

BECOMING INCREDIBLE: HEALING TRAUMA
THROUGH PERFORMANCE

by

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore how dance performance can be a catalyst for healing trauma. Throughout my own research on performance, it has been my experience that the act of being witnessed itself triggers a healing response. The intimacy of performance, where I channel my emotional intelligence through the body, can allow for space to clear the past of any “unfinished business.” This is a witnessed evocation, and with it comes a softening of the heart and the possibility for transformation – a potential for both individual and communal expansion.

The experience of moving with and through my emotions has influenced not only my own performative presence, but it also influences the ways in which I engage with collaborators in my choreography. In my thesis piece, “This is your Paradise,” a trio performed at the Ladies’ Literary Club in Salt Lake City on November, 2014; overwhelming experiences (both in movement and emotional climate) were negotiated by each of the three performers. The piece created a safe space for the performers and audience to experience heightened states of emotion, transitioning between the metaphoric states of Earth, Sun and Stars. These three shifts in existence relate to human conditions of struggle and resistance (Earth), hope and reverence (Sun), and lastly the infinity of possibility (Stars). I conclude by relating my creative process to the healing process itself – where together sensorial awareness and desire act to repair life’s wounds.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Trauma's Hold

Traumatic symptoms are not caused by the triggering event itself. They stem from the frozen residue of energy that has not been resolved and discharged; this residue remains trapped in the nervous system where it can wreak havoc on our bodies and spirits. (Levine, 1997, p. 19)

As humans, our lived experiences are filled with emotional complexity. At times they edify us, grounding us with a sense of security. Our experiences can also barrage us with such force that we question our very existence. On life's stage of emotions, most people have experienced some form of psychological stress that derails them. This state of disturbance, where one's inner "current" is left tumultuous, often describes the feelings associated with emotional trauma. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* officially defines trauma as "a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience...and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone" (American Psychiatric Association, 1987, p. 247).

Although this definition provides a foundation in which to discuss trauma, it also leaves ambiguity. I question what qualifies something as being "outside the range of usual human experience" and what triggers a person to experience distress. How are some people overwhelmed and defeated by an event, whereas another person with a

similar experience is able to re-engage in life? Peter Levine, author of *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*, comments on a number of factors that can contribute to one's response to a potentially traumatic event:

- The event itself: How threatening is it? How long does it last? How long does it occur?
- The context of a person's life at the time of the traumatizing event: support system, family situation, health.
- Physical characteristics of the individual: genetics, age, overall fitness level and one's level of physiological development.
- A person's learned capabilities: infants and children vs. adults.
- The individual's experienced sense of his or her capacity to meet danger: sense of self-confidence, developed intuition and available resources (internal and external resources).
- History of success or failure – past successes and failures in similar situations. (1997, p. 48-52)

Beyond these factors (that are often outside of one's control) that contribute to a person's response, the physiological recognition of trauma lies within the nervous system. Levine continues this idea:

When our nervous systems prepare us to meet danger, they shift into highly energized states. If we can discharge this energy while actively and effectively defending against threat (or shortly after the threatening event), the nervous system will move back towards a normal level of functioning. Our felt sense will feel complete, self-satisfied and heroic. If the threat has not been dealt with successfully, the energy stays in our bodies... When the energy of this highly activated state is not discharged, the organism concludes that it is still in danger. The effect of that perception on the organism is that it continues to re-stimulate the nervous system in order to maintain and augment that level of preparedness and arousal. When this occurs the debilitating symptoms of trauma are born... The nervous system compensates for being in a state of self-perpetuating arousal by setting off a chain of adaptations that eventually bind and organize the energy into "symptoms." (1997, p. 145, 146)

Post-traumatic symptoms can affect not only one's psyche but also the biological makeup of a person's anatomy. Symptoms can develop immediately after an incident or over a period of time, often times manifesting themselves in complex and mysterious ways. When traumatic symptoms become chronic they can diminish one's ability to

function, often amplifying all emotional states and experiences (Levine, 1997, p. 143). A sense of helplessness may blanket a person's psyche, paralyzing one's development or ability to overcome this "frozen" state (Levine, 1997, p. 142, 143). Emilie Conrad, a specialist in movement therapy for trauma, describes the immobilizing effects of cumulative trauma in her book, *Life on Land: The Story of Continuum*:

When traumatic events are cumulative, the pattern is engraved into our nervous systems, thus becoming the nucleus of all our strategies and compensations. Memory, encapsulated in ice, now perfectly preserved. Memory will govern from its frozen throne, particularly maintained in the entrapment of breath. After all, the message is do not move, remain invisible, the enemy is close by.
(Conrad, 2007, p. 26)

This state of feeling trapped in the symptoms of trauma, without fully understanding the dynamics of trauma's hold, is a place with which I am deeply familiar. It is a sad, dark world of cyclical confusion where life feels like a chore rather than an experience.

A Blueprint for Healing Trauma

I believe awareness and desire are the first steps in healing trauma. There are many paths that offer a blueprint for emotional recovery – the journey towards vitality where “the nervous system regains its capacity for self-regulation,” where “our perceptions broaden to encompass a receptivity and acceptance of what is, without judgment” (Levine, 1997, p. 193, 194). Within my own healing process, I have found that my ability to flow through emotional states adventurously lies within movement. Specifically, I am referring to movement of the body that is intentionally made visible for an audience, or group of witnesses – those who corroborate, or support with their senses.

This thesis itself serves as a witness to my own trauma and chronicles a process of healing that has been transformational to me both personally and artistically. In Chapter

2, I uncover my past and the pivotal experiences that initially led me on this journey towards healing. From this personal place of understanding trauma's hold, I discuss in Chapter 3 how the body can act as our greatest healer and through intentional movement we can "move" trauma, thereby resetting the nervous system. Chapter 3 also introduces dance as a form of therapy and the power of movement when it is made visible through the eyes of a witness(s).

In Chapter 4, I discuss the initial phase of my choreographic research in "Bury Me In Lace," a duet performed in New York City in 2011. This exhilarating and clarifying experience left such a mark on my sense of self that it altered the purpose and meaning for my path in dance. It allowed me to truly reflect upon my past traumas with a greater perspective, igniting an empathetic response for myself. I felt accepted and nurtured, which is something I had not experienced prior to this performative moment. It was as if I was witnessing myself in all stages of my life (past, present and future). This gave me hope and a sense of appreciation for the dimensionality of life – for the passion that can exist in tragedy and in brightness. This climactic experience allowed me to trust in my body's wisdom to heal and it inspired me to share my awakening with others through my choreography.

In Chapter 5, I take readers inside the creative process of my thesis piece, "This is your Paradise," a trio performed at the Ladies' Literary Club in Salt Lake City on November, 2014. This piece challenges and confronts elements of our human existence, such as struggle, resistance, hope and faith, with an intention to acknowledge and embrace being made visible in these negotiations. Within the process of creating and witnessing the performance of "This is your Paradise," I am humbled by our capacity as

humans to heal, renew and to even metamorphose.

It is my hope that this thesis will open up future possibilities for trauma therapy, addressing the power and healing potential of performance (movement made visible) within the field of dance. This thesis has also awakened a desire in me to further embrace heightened expressivity in my dance making and teaching – where I can gather people together to cultivate and practice bravery. Inside the rehearsal process, within the classroom setting and during performance, incredible emotions can be mobilized and shared. My research proposes that when our lived experiences are seen, heard and felt in the company of others, healing can occur on an emotional, biological and spiritual level.

