

Returning to the Well:

An Inquiry Into Women's Experiences In
Community-Based Expressive Movement Sessions

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by

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ABSTRACT

The present study inquired into 12 women's experiences in five community-based improvisational movement sessions. The study was two-pronged in nature, attending to the experience of natural, expressive movement and somatic awareness exercises as well as the experience of gathering together as women to dance. Session activities were taken from movement and somatic practices and forms such as Authentic Movement, the Five Rhythms®, YogaDance®, the Big Fat Ass Dance Class®, contact improvisation and African Dance. The chosen methodology was hermeneutic phenomenology using a weekly sharing circle, post-session interviews, and journal entries as data. Although the study places itself within a psychology and dance framework, it does not derive from a formal Dance/Movement Therapy perspective but instead focuses on the inherent experience and worth of expressive movement within a community framework. The women's voices were prioritized in order to return to the essence of the phenomenon of women coming together to move expressively. Three core constructs arose from my analysis: Conscious Embodiment, Conscious Play and Conscious Connection. The central role of relationality in the experience of all three constructs: embodiment, play and connection is explored in the discussion chapter. Findings contribute to a preventive and resiliency orientation as opposed to the more typical clinical and therapeutic research found in the field of Dance/Movement Therapy.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my children, Emma and Jonah. They kept me solid throughout the fluctuating and often challenging circumstances of my recent life and somehow, in spite of frequent and ongoing bouts of preoccupation as a student and single mother, have grown up to be wise and beautiful people.

A Retrospective Note

As with everything important that has happened in my life,
including climbing tall trees, giving birth,
and heading off to foreign countries,
I am grateful that I had no idea beforehand
what the process of writing a
hermeneutic phenomenological thesis
would entail...

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CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The Central Motif: “Returning to the Well”

Although I chose the image of “returning to the well” as both title and central motif for this study with little conscious deliberation, its meaning has become increasingly clear throughout the process of conducting the present research. My own story is important in as much as it helps to describe the central motivation for the present study and sheds light on the central motif; for it is through my own life experiences, as a dancer, a woman, and a human being who seeks her spiritual source, that the image of “Returning to the Well” has emerged. My own experiences and inclinations cannot and, I think, should not be separated from the inquiry. Hopefully, a fuller understanding of my own part in the development of both the motif of the well and the study as a whole will assist the reader in penetrating the essence of the experience of “returning to the well.”

My Story

Profound, human, tender, the cry of communion with God
through the medium of the five senses and the grace of the Duende
that stirs the voice and the body of the dancer - a flight from this world...

Lorca, F.G. (trans.1989)

Throughout my life, I have danced. As a little girl, I moved in scarves and shawls to music in my parent’s living room. I responded viscerally and emotionally to the music as I moved my body. I did not wonder or doubt this process. It was not even something particularly remarkable to me. I simply danced and felt joy.

As a teen, I sought to translate my love of dance into something more formal. I left home at 17 years of age, untrained, to study with Les Ballet Jazz de Montreal. I was too old to be

seriously considered as a candidate for professional dance and too young to defend myself against the rejection. I felt there was no place for the kind of dancer I was and no way of becoming the kind of dancer others expected me to be. Sadly, I cut dance out of my life in any formal way, feeling I didn't have what it took.

Still, my original connection to movement and music remained intact, if largely dormant throughout the years. I experienced isolated moments where I found myself transported and transformed by a movement experience: at clubs in Amsterdam and Montreal, at folk festivals, and one evening during a summer thunder storm, dancing to the rhythms of a djembe. The tonal qualities of a lead guitar solo or a particular drum beat would evoke a joyous sense of freedom in movement and on rare occasions, a seeming shift in consciousness. Dance was neither a casual form of entertainment nor primarily a means of aesthetic expression. Instead, it seemed to be a doorway to an altered consciousness where I was at once both more and less myself.

In 2000, I discovered Flamenco. The description of *duende* (Lorca, trans. 1989), a sort of primal, creative possession that comes from the earth, moving up through the feet and into the body, seemed, in some sense, to mirror my own state during those rare moments. The complexity of the movement language of Flamenco, however, meant that I was unlikely in my lifetime to develop any real ability to access *duende* energy through that dance. Still, I found in Flamenco an affirmation of the unity of the spiritual and the primal in dance and found my own movement patterns transformed in the process.

My own movement experiences seemed to be tapping into an important source that, although not very obvious in Western styles of dance and movement, was strongly evident in traditional dance practices of other cultures. Several years ago, I discovered a video called "Road to the Stamping Ground" (Hulscher, 1984), where Jiri Kylian of the Nederlands Dance

Theatre was given permission to witness a sacred gathering among several Aboriginal groups from Australia. In the raw, powerful *long-dance* of the Aborigines, men danced their stories together through the night by the light of the fires, portraying the hunt and the hunted. The prolonged and repetitive movement, the intensely physical, shared expression, and the rising sun at dawn seemed to combine, to initiate a shift in consciousness and a renewed community connection. The footage was followed by a choreographed piece by the Nederlands Dance Theatre inspired by those same long-dances. Although the European interpretation was aesthetically beautiful and technically accomplished, it struck me as superficial in comparison. I felt that there was a source to which the Aborigines had some kind of access that the European choreographer and dancers did not. The juxtaposition between the two demonstrations of dance was startling and it was at this point that I considered the possibility that perhaps what I was experiencing had less to do with dance per se and more to do with spirit.

I continued to feel an urge to seek out improvisational movement experiences in order to again “lose myself” in movement and sound. In 2004, I discovered The Big Fat Ass Dance Class®, a community dance class run by Aileen Hayden, a local dance and yoga teacher trained in improvisational techniques such as Authentic Movement, Gabrielle Roth’s 5Rhythms®, Contact Improvisation, Kripalu YogaDance® (formerly DanceKinetics®) and Action Theater ®. This class offered “ordinary” women opportunities to explore their relationship to their own movement expression and to each other. Here, I found the means to express myself freely and explore inner landscapes through movement. I was impressed with what I felt Aileen was providing for other women who, like me, loved to dance but were untrained and often unsure of themselves. Knowing the potency that expressive movement held for me, I wondered about the experiences of the other women in the class.

Although the motif of “Returning to the Well” appeared spontaneously at the outset of the present study, it grew out of a longstanding desire to investigate and better understand the state of consciousness that has occasionally arisen in the middle of my movement experiences. Intuitively, “the well” was symbolic of some underground place over which I had no control and which seemed to house an energy that, when accessed, would overtake my usual state of consciousness. “The bucket” might indicate that it was possible to dip into this source, if one knew how. In my own life, I had noticed that music was the primary “catalytic container” that could reach down and bring up a movement response from these deep waters. The exact identity of “the source” was a mystery to me, but I did know it to be life-giving and it flowed like water, whether gently or powerfully.

The image of the well also resonated with me because of my experiences with the women in my life. As part of a tightly knit homeschooling community, I have experienced strength through female communion. Coming to the community well signifies an opportunity for women to cease their work for a time and “fill up”, not only on the water that they draw from the depths of the individual psyche but on conversation and laughter with their “sisters”.

Unfortunately, I came to realize that the image I hold of women at the community well could not be further from the truth in “developing” countries around the globe. On the internet, I typed in “Returning to the Well” and came up with several sites that outlined the atrocious hardship women undergo collecting water for their families. Some travel over 5 kilometres per day with heavy buckets on their heads and with a full day’s work awaiting them once they return home. Conversely, Aboriginal women in the Canadian North do not travel to a well. They have the “convenience” of having contaminated water piped straight into their houses. Although initially appalled that I was demonstrating my class- and race-based ignorance of women’s

reality in other parts of the world, I have deliberately kept the motif for the study. Perhaps there is some usefulness in reflecting on the difference between image and reality, lending further impact to the inquiry of what it means for women to “return to the well”.

Coming Full Circle

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot (1942/1952)

There was a curious circularity to the research process, wherein I seem, in the end, to have taken Eliot’s (1942) lengthy and arduous journey back to where I started. Every aspect of the research was “small ‘p’ phenomenological” in nature, in that everything from the initial impetus, the methodology utilized and the content of the movement sessions, to the means of data collection and analysis, was heavily influenced by a phenomenological way of thinking, choosing and considering. For example, the activities in the sessions reflected a phenomenological approach; that is, becoming conscious of one’s experience and perception of time, space, sound, colour, shape and human relationships. Like Eliot’s frame of mind in the above stanza of *Little Gidding* (1942/1952), the inquiry brought me round to a fuller understanding of the original experience. Although some scholars question the legitimacy of such circularity of thought (Solomon, 2001), it seems that this is the strength and not the weakness of a phenomenological study because, in the coming round, one has made not a circle but a spiral; deepening and enlarging one’s understanding and appreciation of the experience at hand.

Significance of the Study

The reason why so many people are in deep trouble is because the flow of their inner life is denied expression. They have lost the ability or the opportunity to express themselves through dance, through their body.

(Pearson, 1996, p. 71)

As the literature review will indicate, there is a respectable and growing collection of research in the area of Dance/Movement Therapy (D/MT). Why, then, another study on movement? The majority of studies in the field of D/MT are performed for the purpose of explicating theory and practice in order to demonstrate the legitimacy and efficacy of their craft as an alternate and effective therapeutic tool. Seen as somewhat unconventional and marginal in the realm of psychology, D/MT has naturally responded by attempting to carefully define itself and to demonstrate concrete therapeutic outcomes. Furthermore, due to the nature of D/MT which seeks, in part, to uncover subconscious patterns expressed through movement (Adler, 1992), research often adopts a psychoanalytic perspective, which undergirds and heavily influences much of the literature. In the tradition of psychoanalysis, an interpretation of unconscious material is required. Movement cartography such as the Kestenberg Movement Profile (Loman & Merman, 1996) is used by many Dance/Movement therapists to understand the psychological statement the body is making through gestural language. In order to interpret the profiles, there must be then an expert who understands the “movement language” within the context of psychology. In conclusion, the experience of movement from the formal therapeutic perspective is steeped in interpretive theory and dependent on an expert therapist in order to achieve outcomes that are often a response to a perceived pathology.

That this trend has taken place is, I believe, both natural and, in many ways, desirable, as such development of theory and practice has allowed Dance/Movement Therapy to become more

established and credible. However, even within the D/MT field, there has been an ongoing recognition that in taking this interpretive direction, something has been lost. As D/MT therapist and researcher Janet Adler (1992) states, the “inevitable and essential journey” of developing the field of D/MT has contributed much to the field of mental health. However, she also states,

But as we arrive, there is an enigmatic sense of loss, a shadow... We have in some important ways forgotten about intuition, the great gift with which we began. Again, what has happened to the mystery, to the not knowing, to what some might call soul? Can we reawaken the relationship between body and soul, can we turn to an original source, but this time with consciousness? (p. 75)

Codification results, at least partly, in a distancing from the original and simple act of moving (Adler, 1992). Adler was not the only Dance Movement therapist and writer to stress the importance of essential body experience and movement. More recently, Hartley (2004) stated, “What we need in order to transform our sickness into health, and our confusion into wisdom, lies essentially within us, and not in the hands of the doctor, therapist, priest, or healer” (p. 2). There is recognition within the field that the very potency of therapy comes from the strength of its ongoing ability to recognize and maintain the essence of the movement experience apart from interpretation or manipulation. Adler (1992), in fact, likened this to the need for religions to keep in touch with the initiating mystical experience that seeded the religious tradition in the first place. Similarly, this study provided an opportunity to revisit the original and essential process of self-expression through moving together as women.

In comparison to the relatively well-represented perspective of D/MT, there has been little research of the experience of informal expressive movement outside the clinical realm (see literature review for exceptions, pp. 19-21). “Returning to the Well” contributes to this small body of research, giving voice to the role of individual expression and group connection in an individual journey of self-development and holistic healing.

The present study, “Returning to the Well”, offered 12 women the opportunity to return to this essential, experiential level, where the focus was on the women’s voices and not the lens of a specific therapeutic theory. I believe such an inquiry into the potency of natural movement could act as a grounding rod for the field of D/MT in much the same way that the Rogerian return to the simple but profound notion of empathic listening has grounded the theory and practice of psychology and counselling. Rogers’ basic tenets continue to remind therapists that empathy and the act of listening are the core therapeutic experiences upon which all further theory and technique could soundly and confidently rest. In a similar way, simple expressive movement in a safe and inspiring atmosphere re-emerges through the women’s descriptions as being a force sufficient unto itself, and, in doing so, sheds a renewed light on what must remain the essence of both theoretical and practical approaches to movement therapy.

The primacy of women’s voices and women’s experience highlights another equally important aspect of the present study. The phenomenon being researched was not only movement but that of women *sharing* the experience of movement. The prevalence of women’s gatherings and circles across culture and time suggests that this personal and social phenomenon is something worthy of study. As Marilyn Fowler, president of Women’s International Network (W.I.N.) stated at the U.S.A./Afghan Circle Delegation of 2003, “At this critical time in our history, it is imperative that women of the world come together and create alliances, networks and bridges across all divides” (in Aguilar, 2004, para.2). My literature review uncovered little formal research of women’s groups and even less of the intersection of women’s gatherings and creative expression through movement.

