

MIND IS AS IN MOTION

Dance Artist Gill Clarke reflects on the mindfulness of the dancing body

'Minds emerge from process and interaction, not substance. In a sense we inhabit the spaces between things...' P Broks...

It is often difficult to put into words, and even harder to justify to politicians, the ways in which dance works its magic - the basis of its transformative powers. We tend as a culture to value only what is tangible and measurable whereas dance is all about the ephemeral, the allusive, the in-between.

Yet I am increasingly excited by the contribution dancers do and could make within our various communities, not only as performers, but as harbourers of an embodied knowledge, traders in mindful motion - facilitating experiences rather than delivering consumable goods.

As we have evolved as humans our ever more sophisticated, analytical brains have been taking over control. Instead of turning our developed intelligence inward to better understand how we live through our bodies, or outwards to understand our symbiotic relationship with the natural world, our intelligence seems paradoxically to be directing us towards an existence beyond the body, with need only of a brain in order to operate and design technology. A rational and technological arrogance has gradually led us away from 'relationship', and towards an ecological tipping point - in terms of the sustainability of our external environment and our bodily health.

I am not naïve enough to think that dancers can single-handedly get us out of our present troubles, but I do believe their concerns, expertise and knowledge are ever more vital in connecting us back into our living, moving organisms, to a sense of relationship within ourselves and with the world. In our small ways, in the transformative experiences we partake of and witness daily through our dance practices, we can and do help at least to bring a greater embodiment to mind and mindfulness to body.

Since Descartes (17th Century Philosopher and Mathematician) we, in the West, have retained a duality between mind and body, which has remained lodged in our language. Even to use the term bodymind implies the putting together of two things that are really separate. I envy the Germans who have two different words for body: 'Körper' which relates to the physical body, and 'Leib' with the sense of lived, experiencing body/mind/spirit. (I will use the term 'self' to attempt to encapsulate this integrated whole, with which some dance practices are particularly engaged.)

Way back as a child I began to connect my passion for dancing, with a curiosity about learning. I was aware that in my out of school dancing I was somehow learning more, applying my intelligence more keenly, than I did most of the time at school with its emphasis on memorisation and regurgitation of information. If, through evolution, intelligence has been manifested as an ability to adapt to a changing environment, then the dynamic dance processes I was involved in, applied and developed my intelligence.

I remember even early on, being riled by comments that seemed to dismiss dance as 'self-expression' - as if it was a matter of letting off steam, - like running round the playground before focusing back on the 'serious' work. I sensed that what I was involved in was more substantial than that. I have subsequently enjoyed how linguist G. Kress has written about visual art and children's play - as cognitive acts, as 'meaning-making', as 'intentional' activity.....yes that is what my dancing 'felt' like - making a considered mark on the paper, not just mindless scribble.

In hindsight I have wondered if my childhood experience of 'mindfulness' was a felt-sense of, and the satisfaction that came from, a total engagement of 'self' in the dancing - the energising power of the self focused in thought and reflection as action. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes of people engaged in 'optimal experience' or 'flow' that 'they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing'.

Or physicist David Bohm relates this idea to learning:

'...the ability to learn something new is based on the general state of mind of a human being... (in which) there is an undivided and total interest in what one is doing... Only this kind of whole-hearted interest will give the mind the energy needed to see what is new and different...'

So I was predisposed to seek out dance practices that were concerned with learning through sensing, and the refining of awareness of my 'self' in motion. I discovered how focusing the mind and imagination through the body could re-pattern, or re-educate, my movement with a speed and efficiency that endless repetition, and attention to the 'physical' had not achieved, and this further fuelled my curiosity about the integration of mind and body in movement. These 'somatic' and improvisational practices gave access to a more openly perceptive and receptive state, one that prioritised subjective experience, proprioception, a listening to, and questioning of, movement that arose from the body, an opening up of choice in the movement that my bodymind could allow to arise or which my mind could more consciously intend and shape.

Some of this might sound a little self-indulgent. Indeed at times the experience needs to be self-absorbed, proprioceptive, in order to be a rigorous process of tuning one's awareness and attention. And partly this self-absorption relates to the time and focus needed for the 'un-learning', and 'un-fixing' of habitual patterns of mind and movement. As children we learn through constant interaction with the world, we have a mental and physical flexibility and openness - our world and our brains literally emerge from this dialogue. For adults, movement practices can enable a re-awakening and re-tuning of this perception of relationship - of layers and elements of our body and mind to each other, and to the environment around us.

In part such practices are trying to redress a balance, turning up the volume on the sensing, intuitive 'self', to meet the more dominant rational brain. Psychologist William James wrote insightfully, over a hundred years ago, of the limitations of our over-emphasis on conceptualising and labelling the world:

'Out of time we cut 'days' and 'nights', 'summers' and 'winters'. We say what each part of the sensible continuum is, and these abstract 'whats' are concepts. The intellectual life of man consists almost wholly in his substitution of a conceptual order for the perceptual order in which his experience originally comes.'