CHAPTER II

PAST

Childhood Imprints

It seems that the early memories, the things that claim us when we are very young, unfold like mysterious threads, creating little slivers of a road to travel. (Conrad, 2007, p. 31)

At 3 years of age I am ebullient. I am animated and a tease. I am joy. I am proud to have a new baby brother. One of my first memories includes my toddler-self and my baby brother being filmed by my mother. After an abrupt move from the Midwest, our family of four settled in Boise, ID as my father went to work as an emergency physician. My young stay-at-home mother, out of a desperate need to feel connected, bought a 1988 video camera to film our new lives out West. My untrained self brightens to “show off” our new home to my grandparents. I get close to the camera with ease, performing in a whirlwind of theatricality. My eyes are wide and wild. With disdain and annoyance (verbally expressed in the camera), my mother quickly pans to my brother and I am forgotten. He is her pride and source of joy (the little she had). He was her choice. I was her burden. In that filmed instant I become invisible, and this seemingly harmless moment represents the imbalance I would feel for the duration of my upbringing. I am not wanted. This is my first memory and simultaneously my first traumatic imprint.

To understand the significance of this experience that engrained itself in my

identity, I offer the following from Robert Anton Wilson, a mystic, psychologist and novelist. Wilson writes in his book, *Prometheus Rising*:

Imprints are hard-wired programs, which the brain is genetically designed to accept only at certain points in its development. These points are known, in ethology, as times of imprint vulnerability. An imprint is a species of software that has become built-in hardware, being impressed on the tender neurons when they are particularly open and vulnerable...The imprint establishes the limits, parameters, perimeters within which all subsequent conditioning and learning occurs...Before the first imprint, the consciousness of the infant is “formless and void” – like the universe at the beginning of Genesis. As soon as the first imprint is made, structure emerges out of the creative void. The growing mind, alas, becomes trapped within the structure. It identifies with the structure, in a sense it becomes the structure. (1983, p. 38, 39)

This imprint of feeling unwanted, unloved and an outsider within my own family, was encoded in my “structure” – it made me believe that I was unworthy. Divergence from my mother’s “programming” efforts were felt in my father’s presence – his accepting, calm, and open-minded nature was just strong enough to allow for a tiny portion of hope in my life. Unfortunately, the frequency of his presence was not enough to counter my mother’s relentless displays of general disapproval towards me, and her continual barrage succeeded in imprinting inadequacy upon me.

My elementary years are filled with suppression. Any glimmer of that bright, animated girl in the home-movie is gone. I am forced unconsciously into seriousness, conditioned to store myself away, far from my mother’s controlling reach. I try to be perfect for her, to be the daughter she really wants – smart, well behaved, submissive and most importantly a religious servant for “God’s glory” within our church. I exhaustedly “train” for this marathon of winning my mother’s approval. I run circles in my mind, scrutinizing each scenario in which I trip and fall, landing in her pile of disapproval. In the moments when she stamps that gold star of feigned acceptance, I weep inside

knowing that my “winning moment” is circumstantial. She has stabilized for that moment, therefore I am safe. My growing body and mind are stunted in confusion. I keep screaming for help but my body is immobile, hiding my calls. It stores all of my felt traumas inside, in a wound-up package of self-doubt. I am painfully hollow and I am 10.

My father, a loyal, loving man, has committed to working 70 hours per week in a draining profession. He is mostly gone, and always exhausted. I cherish the time my brother and I have with him, escaping to the mountains when my mother “has had enough of us.” I soak in those sane moments when I am accepted, when I feel alive in my youthful energy and when I feel a sliver of love. He is also empty inside, dead from her unhappiness. As I enter my teen years, lacking a stable basis of my own, I attempt to create stability for our family by “saving” my father and younger brother. I develop a hyper-awareness of their emotions in response to my mother’s anger, sadness, fear and hostility. My own turmoil becomes secondary to their distress and I model my belief that having empathy for others is the path to heal myself.

I began to reach out to other people beyond my family who experienced trauma in their lives – peers at school, members of my church and even to people beyond my years. This recognition of trauma felt in a person’s body and psyche was an intuitive skill I developed to connect with others. In retrospect, it was one of my coping methods that I fostered in order to survive my loneliness. I was searching for something to fill my void. I wanted to feel unconditional love and that desire manifested as an outpouring of acceptance for others.

In order to survive my unstable home life, to protect myself from “danger,” I often found myself closed off from the world – in a tight, contained “self-hug” where my

vital organs were protected. I was quiet and cautious, truly I was afraid. My fear of my mother's unpredictable psyche served to protect me from entering into unsafe territory, to create the illusion of predictability to exist within. That same fear immobilized me. My form, the structure of my body, was rigid and bound. I was sheathed with callouses from my emotional wounds, unable to move. Emilie Conrad describes the immobilizing impacts of fear:

Extreme forms of adaptation in which we become stifled systems are forms of paralysis. Although a person appears to be ambulatory, he or she is actually living in a petrified state. These levels of adaptation that began as a means of "self-protection" can turn into "self-annihilation" – they become closed systems. Bodies cannot heal or self-organize in claustrophobia. The ongoing movement of creative flux that is nutritive to all existence becomes sluggish and stiff as impulses and messages of change are quickly stifled. (2007, p. 45)

As I approached my 18th birthday, my engrained and internalized states of fear and anxiety, coupled with a curious phase in which I was outpouring excessive amounts of emotional support for others, began to rapidly degrade the health of my being. I was suffering from migraine headaches, severe intestinal pain, and I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that hospitalized me several times. My bodily symptoms were screaming at me, I was rotting from the blackness of my grief.

With the assistance of my grandparents (from afar) I decided to move out of my home shortly after my hospitalization. My decision was instinctual and met with great resistance from my parents. My mother could not bear to let me escape her control and my father felt his family structure shattering. I fled with no real belongings of my own – they were all withheld from me. A profound depression set in immediately after I moved away as my mother "officially" outcast me, and my former religion banished me. I was in anguish from the realization that my brother needed me and I was financially destitute. I

was alone, pretending to be an adult in a huge world of guilt and fear. But there is always a crack in the darkest of situations where the light is forced to shine through. In my bleakest hour, two beams of light fell upon me – community and choreography. A new road to travel became illuminated.

Community and Choreography

Responsibility is an important word in psychology, for it connects you to everything you experience. Taking responsibility means accepting everything you say, feel, hear, write, see, and communicate as part of you. Accepting your accidents and your lies is an act of compassion. Taking responsibility means focusing awareness not only upon the events you identify with but also upon the events you want to disavow. (Mindell, 1993, p. 52)

As I created a new reality for myself, one of determination, ownership and mostly desperation, I caught myself falling into familiar patterns of self-preservation: “I must survive, I WILL survive.” This sadness-madness of surviving the world alone, without a community of support, encouraged obsession. I was controlling my world in over-drive, forcing higher and higher levels of productivity from myself. This system of excess served to distract. The result of my distractions is that I learned so much about how to do, that I forgot how to feel. My senses were overloaded with excessive amounts of stimulation at every given moment. I evolved to accomplish more in less time (and I did this well), but I could not feel the peace of a moment. I arrived at a place where it took an enormous effort to not make an effort.