Although an expressive movement group may seem insignificant in comparison to an international networking and coalition-building initiative, both have as their bases the act of

women coming together to support one another and share, whether this involves finding solutions to world issues across national divides or finding self-expression through moving our bodies freely and in safety together. In this sense, the community dance gathering is potentially as important as the international conference, perhaps not only for the individual women dancing, but for the world as a whole. Is it not possible that bridges and alliances are built among women through the embodied experience of movement expression? Might women's experiences in expressive movement sessions indicate something, in their essential humility, of great import in this day and age of increasing disconnection? The present study sought to gain insight not only into the experience of the sessions themselves but also into the social implications of such women's gatherings as referred to by pre-eminent activists and authors such as Fowler and others.

Inquiry into community-based opportunities for wellness was another significant aspect of the research. L'Abate (2007) suggested going beyond the more typical prevention or therapy perspectives to think in terms of health and mental health promotion. He advocated utilizing the community to provide individuals with what *promotes* well-being as opposed to only seeing things in terms of problems to be prevented or, eventually, treated. He argued that there would be a huge cost-savings to setting up community-based programs that come from a promotional perspective and an opportunity to provide supports and resources to a much larger segment of the general population. I would add that considering wellness from this promotional perspective also empowers the average individual to consider his or her particular challenges in a positive light; as rich opportunities for learning and growth as opposed to something pathological or deficient.

El Guindy and Schmais (1994) described a community-based approach to women's health and well-being in their article on the Zar, an ancient Egyptian dance of healing. Although coming from a therapy perspective, the Zar does provide healing for women within their community as opposed to clinical treatment in an isolated environment such as a hospital. At the end of the article, El Guindy and Schmais recommended that Dance/Movement therapists working with hospital patients in the West apply this community-oriented approach by bringing family and friends into the clinical setting as a means of bridging the gap between the clinical reality and the woman's everyday life, very much in keeping with a "continuity of care" (p. 118) model that utilizes the resources already available at the community level (L'Abate, 2007). "Returning to the Well" proposed looking at it the other way around. Metaphorically speaking, rather than bringing jugs of water to the thirsting person, why not reside nearer to the well, where thirst-quenching waters are readily available, within the community itself? As Nemetz (1995) stated, in the West, movement and dance have become separated from daily communal life, creating an experiential desert and a sense of disconnection not found in other times or cultures. What this study proposed, then, was to inquire into what takes place when women return to the community well, dipping into the waters of safe and supported self-expression. Such an inquiry into the experiences and relationships that have traditionally been and still are available to women within the community, fits well with both health promoting and positive psychology models of care.

Accessibility is another issue affected by the formal requirements of Dance/Movement Therapy. D/MT is conducted by a certified therapist who typically has years of training, both as a dancer and therapist. The reasons behind this degree of training are, in part, related to the highly specialized skills involved in the therapy. However, if there are no therapists certified in

D/MT, as is often the case in smaller centres, an expressive movement approach to therapy rarely happens. Although therapeutic practices such as Somatic Experiencing® (Levine, 1997) have begun to bridge the gap between psyche and soma, there remains a huge split between ‘talk-therapy’ approaches and somatic or, more particularly, movement-based therapy. This study investigated the inherent therapeutic worth of expressive movement experiences such that therapists without certification in D/MT might be encouraged to explore somatic and expressive movement strategies with clients, in either individual sessions or in groups.

“Returning to the Well” occupies a unique position. The tenor was informal and naturalistic as opposed to theoretical and therapeutic. The inquiry was also unique in that it paid attention to women’s experiences of moving expressively *together*. Both aspects were allowed to merge and emerge throughout all phases of the study. As shall be seen in the following literature review, I could find only one study of the intersection of these two phenomena in a community-based, non-therapy context (Juhan, 2004; Cook & Ledger, 2003). As such, the present study investigated an important and heretofore largely unexplored area of research.

The Research Question

Given the demonstrated significance of the topic of study, I asked the following research questions: What is the lived experience and meaning-making of women participating in women-only, expressive movement sessions? And secondarily, what is the lived experience and meaning-making of being a part of a women’s group?

Asking the two questions provided flexibility of focus in the study, allowing both the experience of expressive movement and relationship to be highlighted when required. This resulted in a fuller picture of the women’s experiences of dancing together, as the total experience could not be understood without consideration of both facets. The two questions also

indicated that, from the beginning, this was more than simply an inquiry into the experience of expressive movement. Rather, it was an inquiry into relational experience: between the individual and her own movement, between body and psyche and between women as they move together within the circle of their shared experiences. Thus, these two intertwined questions reflected the unique and subtle way in which the experience of movement and relationality interact.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I outline the existing literature pertinent to the present study. As a perusal of the research literature indicated, inquiry into expressive movement has primarily occurred within the context of Dance/Movement Therapy. The underlying assumptions of D/MT are presented and used as a framework from which to consider ongoing trends in research, both in terms of the exploration of “bodymind” and of movement. This section is followed by a review of literature on the prevalence of women’s groups around the world and their role in the lives of women. The scarcity of research studies and academic literature pertaining to community-based movement groups for women, both in other cultures and, perhaps to an even greater degree, in the Western world are outlined, followed by a review of research exploring community-based group work for women and its intersection with recent inquiry into resiliency, prevention, and a strength-based conceptualization of therapy.

Underlying Assumptions of Dance/Movement Therapy

The literature pertaining to expressive movement is primarily devoted to the study of D/MT which, according to the Dance Movement Therapy Association in the U.K. is defined as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement and dance through which a person can engage creatively in a process to further their emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration” (Cook & Ledger, 2004, p. 42). D/MT springs from two underlying assumptions that have influenced and directed theory development, practice and research since the inception of the discipline. The first assumption is that psyche (the psychological) and the soma (the physical) aspects of the individual are related in important ways (Stanton, 1991) and the second, that movement is a process that “furthers the emotional and physical integration of the individual” (Stanton, 1991, p. 108). Great energy has been directed at developing theoretical constructs and

practices based on these assumptions and conducting research to support these assertions. It is useful to explore these two assumptions to understand the history of research and development with respect to D/MT in particular and movement in general.

Somatics: The Bodymind

Movement is the unifying bond between the mind and the body,
and sensations are the substance of that bond.

(Juhan in Hartley, 2004, p.37)

The assumption of an integral relationship between body and mind is a key aspect of D/MT and other somatic therapies. The word *soma* comes from the Greek and is defined as “the body experienced from within” (Hartley, 2004, p.11). *Somatology* is the term often used to refer to the applied integration of mind and body and has historical roots that go back to ancient healing practices and shamanic traditions “from every part of the world, and every period of pre-modern civilization that we know of” (p.11). These traditions considered the psyche/soma connection to be fundamental to healing and to the ongoing psycho-spiritual development of the individual (Hartley, 2004).

In the Western world, the notion of the interconnectedness of psyche and soma is generally accredited to Wilhelm Reich (Newham,1994). More recently, the bodymind connection has received renewed attention in psychology, particularly in the area of trauma work (Levine, 1997; Kirmayer, Lemelson & Barad, 2007), and in the health sciences as well, with increased exposure to Asian healing practices such as yoga and acupuncture (Pelletier, 2002). In 2001, so-called “Mind-Body Interventions” (Pelletier, 2002, p.4) were included as one of the major categories in the taxonomy of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) that was created by the National Institutes of Health (Pelletier, 2002).

Despite a split between psyche and soma being “endemic in the modern Western world” (Hartley, 2004, p.6), it is becoming increasingly accepted, at least intellectually, that the mind and body are intimately connected and integrated in their functioning. Hanna, considered the father of somatology in the west, stated, in his ground-breaking book, *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking* (1970): “The science of somatology...sees the human spirit as transparently embodied and sees the human body as transparently inspired” (p. 11). In other words, soma and psyche are not viewed in a dichotomous subject/object relationship but rather in an integrated and mutually influencing one. In fact, what is put forward is that in order for there to be psychological healing and transformation, the body must be included in the equation and the split between mind and body must be healed (Hartley, 2004). Research in this area is limited in comparison to allopathic approaches to health (Hartley, 2004, Forward) and the general perception of the public and researchers alike, is that bodymind treatments are not backed up by sound research at all (Pelletier, 2002). The recent introduction of integrative approaches to health in the Western world, combined with the lengthy practice of such medicine and therapy in traditional cultures around the world, indicates that the area is undoubtedly rich for exploration.

Hartley (2004) observed that although the effect of the mind on the body (psychosomatics), has been given a certain and sometimes negative status (consider the label “hypochondriac”), less well-considered have been the effects of bodily sensation and movement on the psyche. In his seminal work, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin*, Montagu (1971) termed this the “centripetal approach” (Montagu in Hartley, 2004, p. 36); or working from the outside in. This approach is at the root of eastern traditional medicines and wisdom traditions such as Chinese medicine, tai chi and yoga. In the Western world, the centripetal approach has only relatively recently found application, particularly in the health sciences,

through such forms of body work such as massage therapy, energy work and yoga (Hartley, 2004). Still, the dichotomy persists. Even though attention is finally being paid to the neglected half of the mindbody equation, there is still little consideration being given to the dynamic and interactive relationship between the two. Hartley's (2004) book constituted an appeal for increased integration of mind and body, both in practice and in research.

As mentioned, theorists and practitioners such as Peter Levine (1997) have been instrumental in responding to this appeal for increased integration. Levine treats trauma-related psychological issues at the level of the reptilian brain or brain stem, where instinctual and completely physiological processes of fight, flight and freeze influence psychological reactions to specific events. Although such integrated therapies are becoming more common in therapeutic circles, academic papers and research studies in this area are still minimal.

The connection of psyche and soma is front and centre in the domain of transpersonal psychology. Here, bodymind is not only conceived of in terms of psycho-physiological precepts but in terms of levels of consciousness as well. Ken Wilber (1996) referred to the reintegration of psyche and soma as the "centauric realm" (p.53), his label for what he considers the gateway to transpersonal states (See Discussion Chapter, p.152). Other theorists in psychology who extended the significance of the bodymind relationship to the realm of the transpersonal include Stanislav Grof (1998), who coined the word "holotropic states" (p. 2), meaning "moving toward wholeness", from the Greek *trepein* (moving toward) and *holo* (wholeness). He used a specific kind of breathwork in order to affect a shift in consciousness in order to access transpersonal information and creative energy. As stated in the introduction, my own experience seemed to include a transpersonal aspect, initiated by physical sensation and movement in response to melody and rhythm. Mainstream, academic inquiries into the interrelationship of these terrains

of body, mind and spirit in western culture are, however, still rare and constitute an important addition to the research literature.

Trends in Dance Movement Therapy Research

A review of the literature on D/MT indicated that in its early stages, the field began as many disciplines do; through trial and error application. Marian Chase, a pioneer of D/MT, applied her understanding of somatics and the role of movement to clinical contexts, working with hospitalized psychiatric patients (Nemetz, 1995). Theoretical constructs and principles grew from these clinical experiences. Actual formal studies, whether qualitative or quantitative, were yet to come.

Meekums (2005) described the research done on D/MT as still being “in its infancy” (pp.1473-75) and called for more random trial studies in order to provide increased experimental evidence for the effectiveness of D/MT. Other researchers/practitioners within the discipline have also appealed for an increase in evidence-based research using statistical analysis. Diane Dulicai (2005) appealed to researcher/practitioners to conduct experimental studies, rejecting commonly held notions that Dance Movement therapists cannot conduct quantitative research because they are “creative thinkers, not analytic thinkers” (p.19).

Recent research indicates that the trend towards quantitative research is increasing. For example, at the 1st International Research Colloquium on D/MT in 2004, four studies were randomized and controlled statistical studies and four were described as qualitative, exploratory or practice-based (NYS American Dance Therapy Association, Summer 2004). Fully half of the studies that year were quantitative. Horwitz, Kowalski and Anderberg’s (2006) study of outcomes with fibromyalgia patients, Berger’s (2000) study of the movement patterns of borderline and narcissistic patients and Truppi’s (2001) study of D/MT treatment outcomes with

sexually-abused adolescent girls in residential treatment, further demonstrate the evidence-based research trend, as well as a focus on specific, clinical populations.

At the same time as many D/MT studies are embracing an experimental research design, there are efforts to provide comprehensive research guidelines specific to therapeutic arts research and post-positivist approaches. The publication *Dance Movement Therapists in Action: A Working Guide to Research* (Cruz & Berrol, 2004) is one example. A post-positivist research paradigm is valued and legitimized as being a natural and powerful research choice for therapeutic art research (Cruz & Berrol, 2004); one that can bring something to the research of expressive movement experiences that perhaps quantitative research cannot. Another text, *Artistic Inquiry in Dance/Movement Therapy* (Hervey, 2000), encouraged researchers to embrace the intertwined identities of artist and researcher; thus, advocating for new forms and processes in research such as the inclusion of non-verbal data representations and interpretation. Artistic Inquiry questions the usefulness of doing research in a way that does not take into consideration the very nature of that which is being studied. Rather than don the cloak of researcher-as-scientist and translate creative process into the language of quantity and outcomes, Hervey (2000) advocated speaking in the language inherent to that which is being studied; the mother tongue of metaphor and image.

