

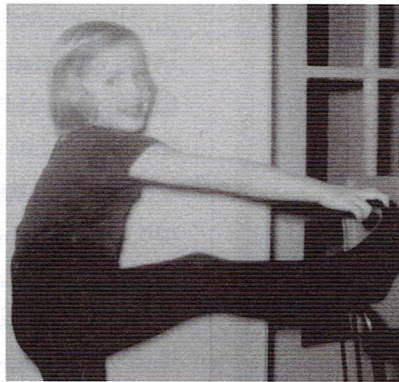
Yielding Toward Presence: Dynamic Relationships in Dance Performance

~ Darcy McGehee, Canada (2003)

Growing up in the ballet studio world, I accepted living in a high-adrenal state. Controlling the flight/flight/freeze response in order to please was also part of the package. In that world, life became a performative act; my relationships with need and with real desire were often put on the back burner. Cultural and aesthetic images of lightness and flight and constant, elusive movement fired my very active imagination.

My cortical motor systems were highly connected to my high-brain smarts. Independence, drive, and discipline were applauded early on, from walking at nine months to pushing the limits of exhaustion through my teen years. I was the high-extensor-tone kid who found physical containment in hypertonic power muscles and lightness in anorexia. I did not perceive my health as something that I had anything to do with. Illness and injury were the result of invasion by forces beyond my control.

I loved dancing. Flying, defying gravity, and the feeling of transcendence gave me great joy, but the truth was that I had no way to land or to come back home again. Trust issues emerged—I either completely threw myself into the influence of others or backed off entirely into my own world. I would either attempt to control myself and



Three-year-old aspirations.

everything around me or escape to fantasies that allowed me to disconnect from the real world. Fantasy can motivate, but it does not support a more fundamental corporeal awareness of moving into support to reach and grow.

Thirty years ago, I temporarily left behind the verticality of ballet to revel in the modernist trajectories of suspension and fall, but I never quite moved past being a gaze-receiving object. Then, as a faithful post-modernist, I twirled the kaleidoscope of my bodymind view of performance and did my best to extricate myself from feeling good as the tragic heroine. Disconnection and a lack of metaphor only added to my brave suffering.

The second half of my dancing life was about perpetual inversion. I was engaged in the myth of falling, desperately trying to find ground through high-brain intention. I began to realize an acute urge to be horizontal and to pause. The trouble was, I did not know how to do this.

Research into somatics and neurodevelopmental theory has taught me that I was doing a lot of unsupported motoring then. I was out in the world without a way to transition back into rest, comfort, and desire. Through these musings, it began to occur to me that performance is, in fact, a social relationship that has to do with communication at very subtle as well as very obvious levels.

Somatic experience told me what fifteen years of looking at anatomical representations of the body had somehow failed to reveal—my cortical, imaginative brain had to make connection with my locomoting body through my brainstem, my low brain, and my mid brain. Without the integration of sub-cortical brain systems, my action was lacking in the subtleties of genuine communication. I was not fully present; I was lacking relationships in the performing moment.

The reflexes that underlie movement depend on the proprioception of gravity, providing a basis for relationship to self. Relationship to self gives one person the basis for relating to another. I needed to rediscover gravity.

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My journey of learning and research through Martha Eddy's Somatic Movement Therapy Training program, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's School for Body-Mind Centering, and somatic practice—particularly observing babies and children—has led me to understand a primary concept of moving into support. This affords me the pleasure of modulating movement and focus between inside and outside in body systems and developmental movement patterns, and it affords me a subjective voice in a performance relationship. The simple and powerful concept of yielding into a relationship with gravity and exploring the astonishing ability of the body to be in dynamic reciprocity with self and other now forms a basis of my teaching and practice.

I am intrigued by the similarities between movement markers for diagnosing developmental delays and historical representations of the dancing body. I recall the aesthetic dancing body of my youth: little spinal rotation, thoracic hyperextension, toe walking, frontal-plane weight shifting, arms held up, no midline crossing, defending through the senses, restricted gaze shift. I also recall my own difficulties with connecting vocally to communicate. Perhaps being engaged in the myth of falling was a "stim," a stereotypical activity for me, much like the repetitive actions that autistics engage in. These behaviors often signal a stuck attempt to stimulate neural support.

Research in neurology is redefining motor learning and beginning to situate expression and aesthetic in embodiment.