In order to cope with the frenzied demands I was placing on myself and to guard against another bodily breakdown, I decided (rather instinctually) to welcome healing into my life. With a generous and much needed financial gift from my grandparents, I signed up for a choreography class at Boise State University. Practically, this class fit into

my work schedule, yet it also deeply excited me. It was not a rational or pragmatic decision, it was a call to stop promoting mania. I had consciously left a household ruled by mania, only to recreate another version of that insanity. Peter Levine comments on the recreation of trauma:

The drive to complete and heal trauma is as powerful and tenacious as the symptoms it creates. The urge to resolve trauma through re-enactment can be severe and compulsive. We are inextricably drawn into situations that replicate the original trauma in both obvious and unobvious ways...re-enactment falls into the category of "survival strategies." (1997, p. 173, 174)

The composition course was held in the Theatre Arts Department – a program that supports experimentation, improvisation and the creative process. I was attracted to their mission statement that theatre "recreates the human condition by telling the truth." I wanted to tell the truth, to be witnessed in my "confession" of the past. I wanted to shed the burdens of my past while simultaneously re-inspiring the suppressed sides of myself that could be animated and unreserved. With minimal movement experience and no choreographic skills prior, I walked into my first class with gratitude. I was acknowledged.

The professor of the course was an unguarded, sincere and powerfully intuitive woman. As a 50-year-old mother, grandmother and wife, Marla embodied all of her life experiences in the classroom. Rather than assuming a teacher persona, Marla was human, she was transparent and she "saw" me. She radiated with self-respect and this warmed the space, inviting students to join in learning with an equal respect for themselves, others and the environment. She also highly valued personal expression, viewing creativity as one's relation to the world. Marla fostered an energetic space that allowed me to feel comfortable in my own skin, to feel self assured and confident that I was enough. I

trusted Marla.

From the moment we met, there was a deep connection felt, an unsaid understanding of one another and a mutual respect. I felt her honest, unpretentious presence and she felt my need for a mentor and a true friend. Parker Palmer comments on the power of mentorship in his book, *The Courage to Teach*: “The power of our mentors is their capacity to awaken a truth within us, a truth we can reclaim years later” (1998, p. 21). Upon reflection on this pivotal time in my life, I recognize the fortuitous timing of this relationship development. In her community of support, I allowed myself to take responsibility for my present experiences. Within my newly forming avidity for choreography and performance, I could travel anywhere.

CHAPTER III

HEALING FROM SENSATION

Instincts from the Wild

Dusk falls on the Idaho wilderness. In this high desert ecosystem, where each moment is a challenge to life, a herd of mule deer grazes unsuspectingly as a wolf stalks nearby. The direction of the wind shifts just before the wolf darts from its cover in the sagebrush, and the herd smells danger. The wolf locks in on the easy prey, a young doe, and chase ensues. Seconds before contact, the young deer falls to the ground immobile yet uninjured (Levine, 1997, p. 15). This quiescent state is actually an instinctual response, an automatic shift into an altered state of consciousness:

Many indigenous peoples view this phenomenon as a surrender of the spirit of the prey to the predator. Physiologists call this altered state the “immobility” or “freezing” response. It is one of the three primary responses available to reptiles and mammals when faced with an overwhelming threat...Nature has developed the immobility response for two good reasons. One, it serves as a last-ditch survival strategy...During this time, the (deer) could awaken from its frozen state and make a hasty escape in an unguarded moment. Secondly, in freezing, the (deer) enters an altered state in which no pain is experienced. (Levine, 1997, p. 16)

Involuntary protection, or “freezing,” is also a shared human response. This instinctual mechanism for guarding against a physiological threat is considered “a gift to us from the wild” (Levine, 1997, p. 17).

This “gift” from our animal heritage is the first (and oldest) of three key responses

to a perceived threat. In an interview with Victor Yalom, Peter Levine describes the two other systems:

The next in evolutionary development is the sympathetic nervous system, the fight-or-flight response... Basically, in the fight-or-flight response, the objective is to get away from the source of threat. All of our muscles prepare for this escape by increasing their tension level, our heart rate and respiration increase, and our whole basic metabolic system is flooded with adrenaline. Blood is diverted to the muscles, away from the viscera. The goal is to run away, or if we feel that we can't escape or if we perceive that the individual that's trying to attack us is less strong than we are, to attack them. Or if we're cornered by a predator – in other words, if there's no way to escape – then we'll fight back.
(2010)

Postfreeze, fight-or-flight, humans have evolved to process threat in what Levine presents as the “third and most recent system, the social engagement system [which] only occurs in mammals. Its purpose is to drive social engagement, making friends in order to defuse the aggression or tension” (2010).

This “social engagement system” where traumatic energy is released through verbal communication, is the most recognized and practiced method for healing trauma in humans. Interestingly, Levine states that this method can actually perpetuate traumatic symptoms when a person relives his or her event without unlocking the trauma in the nervous and muscular systems (2010). In fact, over time the re-enactment of a traumatic event can become addictive, recreating a neuromuscular response (similar to fight or flight) with the release of adrenaline (a hormone released into the bloodstream during physical and emotional stress) and endorphins (the brain's opiate) similar to the original event (2010). This potent energy from the initial trauma can linger physically in our bodies, locking itself in our physiology where it remains imbedded until it is addressed and dispelled.

“Body as Healer”

Healing traumatic symptoms lies in restoring our nervous systems by releasing and redirecting trapped energy:

To re-channel that energy into an active response, so then the body has a response of power, of its own capacity to regulate, and the person comes out of this shutdown state into a process in which they re-own their vital energy – we use the term "life energy." It's not generally used in psychology but I think it's a term that is profound in people's health, that people...have the capacity to direct this energy in powerful and productive ways. (2010)

Levine describes how the nervous system can be restored by slowly discharging trauma over a period of time. He compares this release to a process called *titration* (a term borrowed from chemistry in which an acid is added to a base). A trained chemist knows that if an acid is quickly added to a base an explosion will occur. Contrastingly, if an acid is slowly released into a base the substance will at first fizzle and eventually neutralize. Over time, and with repetition, the substance will even result in a salt-water solution; “instead of having these toxic substances, you have the basic building blocks of life... You're not actually exposing the person to a trauma – you're restoring the responses that were overwhelmed [during the initial trauma]” (2010).

Neutralizing potential post-traumatic explosions lies in “talking to the nervous system” (2010). Levine argues that traditional methods of talk-therapy, where emotions are only expressed verbally, can often retraumatize patients. Instead, he proposes that bodily expression (sensations in the body that are experienced and physically moved) is the foundation for actual healing (2010). When the body is allowed to *feel* varying emotions, that have been suppressed, it desires movement.

Linda Hartley, somatic movement therapist and author, agrees with Levine, and adds that with attention given to the nervous system, movement is the strongest source

for healing trauma. Hartley comments:

To “embody” the nervous system, to ground it in physicality through bringing awareness into its tissues, can energize, release, and strengthen the brain and nerves. Working with the physical presence and substance of the nerves at a cellular and organic level enables us to become conscious of unconscious patterning within the system. Once a pattern has been made conscious, choice is opened to us; instead of acting out of habitual responses we can explore new and more creative ways of initiating movement.” (1995, p. 263-264)

Postfreeze, fight-or-flight, animals in the wild instinctively know how to care for their nervous systems. After a threat has been assessed, an animal will often re-set its organism post-trauma by trembling, vibrating or shaking. This inner wisdom moves an animal into a heightened sensorial state; “regulating extremely different states of nervous system activation...animals move easily and rhythmically between states of relaxed alertness and tensed hypervigilance” (Levine, 1997, p. 98). Much can be learned from an animal’s instinctual power to release potent energy (including the hormones: adrenaline, cortisol, norepinephrine) through dynamic movement. For humans, I ask, what is our healing potential when sensations are moved through the body, when we process the signals that have been locked in our nervous systems? From this place of release, what movement potential exists when we work with the “presence” of our nervous system?