There is tension in D/MT research, between the need to be seen as legitimate by funding bodies and the scientific or academic community and the need to value the subjective and qualitative nature of the work. Although it is important for the discipline of D/MT to respond to the call for evidence-based practice, over-emphasis on quantitative approaches may, as Adler (1992) stated, take the discipline too far from its embodied origins. Applying the metaphor of the well to research, perhaps it is important to return regularly to drink from the phenomenological

source. In this way, quantitative research can be allowed to properly support the underlying and inherent phenomenological characteristics of somatic and movement inquiries rather than expecting expressive inquiries to conform to the experimental need to quantify, categorize and correlate.

Another aspect of D/MT that has influenced research in this area has been the discipline's association with depth psychology (Adler, 1992), in which patterned bodily postures and movements are conceptualized as indications of subconscious material. Dosamantes' (1990) *Movement and Psychodynamic Pattern Changes in Long-Term Dance/Movement Therapy Groups* is an example of the enduring influence of depth psychology in D/MT research. The present study, however, deliberately bracketed theoretical assumptions regarding the interaction between movement and deeper psychological processes, in order to hear afresh the voices of the women involved in the experience.

The D/MT literature also reveals another significant research preoccupation. Theory and practice were historically based on clinical populations (Stanton, 1991) and this tendency has continued in the area of research. D/MT was originally originated within with pathological conditions such as schizophrenia and autism that made verbal therapies difficult (Stanton, 1991). This tendency to develop theory and practice based on clinical populations has continued within the discipline. A review of literature abstracts brings up numerous clinical case studies or quantitative studies covering a diverse range of diagnosed conditions, including autism (Parteli, 1995), anorexia nervosa (Rice, Hardenbergh, & Hornyak, 1989), fibromyalgia (Horwitz, Kowalski, Theorell & Anderberg, 2006) and cancer (Ho, 2005). Few studies in D/MT have applied movement therapy within a non-clinical sample of women.

Concurrent with the trend towards clinically-oriented and/or quantitative research has been a renewed and contrasting focus on the uses of internal movement impulses free of external interpretation. Authentic Movement encourages non-analytical “witnessing” (Adler, 1992, p.90) of natural movement by another dancer within the group. Another dance form which encourages an equally naturalistic exploration of movement is Gabrielle Roth’s 5Rhythms®. Roth, a self-described “urban shaman” (Roth, 1989), has identified a series of improvisational movement rhythms or themes that echo those found in traditional dance forms from around the world. These rhythms, ‘flowing’, ‘chaos’, ‘staccato’, ‘lyrical’ and ‘stillness’ (Roth, 1997), provide a general framework within which improvisation can take place. Contact Improvisation is yet another improvisational dance form, emphasizing partner or group movement interaction as well as individual movement exploration.

Common to all these dance forms is a focus on participants connecting with authentic or essential movement motivations rather than on external understandings of movement for the purposes of evoking therapeutic change. As Musicant (2001) stated, even Authentic Movement, which arose out of the D/MT tradition, has begun developing in this direction so that it is conceived by some as movement therapy but by others as “movement practice” (p. 17); a tool for creative regeneration or spiritual transformation. Although classes and workshops offering instruction in improvisational movement forms such as 5Rhythms, Authentic Movement and Contact Improvisation are springing up in cities across North America and in Europe, there has been little academic inquiry into this phenomenon. Exceptions are Stromsted’s (2000) dissertation, *Re-inhabiting the Female Body: Authentic Movement as a Gateway to Transformation*, Adler’s (1992) *Body and Soul*, and Esbjorn’s (2003) study of twelve contemporary mystics, one of whom uses Authentic Movement as her practice. Apart from such

theoretically-based research, there are only a handful of applied studies, including Cook and Ledger's (2003) study of 5Rhythms® Dance for the general public, Jahner's (2001) inquiry into expressive arts (particularly 5 Rhythms®), and Juhan's (2004) phenomenological study of the Open Floor process, which combines 5Rhythms with gestalt and Integrative Body Psychotherapy.

In general, current research on D/MT and expressive movement exhibits a tension between the scientific and a more subjective, artistic way of knowing. This influences not only the research methodology (quantitative versus qualitative studies) but the practice of D/MT itself; where external interpretation and analysis of movement jostles with a recognized need to return to let experience speak for itself. I believe that both strands of inquiry into D/MT and, more generally, expressive movement experiences, are important. However, in keeping with the exhortations of the likes of Adler (1992) and Hartley (2004) to return occasionally to the root of the original experience of moving, the present study focuses on natural movement expression and the women's own description of their experience of moving together. Using the image of the well, the present study is not an analysis of the chemical makeup of water, but a good, long drink of the stuff itself.

Women in Groups

The second aspect of the present study pertains to the phenomenon of women gathering in groups. In reading the D/MT literature, it became apparent that the majority of individuals writing about, training in, and using D/MT as a therapeutic tool were women. The phenomenon of women gathering to express themselves and connect with one another is not circumscribed by time. Threads of apparent connection can be found in both ancient and more recent history. Marija Gimbutas (1999) was an archaeologist who turned the field of archeology on its head

with her feminist interpretation of the significance of artifacts of Old Europe. Gimbutas argued that these artifacts suggested a matrifocal social structure in which women's activities and values were celebrated and worshipped. She went further to suggest that the temple, belonging to "the realm of women" (p. 73), was a gathering place where women went about their daily activities such as bread baking, cloth weaving and pottery, within a sacred context. Gimbutas also stated that "communities of priestesses and women's councils...must have existed for millennia in Old Europe and in Crete" (p. 120). Similar social structures were also described in Feman Orenstein's (1990) work, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* and in Sjoo and Mor's (1991) *The Great Cosmic Mother*. A more recent historical reference to matrifocal social structures is found in Yang's 1999 documentary, *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China (Women Make Movies, n.d.)*. Yang described a women's subculture complete with a separate language known and spoken only by women that was described as being "born of resistance to male dominance" (*Women Make Movies, n.d.*).

Literary reference to women's gatherings is found in the historical fiction, *The Red Tent* (Diamant, 1998), which described the culture in Israel circa 1500 BCE, when Judaism shared the religious stage with a pantheon of Canaanite gods and goddesses. This historical fiction portrayed strong relationships between women and referred specifically to the gathering of women within the context of regularly observed menstrual rites in the menstrual hut, or 'red tent', a phenomenon which the author states is common in pre-modern civilizations around the world (Diamant, n.d.).

Today, women continue to gather across the globe. For example, a perusal of the internet uncovers a web of women's grassroots groups working both nationally and internationally to address issues of peace, human rights and the environment. The Women's Intercultural Network

(W.I.N.), in conjunction with women's organizations in countries such as Afghanistan and Uganda, brings women together through their program entitled *Calling the Circle of Women from the US and Afghanistan: Becoming Full Partners in Democracy* (W.I.N., n.d.). In the Western world, the notion of "calling the circle" seems to be alive and well. A quick perusal on the internet yields names as diverse as *Bethel Circle*, formed for bible study and fellowship (Bethel Lutheran Church, n.d.) and *WeMoon*, a circle formed to celebrate the rituals and days of the Wiccan calendar (Meetup, n.d.).

BeComing: Women's Circles, Women's Lives (n.d.) refers to both a documentary of a women's circle and a 6-month program designed to facilitate an experience of personal growth within a circle of women. Both the documentary and the program attached to it were an invitation for other women to "convene, join or re-enliven the women's circles in their communities" (para.1). Considered a means of "honor(ing) the feminine voice within", the women in the *BeComing* project hope that their efforts will have a positive effect not only on the women participants in the program but on the "collective field of our culture" (para.1). At all levels, it seems that women around the world are gathering together to rebuild both personal and social capital.

The movement toward harnessing the personal and social potential of women's circles has been taken up by several prominent women. Shinoda Bolen, a Jungian therapist and writer, has recently written two books, *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and the World – The Essential Guide to Women's Circles* (1999) and *Urgent Message from Mother: Gather the Women, Save the World* (2005). Both books address women as the keepers of a knowledge and process that is linked to the metaphoric and literal power of convening circles for communal sharing and governance. In an article highlighting her upcoming talk at the *Women and Courage*

conference at Omega Institute, renowned woman of letters, Isabel Allende (in Schnall, 2008) was quoted as saying, "Sisters: talk to each other, be connected and informed, form women's circles, share your stories, work together, and take risks. Together we are invincible. There is nothing to be afraid of." (para. 18).

Groups that share free-form dancing as a central theme have also been reported in the media. Not long after the completion of the "Returning to the Well" sessions, the Globe and Mail newspaper ran an article on the phenomenon of the "Dance Dance Party Party" (Dance! Dance! Party! Party!): a non-structured, women-only, expressive dance gathering that began in New York and is showing up across North America as well as in New Zealand and Italy (Leung, 2008).

Evidence of women's spiritually-oriented, growth-oriented or dance groups in other cultures is more difficult to find, although my intuitive sense is that women's circles are likely to be even more important to women in cultures where delineation by gender is more prevalent. Monthly women's gatherings in honour of Rosh Chodesh, the Jewish new moon ceremony observed by some Jewish women both in North America and abroad (Jewish Women's Circles, n.d.), is one such example. In the Afghani movie, "Osama" by writer/director Siddiq Barmak (Osama, n.d.), women gathered together to sing and dance and speak freely against the backdrop of extreme oppression under the Taliban regime. The Zora circles of Somalia, where women come together for the purposes of healing through trance dance, are another example of women's gatherings that were mentioned by Whitaker, Hardy, Lewis and Buchan (2005) in an article on Somali women's conception of psychological well-being. The Zar, a similar healing dance, is practiced by Moslems, Christians and Jews throughout Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, parts of Nigeria and Iran (El Guindy & Schmais, 1994). Described as "primarily a women's cult" (El Guindy &

Schmais, 1994, p. 108), the sick woman is attended to by a “Kodia” (p. 108) or healer and her helpers, who sing and drum in order to support the woman in abandoning herself to movement in order to cast out troublesome *jinn* or spirits. The Zar provides not only a personal therapeutic opportunity for the women but a sociological and political one as well. Gatherings such as the Zar dances allow otherwise oppressed women to be leaders and be supported in the parallel female subcultures existent in those societies.

To summarize, although there are both historical and contemporary references to women coming together to dance and share their collective feminine experience, formal systematic research of such community-based, women’s gatherings seems to be largely missing. Apart from the articles on the Zora and Zar circles of Africa and the Middle East, I was unable to locate peer-reviewed studies of community-based, women’s movement groups in the non-Western world and research in North American and European contexts appeared to primarily study expressive movement from the circumscribed position of D/MT and not from community-based perspectives.

Group Therapy

“Returning to the Well” explored women’s experiences within a group context. There is much evidence that groups are effective contexts for shared self expression. Group environments generate an energy and dynamic that is conducive to rich personal experiences. For example, groups can facilitate a sense of commonality among members, an increased sense of belonging, the opportunity to receive feedback and learn from others’ insights or self-expression as well as enhance motivation (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002). Yalom (1975) identifies several so-called “curative factors” (p. 3) derived from group work: instillation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, correcting the family group experience, development of socializing

techniques, imitative behaviour, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis and existential factors. Although many if not all of the factors apply to the “Returning to the Well” group experience, three curative factors seem most pertinent: catharsis, group cohesiveness and existential benefits (e.g., coming to terms with the basic issues of life and death and consequently, choosing to live life more honestly and authentically).

Another feature of the present study was that the group was only open to women. Yalom’s curative factors are described with neutral, non-gendered language, but Carol Gilligan brings women’s experiences in groups to the fore. Gilligan (2003) suggests that women (and perhaps all humans) are hard-wired for relationship and that “sisterhood is pleasurable” (p. 94). Gilligan’s (1977) seminal piece, *In a Different Voice*, constructs a female morality centred on relationship, where care and responsibility are considered moral parameters on equal standing with the more conventional masculine notions of justice and truth. In Gilligan’s writing, then, women’s understanding of pleasure and morality, two of the most powerful motivational forces in the human experience, are considered from the perspective of relationality. What this suggests is that the group experience might be different for women than for men, both in terms of its meaning for the participants and its potential effects. In any case, it is important to consider the role of gender when inquiring into women’s experiences in a group context.

A Grassroots Perspective

“Returning to the Well” viewed women’s movement experiences from a grassroots perspective. In this sense, *grassroots* refers to an inquiry into resources which are embedded within the women’s lives and within the community, are not dependent on outside expertise, are not considered to be formal therapy, and which have a strength-based, prevention and resiliency orientation to women’s psychological well-being. Although there are some examples of research

in this area, such as a discussion of a grassroots community mental health initiative called *Women caring for Women* (Fenner, 1999), a descriptive article on an elder's friendship support group (Greenberg, Motenko, Roesch & Embleton, 1999), and a similar article on a Sri Lankan women's empowerment group (Tribe, 2004), community mental health research has tended to take a clinical perspective as opposed to studying women's general well-being.

