentality. Could I be successful in showing two physically connected men without the frequent assumption that because they are dancing together, the choreography was portraying a romantic/sexual relationship? At one point the duet perhaps read more like a

bar-fight, and it took much trial and error to convey the desired internal battle of coming to terms with guilt and responsibility. To help with this I decided to have moments where the movement softened and surrendered, and the men found cohesion in physical intent and purpose. The contrast between the yield and fight gave the duet more depth and revealed more of the complicated nature of conflict that exists when we are faced with difficult moral decisions. I wanted there to be moments where ideals and beliefs are clung to, shown by sharp, angular, aggressive movements, and then moments where the two men allow themselves to be influenced and molded into someone surprising, and contrary, to their perceived notion of themselves. These moments are shown by partner work that is communal and more democratic in shared weight and intent, and shapes that organically mold and morph.

There were several times during the choreographic process that I viewed the two men as one, and the conflict that was being experienced was a mental and emotional struggle. It was my intention to capture the internal conscience of a person partaking in the Milgram experiment, or experiencing some other moral dilemma: *Should I continue? I do not necessarily want to harm this person, but I want to fulfill my duty to the experiment. I am not to blame for his pain; I am being told what to do. But then again, I am the one pressing the button....I could stop....But I agreed to do this....It is my job, my responsibility....* In the male duet, I wanted the choices-- to obey, or not to obey, to conform, or not to conform, to continually be at odds with one another. When they were not at odds, and when they experienced harmony, the movement was flowing and easeful, and the men were pulled in one direction without much effort or struggle. This state of flow never lasts for long, as their conscience does not allow for ease, and

almost as immediately as it is experienced the two dancers are propelled into motion full of tension and unrest.

## CHAPTER 5

### GUILT AND SELF-MYTH

*Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience. But nothing is a greater cause if suffering.*

*Fyoder Dostoyevsky*

In the men's duet of *Running From Conscience* I was interested in exploring how we come to terms with our guilt and the complex issue of taking personal responsibility. Is admitting wrongdoing liberating? Is the wrongdoing so great that sometimes we keep ourselves from accepting responsibility at all costs? Coming to terms with accountability is at the heart of Wendell Steavenson's book, *The Weight Of A Mustard Seed*. She writes:

Speer was held up for many years as the Nazi who admitted collective responsibility for Nazi atrocities, who put his hands up and refused to excuse his own participation. But he categorically and continually, throughout his trial, his twenty year imprisonment and until his death in 1981, denied that he knew about the extermination of the Jews or the extent of the slavery of the legions of forced labor that his ministry relied on for war production. ...Gitta Sereny tried to probe the shadows behind his erudite dissembling. She wrote, "The truth, or course, is that lies are not necessarily simple," and came to the conclusion that despite his protestations, Speer must have, in fact, known about the Final Solution. But it was something that Speer's daughter remarked that caught my attention: "How can he admit more," she asked Sereny, "and go on living?" After all, I thought, what person does not sustain themselves with self-myth? How would it be possible to look in the mirror without it? (Steavenson, 2009, p.74)

By the end of the duet the two dancers are heavy. I imagined that they could no longer outrun the weight of responsibility, and came to a point where they were ready to come to terms with their actions. The movement that I chose to convey this state shows two physically strong men leaning over undulating their shoulders and upper backs in organic circular patterns, juxtaposed with sudden jerky movements. When I watched this part of the duet I was often overcome with a feeling of thick sadness and loss. It felt deeply honest. The dancers seemed exposed and vulnerable. I imagined both had come to an emotional and kinesthetic place where the impact of their actions was made evident and they were willing to confront the consequences. There was another moment that struck me as profound: I saw them coming to terms with their accountability, these two men, perhaps in representation of one man and one mind, are able to look at one another square in the eye. This was the resolution, or the conclusion, of all the tension, struggle, and unrest. Running from truth and accountability was no longer desired. Once ownership has been claimed, they are able to face one another, and thereby themselves.