Dance as Therapy: Moving from Sensation

Since the earliest times, dance has provided a vehicle for individual and collective healing. Ancient cultures practiced dance to unite the community in a common feeling and purpose, to facilitate healing, to evoke the gods of fertility or hunting, and to induce altered states of consciousness which enabled the individual and the collective to experience connection with the spiritual source of life. (Hartley, “Embodying Consciousness,” section Dance Therapy, para. 7)

Since the 1940s dance has been formally recognized as a therapeutic approach to healing trauma, uniting movement practices and psychology as a means of bringing vital

energy back to an individual. Dance pioneers such as Marian Chace, Mary Starks Whitehouse, and Liljan Espenak “began to apply their skills in teaching dance in the community, to working with patients in psychiatric settings” (Hartley, “Embodying Consciousness,” section Dance Therapy, para. 1). These early pioneers began research into areas of Freudian and Jungian psychology, which served to orient and also validate their intuitive ways of working with movement and healing (Hartley, “Embodying Consciousness,” section Dance Therapy). Alongside these dance pioneers, the cross cultural movement analysis of Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff, helped contribute to dance therapy, theory and practice. Hartley further discusses the basis for dance as therapy:

Dance therapy is based on the perception that body posture and movement intimately reflect emotional and psychological processes. The creative use of dance movement allows the expression and integration of forgotten or repressed, pre-verbal, or inexpressible feelings and memories. As the client moves, the therapist witnesses her movement and then reflects back to her what has been expressed; she may use movement to empathize with or mirror back her client's movement, or she may use words, imagery, music or other methods. Unconscious material can gradually be reintegrated into consciousness, and a fuller sense of self [can be] developed. (“Embodying Consciousness,” section Dance Therapy, para. 2)

Joan Chodorow, a movement therapist influenced by Whitehouse, describes in her conference presentation, “Dance Therapy and the Transcendent Function,” how dance therapy can take one of two approaches (but a therapist is encouraged to remain fluid within these approaches and both are often employed):

- The first approach emphasizes “conscious, everyday reality, especially regarding time and space limitations, and it works to *strengthen ego boundaries*...Here, the dance therapist attempts to evoke specific movement responses which will help the person cope more effectively with the external world” (Chodorow, 1977, p. 20-23).

This approach aims to help strengthen and organize a person's conscious viewpoint through structured rhythms, clear spatial directions and intentional weight shifting (Chodorow, 1977, p. 20-23).

- The second approach uses movement as a means of *dissolving ego boundaries*. The movement is based on internal rhythms and softer spatial patterns, while the subject is encouraged to keep his/her focus internal. Awareness of one's inner reality becomes a central focus (as the eyes are often closed). "As the brain receives an ongoing but diminished flow of sensory input, it may begin to create its own internal experience through increasingly vivid imagery." This method of navigating the inner landscape "can facilitate profoundly important insights and new levels of integration for people who have already developed a strong ego position" (Chodorow, 1977, p. 20-23).

The Witness

In 2009, my first day living in NYC, I attended an Authentic Movement based improvisation class that focused on initiating movement from internal sensations. Similar to Chodorow's approach (i.e., dissolving ego boundaries), we were encouraged to map our inner landscapes, moving from desire, impulse and intuition. As we were witnessed and protected by another person, we were asked to move for 45 minutes with our eyes closed. The witness was encouraged to compassionately observe without judgment or interpretation, noticing both their own sensations and the sensations of the mover.

At this point in my dancing experience, I had grown to need improvisation in my practice. In a way, I was addicted to its freedom and the release of emotions that I

experienced during and after the “ride.” I had moved to NYC in an effort to expand my spirit, to call back my wild-theatrical-self that lay dormant in my nervous system. I believed that this city would challenge me in every possible sense, while simultaneously giving me distance from my past in order to heal. This class was my first experience improvising with no visual stimulation and in this nonstructured environment I was taken care of as my partner held space for my impulses.

My Experience from Memory

I need to explode, to hurl myself in all directions, following the burning sensations inside the core of my body. The participants around me are slow in their practice and I feel controlled by the timidity of the room. I also question the purpose of being observed without engaging my eyes. I know the world through my sight; I strongly connect to my surroundings by befriending the visual spectrum of energy around us. I not only see with my sight, I feel with my eyes. An honest fight to keep my eyes closed, I will follow the sensation coming from my eyelids.

As I am remembering this experience (with the assistance of my journal writings and drawings), I felt trapped in my attempt to move authentically. In the company of others, I found it difficult to differentiate my desires and impulses from those around me. The room became one energetic amoeba and I felt claustrophobic. Removing sight from my experience, and moving at a slower pace with the class, was holding me back. I decided to confront my feelings of irritation and dissatisfaction by opening my eyes.

I am flooded with soft, expansive image-scapes. The space with all of its moving bodies, welcomes me. I dash from corner to corner, discovering every detail of the space,

acknowledging the support I receive from its structure. I forget that my partner is following me around, committed to protecting me from potential injury. She is unsure of my movement impulses; I can sense her guardedness. She is apprehensive, but willing and desires to offer something in return. Without speaking I feel her acceptance.

My motor burns hot near the end of my exploration and I begin to shake, bounce and stomp. I move my limbs rhythmically in states of opposition – powerfully dark and buoyantly ecstatic. I am confident and forceful. Where is this coming from? I continue to trust in these subconscious instincts, trusting that my body knows best. My spine counters the force of my spinning limbs with fluid, snake-like waves. An oceanic current pulses through my vertebrae, stretching me to feel expansive, larger than my own form. Big, bold, brave, and without thought directing me – I float.

Reflecting with my partner and the class afterwards, I realized that my movements (coming from sensations) were not rational; they were spontaneous gestures of my unconscious. My instinctual body had guided me through the creation and release of “mini-traumas,” which had escaped in tremoring bursts of what had been long-trapped emotional energy. Near the end of my improvisation, my body had created the state that Levine identifies as *titration*, where I felt emotionally neutralized rather than toxic. Embracing and following this inner to outer awareness removed my mind from evaluating my perceived experiences. Instead, I became a witness for myself. I became the experience from all vantage points.

Mary Starks Whitehouse, the seminal figure in developing the Authentic Movement practice, discusses this idea of witnessing one’s self in her essay *C.G. Jung and Dancer Therapy*:

(The) balance between action and non-action allows individuals to live from a different awareness. They come to the place where they can view everything, from a simple movement to the deepest and most poignant moments of their lives, with an element of detachment, having two qualities at the same time. It is not that they do not suffer but that they know suffering is not the only thing, its opposite is also there. It is not that they do not enjoy, they know there is suffering. Finally, if they are lucky, they can contain and be aware of both of these at once. Then something new is created. (1999, p. 83)

From this new vantage, I became interested in exploring and translating this improvised experience to more visible spaces. I asked: How could the all-seeing, all-perceiving witness of the Self, amplify a performance? My body's willingness to heal in that experience of kinetic *titration* produced a felt connection to my partner and to the room itself. Could this same healing experience be elicited during an actual performance? Could this same intimacy, this strengthened relationship forged through vulnerability, be cultivated consistently in a performance? I began this research on my own body and interestingly, I began working with my partner from the Authentic Movement class. She became my ally during my greatest experience in healing. We softly illuminated each other's past emotional wounds, aiding one another in the regeneration of a new, pliable, permeable emotional skin.