Conclusion

“Returning to the Well” is the exploration of a simple activity (women moving expressively together), embedded into community infrastructure, and without a clinical therapeutic overlay. A review of varied literatures revealed limited systematic study of this phenomenon and suggested that a phenomenological inquiry into this experience is a valuable means of garnering a deeper and integrated understanding of the integrative nature of psyche and soma, the essential experience of expressive movement and the phenomenon of women in groups.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline the key methodological approaches and influences associated with “Returning to the Well” and then describe how participants were selected and how the sessions were developed. Strategies for generating and analyzing the data are presented next, followed by a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Methodological Approaches and Influences

Qualitative Research

I chose a qualitative approach to investigating the present study’s research question for several reasons. Qualitative inquiry seeks to make meaning of experience (Patton, 2002). There is an attempt to acquire “an inside understanding” (Schwandt as cited in Patton, 2002, p.51) of experience; to wonder and inquire in a holistic and naturalistic way, in order to maintain as much of the essence of the experience itself as possible (Patton, 2002). The qualitative researcher is an observer situated specifically in the world, aiming to gain an understanding of an experience. In qualitative research, there is no objective truth to be uncovered. Instead, the qualitative researcher is an interpreter of experience; a transformer of experience into representation or meaning (Patton, 2002). Qualitative inquiry, then, is holistic, context-specific and subjective.

As demonstrated by the existing literature on the subject of Dance/Movement Therapy (D/MT), the study of women’s experience of movement involves and incorporates all levels of a person: the physical, the emotional, the cognitive and the spiritual or transpersonal. It is appropriate to choose a methodology that has the ability to be flexible and responsive to the subtleties of inquiry in a holistic manner.

Subjectivity of voice in qualitative research is not only recognized and acknowledged but celebrated. This echoes the feminist perspective put forward in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*

(Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986), which acknowledged the subjectivity of knowledge, and the importance of a woman's own, authentic voice in the construction of meaning. Furthermore, as Belenky et al (1986) stated, these voices do not exist abstractly from the environment but, rather, tell the story of relationship; in this case, the holistic relationship that exists between mind, body and soul within the individual and between the women themselves. This subjective and relational understanding of experience is inherent to both qualitative research and this study of women's experience of moving together. From a feminist perspective, qualitative research legitimizes both the subjectivity and interconnectivity of the "feminine" voice and experience.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Within the larger framework of qualitative research, this study was conducted from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. The term *hermeneutic phenomenology* encompasses what may seem to be two anomalous approaches: hermeneutics, which concerns itself with the interpretation of a phenomenon and phenomenology, which focuses on the phenomenon or experience itself and seeks to minimize derivative interpretation (van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology seeks to be intimately engaged with the essence of "lived experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 44); to reflect on it with as few preconceptions as possible. As van Manen (1990) stated, "The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (p. 36). Thus, in phenomenology there is an honouring of lived experience as "the totality of life" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). However, there is also an awareness of the vanished nature of any experience and that any reflection is, by definition, derivative. This is the 'hermeneutics' aspect of the methodology that recognizes that

“there are no such things as uninterpreted phenomena” (van Manen, 1990, p.180). As van Manen continued, “the ... ‘facts’ of lived experience are always meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced” (p. 180).

This somewhat paradoxical positioning of researcher; of being both present within the immediacy of the lived experience while recognizing the constructivist interpretation that accompanies any experience, was a natural alignment to adopt in “Returning to the Well”. On the one hand, expressive movement was a physical representation of phenomenological inquiry. There is an inherent focus on the experience of being in the body, in the moment, and through the senses; of what Heidegger termed *dasein* (in van Manen, 1990, p. 176): our ability to wonder about our beingness in the world. On the other hand, Walden (1998) suggested that movement is inherently a communicative and relational process - a somatic attempt to create relationships between the self and the environment (whether human or non-human) in order to create meaning. Van Manen (1990) quoted Dilthey as stating, “Just as our body needs to breathe, our soul requires the fulfillment and expansion of its existence in the reverberations of emotional life” (p. 36) and went on to say:

Lived experience is the breathing of meaning. In the flow of life, consciousness breathes meaning in a to and fro movement: a constant heaving between the inner and the outer...

There is a determinate reality-appreciation in the flow of living and experiencing life’s breath” (p. 36).

Further, van Manen (2002) suggested that the arts in general are essentially a creative interpretation of experience. Thus, expressive movement is a hermeneutic practice as well as a phenomenological one - creating a sometimes gestural/ sometimes verbal text from the phenomenon of being. Hermeneutical phenomenology contained within it the inherent

characteristics of the present inquiry: a captured glimpse of the lived experience and the meaning of being and moving in the body within the lived world of the dance studio. Both the content and the process (i.e., the methodology) of the study were in alignment.

This breathing of meaning from and into lived experience not only reflected the movement and somatic orientation of the study but mirrors what some argue is a woman's experience of life as well. According to Belenky and colleagues (1986), women tend to grasp meaning in a more subjective way, or as Sjoö and Mor (1991) suggested, a more visceral way that is very much grounded in the physical rhythms of the body and of the earth. A woman's very body is her lived space, and her lived time is marked by the rhythms of that lived space - the corporeal time piece (van Manen, 1990). Her experience of her cycles of menstruation and of birthing life through her body continues to remind her of this inter-weaving of lived time and space and consciousness. Phenomenology provides both a forum and a language for this relational or inter-woven understanding of reality and within the present study, brings this stance and languaging to the two inter-related phenomena of women moving and women moving together.

Although women gathering together to dance, sing and share seems to be a longstanding phenomenon around the world, studies of this phenomenon at a personal, grassroots level, are lacking. This very lack of attention and awareness makes the topic ideal for a phenomenological study, which can serve to bring a light of fresh awareness to that which is taken-for-granted (van Manen, 1990).

Creative Inquiry

“Returning to the Well” centred on creative expression at every level and phase of the inquiry. The movement sessions were multi-modal in terms of their expressive content. The

language of experience, whether at the individual or group level, was primarily gestural and not verbal. As indicated by D/MT research, the body speaks in metaphor and gestural images whether as a monologue or as in dialogue with others in the group. As Lett (1993) stated in his research of multi-modal artistic expression, the arts are “vehicles for carrying meaning” (p.371) and Walden (1998) referred to movement and artwork as alternative forms of data that “prompt new ways of knowing” (p. 64), acknowledging and appreciating the role of paradox and the non-rational.

My contribution, bringing experiential opportunities to the group, facilitating the sessions, and then responding to participants’ experiences after the fact, was also a creative process. As defined by Hervey (2000), the “creative researcher” (p. 65) is one who has skills and/or traits that “facilitate the creative process” (p. 65). Key among these are, not surprisingly, imagination and intuition: “Together they open consciousness to the infinite possibilities that may present themselves during the artistic research endeavor” (Hervey, 2000, p. 65). As researcher and group leader, I attempted to create an environment that was conducive to creative self-expression and encouraged participants to reflect on their experience of creative expression.

Hervey (2000) referred to the significance of “aesthetic experience” (p. 15) in impacting all levels of a person’s experience, be it kinesthetic, cognitive, emotional or spiritual. She described the capacity of movement, verbal or visual imagery to “catalyze alternative knowings of conscious, tacit, and non-conscious beliefs and feelings” (p. 31). In other words, the participants were provided with opportunities to connect with the creative process in a way that, although not blatantly therapeutic, was “elicitive”, that is, bringing forward existing cognitions, emotions, narratives and memories, finding ways to “gently rock but not capsize the boat” (Barry in Hervey, 2000, p. 30). My role as a researcher was creative or artful not in terms of product or

skill but in terms of being open and encouraging participants' openness to the ambiguity, paradox and surprise within the experience of being and moving together.

It is important to clarify that what I practiced in "Returning to the Well" differed from what Hervey termed artistic inquiry in her text, *Artistic Inquiry in Dance/Movement therapy: Creative research alternatives*. One criteria of artistic inquiry is the use of art to communicate meaning at all stages of the study, by both participants and researcher. It was not my intention, as a researcher to have participants' data or my presentation of their data qualify as 'art', nor to attempt to have any of us fulfill the role of artist. Neither participants nor researcher were trained dancers. We were amateurs, in the very best sense of the word with a criterion for participation being love of dance as opposed to mastery. Still, creative expression was at the core of this study and it is my experience and assertion that the creative process itself remained qualitatively, if not quantitatively, the same for these women as for a trained artist.

Post-Modernism

Postmodernism threads its way through feminism, phenomenology and creative inquiry and brings attention to several significant aspects of the study. Gergen (1991) stated that within the framework of post-modernism, "the vocabularies of personhood are less mirrors of truth than they are means of relating" (p. 247). According to this approach, there can never be too many voices as each voice offers something to the conversation that is unique to that perspective. Post-modernism "invites a heteroglossia of being; a living out of the multiplicity of voices within the sphere of human possibility" (Gergen, 1991, p. 247). Research inquiry is not threatened but enriched by the recognition of this infinitude of possibility.

Furthermore, post-modernism liberates interpretation and representation from certain limitations, embracing not only the multiplicity of voices but layers of perception and further, the

ongoing interactivity between the creator and the perceiver, participants and researcher, mover and movement session facilitator (Walden, 1998, p. 62). Relationship, whether between mind and body, among participants or between participants and researcher was so central to the study that there had to exist an acceptance of the unknown and, consequently, a flexible agenda, not only in terms of activities but in terms of data collection and analysis (see p. 44). As Walden suggested, having a pre-determined notion of the direction of the study is a useful means of focusing the procedures and analysis; useful, that is, until “the seams start to rip” (Walden, 1998, p. 69) and what is developing in the study begins to influence and possibly dismantle that very framework. Post-modernism provided a sufficiently porous container for an investigation into the essential nature of lived experience.

The Ineffable

Mention of the unknown introduces one other important aspect of this study, the transpersonal or numinous face of experience. Once again, this aspect is inextricably interwoven into the feminist, phenomenological, somatic and post-modern frameworks. As indicated in the literature review, there is a transpersonal aspect to expressive movement. Dienske (2002) suggested that the ineffable is “connected with our bodily experiences” (para.5) and the “tacit rich knowledge” (Murray in Dienske, para. 5) that appears is physical knowledge, brought into our awareness sensually. Although I have seen powerful descriptions of this sensual knowing throughout the literature on movement and somatics, perhaps the most potent description I have found is by dancer, Simone Forti (2003) as she described a time spent communing with nature in her garden in northern Vermont:

How to explain what I learned from the snow, from the compost bin, from the stars?
When a fresh wind is blowing down the mountain, I absolutely gulp it down. Stand there
in the field and gulp it down. Gulp it in. Or reaching into the dirt for the potatoes, my

self dives into my fingers and I am the dry crumbly ground. I am the cool round things, of delicate russet skins, emerging miraculously clean. (p. 59).

These physical knowings are powerful but inexpressible, except, as Dienske (2002) suggested, through poetry or other forms of the arts. As I have personally experienced, movement allows for such a direct experience, even without a huge vocabulary of motion. Dienske (2002) suggested that what is required in order to break through the familiar and to have what she referred to as a “unity recovering experience” (para. 37), is to shift into a receptive, or what is often identified as feminine, way of being; re-establishing contact with the body, with the moment and respectfully inviting in the unknown. This receptive stance is paralleled in phenomenology which, as Walden (1998) has suggested, makes room for meaning; waits upon it. It is this very stance I took in reference to the activities I chose for my movement sessions, the way in which I interacted with participants and my treatment of their descriptions of their experiences. In all cases, I invited in and accepted experience, expression and meaning, as much as possible taking a receptive stance and allowing the women’s chosen descriptive offerings to speak for themselves.

Details of the Research Process

Selection of Space

The women’s groups took place in an intimate local studio space. All dance mirrors were covered in order to facilitate participants’ sense of comfort and self-acceptance. The sessions were held Sunday mornings from 11:00am – 12:30pm and no one else, save the janitor, was in the building. Each Sunday, I came in early to set the space up for the group. I covered all the mirrors with sheets and curtains, turned on the heat and, in general, spent about one half hour claiming the space for the group.

Selection of Participants

Participants were recruited by word of mouth both within my circle of acquaintances and outside of that circle of familiarity using a combined approach of first, inviting specific individuals and then shortly after, opening the study up to an email “tree” invitation run by an acquaintance, comprised mainly of artists, alternative practitioners and individuals interested in personal development. This combination of having both acquaintances and new contacts reflects the situation often found in community-based groups, where some participants know one another while others do not.

Criterion sampling was used to identify participants with experience with the phenomenon and therefore able to provide rich data (Creswell, 1998). Participants were identified using the following criteria: they were women who (a) had previously enjoyed informal expressive movement experiences of a mostly improvisational nature, (b) were interested and willing to reflect on movement experiences, (c) were able to commit to five 1 ½ hour long movement sessions and (d) were willing to be audio taped for the purposes of research. I had originally thought to include videotaping but when several of the women expressed discomfort with the thought of a video camera in the room, I altered this criterion and, in the end, used neither video or audio taping, preferring not to interrupt the flow of the sessions with the use of technological tools. Potential participants were screened over the telephone as they contacted me.

Given the non-therapy focus of the sessions, an additional, extremely important criterion, was the participants’ ability to manage their own psychological processes. Somatic and movement-based therapies are potent means of accessing subconscious emotions and memories (Hartley, 2004); so, if difficult emotional material surfaced during a session, participants had to

be capable of personally managing that emotion in order to continue responding and functioning within the group as a whole. Capacity for psychological self-management was, of course, challenging to ascertain. I made a decision that my role in recruitment was to clearly communicate the goals of the project and to determine, through a few pertinent questions, the participants' present life resources, both personal and professional, as well as past experiences in managing difficult personal material in a group context. I also created and made available a list of possible support people that participants could access if they so desired. Finally, at the time of screening, I asked each woman if she had any concerns about the group. This not only enabled me to answer her concerns but gain more information as to the suitability of this experience for each woman. I also reviewed the criteria and my decision making with my research supervisor prior to finalizing participation in the project.