In most of the pieces I create, including all the choreographies addressed in this thesis, I experienced detailed narratives that go beyond pure physicality, and are similar to storytelling. My process begins well before any rehearsal starts with me thinking about the piece, visualizing moments and movement motifs, and distilling the ‘take-away’ message that I would like to communicate. By the time I walk in the studio I let the hours of thoughts, hopes, and ideas for my work wash over me, and hope that all my preparation, research, and problem solving will somehow make its way into the work. While I am choreographing on my dancers I am, for the most part, acting on an instinctual and kinesthetic level, but I believe that this instinctual and kinesthetic

sensibility is born from the research that I previously did. Ultimately, I go back to a very detailed place, and after seeing my work time and time again, my mind begins to make connections and formulate very human stories. Because these are all abstract works, with no program notes telling the viewer what conclusions to draw, I do not expect my audience to walk away with anything resembling the narratives that I experience. I do hope, however, that because I put great thought and detail into my work, the audience will at least experience *something*. I believe if I put enough work and craft into my pieces the viewer will be left with a residue, or a pulse of my intent. Ideally that beat, coupled with their own imagination, sub-consciousness, and life experiences will come together to create a powerful and meaningful experience.

The narrative that I envisioned the duet traveling through is very similar to the theory developed by Ernest Becker. He believes that humans are in a constant state of trying to deny death, and human civilization is actually based on a defensive system that continually fights against the knowledge of our own mortality. This denial is necessary for us to function in the world because believing that a part of us will live forever gives us purpose and motivation to act. Without this belief Becker believes that humans feel helpless, aimless, and depressed. He theorizes that we have a physical self, whom we know will one day perish, and a symbolic self, whom we convince ourselves will live forever. Those who are depressed are those that are constantly reminded of the physical self, in other words they are all too aware, and constantly reminded of mortality, and their seemingly insignificant existence. Conversely, it gives us satisfaction to establish our symbolic self, which can transcend death. Becker called the pursuit of establishing our symbolic self the “immortality project”, and this “project” serves as the backbone of our

ego. The allure of living forever propels us to act, and try to succeed in life. However, the denial of one day ceasing to exist also prevents genuine self-knowledge, and is the cause of much evil and injustice. When “immortality projects” clash (i.e., people, nations, religions disagree), war, genocide, bigotry, racism, and nationalism occur. When morality, which could also be viewed as the ego, is at stake, humans will often try and salvage it regardless of consequences. Becker believed that coming to terms with our mortality would create a better world. (Becker, 1973) It seems acknowledging mortality is similar to acknowledging guilt: in both cases we realize our fragility and imperfections as human beings, and life can be lived with more honesty. The power also resides in the realization that every person to ever live is burdened, or blessed, with the same mortal and guilty predicament.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE INNER RING

Over the course of these three years I have often questioned why I am drawn to this particular research material. Through studying the actions and decisions of others, I question what I would have done if faced with a similar situation. I yearn for an assurance that I would act with courage, but I cannot safely say that I would. My hope is that by doing this research I will become more courageous, and less susceptible to blindly follow a harmful group or movement. Looking at my past actions I see that acting with courage takes a lot of *courage*. There have been instances when I refrained from sharing my religious beliefs because I feared social discomfort, or being singled out as *different* or *odd*. There have been situations when partial truths were spoken and out of apathy, or again social discomfort, I did not provide clarification. I, like many others who feel comfortable and secure in groups that provide companionship, fear being alone. Although this fear could sometimes be brushed aside and explained instead by *not wanting to be in an awkward situation*, at the root we humans are frightened by the idea of being left out. In his lecture *The Inner Ring*, C.S. Lewis writes, “I believe that in all men’s lives at certain periods, and in many men’s lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside....Of all the passions the passion for the Inner

Ring is the most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things” (Lewis 1944, geocities.com accessed 11/20/08).