CHAPTER IV

PERFORMER AS HEALER

The “Glowing Body”

Following my Authentic Movement experience, I became interested in the ways in which we perceive ourselves, and the bodily reactions that occur when we are witnessed. I began to question the intention of performed movement for an audience and if being made visible is a necessary component in the healing process. I researched these questions, along with Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of the Looking Glass Self – the perception of self that grows from social interactions (Vogt Isaksen, 2013) – in “Bury Me In Lace,” a duet created in New York City in 2011. I consider this piece, along with my performance research at that time, to be the prelude and impetus for my thesis work (which I will discuss in Chapter 5).

In the beginning phases of my creative process for “Bury Me In Lace,” I was simultaneously training and performing with Pavel Zustiak’s company Palissimo. In “The Painted Bird: Bastard,” an intensely physical piece that challenged my notions of performance presence, I became acquainted with what theatre anthropologist and author Eugenio Barba describes as the “dilated body” (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 19). This type of awareness brought:

Continuous mutation, growth taking place before our very eyes. It is body-in-life.

The flow of energies, which characterize our daily behavior, has been re-routed. The tensions, which secretly govern our normal way of being physically present, come to the surface... The dilated body is a hot body, but not in the emotional or sentimental sense. Feeling and emotion are only a consequence, for both the performer and the spectator. The dilated body is above all a glowing body... the particles which make up daily behavior have been excited and produce more energy, they have undergone an increment of motion, they move farther apart, attract and oppose each other with more force, in a restricted or expanded way. (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 54)

The work of Palissimo confronts the bridge between theatre and daily life and the polarity between performer and viewer. Within “The Painted Bird: Bastard,” we were asked to improvise with opposing energies – to shift between paradoxical states within the body, allowing these tensions to be made public. These energetic mutations created a stage world that Zustiak crafted (and then later edited), providing a compositional silhouette for us as performers to outline rather than strictly model.

This way of softly maneuvering through the challenges of choreographic immediacy broadened my understanding of presence, my “personal temperature-intensity” (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 81), and the potentiality to heal that lay dormant within myself. The attempt or even struggle to balance oppositions (in front of an audience) was the closest feeling of purity or authenticity I had experienced thus far in my performing life. My body was “in-life,” rather than performing versions of life. I was kinder to my body in performance as I accepted and amplified its confusions and idiosyncrasies. Acceptance without judgment for myself became part of my healing path and I carried this state of “glowing” presence into the performance of “Bury Me In Lace.”

The Performance: “Bury Me In Lace”

The lights are on, bright and exposing with nothing to hide. I enter into the room acknowledging my partners of presence: the space in which I will perform, the ground supporting my feet and the witnesses of this evocation. I can feel the warm sheath of fluttering energy penetrating the space as I set my performance intention. As the audience settles, I listen to my inner state, noticing the emotional and physiological energies that emerge from this sympathetic meditation. I silently move these energies in my body as I prepare to dance with my body.

This energy in the form of presence was “intimate, something which pulses in immobility and silence, a retained power which flows in time without dispersing in space” (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 81).

The house quiets and I am stripped away, after my confessional movement, I am vulnerable. I offer my receptive body and dilating mind to the present. I am aware of the current moving towards the future and of the debris filtering through my body from the past, but I completely fall in love with the vivid, present moment. Time effectively stops, and a state of ultra-clarity is achieved. With senses pulsating, this moment alone becomes all, and it is enough.

Here, I enter into my performance state. This place is where I am open to forgiveness, allowing for space to clear the past of any unfinished business. This is a witnessed evocation, a softening of the heart where possibility for transformation exists – a potential for both individual and communal expansion. When the heart is feeling and the senses are responding, both from the performer and from the audience, a mutual exchange of trust potentially develops. This exchange is not forced or dictated; rather, an

experience emerges that is unique to each performance environment/situation. For me, the immediacy of this unrepeatable experience is sacred.

This sacred place of sharing is where I also trust in the wisdom of my body, allowing me to nurture any underdeveloped or unclaimed personal power in the form of presence. The Balinese describe performance presence in three distinct ways:

Cesta kara, Taksu and Bayu. Cesta kara is the power, which the performer acquires with regular and vigorous training. *Taksu*, on the other hand, is a kind of independent divine inspiration which takes possession of the performer and which is not under his/her control...*Bayu*, “wind” and “breath” is the term normally used to describe the performer’s presence...it is the increase of power which elevates the body and whose complementarity generates life. Before being thought of as a purely spiritual entity...the soul was thought of as a wind, a continuous flux that animated the motion and life of animals and humans. (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 77, 79)

The performance of “Bury Me In Lace” is where I first understood *Taksu*, a presence that was beyond my control, an independent witness that guided me through sensations that were outside of my consciousness. I had noticed this feeling of being watched or guided by another presence during my previous Authentic Movement experience, but I was not ready (or practiced enough) to fully open my channels at that time.

The intent within the material of the duet was to stalk our “wind” through repetition (in space and in the body) and the management of density (effort of movement and the heat created from friction). We exposed our “glow” and contrastingly, we chased our shadow sides around the stage space, our dark yet light egos, hoping to “stimulate the spectator’s sensibility and steer him [her] through a complex labyrinth of emotions” (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 155). My intellect was not involved in this desire to “weave a dynamic web” of contrasting energies, rather it was my lurking *Taksu*, a presence that not only shaped the content and actions of this piece, but a presence that guided me

towards empathy (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 157).

Near the end of the duet, I circle the space with a driving speed, testing my *Cesta kara* inside my tornado of “wind.” Choreographically, I was interested in the “grammar of the feet,” the language of circularity where the room became animated with each passing (Barba & Savarese, 1991, pg. 126). I challenged this spatial patterning until the point of exhaustion where I no longer had complete control over my form. Within this void where choice left my body, I felt another dominant presence occupy the space. At first this presence was looming and dangerous with a fierce intent to impede my movement. My machine began to fall apart, to malfunction with pieces catapulting throughout the space, landing near my partner and towards the audience. I was desperate and childlike as I reacted to this disturbance. Anger, annoyance and hysteria purged through my nervous and muscular systems. My body modeled my energy through movement as it spastically fluxed between constriction and flow.

Interestingly, my *Cesta kara*, my trained presence, began to meet this force in the middle. My training with Palissimo had left me with new ideas about the value and implementation of choreographic flexibility – how set material can be retailored in response to immediate performance sensations. In this state, the set material of the piece became secondary to the needs of my *Taksu*. I began to initiate movement in ways I could never repeat, movement that existed outside the realm of my previous dance vocabulary. The way my body instinctually negotiated presence became calming and even gratifying. I moved from the center of my body, behind my navel, and this warmth traveled to my hands, eyes and face. I was translucent potential that confronted the space, my partner and the audience with tenacious vigor.

My loquacious hands began to dialogue between “strong and soft energies” (Barba & Saverese, 1991, p. 130). They connected me to the surroundings, both physically and energetically, acting as tendril-like receptors, reaching their antennas into the space. My middle fingers reached the farthest – probing, searching and connecting to my greater kinesphere.