As will be seen, these criteria for selection shaped not only who participated but the overall feel of the sessions themselves. On the one hand, the consequences of clearly stating the need for women to be emotionally resourceful both in the screening, at the beginning of the first session and later, when the list of possible support people was handed out, led several women to restrict their emotional experiences within the group. On the other hand, all women were quite willing to accept these limitations and some were actually relieved that there would be a high level of personal responsibility expected and therefore less chance of what they termed indulgent behaviour. In retrospect, however, I think that I would have accompanied this description of goals with a more clearly stated welcoming of all forms of expression in the sessions, including emotional expression, with the expectation that it would be the woman's responsibility to self-manage, using movement to process the emotion as she saw fit.

Formal dance experience was not a criterion, although I now believe that highly-trained dancers would likely have found participation in this study illuminating and valuable. Still, I ensured that the women understood that not only was skill and performance not the point of these sessions but that, as a facilitator, I was more a student of movement rather than a trained teacher of dance.

The Group

The type of group in the present study is referred to as a “growth group” (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002, p. 5) and is also known as a sensitivity-, awareness-, or encounter group. The purpose of such a group is not to form around a shared problem, such as an addiction or disorder, but to give individuals an opportunity to “learn more about themselves” (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002, p. 5) and to encounter one another within the group context. Because learning and growth within the group came from direct experience as opposed to abstracted discussion, the group is referred to as an experiential growth group (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002).

There were 12 women in the sessions (13 including myself). Jacobs, Masson and Harvill (2002) recommended 8-10 for an experiential group; however, in consultation with experienced dance facilitator, Aileen Hayden (Big Fat Ass ® dance class), a larger number was decided upon, not only to provide some latitude in case certain women wish to discontinue but, as well, to ensure that participants did not feel too individually exposed. We both agreed that a larger number might better facilitate a sense of “group” as opposed to a few individuals in a room.

Each session was 90-minutes long and occurred once a week. Jacobs, Masson and Harvill (2002) suggested 90-minutes as the ideal length of time for a growth group. Any more time is tiring and difficult for participants to fit into their lives. Any less does not allow for sufficient time to fully inhabit the experience and then shift back into the outside world. The sessions were

frequent enough to allow for a certain consistency and momentum to develop and not so frequent that participants felt overwhelmed or burdened by the commitment (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002). There were five sessions in all. The number was reduced from the average number of dance classes, which is 8-10. This reduction in number was decided upon given the research context (in order to be effectively manage data collection and interpretation), while still allowing for adequate experiential opportunities for the women.

Participants came 30-minutes early to the first session in order to allow for any questions or concerns and to obtain informed consent. At the outset of each session, participants were reminded that if, at any time and for any reason, they felt that they wished to discontinue as a participant, they were free to do so and their personal data would be withdrawn from the data pool.

The Role of Facilitator/Researcher

The role of facilitator/researcher in any group varies depending on the type of group. In keeping with the group's purpose, facilitator styles range from being directive and structured to being more free-form and egalitarian in decision-making (Jacobs, Masson & Harvill, 2002). The very content of the sessions required a more directive style, with my role being to provide the basic framework of a very specific "movement journey" in order that the women's attention could be more open and receptive. However, my decisions about the direction of the group were, at any given point, determined by the perceived needs of the participants and, in fact, fluctuated based on my intuitive sense of what was going on in the room. For example, in the final session, the women were deeply affected by the Heart Dance (see Results Chapter, page 61) and, based on my reading of the energy in the room, and the unspoken but physically expressed inability of everyone to move on from this activity into the next, I altered the flow of the sessions and

encouraged everyone to take some time and walk through the space in order to allow things to settle.

A defining feature of both the movement sessions and the research process as a whole, was my engagement in the complex roles of creator, participant-facilitator and participant-researcher of the experience. Although I leaned heavily on the Big Fat Ass Dance Class® for both content and structure, the sessions were, ultimately, my own creation. In the weeks before the movement sessions began, as well as between each session, I assembled the scaffolding upon which the women's experiences might hang. During the sessions themselves, I occupied the role of participant-facilitator. Throughout the inquiry, I was simultaneously inside and outside the experience, a process I have come to call "straddling". It was important that I exist not as a separate and observing "other" but, as much as possible, as a participant in the experience. On the other hand, I had to be distanced enough to effectively facilitate the group process. Straddling allowed me to be an engaged member of the group as opposed to an observing non-participant. This was crucial in maintaining an atmosphere of trust and non-judgment. As a result of this complex stance, my role as participant-facilitator took necessary precedence, with my researcher role emerging after each session, in the form of note-taking and journaling. Even here, the researcher role was a complex one as I was still involved in the creative task of preparing the next week's movement experience and assessing the effectiveness of my job as facilitator in the previous one.

The experience of straddling was a little like walking the razor's edge or riding a shifting wave, to use a less painful simile, wherein I continually redefined my role based on moment-to-moment experiential and research-oriented considerations. There were limitations as well as benefits to such an approach. Straddling meant that I was provided a glimpse of the interior of

the experience of moving and being together at the same time as being necessarily outside and in charge of it. At the same time, it meant that I could not be fully inside or outside at any given moment. Whatever the consequences, it is certain that the peculiarities of this shifting stance became part of the inquiry itself.

Group Activities

The chosen movement activities reflected an intent to provide a safe and yet fertile opportunity for creative individual and group participation (see Appendix A for a more in-depth description of activities). In reference to safety, the notion of a “safe container” (Stromsted, 1998, p. 203) was applied. This refers to the provision of a “free and sheltered space” (Kalff in Stromsted, 1998, p. 203) and time separate from ‘ordinary life’, allowing participants to open up fully to their experiences within that space and time. For example, activities were designed to enable a gently progressive self-exploration with adequate preparation, explanation and guidance. Furthermore, I made sure to communicate positive group principles at the outset of the sessions, such as group agreement to maintain confidentiality and to behave in a warm, inclusive, non-judgmental manner throughout. The group also came into a circle at the beginning and the end of each session in order to create a spatial and temporal distinction (boundary) between the session and the participants’ regular lives. This allowed participants to experience our time together in such a way that they were free to explore new internal territories, knowing that the boundaries and conventions of everyday reality would be re-established at the end of each class.

Choices regarding activities were also influenced by my personal dance and movement experiences and training. My most powerful movement experiences came from allowing natural, improvisational movement to emerge in response to sound or physical sensation. Many of the activities I chose reflected these personal preferences. In order to provide a fertile environment

for creative individual and group expression, activities were taken from various improvisational sources such as Authentic Movement, Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms®, Contact Improvisation and other movement activities developed by Aileen Hayden for her Big Fat Ass Dance Class®. Exercises to enhance the relationship between psyche and soma, as discussed above, were also included. This included sensory awareness exercises, walking or movement meditations and a small amount of voice work in the form of simple chants and free vocal expression. To enrich the repertoire of movement activities, an African Dance teacher was invited to lead the fourth session in the same spirit of exploring women's experiences dancing together, from a cross-cultural perspective.

All of these forms have been demonstrated through years of usage by teachers and students to provide fertile opportunity for creative expression through movement. These particular movement practices also integrated well with my own movement proclivities toward inwardly-focused, improvisational movement in response to music. I chose improvisational movement forms that were geared to increase somatic awareness and decrease mental processing, and to bring any deep movement motivations to the surface. As well, my personal affinity for sound and rhythm led me to consider my musical choices carefully and place at least as much attention on them as on the choice of movement activities.

In retrospect, it is important to note that the most significant experiences I have had with expressive movement have been private. Although others may be there with me, I dance with my eyes closed and only experience these "altered states" in environments where I feel free to let go and forget everyone around me. So it is interesting that my other motivation as a researcher was about inquiring into shared experience; what it meant to express within a group. The use of more than one technique provided a degree of variety in exploration as some, such as Authentic

Movement and the Five Rhythms®, reflect my own tendencies toward an inward focus, while others, such as Contact Improvisation, African Dance and some of the activities from the Big Fat Ass Dance Class®, tend to be more vigorous, light-hearted and group-oriented.

In planning and running the sessions, I drew heavily on the community-based Big Fat Ass dance classes®. Not only did I use material that I had learned while attending the class but also hired Aileen Hayden for a two-hour private “teaching seminar” to get a more in-depth understanding not only of specific activities that she uses in her classes but also suggestions on such things as how to structure the classes and how to fuse individual movement exploration with shared experience. As well, the sessions were similar to the Big Fat Ass Dance Classes® in that they were created with the untrained dancer in mind, and therapeutic as opposed to therapy-oriented. Another individual who heavily influenced my sessions was Martin Keogh, an internationally renowned contact improvisation dance educator and facilitator. Both content and process were affected by exposure to his ideas and expertise in making contact with one another and the environment in a sensitive way.

A Brief Description of the Sessions

There were five sessions in all, with each one being 90-minutes in length, including the opening and closing circles. The sessions had the following loose, overarching themes:

Session 1- Encountering Space

Session 2- Encountering Rhythm

Session 3- Conscious Repetition (ritual)

Session 4- African Dance

Session 5- Gratitude and Prayers (Chakra Journey)

Common to all sessions was the opportunity to simply enjoy our bodies, our movements and each other and to become more aware of who we are as dancing women; women dancing together. It is important to recognize that the sessions constituted only a taste of what might occur after a more prolonged exposure to this kind of experience; however, the data generated from five sessions was more than sufficiently rich and provocative.

Data Generation

As stated previously, deciding what constituted data and how it was to be collected, analyzed and represented was approached from the perspective of creative inquiry, with multi-modal creative expression considered a legitimate form of data. As a result, data generation was composed not only of verbal, post-session interviews but also of verbal and written data coming directly from the movement sessions themselves (see Table 1). I also kept a journal, making entries occasionally throughout the sessions and the data analysis phase.

Several changes were made to the original data generation outline. Both audio and video recording of data were not included, as they felt intrusive to the participants and to myself. I opted instead to take notes immediately after each session. As well, although I presented the women with the alternative of choosing a movement presentation using any combination of movement, spoken or written word, visual art, or sound to communicate impressions of the group, all of the women elected to have the verbal interview. Finally, although I provided a journal to all the women, only one of the participants wrote and shared her entries with me. Similarly, I found that as a researcher, my own ability to organize and run the sessions were sufficiently overwhelming to preclude much reflective activity during the sessions and so my journaling was minimal. As discussed above, research changes are a necessary and even desirable part of post-modern approaches to qualitative methodology. As van Manen (1990)

states, “A certain openness is required in human science research that allows for choosing directions and exploring techniques, procedures and sources that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project” (p. 162). This need to be responsive defined not only data generation but research decision making at every step of the way.

Table 1: Data Sources

Data Collection Activity	Description of Data Collection Activity
End-of-Session Data	a 15 minute time period at the end of each session, where participants were invited to share impressions, reflections and experiences that took place in the session. Researcher notes taken immediately after to record data.
Individual Interview	Individual interviews were, on average, 2 hours in length and took place within three weeks of completing the sessions. All interviews were used as formal data, although three transcripts were paraphrased due to technical difficulties with recording apparatus.
Participant Journals	all participants were given a journal at the first session which they can voluntarily choose to keep across all session in order to provide a continuity of experience, encourage reflection, and encourage integration of sessions into daily lives.
Researcher Journal	Kept intermittently over the course of the research as ideas, concerns, feelings surfaced.

Verbal data from interviews and notes from the sharing circles were transcribed and then entered in a computer software program (N Vivo) in order to assist management of data during analysis. Portions of my journal entries were entered selectively into the database during analysis. One participant’s journal entries, read to me during interviews, were transcribed and included as interview data.

Data Analysis

As van Manen stated, phenomenology is the process of “the breathing of meaning” (van Manen, 2002); a process, I would add, of breathing in experience and breathing out meaning. Again, phenomenology mirrors the study in question. Breathing serves as both a somatic phenomenon and a metaphor for the dynamic and cyclical process of moving between the source of experience (the body within time and space) and the textual or gestural expression of its meaning. This integration between subject matter and methodology provides rich opportunities to truly embrace the processes of both “reductio” and “vocatio” (van Manen, 2002).

Reductio

Reductio is the process of re-achieving “direct contact with the world by suspending pre-judgments, bracketing assumptions, deconstructing claims, and restoring openness” (van Manen, 2002). An attempt is made to put aside preconceptions in order to connect with the natural wonderment of experience; to allow the essence and originality of the experience to come through. This process is assisted by the attention to movement and embodied experience inherent to this study, and by the ongoing exhortation to return to the body, much as a meditator uses attention to body sensation as a way to quiet the mind and recognize ungrounded storytelling (Mipham, 2003).

Unlike empirical phenomenology, however, which suggests that pure experience can somehow be separated from the researcher’s subjective stance (Hein & Austin, 2001), the phenomenological reduction, or reductio, acknowledges that the viewer can never be entirely separated from the viewed and that the objective of reduction is to become conscious of and express one’s stance. In this way, the researcher’s voice becomes part of the dynamic interaction taking place as opposed to a calcified structure of meaning laid unthinkingly over the inquiry.