It does seem that we are born with this passion to be part of a group, or a ring. As I type this paragraph with my right hand, I hold my eight-week-old son in my left arm. If I put him down, if he is left by himself, he will immediately become upset and scream until I pick him up again. I believe he is comforted by my skin, my voice, my smell, and by knowing that another human is near. Of course as he grows and develops he will learn to become more independent, but the need to be near another and feel connected with other people will never fully disappear. Beginning with the moment we are conceived, our beings are connected and completely dependent on another. We all begin this life hopelessly needy; and initially do not even understand the separation of ‘self’ and ‘other.’

cite It would be unnatural, even impossible to see an infant or young child that is not in constant need of the companionship of a caregiver. This constant need that is established from conception carries through our entire lives, and for better or worse, informs our choices.

## CHAPTER 7

### STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

*No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.*

*John Donne*

The constant need for companionship, and affirmation through companionship, was explored in my choreographic work, *One*. In this piece I created a world where four individuals felt continually compelled to be the same. They plucked along on the same beat for some time, doing the same rhythmically tedious movements. When they paired up in duets they were extremely aware and connected with the other partnership, and made sure to never deviate with what the other group was doing. It was unison; and I tried to coach their movement quality so it was almost like they were dancing in a tunnel, unaware of the environment around them. However, there is nothing either sinister or overtly harmless in their constant unison, as I imagined them almost as children being guided/controlled by an adult figure. They are four individuals, yet through social control of their behavior act as *one* person, action, and intention. Eventually, one dancer is no longer content with the group, and begins to step out of the tightly organized formations and movement patterns. I saw her character yearning to be an individual, and

was inspired by great individuals who singularly made a difference, such as Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Instead of the others being inspired by her quest for individuality, they tried to force her to conform to the monotone hum of the group by pulling and pushing her back into unison. The movement of the piece then centered on trying to keep the rogue dancer in line. She reached up, reached outward, and tried to break free from the strong pull of the other three dancers; however, at times the soloist did seem to resign herself to the persuasive pull of the group. It simply takes a lot of effort and energy to constantly be at odds with the majority. Similarly, choreographically, it also takes a lot of effort and energy for the eye to withstand several dancers doing different movements for an extended amount of time. This is why many group pieces have unison; it is easy and enjoyable to watch, just as it is easy to and pleasing to be a part of.

The group was never content to allow the individual to break free, and again and again it pulled the soloist into its tight circle. I initially did not even question the groups' almost obsessive preoccupation to once again include the soloist. My focus was entirely on the one dancer and her quest for individuality. But why does the group care so much about one member? Why are they not content to let this dancer go on her way, and they continue as before? I remember asking myself this same question at every party I went to in high school. I had no interest in underage drinking, but took no issue with my peers' choosing to drink. I could never understand why they wasted energy trying to get me to drink---couldn't they focus on their own drink, and allow me, as well as themselves, to have a good time? Sigmund Freud believed that we seek groups, and want to maintain them, because in groups we can recapture the sense of security that we experienced with

a nurturing parent, or the bond that we felt with brothers or sisters. Freud's concept of the unconscious also explains why people cannot always explain their reasons for taking part in group's activities. Wanting to belong to a family is imbedded into our subconscious to the degree that we may not be able to articulate our group-seeking tendencies, which was personally shown to me when I failed to question the group's' preoccupation with maintaining their original membership (Forsyth, 1999, p.59).

Another reason that a group would want to maintain full membership would be to receive validation for choices and actions. If everyone participates, there is zero to limited guilt. Once an individual deviates from the group, the conscience is challenged, and the situation becomes uncomfortable.

At the end the solo dancer gained her independence. I saw her hard-fought independence as rewarding, yet melancholy. She faced the world alone, without companionship, and the calming security of being in a group, or a family. The group continued to plod along, always in unison and never alone.

The fear of facing the world alone is at the heart of an experiment done by Solomon Asch. The men he studied thought they were taking a visual acuity test, but only one group member per experiment was an actual subject. On each trial, the experimenter displayed two cards, one with one line, and the other with three lines. They were then asked to pick the line that matched the standard line in length. Few people made mistakes when making judgments alone, but when the majority of the group began to give incorrect answers, 76.4% of the 123 subjects conformed to the group and also gave an incorrect answer (Forsyth, 1999, p. 176). This experiment shows that fellow

group members can influence people to deny the evidence of their own eyes so that they mismatch lines of obviously different lengths. Asch states:

No subject disregards the group's judgments. Although the task calls for independent judgments, virtually no one looks upon the estimates of the group with indifference as irrelevant. Each immediately grasps the estimates of the others in their relation to his own estimates. (Asch, 1952, p. 461)

As I discovered through choreographing *One*, it is nearly impossible to be immune to the persuasion of a group. Individuality can be obtained, but for some the consequence of differentiation from a group is unbearable. Asch explains: "As soon as he becomes concerned to know why he is wrong, and as soon as he begins to respond to the urgencies of the situation, he becomes less free to look at it with a detached eye and to arrive at a solution that to an outsider seems relatively simple" (Asch, 1952, p.463). Size of a group does make a difference. As the number of individuals in a unanimous majority increases, so does social influence. When Asch replicated his procedures with groups ranging in size from 2 to 17 members, few people conformed when one other person disagreed with their judgments, however, when subjects faced two opponents, conformity increased to 13.6%. Three against one increased conformity to 31.8%, and conformity peaked at 37.1% in the seven to one person groups (Forsyth, 1999, p.178). Decision-making is never formed outside of external and internal pressures. Peer pressure, especially within a group, has the power to greatly alter our thinking, and lead us in directions that we previously would have thought impossible, or at least improbable.

The process of choreographing *One* taught me as much about group behavior as the actual final choreographic product. I had four dancers, all very talented, but a combination of circumstances that occurred during the rehearsal process caused the group

dynamic to feel flat. One of the dancers sustained a neck injury a couple of weeks into the process. Before this, rehearsals were going very well; I was excited about the energy and enthusiasm that they all showed for learning new choreography, and for contributing their own artistry to the process. Understandably, once the dancer became injured she was not able to perform most of the movement and because she was in pain, did not contribute dynamic energy to the group. Gradually I felt the enthusiasm for the piece begin to slide downhill. I felt that at times the other dancers were approaching the movement as if they too were injured and unable to do the movement full out. The injured dancer's energy was infectious, and as the choreographer, I felt powerless to change the direction that the piece was headed. I felt that the group's apathy was stronger than my individual enthusiasm. Eventually I resigned from trying to change the situation, and was grateful for the time and energy that these four dancers did give to the piece.

Looking back, I now regret that I did not take more initiative in this situation. While I couldn't have changed the injury, I could have possibly altered the energy of the group. At the time I felt powerless; as if the piece was following a trajectory that was unstoppable. I served as a confirmation of Asch's more than 30% that conformed when in a four to one ratio. People have often told me that I am easy-going, that I *go with the flow*. However, after doing this research I realize that often this flexibility is actually complacency, and a result of feeling, but not necessarily being, powerless. I have dismissed certain situations as *that's just how it had to be*, when in actuality, perhaps certain events played out in particular ways only because I allowed them to. If I would

have been more willing to assert myself and confront the group, perhaps I could have drastically altered the outcome of the both the rehearsal process and the final product.

## CHAPTER 8

### FREE CHOICE?

Feeling powerless, as if life and situations just happened, without being able to exercise control and influence, is at the heart of the research of Carnaghan and McFarland. They were intrigued with the cruel behavior that was shown in the Stanford Prison experiment conducted by Phillip Zimbardo, which was an experiment designed to test whether good men would engage in bad behavior when put in specific circumstances. Zimbardo randomly assigned college students to either be guards or inmates in a simulated prison. The guards adopted their roles with such brutality and vigor that the study had to be halted before it was finished. Zimbardo later argued that the sense of obligation to which Milgram referred is not entirely dependent on the presence of strong authority figures, but rather because humans conform to what is expected of them as a member of a group. The acts of guard aggression were explained as a “natural consequence” of being in a guard uniform, and asserting the power inherent in that role. Zimbardo states:

The fear of rejection when one wants acceptance can cripple initiative and negate personal autonomy. It can turn social animals into shy introverts. The imagined threat of being cast into the out-group can lead some people to do virtually anything to avoid their terrifying rejection. Authorities can command total obedience not through punishments or rewards but by means of the double-edged weapon: the lure of acceptance coupled with the threat of rejection. So strong is this human motive that even strangers are empowered when they promise us a special place at their table of shared secrets---“just between you and me.” (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 259)