My face came alive beyond habituated patterns of daily expression. It felt uninhibited and free to take on the characteristics of any person in the room. As if I were looking into a carnival mirror, every facial movement was distorted and the life of my dance felt comedic. I even laughed audibly at my nonsensical behavior. Could this absurdity have been a suppressed side of myself, or was I channeling a deeper need – the necessity to disassociate from my perceived sense of self?

I began to “see ahead with the eyes and behind with the heart,” creating a new dimensional awareness that heightened the meaning of seeing and feeling (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 109). My eyes began to converse with this invisible entity and the first image that manifested all around the space was of my mother. She was my *Taksu*. In this realization, I embraced her, all sides of her. I felt *her* pain, *her* suffering and *her* love for me, the love that is caged in her emotional scarring. This opening of my heart, a true empathetic response, allowed me to realize that she was stunted in her pain, tortured in her inability to be “in-life.” Robert A. Johnson, Jungian analyst and author writes, “the worst pain ever experienced is...to be near something beautiful or precious but to be unable to experience it, which is the subtlest form of torture” (1995, pg. 35).

As if *Taksu* was the gatekeeper and the mediator of *Cesta kara* and *Bayu*, my body unleashed trapped emotional residue by threading these three pillars together during

this performance. Following the performance, my body felt rewired and cleared. In realizing that I do not belong to my emotions, I could fully commit to the *feeling state* of my emotions, experiencing them long enough to determine when I could let them go. It was my acceptance of this force, the trust in my previous training and the development of a new sense (my ability to channel another energy outside of myself) that healed part of my emotional wounds.

With the audience, my dance partner and the presence of my mother as witnesses, I forgave the past. This process was intimate and exposing as I made the invisible visible. By accessing the very wounds that created vulnerability in the past, I incarnated a new flesh that formed into strength, self-assuredness and resilience. My rituals of tuning into my emotional and physiological energies pre-performance, allowed me to safely (and fully) access my three tiers of presence. By testing my presence(s), I became more accountable to the audience, my partner and myself.

Following the performance, audience members approached me inquiring about my experiences on stage. As if this piece had symbolized a greater story in which they too played a role, they felt moved by my courage to publicly express the multifarious emotions of life. Some audience members even experienced their own form of healing, where suppressed energy was brought to the surface and then released (through crying and laughter). I was moved by their reflections, realizing that my path in dance was heading in a new and meaningful direction. “Bury Me In Lace” ignited a deep interest in the healing power of performance, becoming the purpose for my current dance making. I became aware of this power while teaching, mentoring and in the creative process of my thesis piece, “This is your Paradise.”

CHAPTER V

INSIDE THE CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS:

TRANSITIONING BETWEEN EARTH,

SUN, AND STARS

In our happiest moments, what sustains us more than pleasure is the mystery itself, not knowing who this is in us. The blind riddle of existence is what makes it possible to live at all, in darkness, at the heart of danger. Being full and happy occurs only in a glimmer-spark floating through an eternity of star-masses. (Richard Grossinger as listed in Conrad, 2007, p.100)

Who Before What: Casting

While in graduate school, I have come to realize that I am attracted to dynamic performers, rather than dancers trained in simply accessing the body. I am intrigued by people who magnify their personalities in daily life and on stage – individuals who are complicated and enigmatic. I am drawn to people who can aid me in accessing sides of myself that I alone am unable to fully understand; and I find myself interested in casting people who challenge me, both in conversation and in the studio. Most importantly, I wanted to work with performers who could be vulnerable – exposing their tenderness. My thesis research itself reveals the breaking and re-opening of my own spirit, and although I was not initially intending to cast people who were grappling with their own traumas, a series of synchronicities brought us together. We entered into this work with a shared openness. Throughout the artistic process of the piece I knew I was seeking

healing. The irony was that each of the performers also found they too had hidden traumas that needed attention. The cast embraced the opportunity provided by the piece to process their individual traumas. The cast of “This is your Paradise” consisted of four artists: three females, one of which was a puppeteer, and one male.

Partnering with Space

From this project’s inception, it was important for me to locate “This is your Paradise” in a specific performance space. Rather than creating this piece and placing it in a space, I wanted to partner with a location. The Ladies’ Literary Club, part of the Utah Heritage Foundation, buzzes with over 100 years of history within its walls, and this past transfers a palpable energy to the space. Even though the building is old in years, it feels more alive than most modern performance spaces. Architecturally, the high ceilings, wood floors, gold curtains and stained glass windows of this historic building deeply affected the material of the piece, and informed how I worked with spatial density, proximity and lighting design. Ultimately, the piece took on the essence of this space – mysterious and wise, while remaining grounded within its imperfections. It offered the dance an otherworldly presence – I had a feeling of being watched by another entity that I found comforting during the creation of the piece.

One of the first choreographic decisions I made was to consider where the dancers would be in relationship to the audience. I designed the performance space to be viewed from curvilinear vantage points, where the audience rounds the stage, becoming a necessary part of the dance. Instead of a flat, frontal seating arrangement, where the boundary between performer and audience is conspicuously demarcated, I wanted the

audience to be in a semicircle where they collectively enclosed the space. Aesthetically this spatial orientation interested me; but beyond my proclivity for circles, I wanted this dance to be felt. If standard distance and theatre formalities were closely adhered to, I feared that “This is your Paradise” would be removed from the audience and void of connection.

I began the piece by introducing each performer into the intimate space, and to the audience. Through a series of precise and calculated entrance processions, an emphasis was placed on magnifying the silence in the room. As each performer found their beginning home, spatial and relational tensions were established, which was a central theme for the first section of the piece. One of the three dancers began by walking in a large circle encompassing the lower stage space. This walk was intended to charge the space with the sound of her rhythmic steps on the creaky, wood floor. Importantly, there was a felt history to her walk, as if she had experienced the space prior to this moment.

As the first dancer circled the space, her gaze began to seek corners of the space. Part of the direction for her focus included my instructions to imagine an invisible audience all around, and to picture this audience as a personification of herself that peered back at her on stage. This resulted in her carrying a sense of being privy to information the audience did not have, while simultaneously confronting her multiplicities. During rehearsals, we used the notion of “mirroring” – the conceptual use of moveable, reflective surfaces that change character with each direction shift. This technique (first discovered in my performance of “Bury Me In Lace) allowed her to find intention in her focus, and it introduced a welcomed theatrical vocabulary that would remain throughout the piece.

The structure for “This is your Paradise” was based on a conceptual idea I had regarding three parts of our solar system: Earth, Sun and Stars. These parts were seen as metaphors that allowed me to explore larger ideas/questions surrounding existence (moving from the known to the unknown in life). Each of these elements has a dominant presence within our universe; at the same time they are only a spec in the greater cosmic plan. I designed the piece to have three distinct sections that qualitatively and metaphorically reflected my relationship with Earth, Sun and Stars. In sectioning the piece based on these three complex states, the performers were able to deepen and clarify their intentions within each part of the triad, and it also inherently created transitions for them to bridge between vastly different thematic and choreographic states.

Earth

For the first section of “This is your Paradise” I explored themes of struggle, resistance, suppression and desperation. The metaphor of Earth allowed me to conceptualize broader aspects of struggle in humanity (such as survival) while paying attention to how the three performers in the dance perceived struggle in their own lives. As a group we discussed the suppressed sides of ourselves, our inner madman/woman that creates resistance internally if not acknowledged.