Indeed, there are no externally fixed representations of the external world in the "motor systems"; rather, it is under the guidance of both internal and external factors with important linkages to frontal, parietal, cerebellar, basal ganglionic, and cingulate gyrus areas that subserve cognitive and motivational activities. The motor system, including related structures, is a self-organizing dynamic system contextualized



Looking for a place to land.

among musculoskeletal, environmental (e.g., gravity), and social forces. We do not simply inhabit our bodies; we literally use them to think with.¹

Current practices in dance pedagogy and performance can benefit from this research that supports developmental movement theory. It is interesting to note that Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen addressed these connections twenty years ago in her manuals "The Dancer's Warm-up" and "Training Problems of the Dancer," two treatises that eloquently address these applications of Body-Mind Centering.²

The population I teach currently is comprised of eighteen- to twenty-something-year-old university students. I endeavor that our work together helps them to become aware of the need to explore concepts of centering, grounding, and the subjective voice in movement and performance. I teach them that a dancer's warm-up can consist of many Body-Mind Centering principles of developmental movement, all of which support efficient artistic practice. Cellular breathing, yielding various body surfaces and tissues to gravity in tonic lab, and balancing the autonomic nervous system through the opening and closing patterns of simultaneous condensing and expanding yield gently awaken primary connections to support action.

All of these are necessary precursors to dynamic balance and the development of mature righting reactions and equilibrium responses necessary in dance performance. Mouthing, nosing, and gentle scanning begin to connect the senses and perceptions to gut-brain impulses and are foundational to spatial intent. Yielding to push establishes weight shift from a supported, connected place, providing proprioceptive support for eccentric muscle contractions in movement initiations toward gravity and in transitions to reaching in space. This fine-tuning of basic patterns allows well-integrated reflexes to support complex, creative sequences of movement.

Classes for children can incorporate more experiential learning based on developmental movement principles. Many studio dance classes for children, whether in contemporary or ballet forms, consist of imitation

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or mirroring, which is often relationally one-sided and draws a child's attention away from sensing and honoring her or his immediate experience. The child attempts to meet the teacher, not vice versa. The improvisational component of dance class, while it connects gesture and movement to imagination, may not establish relationship with corporeal sensation or with the environment. The imagination is often developed in isolation, and its development is unrelated to the kinesthetic, emotional, and social development of the performative dancing body. Playfulness may not be embodied and movement becomes mimetic or symbolically representational, without a sense of metaphor that connects it to a sensing and feeling present moment.

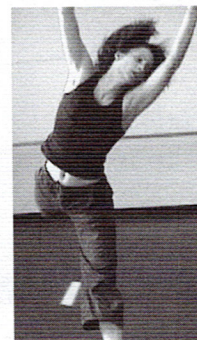
Most children can enjoy the awareness of dynamically shifting internal sensations and movement in the body. For those challenged to do so, the opportunity to play with this shift is critical to their development. These experiences allow children to begin to modulate attention, intention, and action in time, space, and quality of movement. They can learn to bridge inside and outside relationship and understand how to "get back home" again by acknowledging a changing self in relationship to a changing world.

An infant discovers a supported relationship to gravity through being held, being moved, and shaping and molding to a caregiver. A baby learning to travel measures time and space from this initial support as well as from his or her own center of gravity. A child moving in space begins to establish a more independent relationship to gravity, to self-nurturing, and to self-care. This is an important transition that we continue to re-examine as we mature. Exploring moving into active relationship with gravity and connecting feeling, sensing, and doing should be an integral part of any movement class for any age.

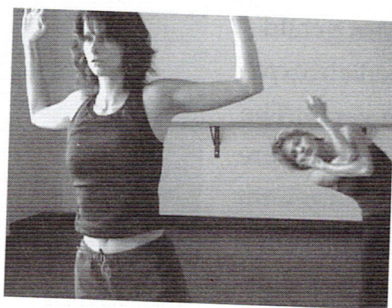
Science now explores what a typically playful child innately knows: movement is critical in organizing us in time and space and supports the emergence of social, emotional, and cognitive function. Yielding opens up dynamic, interdependent patterns of possibility. As I learn to yield to gravity, I learn to bond and defend based on a respect for



"Inside reaching out."



"Outside reaching in."



"Searching for the transition between inside and outside."



"Missed relationships."

my experiences and the experiences of others. I am capable of the pause of presence and relationship.

In theatre, the concept of "The Play" is integral to performance. My current experience of weaving dance and theatre through movement and text is informed by my somatic practice. I try to balance a sensing awareness of inside and outside (self and other) with action that is mediated through feeling.

Exploring this option in a recent piece with two dancers and an actor revealed to me a new kind of virtuosity that was simultaneously very vulnerable and very powerful. The resulting piece, "Shift," frames the question of how to honor a sense of both self and other in a dynamically shifting landscape of interaction. In this piece, performers embody a representation of the ethereal, disconnected bodymind searching for connection.

The process of choreography and performance brought up developmental issues of feeling unsupported in transitions, highlighting the courage needed to trust self and other and the intricate connections between perceptual and motor development. It distinguished the global focus of awareness and the more specific focus of embodied attention.

We explored ways of debriefing from the character bodies we were assuming in this process. A web of simple rhythms emerged in our explorations that mirror the basic physiological and developmental processes explored in Body-Mind Centering: moving in to go out as I condense to expand, moving out to go in as I expand to condense, and moving down to go up and up to go down as I explore the cycle of yield to push to reach to pull to yield again.