Carnaghan and McFarland were not completely satisfied with Zimbardo's conclusions, and wanted to study if participant self-selection was the main factor that contributed to the alarming violent outcome. They placed two ads in a newspaper. The first one was an invitation to participate in a standard psychological experiment. The second followed the wording of the original ad for Zimbardo's Stanford study, and called for people to participate "In a psychological study of prison life." Those who responded to the second ad were very different from those that responded to the first. The individuals in the second group were much more likely to believe in the harsh and hierarchical world that exists in prison. These volunteers scored significantly higher on measures of abuse-related dispositions such as, narcissism, aggression, authoritarianism, and social dominance (Carnahan & McFarland, 2007). This finding suggests that when there is a free choice, not just anyone would willingly choose to put themselves in a prison situation and take on the prison environment. It confronts the issue of personal agency, and after studying the Stanford Prison Experiment highlights that perhaps we have more control in our decision making process. Perhaps people actively involve themselves in situations that they want to be in and groups of people that seem more obedient are not partaking in 'blind obedience' but rather intentionally involving themselves in a cause that they believe in.

## CHAPTER 9

### AN INDIVIDUAL EMERGES

*To be a leader means to be able to move masses.*

*Adolf Hitler*

I wanted my final thesis piece, *Running From Conscience*, to feel as though the action on stage was not a modern dance piece, but rather a tense social experiment, which was being watched and monitored from above. The piece begins with a bold shape made with the bodies of the five dancers. I saw this shape as the solid, functioning shape and structure of a society. It is a shape that is not questioned or challenged; it just *is*, and has been, and will be, for an indefinite amount of time. As the shape effortlessly remolded and traveled, this group of people, this community, moved as a well-oiled machine. This phrase: *well-oiled machine* was used countless times in the rehearsal process because I initially wanted the dancers to move without question, without effort, and without any real awareness of the effect that they were having on one another, not to mention the space and world that surrounds them. I wanted them to feel as if their fate had been previously decided, and they had little choice, therefore little responsibility, in the trajectory of their lives.

To convey ease and natural movement took work and time. That which looks effortless, in dance and in life, is sometimes the result of much planning and effort. I wanted the eye to be able to glaze over the movement, and follow the dancers with ease.

It was frustrating when little stops and “hiccups” appeared, and I would tell the dancers that for this section to work they needed to be seamlessly moving at all times. It took the entire rehearsal process, from July to October, to get this part as desired because it took the collective group effort and intent. If one person was off in timing or movement, the section was unsuccessful, and the group was not able to function. Being in the role of choreographer caused me to become aware, sometimes to the point of frustration, of the great impact that one person in a group can have.

After this *well-oiled machine* energy has been established, I introduced the following text to the piece:

*Please continue*  
*The experiment requires that you continue*  
*It is absolutely essential that you continue*  
*You have no other choice, you must go on.*

*Passive*  
*Passive*  
*Passive*  
*Passive inhibition*

*He tries to regain his individuality*

*Rapidly adapting to his roles*  
*The subject's willingness*

*An accomplice*  
*Orders*  
*You are an accomplice*  
*Guilt*

*By doing nothing the subject learns to do nothing*  
*By not fighting the subject learns not to fight*

*Discomfort*  
*A conflict*  
*Unable to rest in doubt*  
*The subject must resolve a conflict between the two*

*Please continue*  
*The experiment requires that you continue*  
*It is absolutely essential that you continue*  
*You have no other choice, you must go on*

(Milgram, 1969)

This text came from the four lines that were stated to the all ‘teachers’ in the Milgram experiment as they felt doubt and conflict with the pain that the ‘learner’ appeared to be experiencing. The other text is derived from various analyses of the experiments. I compiled phrases and words in a poem-like manner to help form images and to give the work a rhythm and pulse that I could work with on a kinesthetic level.