“Returning to the Well” was certainly a demonstration of this interwoven relationship of researcher and research. My personal life and movement experiences shaped the very content of the sessions and the experiences of participants themselves. This was not only inevitable but important. The only way to conduct a deep inquiry was from an inside perspective. The goal was not random samples and objective “truth” but a rich and sensitive appreciation of the phenomenon under investigation.

Although my philosophical and experiential stance played a role in creating the very experience the women were to have, my relatively un-invested relationship to formal dance or to D/MT provided me with a natural openness to what the women themselves were saying and doing. Furthermore, I quite deliberately chose to take the position of not leading the interviews, choosing to ask open-ended questions about their experiences of the session and accepting whatever they offered without probing for more. In retrospect, this passive stance as an interviewer protected the primacy of the women’s voice in the research while resulting in content that was possibly less phenomenologically rich than it might have been had I been less reticent to be more active in shaping the interview process.

Vocatio

Using a sound metaphor, whereas *reductio* refers to the attempt to become aware of and reduce the chatter of the busied self in order to hear the voice of the essential experience, *vocatio* is concerned with letting things “‘speak’ or be ‘heard’ by bringing them into nearness through the vocative power of language” (van Manen, 2002). This sense of having the experience speak powerfully through the researcher’s text once again merged well with the present study, as movement is shot through with embodied metaphor and imagery. Heidegger’s notion of ‘*Befindlichkeit*’ or “‘felt sense” (van Manen, 2002) perfectly describes the intersection between

the somatic and the numinous that was invited in, within the parameters of the study. Vocative language, as van Manen has suggested, is an effective means of bringing voice to this kind of knowing. In writing the results and discussion chapters, I attempted to connect with the essence of what the women expressed about their experience of being and dancing together in this context. As much as possible, I allowed the women's words to weave through my own reflections and images as they were often striking and powerful descriptions of their experience.

Thematic Analysis

Analysis of the data revolved around thematic patterns or, as van Manen (1990) puts it, "knots in the webs of our experiences" (p. 90), around which meaning tends to coalesce. Discovering patterns of meaning in the participants' descriptions of experience is not a rule-bound or mechanistic process, but rather, a creative one; a "free act of 'seeing' meaning." (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Seeking themes "is the process of insightful invention, discovery, (and) disclosure" (van Manen, 1990, p. 88). This statement acknowledges both the heuristic and hermeneutic aspects of uncovering and constructing meaning patterns, respectively. This holistic relationship to meaning-making constitutes a "dialogue with the text of life" (Dienske, 2002, p.88), which is suggested to honour not only the more active, masculine approach of meaning construction but the more feminine aspect of disclosure as well.

Both during the movement sessions and afterward, in the stage of analysis, I used my personal journal to assist me in approaching the participants' experiences in an open, fresh manner. As Moustakas (1994) stated, "'Establishing the truth of things' ... begins with the researcher's perception. One must reflect, first, on the meaning of the experience for oneself; then, one must turn outward, to those being interviewed..." (p. 57). Following this lead, I allowed my personal feelings, hunches and first responses to the experience of facilitating the

sessions and to participants' interviews to be given free-rein in my journal. It is difficult to speak of this process of immersion and reduction as dichotomous and opposing. I continually moved back and forth, with awareness, between the two sides of the same coin of conscious attending, with the journal providing me with a place to respond spontaneously to the experience of the sessions and the data while at the same time reflecting on my own experience, stance or role in the process.

In addition to the spontaneous and uncensored journaling process, I also applied a more systematic thematic reflection of the data, both at the macro and micro level (van Manen, 2002). I first looked for overarching thematic “knots” within the transcripts and journal entries and then, in a closer ‘reading’, through a selective or highlighting approach, where specific textual or movement phrases were chosen that seem to stand out.

Guided Existential Reflection

The four fundamental lifeworld existentials: lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation (van Manen, 2002) were particularly useful in uncovering the essence of the women's experience in the sessions. Because humans always exist in body, time, space, and relationship, the lifeworld existentials help reveal how we live and experience ourselves as human beings. These existential themes are generally believed to characterize the lifeworld of all human beings (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 1990). For example, (a) we are always bodily in the world, so the lived body always informs or is part of experience; (b) we experience subjective time, which is how time feels rather than how it is marked in minutes and hours, and live with a felt sense of the past, present, and future; (c) we experience the dimensions of our world in terms of felt space; and (d) we live in relation, with the animate, inanimate and spiritual. Van Manen (1990) called them lived existentials in order to differentiate them from the kinds of

themes that characterize the human phenomena studied in human science research, and to emphasize their pre-reflective nature (i.e., they tend to be experienced pre-verbally). The lived existentials are interdependent concepts, but for pragmatic purposes are considered individually. The lived existentials provide a natural means of uncovering meaning in group movement sessions as the very emphasis and goal of the sessions was to encounter and reflect upon the experience of body, time, space and relationality.

Free Imaginative Variation

As an ongoing aspect of analysis, I attempted to differentiate between incidental and essential 'qualities' by asking the phenomenological question, "What are the qualities that make (this) phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is?" (van Manen, 1990, p. 107). I employed "free imaginative variation" (van Manen, 1990, p. 107), imaginatively changing aspects of the phenomenon in order to identify the broader themes illuminating the essence of the phenomenon.

Research Trustworthiness

Guiding Questions

Ensuring research trustworthiness was a process of ongoing reflection and was influenced by the post-modernist and phenomenological stance adopted with respect to all aspects of the research. From this perspective, the emphasis was not on achieving some externally verifiable "truth" that could then be safely generalized to other situations but to effectively hear and communicate something of the essence of the many expressions of the experience of moving together as women, including my own. To this end, I considered several guiding questions, to be answered in the affirmative. The first question had to do with my personal biases and experiences as a researcher and the guiding question was, "Have I managed to become aware of

the influence of my own personal experiences and biases in a way that allows me to effectively reflect on the ongoing dynamic between these biases and the essence of this experience and have I presented my biases adequately to my audience?" I attempted to determine this on an ongoing basis by applying van Manen's framework of reduction, which includes heuristic, hermeneutic, phenomenological, eidetic and methodological reduction.

Heuristic reduction refers to setting aside taken-for-grantedness in order to inquire into experience with an attitude of wonderment and naivete. Hermeneutic reduction refers to the attitude of openness arising from a reduction of premature interpretations of women's experiences based on pre-existing personal preferences, expectations, or wishful thinking. Phenomenological reduction assisted in grounding the study in the concrete rather than being viewed as a theoretical abstraction. In fact, existing theory was examined for the phenomenological insights it might hold, always, however, returning to the lived experience at hand. Eidetic reduction ensured a movement from the particular to the iconic, through the consideration of possible patterns of meaning reflecting possible, tentative representations of human experience. Methodological reduction refers to taking an attitude of inventiveness with respect to the approach to the inquiry instead of relying on convention.

As has been mentioned previously, methodology emerged organically and in response to the particular nature of the inquiry in order to serve the phenomenon itself and not methodological convention. The various reductions described above were not discrete activities but an ongoing process that occurred in no particular order, in response to the women's reflections on their experiences. By continually returning to the women's original impressions of their experiences of moving and being within time and space, I was continually reminded of the essential and particular originality of the phenomenon.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest “authenticity” as an alternative to the positivist concept of validity in considering the credibility of qualitative research. In artistic inquiry, this is perhaps even more important. The question here was, “Have I successfully expressed the voice of the participants in this study, in terms of their descriptions of the lived experience, the meanings they attach to that experience and the interpretations I bring to it” (Patton, 2002)? This criterion of integrity of analysis was addressed by using many quotations from the interview transcripts and by sharing written drafts informally with my research committee and community of friends and associates.

A third criterion was aesthetic in nature and was captured in the question, “Have I succeeded in bringing the essence of the experience and its meaning to life in an evocative manner?” (Patton, 2002, p. 553). This aspect of the study relied on the ability to have my own creative voice come forward in the text. Again, having others read my work gave me an idea of how successful I was in this area, and consulting the extant literature on vocative writing (e.g., Nicol, 2008; Richardson, & St. Pierre, 2005; van Manen, 1997), assisted this process.

A fourth and final criterion of legitimacy was that of reciprocity (Lincoln, 1995). The question here was, “Have I given back to the group in which I’ve been working and has my study somehow contributed to the increased well-being of the women involved?” As this was quite an involved process, I needed to consider this question at every phase of the study. Prior to running the sessions, I devoted a great deal of time to gathering and preparing exciting and carefully considered movement activities. Throughout the project, I encouraged feedback from participants and after the sessions were complete, I attempted to stay in occasional contact with the women, to let them know how much I was enjoying spending time with their particular transcript and how the thesis as a whole was progressing. After the publication of the thesis, I

will continue the process of reciprocity through seeking out venues for publication that communicate their experience to both the academic world and the greater community and will communicate my findings in workshops and conferences as is appropriate. Furthermore, as was the request of several women in the group, I will offer more sessions in the future to provide an ongoing opportunity for women to enjoy similar experiences.

The Phenomenological Nod

A final and important criterion for trustworthy research is what is sometimes referred to as “the phenomenological nod” (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). When the text resonates with the reader, such that there is a recognition of something at the same time familiar and yet new and wondrous, the text can be said to have successfully described the phenomenon in question. In its simplest terms, hermeneutic-phenomenological value is determined when readers are re-awakened to lived meaning and significance. When this occurs, then the nature of a phenomenon has been adequately described, and the more foundational grounds of the experience uncovered (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) suggests that this completes the “validating circle of inquiry” (p. 27). That is, an effective phenomenological description “is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience, is validated by lived experience and...validates lived experience” (van Manen, 1990, p. 27). The reader of the text becomes an active participant in the validation process, determining for him or herself whether description and interpretation ring true.

CHAPTER 4 - RESULTS OF STUDY

This is your body.
Your precious gift
Pregnant with wisdom you do not hear,
grief you thought was forgotten,
And joy you have never known.

Marion Woodman
(with permission from author)

In this chapter, I engage with the data provided for me in the form of interviews with each woman within three weeks of the final session, verbal sharing in the 15-minute sharing circle within the movement sessions, my own observations of the participants' experience and my own written reflection. As much as possible, I have attempted to remain open and responsive to the emotional, imagistic and visceral nature of much of the material as I engaged with it. Hopefully, what has resulted is a text which is, itself, alive and evocative.

The chapter begins by describing three fundamental elements of the "Returning to the Well" movement sessions: the participants, the content and the process. I have defined these as "the container" of the experience. Becoming familiar with the participants and the type of activities in which they were engaged provides the reader with more of an inside perspective of the participants' experience. The third element, the process, emerged out of my analysis of the data and personal reflection. The chapter ends with a discussion of: (a) the interwoven nature of this foundational process and (b) the three core constructs that also arose from my analysis; namely, Conscious Embodiment, Conscious Play and Conscious Connection.

I have attempted to ensure that each woman's voice was represented and heard. It was for this reason that I chose to use pseudonyms as opposed to presenting anonymous fragments of data. Still, some women are quoted more than others. Many times, a certain impression would

be repeated by several of the women in different ways. It was difficult to limit the use of the women's direct quotes, as they were all powerful and telling. However, I chose to include particular quotes for several reasons, including their expressive weight. Certain quotations provided images or verbal data that seemed to best capture what many women were saying. It is for this reason that some women's quotes are used more than others. As a final note, all dictionary definitions referred to in both the Results and Discussion chapters came from the Oxford English Dictionary Online unless otherwise noted.

The Container

The Participants: Allow Me to Introduce You...

In order to speak of the 12 research participants in a more personalized way, and in a way that reflects my relationship with them, I assigned pseudonyms to the women that in one way or another act as a metaphorical representation of my impressions of them or their experiences in the sessions. This was a spontaneous, playful and loose assignation of names. I gave the participants an opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms as well but all were happy to let me choose.

Here, in Table 2, are the names, along with my loose impressions that led to the name or their derivations:

Table 2: Participant Pseudonyms

“Isadora”	A lover of Isadora Duncan, someone who danced internally, with eyes closed, seeking authentic movement impulses.
“Eartha”	Aware of and connected to her body, earthy, strong.
“Rea” (from Mater, Matre)	Mother of 5 children. Wise, powerful and strong as a result.
“Cora” (from Corazon)	Body and heart energy seem to be her language of communication. Emotional, sensual personality.
“Finn” (from Dolphin)	Lyrical, playful, bright and highly imagistic.
“Sola”	Active, masculine, sun energy.
“Vera” (from Verite)	Quiet truth-teller.
Elysse” (from Illyssia)	Nymph turned mother in Greek mythology. She is the youngest in the group and has recently crossed over from maiden to mother.
“Angela” (from Angel)	She is attracted to angels and reminds me of the “colour” white. Her energy is in her head and her hands.
“Thena” (from Athena)	Internal, solid, intellect, father’s daughter.
“Lib” from Libra	She is 2-sided in the sessions. She is quite free and sensual in her dance and she sings sometimes in the sessions. Yet she sometimes feels quite separate and self-consciousness. Also from “Liberte”. She is seeking freedom from this polarized duality.
“Tissa” (from Matisse)	She embodies life as art. She is highly creative – often seems to think laterally. She seems to lead what I term as a “hand-made life” and aspire to live myself.