So dance can play a valuable role in re-asserting, re-experiencing this perceptual present, the undivided self. It is re-assuring though to know that movement practices are not alone in pursuing these ideas. We have some support and corroboration from our more 'rational' colleagues!

On a philosophical level phenomenologists, such as Merleau Ponty, have been concerned with lived experience, seeing people as part of, not separate from the world, and the world as created through our engagement with it.

'Perception in Merleau Ponty's work, is precisely this reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness... Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent and wordless dance always already going on - this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.' David Abram

This 'wordless dance' then inhabits an 'immeasurable', intuitive realm which, by contrast with the authority that is attached to conceptual and analytical thought has, in the West, been undervalued, almost dismissed as a way of knowing and learning.

However, there is now considerable psychological research affirming the power and efficacy of 'intuition' as a mode of thought and tool of learning. Psychologist Guy Claxton in 'Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind' identifies intuition as:

'...a kind of knowing which is essentially indirect, sideways, allusive and symbolic; which hints and evokes, touches and moves, in ways that resist explication. And it is accessed not through earnest manipulation of abstraction, but through leisurely contemplation of the particular...'

and he describes how it helps us learn by osmosis:

'(intuition) works through a relaxed yet precise, non-verbal attention to the details of a situation, to the actual effect of one's interventions, without any explicit commentary of justification or judgement, and without deliberately hunting for a conscious, articulate mental grasp.'

These accounts chime for me with the qualities of my own most productive dancing experiences - whether making, learning, performing or teaching - and with that engaged state of undivided attention. The term 'mindfulness' has been coined for this state, in which one is:

'highly aware and focused on the reality of the present moment 'as it is', accepting and acknowledging it in its full 'reality' without immediately engaging in discursive thought about it... ' On Kabat-Zinn in Guy Claxton.

So again we come back to the perceptual present of experience. Traditionally perception was seen as the passive reception of stimulus through our senses, the relaying of this to the brain, which then responded through action. But there has been an emerging recognition within neuroscience that perception is an 'embodied', or 'enactive' process. Not only do our senses seek and select stimuli rather than relay to the brain a representation of everything they encounter, but this proactive process requires the involvement of our sensori-motor system to make it possible... at the simplest level we need to turn our head, or shift our gaze in order to see.

'Perception does not take place in the brain of the perceiver, but rather is an act of the whole animal, the act of perceptually guided exploration of the environment...' Gibbs

So perception is an activity intimately wrapped up with movement and a holistic engagement of the 'self' in a learningful interaction with the world we inhabit.

'An act of perception is not the copying of an incoming stimulus. It is the step in a trajectory by which brains grow, recognise themselves and reach into the environment to change to their own advantage.' Freeman in Gibbs.

No wonder then that dancers as specialists in movement have developed an interest in deepening an awareness of perception and honing its tools. Such work is not a source of objective or abstract, conceptual knowledge. It is about detailed attention, the 'non-verbal particular', about learning processes and subjective experiences that can open up choices for the body/mind in how it moves, behaves and organises itself in relation to the world.

This sense of 'relationship' is key to dance as a performance art. Bringing attention into the present moment and into relationship, to the flow between internal and the external, to how we inhabit voluminous space and interact with a larger environment which includes the audience - all of these enhance the power of performance to communicate, to involve participation in a shared experience.

But these sensed relationships are also important to living. If we are more alert and ready to act and respond in the changing moment, then we are better equipped to adapt to the complex flux of our quantum world. It is striking how physicists have embraced the fluidity of intuition and mindfulness, just as they have acknowledged energy as well as matter. Heisenberg, for example expresses a wish that new physics might effect the development of human thinking - 'may combine different human endeavours into a new kind of balance between thought and deed, between activity and meditation... ' (he might have added between body and mind)...' Even the most important decisions in life' he maintains must contain an 'inevitable element of irrationality'...

So the interests and ways of thinking of Dance begin to meet those of Science. To date neuroscientific research has tended to focus on pathology as a means of better understanding healthy functioning. Surely, as with the research into the enlarged brain areas of taxi-drivers, there could also be something to be learnt from the study of movement expertise. Much recent work on perception has focused on the visual, also in relation to movement. Dancers, particularly those working with perceptual practices are also refining other senses such as touch and the vestibular system. It would be interesting to discover what their knowledge might contribute to our understanding of human functioning and potential. The visual is, after all, not so dominant in all cultures. The Anlo-Ewe of West Africa, for example, emphasise the proprioceptive quality of balance. Your standing and moral fortitude within their community is established by the way you move!

Well we are not there yet - but I find it re-assuring and re-affirming to discover increasing corroboration from other disciplines of the power and role of practices and knowledge that we, as dancers, have developed intuitively: practices that help us re-balance our experience of the perceptual present, with our rational thought, and re-assert that mind functions through motion, that mind in a sense IS motion.

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