This exquisite dance of opposites has its basis in a seemingly simple, but sometimes elusive, relationship to gravity. This experience gives me insights into the possibilities of a more conversational relationship with an audience in performance.

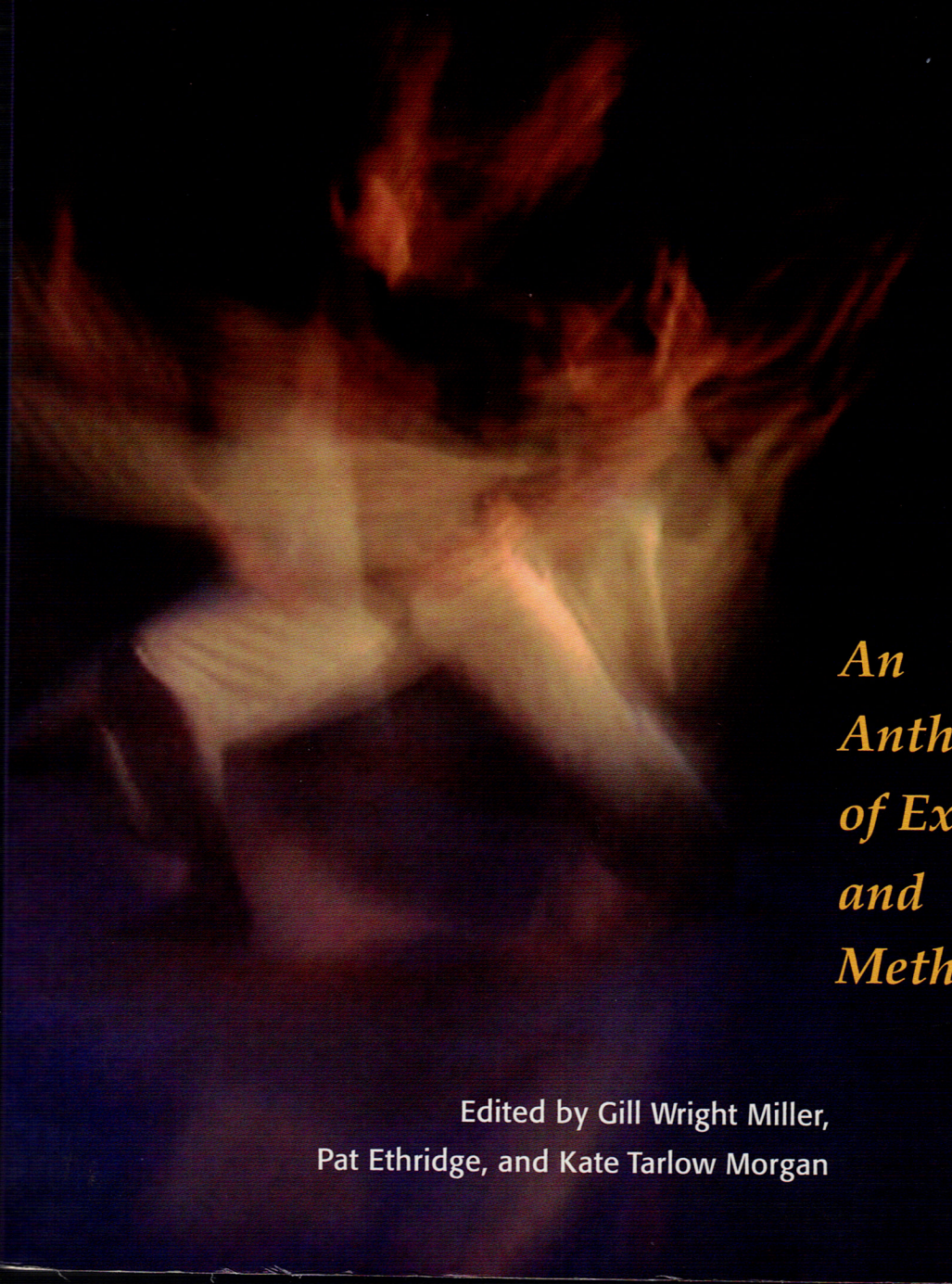
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As a choreographer, I have recently challenged myself with situations and work that didn't fit the practitioner's mold in which we really have a limited understanding of Alonzo's work. It gave me the opportunity to perform and perform. Lines is a work in Dusseldorf where everything is about values about values, not merely as being meaningless or themselves, but values might.

- There is an understanding that should transform the skeletal structure.
- The bodies of individuals are of individuality.
- Choreography is a mix of jazz, modern, and contemporary.

Exploring Body-Mind Centering



*An
Anthology
of Experience
and
Method*

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Pat Ethridge, and Kate Tarlow Morgan