Most of the women were either artists and/or healers and had used alternative healing practices previously in their lives. All except one were 35- 55 years old and I would describe all as being aware, intelligent, creative people committed to personal growth. The younger woman was in her late 20’s and had already experienced much in her life, including becoming a new

mother and being pregnant with a second child. As such, the participants brought a rich source of previous knowledge, experience and wisdom to the group and to the present study. As artists and healers, they also understood the value of journeying into unknown territory. None of the women self-identified as ethnic minorities (although some might have considered themselves as such). At least one woman came to the group with health issues that she felt set her aside from a mainstream, able-bodied life experience and most lived lives that in one way or another could be considered “alternative” or outside the “mainstream”, whether because they were stay-at-home moms who homeschooled their children, self-employed artists, alternative healers and entrepreneurs, or all of the above!

The Content: A Slice of Pie

The content of the sessions had great bearing on the women’s experience. Appendix A lists all the activities used in the five sessions as well as a description of some of the more central, important or possibly obscure activities. In order to communicate some sense of the flow and spirit of the journey that I facilitated during the five weeks, I have provided the following exposition of the journey of each session, using the present tense and an informal, poetic style to bring a greater sense of visceral engagement to the text and reveal something of the spirit of the Sessions:

Session 1: Encountering Space

In the opening circle of session one, we introduce ourselves to one another, in part by demonstrating our favorite sleeping position (an activity from Martin Keogh’s contact improvisation workshops). This is our first entry point into thinking about who we are, through what is a very personal but entirely taken-for-granted physical signature. I spend some time setting up the general tenor of the sessions, emphasizing the two guiding principles of all the

sessions: (a.) the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment where all feel free to be themselves and (b.) the importance of each member assuming physical and emotional *response-ability* - that is, the ability to manage one's responses to the environment and the various experiences one might encounter in the group.

We begin our exploration of space as if for the first time – noticing such things as light, shadow, and sound and above-, below-, and between-space as we move through the studio. Between-space exploration involves secretly and simultaneously keeping track of two others in the room as we move. At a certain point, I give the instruction to visually create an equilateral triangle out of the three bodies in space, still without letting it be known who the other two human parts of your triangle are. This directive results in a tangle of running, laughing, plunging and darting bodies as people attempt to maneuver within the confines of their triangle's form, setting off chain reactions that affect every other person's constantly shifting triangle. The miracle of this activity (should I give away the secret?!) is that sporadic bursts of corrective energy become increasingly interspersed with moments of relative stillness as some kind of holistic sense of order is established. Any minor adjustment might result in everyone flying off into a whirl of movement once more, but eventually, the entire room will be filled with interconnected equilateral triangles in a state of complete and awestruck stillness.

Going internal, I guide the women to encounter breath and bones; let spines take over and move them through the external space. What's it like to breathe space in, push it around, cut it, squeeze it into a corner, stir it up, turn it into honey, turn it into mud? Now, for the first time, the music comes on and I direct the women to let other body parts take over: elbows, heads, hands and buttocks dance the body through the space and finally, come to rest. The session winds

down, with attention brought back into the space within the body; a merging of the newly-encountered external context with an awakened internal body space.

Session 2: Encountering Rhythm

Session two begins with an exploration of inner rhythms. We begin the class with eyes closed, circling our hands in front of our chests, finding our own inner rhythm or “inner flywheel”, as Martin Keogh referred to it in his contact improvisation workshops. When we look around the circle, we see everyone’s hands moving at different rates. Exploration of inner rhythms means connecting to breath and pulse, our own as well as others’ - letting heartbeats and breathing patterns govern external movements, noticing and “stealing” the repeated movement phrases we each come up with as we dance to a strongly rhythmic African beat. Slowing the pace down, the pounding rhythm of breath and heart make themselves known. As the women walk through the space, I bring attention to the alternating rhythm of opposites: sounds and silence, movement and stillness. Gradually, we move into the Stillness Dance - patches of stillness between movements, gradually becoming patches of movement overlaid on a background of stillness, until the body comes to a complete rest.

Session 3: Conscious Repetition (Ritual)

In session three, I introduce the idea of ritual, although I do not use that word. The term is too loaded with religious and occult associations. Instead, I speak of “conscious repetition.” We begin with something that should surely be repeated! In a circle, eyes closed, I give each woman a piece of high quality chocolate and lead them through a “chocolate meditation”: feeling, smelling, licking the chocolate, allowing it to melt in the mouth without chewing, drawing the experience out, extracting every possible sensory response from it. From there, we

move into Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms® exercise - a ritual in the sense that it can be used as a daily movement practice. As the women come again to stillness, I place large swaths of flowing fabric over half the women and invite the other half to find a partner and to create a simple movement phrase together, incorporating the fabric. Finally, we come into a circle again and enjoy a "sound bath", chanting "ohm" and then moving on to whatever sounds or random words emerge.

Session 4: African Dance

Session four is unique in the series in that a local teacher of African Dance is the guest facilitator. Our teacher, Kahmariah, moves immediately into the intense movements of African Dance. Contracting and expanding the solar plexus and chest area, we learn that African dance is very much about the combined energy of power and love, with both of these corresponding to the chakras we are "pumping". Kahmariah takes us through several movement sequences and a coming-of-age dance for young girls at the time of their first menstruation. We learn that in Africa, they dance girls into womanhood and women dance together on a regular basis.

Kahmariah uses both a female drummer and taped music to set the tone for the session and, at one point, we learn how to make the woman's sound - the high pitched "le-le-le-le-le-le!" that can be heard in many traditional cultures in Africa and around the world.

Session four is starkly different from the other sessions. Whereas the others are improvisational and work with each woman's natural movement lexicon, this session demands that we learn new ways of moving and new sequences of steps. Our bodies are asked to respond in a way that is particular to this dance form first and our own movement patterns second. And whereas many of the exercises in the other sessions were almost meditative, these are a joyous aerobic workout. In African Dance, it is believed that the more energy you give out the more

you get back and by the end of the session, we must all be very energy-rich because we are exhausted.

Session 5: Gratitude and Prayers (Chakra Journey)

It is difficult to move back into our original way of being in session five as the African Dance was such a radical departure. We have to regroup and wrap up the sessions all at the same time. As a finale, I offer a Chakra Journey - a movement practice taken largely from YogaDance®. I begin the session with a contact improvisation activity, walking through the space and melting others to the ground with the touch of a hand to their head. Then into the chakra journey.....Music was chosen with chakras in mind: Feist for chakra one (think into the feet and connect with the earth). Onto the floor for chakra two (a spinal seaweed dance to snakey music, moving up to a free style dance to Middle Eastern music in the tradition of women dancing for - and only for - other women). Engaging hips, pelvis, lower belly. Think of the space as your lover. Intense drumming music for chakra three (two groups on either side of the room, creating movements without stopping to think and then coming to the centre to “challenge” the other line of women with their power movements and power sounds. Then moving and sounding as one “tribe” challenging the other). This activity ends in laughter as well as confusion. For chakra four, I turn off the lights, turn on some beautiful, heartfelt music and give no directive other than to freestyle dance. This is such an intense experience that, at its completion, the group is somewhat overwhelmed. The women move to the edges of the room, eyes still down and averted. I have them walk through the room, still in their private space for a while before moving on to the next activity, which requires partner work. Once recovered, the women move into the Chakra five/six activity, Authentic Movement, where one moves in silence and with eyes closed as the partner acts as witness. Finally, for chakra seven, we finish with a

“Jorane” piece - cello and haunting chant. The suggestion is that the women dedicate the dance to someone or something or to the self. This is the last activity of the sessions. We close with a final sharing circle, where what is generally expressed is gratitude for the experiences we have shared together.

The Process: The Act of Sourcing

Claiming the Here and Now

“Returning to the Well” doubles as both the title of the present study and the process of what I have termed *Sourcing*. What is meant by this is contained within the image of the journey back to the wellspring of experience. “Sunday at 11:00 a.m. in the back studio of Dance Saskatchewan” became more than a tangible set of conditions of time and space. With apologies to Marshal McLuhan, the container created *for* the experience *was* the experience. Setting this time and space aside each week constituted not only the necessary conditions but became a part of the experience itself – that of stepping fully and consciously into “Sunday Morning Time” and “Back Studio Space”. Literally stepping through the door of the studio was the physical manifestation of the process of *sourcing*: consciously claiming the Here and the Now within each present moment.

It seemed that walking through the door of the studio became a metaphoric return journey to something primordial or essential. We all came in brewing with the usual inner tangle, but then, to one degree or another, surrendered our duty-filled lives and entered studio space and time. Finn’s comment illustrates this beautifully:

This class affected the way I see time. It’s affected the way I approach time. Because that time was our time as women. Where we weren’t worried about the children, we weren’t worried about the bills... Once that door closed in that class it was like we were in this...in this... void! The empty void. But the place of pure potentiality. Like ... pre-creation. Like before - the beginning of the beginning (laughs). So that’s where I felt it took me.

Both space and time were claimed. I also felt this acutely and commented in my journal on the significance of being first to enter the space each Sunday morning. I write:

I love the feeling of being alone in the space with my music. I feel that it is my space that I am preparing for everyone. I put up the curtains, turn on the heaters, warm it up a bit. I sing a bit, dance a bit. There is emptiness and echoes.

I carefully chose not only the space, but the time for the sessions: 11:00 on Sunday mornings felt like a very particular time to me. It felt like “church” in the sense of being devotional towards the present moment and one’s place within it. Although I do not worship the body, I wanted to offer the women a chance, very loosely, without any talk of such a thing, to worship *through* the body. We each made some kind of worshipful journey to this “well” each Sunday. It was both a journey to an actual place and time and a metaphorical journey to a nexus of concentrated experience; to become a “devotee” of the present moment and one’s lived experience in it.

Many of the women talked about “being in their heads” in their everyday lives; concerning themselves with every moment *but* the one they were presently in. We all inhabit a largely unreal and worry-filled mental space; the noisy imaginings about what did or didn’t happen and what might happen next. Stepping into the studio each Sunday morning brought the women back to the precise and present moment and this became a simple source of rejuvenation. Step to the well, lower the bucket, draw the bucket up, one hand over the other. Tip the bucket and drink. No more. No less.

The act of journeying to the well each Sunday required that a choice be made, actively reflecting the women’s values and priorities. Many of the women spoke of how difficult and yet how important it was to value themselves enough within the context of their busy lives to show up each week. The studio space became a *space-away*; and coming to the sessions a chance, as

Rea said, to “demand that space.” The act of “Returning to the Well” conveyed the message to the self that sourcing the waters of expression and connection felt both crucial and radical, in the original sense of these words. Crucial, coming from the Latin *crux* or “cross”, takes its meaning from the phrase *instantia crucis*, a cross-shaped signpost at the fork in a road and a metaphor for the immediate necessity of choosing the way. The women had to choose: to value the self or to let life have its way. Such a choice was indeed radical. In earlier usage, *radical* meant “relating to or forming the root, original, primary”, sometimes specifically describing a force or “humour” considered “...a necessary condition of vitality”. The choice to journey to the well was the choice to seek communion with one’s self, at the very root of being.

Saying Yes: Conscious Witnessing

Come Dance with Me

If there is a desert,
I send out a call into the wilderness.
Le-le-le-le-le-le-le!
If there is an oasis,
Come dance.
The silent body speaks.

Mischa’s journal

At times, it is useful to speak of *the source* towards which we journey, but also to use the active verb form, *sourcing*, when speaking of the women’s experience. As such, what is described is less a destination than a process. This distinction is more than semantics. Other expressive movement facilitators that I have worked with, including Aileen Hayden, have commented on their preference for using the gerund (-ing) form of the verb in their classes. They might say, “and now we are walking, or “I invite you to feel the spine bending and spiraling”, or “the breath is flowing into the contracted parts of the body” and so on. This linguistic choice reflects the ongoing process of consciously witnessing the present moment.

In simple terms, *sourcing* was the process of saying “yes”. First, there was the initial invitation and the “yes” in response to this was loud and clear. In an email reflecting on the moment she found out about the sessions, Elysse wrote:

When I heard about the workshop you were offering and read the description, I felt a very strong impulse to leap out of my chair and yell, “YES!” It was a body response. I didn't really think. It was like my body knew before my head what I needed. I was seven months pregnant at the time, and I was aware of a desire to move my body. Not jog, not exercise, but movement. When your invitation came along, there was physical feeling of pouncing, of lunging for the opportunity. It was a “yes” feeling.

Others indicated that this invitation was an answer to a literal prayer, came at exactly the right time, or was what they had been feeling they needed. I called out and there was a strong, positive response.

In the African-American Baptist tradition, there is a form of devotional music which is known as “Call and Response”. In the Hindu tradition, something similar is found in the practice of *Kirtan* or group devotional chanting. In each of these forms, the leader invites the group to devote themselves to a deity through self-expression. Although we were not meeting to worship a deity, this notion of call and response is a powerful way of understanding the experience of *sourcing* within the sessions. The word devotion contains within it, the Latin root *votum*, “an earnest wish or desire; a prayer, a supplication.” The initial call to the women to devote time to themselves and celebrate themselves as women within a safe and supportive context of other women, was like the pebble dropping in the water. Rippling outward was the lingering invitation throughout the sessions – to say “yes” to the experience moment by moment; to respond fully. The root of the word, respond, is the Latin *spondere*, meaning “to pledge.” Both devotion and response suggest a stance of committed and intentional availability; a willingness to be both wide open and attentive.