It was my initial intent to include this entire text in the piece. However, as I continued choreographing, and after receiving feedback from several people, I realized that many of the phrases were successfully being conveyed with the movement, and to include them in spoken form would not only be redundant, but also diminish the power and communicative abilities of the moving body. For that reason I included the first four lines, and then scattered a couple of other words throughout the music in the first section. I wanted the first four lines to give an experiment/laboratory feel to the piece, as if they are involved in an uncomfortable situation, but feel as if they must continue. The stakes were high, and the personal conflict that they are all experienced was tremendous. I imagined that this tense experiment was being observed from above. The dancers are aware of being watched, and this gaze has the power to regulate and monitor their every move. In essence, this is how many religions view this mortal life. They cling to the belief that this entire life is a test, and we are all faced with challenging situations, and then will one day evaluate, and be evaluated as to how we acted in those situations. This *test* is being observed by an all-seeing God who will remember all that we did, and all

that we did not do. The voice, or eye, that is monitoring the actions of the dancers is also all seeing, and because of this wide vision, is controlling, and causes them to act in ways contrary to their own personal agenda, or their better judgment.

In *Running from Conscience* I sought to show a harsh, sometimes violent world, where compassion and tenderness were experienced only after the human mind and body reach exhaustion. Humility happens because there is no longer space for anything else. As the first section progressed, the physical intensity also progressed. I wanted the dancers to authentically become so physically exhausted that by the time they succumb to the floor, it is out of necessity, versus an arbitrary choreographic choice. This realness was hard to rehearse because it was a place that the dancers did not want to go. Being pushed to a physical brink is uncomfortable, however, I saw it as a place where tenderness and compassion could emerge, and overcome a sense of duty and pressure to conform to the group. Out of this physical exhaustion and pressure emerged a very human duet between Patrick Barnes and Sarah Reynolds. For me, this was the first time in the piece where two dancers had a real connection and actually sought to understand one another. Sarah yielded her weight and trust to Patrick, and Patrick yielded his weight and vulnerability to Sarah. I wanted this duet to emerge as the only outcome of the tiring physicality that they just experienced. I wanted Sarah to allow Patrick to lift her because her legs were no longer able to hold her own weight, and I wanted Patrick to lean against Sarah because his muscles are heavy with fatigue. I saw them coming together and experiencing a human vulnerability because neither had the energy to maintain the tense physicality that they were just living in.

As Patrick Barnes and Mathew Beals dance in the men's duet, I originally had the three women exit the space, and then return for their trio. After much thought and feedback, I realized that it would be much more powerful to have the women stay on and witness the duet. For me, it made the piece feel more like a social experiment, where the five subjects were required to remain physically present for the entire time, even when the environment became uncomfortable. There was no escape, there was no backstage, and entering from the wings refreshed and renewed was not an option.

I told the three women to watch the duet upstage with curiosity. I wanted them to be watchful eyes that witness the men experience aggression, conflict, power, and ultimately, guilt and humility. The narrative that I experienced while watching the women observe the men and then move into their trio was the following: Individually, the trio may have been deeply moved by watching the men struggle and eventually surrender, but collectively they chose to act as a group, and propel forward as one body and one purpose. I transitioned from the men bent over moving with weighted heaviness to the women moving as one quick precise, even mechanical group because I was grappling with what I saw as humans' inhumane ability to disregard another's pain, whether it be physical or emotional, and continue with an order, protocol or procedure. Those that participated in Milgram's study heard the learner cry out in pain and beg for the experiment to end, and still the majority continued to administer shocks, even to the last and most extreme magnitude. The examples of humans harming others amidst pleas of compassion and mercy that took place during the Holocaust are both numerous and harrowing. Because these women follow the cues of the *group* and the *mass*, they move together with speed and singular focus, which is what I viewed as a complete dismissal

and disregard to the vulnerable moment that the men ultimately had. The women experienced the blurred tunnel vision that occurs when listening to external cues and pressure more than the internal conscience of an individual. I wanted them to feel as if their path had been previously laid, and their participation in this path was inevitable. Feelings, intuition, and individual choice took a distant second to the strong pull of what seems to be unavoidable *destiny* and *fate*.