In order to draw out their interpretations of this theme, I devised a series of improvisational scores that moved the trio through qualities quickly and in varying orders. One specific score that remained in the piece asked the dancers to transition between physicalizing despair, ecstasy and brightness. I intentionally offered emotionally ambiguous states so that the spectrum of these emotions could be interpreted but not

defined. I gave each dance performer a different order and timing, and asked that they remain in close contact while moving on a diagonal plane. It was fascinating to watch how tensions were created through physical and energetic misunderstandings, and how sound (i.e., laughter, stomping, loud exhales) enhanced the physicalization and expression of these states.

As this score developed dimensionally in space, and became more frenzied choreographically, I realized that this section would become the energetic climax of the piece. I had given myself the challenge to structure the piece in reverse order, with the extreme energy frontloaded (as opposed to a more traditional peak near the end of a piece). I became interested in working against expectations for a predictable beginning as this section immediately confronted the audience. This choreographic challenge also allowed me the opportunity to create an emotional intensity that could be later drawn from and processed. It was a set up that would allow for a holistically structured resolution. The sound score in the first section assisted in heightening the atmosphere. “Fire on the Mountain,” a powerful folk song performed by the Marshall Tucker Band in the early 1970s, is a tale of perseverance and the desire for change or rearrangement – by moving West.

The metaphor of moving West coincides with my ideas about resetting the future through perception. Bruce Lipton, stem cell biologist and author of *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter and Miracles*, speaks to the power of perception even at a cellular level:

Signal Transduction focuses on the biochemical pathways by which cells respond to environmental cues. Environmental signals engage cytoplasmic processes that can alter gene expression and thereby control cell fate, influence cell movement, control cell survival, or even sentence a cell to death. Signal transduction science

recognizes that the fate and behavior of an organism is directly linked to its perception of the environment. In simple terms, the character of our life is based upon how we perceive it. (2005, p. xv)

In realizing that perception shapes our view of the world, I became curious about the relationship between thought and emotion. Do our perceptual thoughts surrounding an event create our emotional experience of it? Can emotional trauma be released through intention, therefore changing our biological makeup? I brought these questions into my rehearsals, while researching the physiological concept of *transduction* – according to Lipton, this process transforms trapped emotions into new patterns that promote physical, mental and emotional harmony.

We spent several rehearsals openly discussing our individual histories with emotional trauma and our desire to “clear the future” for future generations, to fully acknowledge our wounds and to end the perpetuation of trauma. Each performer established his/her intention for the piece – a path through the dance that was ultimately personal and inimitable. The choreography of the piece was structured to support each of their intentions, as three emotionally varied worlds intermixed. This further challenged the climate of this section, as these worlds often forcefully conversed with each other. Interestingly, this section of the dance was marked by choreographic situations of hyperarousal, in which interactions became tangled and desperate, adrenalizing the movement and priming the performers to anticipate choreographic fight or flight.

Although rehearsals were often emotionally charged events, I cautiously avoided placing myself in a therapy role, and instead simply held the space. I continually returned to the principles of witnessing, wherein space is created for observation, and interpretation is withheld. I practiced empathy and attempted to avoid attaching to their or

my emotions. During rehearsals, we followed discussions about trauma immediately with movement. I would often play a song unrelated to our rehearsals that was upbeat in tempo and boisterous. We would “jam” together as we stomped the ground with our spines trembling. In this way, I now realize, we were releasing our emotions back into the space and resetting our nervous systems. This ritual of release found its way into the dance and became an important connection between the performers and the puppet.

The role of the puppet and puppeteer became important during this phase of creation. The puppeteer was present for many rehearsals and served as a witness to my process. She would observe rehearsals, gathering qualitative and energetic information from the progression of the piece, and return to her studio to craft the puppet from her interpretations. We collaboratively decided on the gold color of the puppet and its layered structure, but the final entity was actually formed from emotional artifacts of the piece. The puppet was human like in form and carried the layers of the performers’ journeys through Earth, and somehow it gave us permission to transition from being wounded (in a state of struggle) to having hope.

Sun

As the flurry of the first section ended, I introduced glimmers of light, to “mingle the contrasts, deliberately creating sharp contradictions...[uniting] the essence of opposites into a synthesis and [inducing] the spectator to attempt to solve the enigma of the incomprehensible” (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 156). In a way, this models life – the attempt to balance contrastingly rich opposites in order to feel alive. The movement of this middle section needed a simpler arrangement, even more refined in its detailing than

the first section, to allow the audience to reset from the emotionally charged opening. To begin this section, I created a delicate, tiptoeing phrase in which the women performed in unison, traveling upstage, with one performer entering onto the raised stage. Visually this tiered image elongated the stage space vertically and in depth, and it also allowed the audience and performers repose.

“500 Miles,” an ethereal folk song performed by Peter, Paul and Mary, complimented the airy choreography while simultaneously introducing an element of nostalgia. While working with this rendition of “500 Miles,” I was aware of the song’s familiarity and the fact that its lyrics ignite feelings of sentimentality or personal associations with the past for many in the audience. Consciously, I chose to work with feelings of nostalgia in a less traditional sense – incorporating “the passion for a return” (Barba & Savarese, 1991, p. 165). Ultimately, the middle of the Sun section of the dance was meant to operate as an unwinding, a calming of the storm, and a return to innocence. The purity of the body and soul prior to trauma, a place I do not actually remember but attempt to re-create in memory, is central to this part of the performance. Nearing the end of this section, movement ceases as the dancers’ bodies shimmer from the tiny undulations of their breath. For me, this long pause was the most satisfying moment of the piece. In distilling the movement, the performers became the most visible.

Stars

The end of the piece proved to be the most difficult section to choreograph as I had preconceived notions of a successful ending. My expectations overshadowed the information permeating from the preceding section. It took me awhile to realize that the

performers experienced resolution at the end of the middle section. For them, the lengthened pause in movement paid homage to Earth and Sun and they felt unburdened and free.

In this state of choreographic confusion I returned to the audience for inspiration and guidance. In a way, the audience would be the recipient of the work's energetic residue. They would witness the adrenalized state of the Earth section and the reverence for life in Sun. The "we" in the larger performance experience, the audience in relationship to the performers, needed to be addressed and perhaps cleared.

Instead of relying on movement to shift the space, I returned to the golden layering of the puppet's core for direction. This innermost layer symbolized the infinite possibility for healing; representing the ways that trauma can be transformed. This would require having faith "to trust responses and sensations that we can't fully understand, and a willingness to experience ourselves flowing in harmony with the primitive, natural laws that will take over and balance our seemingly incongruous perceptions" (Levine, 1997, p. 204). The section of Earth placed the performers in contact with the instinctual and necessary responses of fight and flight, while Sun allowed them to vibrationally release past trauma, the Star section encouraged them to inhabit a collective emotional state of healing.

In this portion of the dance, I wanted to visually symbolize the shedding of emotions and the re-opening of their star-like hearts. I decided to physically transform their bodies into stars with metallic body paint. Gold paint became the literal and metaphoric glue that connected the performers together in the end, as their identities became one entity. The lighting aided in this transformation as the room glowed with

amber hues, reflecting the gold paint back into the space and onto the audience. The paint transferred easily to clothing and on to each other, painting a messy, imperfect ending where audience and performer alike could rejoice in communal sharing and healing. Finally, as their bodies symbolically merged into one through the reflection of light, I used one last technique to help enclose the space in on the dance. I brought a group of eight dancers (who had been sitting in the audience unannounced) onto the stage one-by-one, to join in a final dance.