Technically, this was the most challenging section of the piece. The dancers had to be completely in unison, acting with one breath and one purpose. If one dancer was having an off day, the section was lost, and failed to communicate a precise and regimented group. Some groups are only successful because of strict adherence and discipline of the members. The key to perfecting this section was repetition. It did not really help to talk about it, or slowly go through problem spots. It had to be experienced in its entirety at tempo so the dancers could feel on a deep kinesthetic level, what it was to move in quick and precise unison. We talked about how the focus of the piece must remain on the group and that when the focus turned inward or personal, little mistakes and deviations occurred.

The last image in *Running from Conscience* showed five bodies lying in a line. I found this final image to be powerful, and for me evoked the shell of the person; the body without a spirit, a soul, a conscience. It is the person after they have been broken down and made to feel that their actions do not impact or matter. It is the body that has been subjected and experimented upon. Or it is, drawing on Ernest Becker, the body that can no longer deny its own mortality. It is in this section that the dancers try and “pass the guilt.” They were laying face up, staring straight to the ceiling, and one by one touched

the dancer next to them. For me, this touch was an attempt to shrug off responsibility and accountability. The touch was soft, but each person did it without looking at the person next to them. Some can spend their entire lives trying to run from their conscience, in a desperate attempt to salvage their ego. Amidst the tender quality, there was a remnant of the assembly line, and human as machine. As the guilt is passed through the line, eventually the center body began to stir. She is awaking and no longer willing to be one of the group. As she moves, as she speaks, as her conscience runs, her movements become stronger and clearer, as well as more frantic and urgent. The others gather around her; some to listen and comfort, some to observe with the ever-watchful *eye*, and some with the goal of stifling her again into submission. The individual voice does not always bode well in the masses, but amidst the stares and movements of the four others, she is still seen, she is still heard, yet ultimately, she is still silenced.

## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUSION

Initially, I found this research provocative and intriguing, yet also depressing and discouraging. I was researching how humans, against their better judgment, act in ways that could be extremely detrimental. It seemed that all the social experiments that I studied painted a human culture without courage, and a limited sense of responsibility and accountability.

As it is nearly impossible to separate and compartmentalize life from research (and then what would be the point?!), my concluding sentiments of this research could partly be attributed to my personal life. For the entire choreographic process I was pregnant; in fact, closing night was my due date, and then for the entire writing process I had a newborn baby to care for. As every parent can attest, babies are very time consuming. Although I would not want it any different, my life has completely changed, and a huge majority of my day is either spent caring for my son, or at least being ready to care for him. There have been moments of questioning how one individual can take up so much time and energy, and then the realization that at one point, every human being was as time consuming and as needy as my child. Through this experience I have realized that one individual can take endless energy because one individual *matters* that much. One single individual has the capacity to change a person, a family, a community,

a nation. Perhaps in moments of fear, indecision, perceived obligation, or even apathy, we relinquish our power, but nevertheless our influence is always there, simmering below the surface. As this process comes to a close, I feel empowered, and have a renewed hope in the impact that one single individual can have. The irony is that in studying the impact and movement of the masses, it is the “power of one” that I am left with.

My optimism could in part also be contributed with my journey through the creative process. Creating work, even when the inspiration of that work is discouraging, is encouraging. Contributing my ideas and perspective to the world feels proactive, as if my work has the potential to elicit change, or at least bring about a greater consciousness. Regardless of the finished product, there is always the process of working with the dancers, which can be transformative and uplifting. Choreography is a viable form of research, and the human lessons that I take from the creative process equal, and in some cases trump, the lessons that I have gleaned from books, lectures, and theories. As this thesis points out, we live amongst the influences of others, whether it is for the good or bad. Part of the joy of the choreographic process is being affected by the opinions, artistry, and physicality of the dancers. I seek the communal and collaborative environment that can exist in the studio. Having dancers contribute ideas imbues the process, and the finished product, with more depth and meaning than I could imagine on my own. It is when this synergy happens that I gain the most new knowledge, because this is when the sum of our experiences with the subject matter seeps into the piece. The work then surprises me, and the process and product are rich with meaning and depth. The work has a voice of its own, and I am privileged to watch, listen, and be taught.

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