The performers' movements during this phase of the dance embraced oddity through puppet-like gestures, subtle joint articulation, and quiet, rhythmic feet. As the puppeteer (who had witnessed the dance from the audience during the sections of Earth and Sun) circled the group and walked the puppet downstage, the group began to amplify their movements, deepening the sounds of their stomping feet while sending their focus towards the sky. Their connection to the earth, while searching for a higher meaning with their gaze, is a representation of my version of paradise – forgiveness of the past, a commitment to the present and an acknowledgement that the future exists in our imaginations. As the piece concluded, the room intensified yet again as the puppet slowly bowed for the audience, suggesting that reality is created with the mind and what we give our attention will grow.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

We are human. We are more / We are here in this body / Flesh storing emotions.
Holding whispers of our ancestry / This body, this house / Pliable. Sensitive.
Carrying memories / The keeper of spirit, the medium of our expression / Where I
becomes we / From this body it becomes. Breath / Inhale deeply and awaken the
inner / Full to fuller; free / The five senses welcome extra. Extra-sensory
perceptions / There is more / Dimensions open their doors, inviting passage /
Why? Why want more? Isn't this enough? / I enters and quietly answers, yes /
Yes to needing connection, yes to the discovery of that which is beyond form /
Enough is good, enough is programmed, enough is to know / But beyond is risk,
where there is blindness and vulnerability / The feeling of this place I desire /
Seeking an expansion of perception, a freedom of codification and of habit / The
ritual and ceremony nurture growth / Nurturing the energetic pulse that never dies
/ Perfection is dead. It is stagnant energy gripping those who are afraid / Fear of
new, afraid of losing value, loss of worth and of place / Shake the dirt off
hardened roots. Replant / Sprout. Bloom. Connect / Vibrant life, vibrant we.
(Heller, 2013)

Cultivating Courage

I dance, choreograph, teach and perform to connect with people and life. It is in the act of being witnessed and witnessing that I feel my existence. I believe that we are all part of the same mystery and collectively we search for meaning. On our individual paths that march towards the great unknown, we occasionally experience moments of clarity – a quality of light that serves to inspire others to stay “in-life” and to find their path with heart. Trauma can confuse that path, and damage the heart, which I believe is the driver of life. From my past experiences with trauma, I realize that finding connections with others, and creating opportunities for connection, promotes healing.

The potential connections found within the classroom setting, the creative process, and between audience and performers are all opportunities to cultivate courage – the courage to practice “continuous mutation” as witnessed by others. This involves even “upsetting [one’s] own sense of self, changing identities, and dropping personal history...breaking the explicit and implicit rules of the past” (Mindell, 1993, p. 201). Overly identifying with the past and with our personal histories can trap us as victims of our experiences. It is our perceptions surrounding our experiences that create our views of the world. Bravery is required to detach from past wounds to realize that we are “the doer and the one done to, the seer and the seen. [We] are the ones struggling under the pain of life, the one who creates the pain, and the one who must facilitate between the two...Everything is connected, and nothing happens without warning, though you may experience it as such” (Mindell, 1993, p. 63).

It also demands courage to venture outside of our normal ways of engaging with the world. When I amplify my body and emotions in performance, I am free to stalk my life force, which I believe lies somewhere between sanity and madness. The vital energy that animates my body becomes my power, allowing vivacity, and ideally, healing. Performing takes me outside of my predictable routines into nonrealities and absurdities that serve to put me in touch with the indefinable. Performing allows me to sit with all sides of myself – my insecurities, fantasies, excitabilities, and even my sadness. I find a space from which I can witness these feelings and choose to relinquish attachment to them. When I can practice this in the company of others, where I can feel incredible emotions, it is as if a part of me is allowed to become incredible.

Becoming Incredible

I believe that the conflicts in our lives, even our experiences with trauma, provide us with opportunities for transformation. Through transformation:

Our emotions begin to lift us up rather than bring us down. They propel us into the exhilarating ability to soar and fly, giving us a more complex view of our place in nature... We are able to learn from our life experiences. Without trying to forgive, we understand that there is no blame. We often obtain a surer sense of self while becoming more resilient and spontaneous... We become more in tune with the passionate and ecstatic dimensions of life. (Levine, 1997, p. 193, 194)

I view transformation as a process of acceptance – of practicing loving-kindness towards one’s self. Pema Chodron, Buddhist nun and author, describes loving-kindness in her book, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, as “the sense of satisfaction for who we are and what we have...this practice is about finding our own true nature and speaking from that, acting from that. Whatever our quality is, that’s our wealth and our beauty” (1991 p. 7, 8). Transformation is not about becoming something better; it is about befriending who we already are. It is the process of moving from better-than/worse-than judgment to a place of complete acceptance.

Within my rehearsal process and in the classroom, the idea of making friends with ourselves (as delightful and painful as this may be) informs *how* I make work and *how* I teach. The atmosphere I intend to create opens up the possibility for lived experiences to be seen, heard and felt. In this unguarded, and hopefully generous space, I encourage others (and myself) to go beyond the external, to access something deeper than just form and placement.

For me, dance is lifeless when it is constructed from a template of positions, techniques and tools, and I believe in order to keep dance alive we must recognize that the form is not enough. The moving body is a powerful force, but we limit that power

when movement contains itself inside of the body. I believe that the true vitality of dance exists when all forces align – the body, the spirit, the energy of the environment, the influence of sound and the impact of other bodies sharing the space. I appreciate the quote by dancer/musician Gabrielle Roth, “Energy moves in waves, waves move in patterns, patterns move in rhythms. A human being is just that; energy, waves, patterns, rhythms. Nothing more. Nothing less. A dance” (para. 1, n.d.). I believe that dance began as, and is once again, reasserting itself as an energetic expression. After all, in its purest form it transmits an intentional expression of life’s energy.

Becoming incredible is an investment in myself and it includes the admittance that, for now, I am still healing. That I feel love by giving love, that I often have empathy for others more than myself and that at times I still allow myself to feel unworthy. For me, acceptance means allowing these emotions to surface, sitting with them, and then witnessing my response. Acceptance also means letting go of fixation on my emotions, and in turn releasing myself from the controlling grip emotions can exert. This practice of conversing with my emotions, where the length and subtleties of these conversations vary, feels to me to be authentic. I do not have to tame my “demons,” rather I can “nourish the uncanny...[re-envisioning] madness as a gift to be developed, an emergence of the spirit” (Mindell, 1993, p. 156).

Performance becomes my sixth sense, my extraordinary intelligence that connects me to the Incredible. For me, becoming incredible is terrifying and magical; it means that I choose to believe I am capable of anything. Performance is vast, unparalleled in its extremes and transparent in its condition. It is always waiting, wanting more, needing more to sustain itself. Yet, it is also vulnerable – riding the edge of survival. I appreciate

and honor the edge, where physical and psychological thresholds are challenged.

Performance summons great power and also demands great responsibility. Responsibility to the audience, to one's self, to the ritual, and to the sacred.

Performance is a return to expression and meaning – it gathers people together to feel and experience something larger than form. It is ritual. It can be a throughway to access our potential as humans, to access the microcosms and macrocosms that we are constantly negotiating. It is a calling to separate from our habitual created realities, realities that often serve to trap us within societal molds and expectations. Our dancing mothers and fathers tapped into something greater, they recognized our potency as emotive beings. Our ancestors sought transcendence, to elevate and escape beyond the “ordinary range of perception.” I know that dance took them there. Dance continues to take me to this spiritual place of ascendance. Performance offers More.

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