Like the conscious choice to set aside the time and space each week to journey inward, the act of being receptive and attentive, the act of *conscious witnessing* (Tolle, 2005; Wilber, 2006) is yet another container in which the source waters can be drawn up to the surface. A cracked vessel will not hold water. A vessel not mindfully lowered and drawn up will never reach the thirsty mouths. Sourcing is the process not only of journeying back but, once there, becoming fully available to and conscious of the act of being.

Many of the women referred to this receptivity as a kind of “listening”. Speaking about what had been important about the sessions, Elysse said:

...and that’s been a big theme for me... just listening... *really* listening. Both...inside, listening to my inner voice, but also listening... to nature, to people, just *really listening*....to (my son)...you know, really hearing what it is that *he’s* trying to say to me.....so listening to that... but listening to myself has been a big thing. What is it that these feelings are...trying to communicate to me. So to just...to listen to (laugh) what’s coming up? And not just what’s comfortable. And to allow it to just move through, and then allow it to change, and allow it to stop and allow it to ...move it into something else. It was *really* cool and I was *really* surprised how easy ... it came.

Finn described the process of witnessing in terms of “being true to (herself)” and “listening to (her) heart”. She said:

(The experience) was really about listening. ...really honing in on what does your body want to do? And what is your body saying? Because the way that our world is working, we still have a lot of people telling us.... from outside influences... how we should act and how we should be and what we should do.

To be conscious is to listen for the “still small voice” (I Kings 19:11-12, Revised Standard Version) that resides in the interior self.

The activities in the sessions were themselves designed to assist the women in tuning in to what their bodies and their hearts had to say. When I asked Eartha if she had ever experienced anything similar, she said:

Ah, interesting.... I think... strangely enough... in meditation. Sitting... and being still and quiet, I’ve had these sorts of “ah hahs” (as well). So it seems strange that, from

stillness to movement.... And that would be the only other place I would think of... that I would compare it to. Sitting alone, in meditation....And I think ...because it's a witnessing, because it's just... an awareness. Being in your body...and being...aware.

In many ways, the sessions *were* like a movement meditation – not in any strict sense but in the receptive orientation toward the present moment through the senses – what the women saw, heard, felt, smelled, and tasted, and the act of moving through the environment with one another.

Non-doing: Emptying Out and Slowing Down

A human can only act, that is, move outward, in a manner that is specifically human, to the extent that he or she can receive the gift of energy being poured out from the source.

(Needleman, 1989, Introduction to Tao te ching, p. xxi)

The process of becoming receptive and sourcing the “root of being” seemed to be as much about removing something extraneous as it was about introducing anything new. All the women knew they wanted to turn something off so that something else could get turned on. The activities encouraged disengagement from mental processing and a subsequent reconnection with somatic-based awareness. Everyone experienced a sense of real relief and nourishment from this disengagement. Finn described the sense of relief as the “ahhhh feeling” that came from being able to disengage and relax and allow. She described it as a “settling in” - both into her own body and into the experience of disengagement. She said:

Within the classes... I was *slow*. I got really slow in my movements. And I got quiet. And I went to... the open, empty spaces...because I can fill it all up. I can just- I can have these superwoman days where I get a whole lot done. But then what happens 3 days later? I have to say ‘ok everybody go away now I’m going to go hibernate in my room now’. So it’s helped me - I don’t why I’m saying ‘elongate’. But it’s made me realize that there will be tomorrow to get x, y and z done. It’s helped me use the space of today differently. Whereas before I just put too much in each day...and now I’m, like, ‘this can happen tomorrow. This is going to happen today.’ So it’s because we did a lot of things in that hour and a half to take us to different places.

Disengagement or non-doing is related to time. Finn slowed herself down and emptied herself out. It felt to her that a great deal happened and yet time elongated, things slowed down and the

spaces opened and emptied. The practice of ‘non-doing’ in the sessions - of slowing down and emptying out, of putting the focus on being receptive rather than “fill(ing) it all up”, allowed her to settle in and relax. In her interview, Rea shared that the sessions allowed her to “slow down and remember”. In life, the relentless push and pull of our human will is related to the rush of clock time, whereas ‘remembering’ ourselves is a receptive, conscious stance that shifts time from the linear demarcation of the clock to the lived sense of time within the present moment. From that place, one can use time instead of being used by it. One can fully own the lived sense of it instead of running to catch up to something that seems to have already passed by.

In the Authentic Movement activity, the idea was to move only if clearly compelled at a physical level. Again, the permission to do nothing; to release the habit of doing simply for the sake of doing, was a huge relief. Elysse shared, “I *really* appreciated the guidance of... or the permission, from *you* to.... If you don’t hear anything, you don’t have to move.... I felt really freed by that.” The women loved the opportunity to get to the bones of their movement, even if that meant no movement at all. Instead of a mentally-derived message about what movement they *should* do, they were given permission to enjoy a completely receptive response. Rea said:

I can hear you in my mind... I ...appreciate exactly what you said because ... I didn’t move at all at the beginning. I just waited. And then, I started moving. And then, I hear your voice inside my head about...if it isn’t authentic movement, you know, basically don’t do it.... just wait, you know. And so I’d hear that and it would be like a check-in... As I was moving... that voice would come... It would be a little moment of- check- and say, ‘yup, authentic movement and we can keep going with it’. You know, just move.

Non-doing does not necessarily mean “no action”. Instead, it means action that is in response to a deeper impulse. If there is no deep impulse, then one remains still. The main task is to listen and then allow. Allowing denotes a state of passivity, which is considered a sign of weakness in our culture. The root of the word reveals something very different, however.

Passive comes from the Latin *passivus*, meaning “subject to passion or emotion, capable of

suffering or feeling” and the Middle French *passible* meaning “sensitive”. The root *pass* is also found in the word *passion*, a word that conjures up quite a different picture. The original sense of *passive* conveyed the idea of sensitivity, openness to influence, and intensity whereas in modern usage, the notion of sensitivity and openness is lost and replaced by the connotation of inactivity, weakness and “submissive(ness)”. Aligning with the original sense, to be passive or receptive is not to be inactive or powerless, but to be passionately committed to the present moment, whatever it might hold.

Conscious Embodiment

Lost in the Desert: The Silent, Forgotten Body

Damn Thirsty

First
The fish needs to say,
“Something ain’t right about this
Camel ride-
And I’m
Feeling so damn
Thirsty

Hafiz (trans. 1999, p. 198)

Van Manen (1990) refers to the phenomenological inquiry as giving voice to what has been silent and/or forgotten. “What is” can often be understood by looking at “what is not”. The women’s expressions of their thirst for movement and their gratitude for the experience of the sessions were a declaration of the silencing of the body in their daily lives. Here is what Elyse said about her thirst for dance:

I really discovered through this, and I’ve known this about myself, how important it is for me to move my body and to move it in a conscious, loving way and to take time to do that. A big, big, big thing in these sessions was just really realizing how much I love, and need, and want...to move and dance ...in a free form like this.

Most of the women echoed this sentiment. At the end of the first session, some tears were shed as participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to dance. Everyone in that room was thirsty to feel her body expressively in motion.

Despite the deep need to dance, disconnection from the body was encountered throughout the sessions. Lib said:

I found it a struggle to get ... into the class and get moving and get into my body but once I did I felt more balanced. ...and that confirmed for me... that...*I need to be in my body.* Because I spend way too much time up...in my head.

Being “up in the head” makes it easy to forget that the body is for anything other than hauling the brain around from point A to B and back again. For Lib, the disconnection was blocking her from getting back into connection again. A couple of other women mentioned this “Catch-22”. It is as if there is a chronic block that stops some of us from getting the very thing we want and need in our lives. Where does this disconnection come from? In listening to the stories of the women, I saw that there were so many things that had shut them down on one level or another: the mental activity in their jobs, their busy lives with children and grandchildren, pregnancy, exhaustion, serious illness, (either their own or someone else’s), death, divorce, depression, grief, loneliness, or, as Finn put it, the “superwoman” complex. In other words, life sometimes grinds us down, renders us silent, or even brings us to our knees. Sometimes we barely breathe and seem to retreat into a small part of ourselves. We tighten, our blood slows in our veins, and our bodies become silent and forgotten.

Some women spoke of chronic tension in their shoulders, of feeling “fragmented” or of feeling “contracted” in a strong somatic reaction to their environment. After the sharing circle at the end of one of the sessions, I wrote, “The past few days with the snow, Finn says she has been getting this sick feeling of dread - it happens every year - like she’s vomiting inside herself.

Shutting down. Contracting.” Here, the body was speaking powerfully, even as it contracted and disconnected. For others, the disconnection took the form of a sort of systemic numbing. One woman, who was recently in a new intimate relationship said, “Not being able to feel your own body is not good. You know, ... (laughs) it doesn’t help things!” She was re-surfacing after grieving the death of more than one person who was close to her in her life. Now an opportunity for love and renewal was coming into her life and she was having trouble responding sensually or sexually because her feeling sense had, on some level, shut down. Isadora, who years ago, would have been the one dancing all night long at a party with her eyes closed, totally absorbed in the experience, wrote in her personal journal about feeling disembodied now as a result of illness and disability: “Ah yes, my soul wants the old Isadora back, she’s covered in a hardened skin. Lifeless scars. And I’m seeing very small portions disappear each re-visiting of the dance experience.” Disconnection is like scar tissue; lacking the original suppleness and vitality that she remembered.

I too became aware of my numbness and disconnection while facilitating the sessions. In my journal, I write:

I am feeling physically disconnected. I’ve been doing quantitative research work lately- abstracting peoples’ agony into categories, frequencies, and correlations. Primitive people use ritual and art to express deep unified social values. These hats that I put on create rituals of disembodiment. I am needing to connect (still, and again) with a daily movement practice.

To be connected to our somatic resources is something not supported by the “rituals of disembodiment” that run through our lives. The sessions reminded us all that in our lives outside the sessions, we are parched and yet do not even know how thirsty we are until we stand before the water.

A Homecoming

A feast for the senses, was the first step, and arrives at getting lost in the doing, joy in the being, relaxed in the purity of motion. Trusting in all that process, a swirling unity felt almost immediately, 12 cats rolling in the dirt of experience.

Isadora's journal

In the way that the wilderness brings to mind the home, the women's awareness of "something missing" brought to mind "something more". Being physically attentive, active and expressive was, in many ways, like a homecoming. Our bodies are the only home we cannot leave while we are alive and yet, although we live within them, we do not often fully inhabit them. The term "embodiment" (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991, p.27) refers to fully dwelling within our bodies; to fully returning home. "Returning to the Well" is a return to our physical source of life - our own bodies. The women came back home with the relief and enthusiasm of someone who has been away too long.

The expression of homecoming or return to the embodied self was not only evident in the women's emotional and physical response to the sessions but in their words as well. When I asked the women about moments of discovery in the interviews, I was sometimes corrected quite pointedly. Tissa, for example, shared that it was "more like a remembering" than a discovering and Rea mentioned "slowing down enough to remember". It was not that the women did not visit any truly new places. Some did. But there was a clearly expressed familiarity about the place they found themselves in the sessions - both in terms of the return to the present moment and the return to the embodied experience of the self.

Ironically, exploration of the Here and Now often took the women to a place in the past. Home is a place *of* memory and a place *in* memory. Deep source water carries within it, among other things, all that we have been and all that we remember about ourselves: both the sweet and

the bitter. Part of the homecoming was not only an appreciation of the present moment but a somatic reintegration of the past.

The Water Is Sweet

Creating space for embodied was primarily a joyous experience. We bring our consciousness back into our bodies, taste ourselves and find our remembered selves delicious. As Isadora's quote suggests, the sessions were "a feast for the senses". It was evident how much the women loved the sensuality of many of the activities. In the sharing circle after one of the sessions, Eartha compared how she felt in the sessions to an earlier time, when she and her close female friends would frequent the local nude beach, basking in the warm sun and feeling the wind on their skin:

I felt absolutely great. And like I said yesterday ... relaying it back to my experience of being at the beach ... with beloved women, and that sort of thing in my life... yeah...I felt beautiful moving in that class... it was a very good feeling for me.

Cora experienced several moments of "deliciousness" as well. In the last session, dancing to Middle Eastern music, I mentioned the fact that in most Islamic cultures, women do not dance in front of men other than their husbands; they only dance for each other. Here is what she said about her experience of that dance:

Cora: (sharp intake of air). Oh! And ... I felt sensual and sexual and very Like (Eartha) (said), you know, when she spoke (about feeling beautiful)... *that was it.*

Me: "Myum! Myum! Myum!" (in imitation of sounds Eartha made in her comment in the sharing circle about feeling beautiful and sensuous)

Cora: Yeah!" Feeling so ... beautiful, like, not *beautiful* – it's like this inner feeling of... ahh! I don't know... yeah! Just... feeling beautiful...because...I think we forget that. Because... *I do.* That I'm not just a mom and I'm not just... I am filled with this... beauty. Because I think that's what a woman taps into when she's dancing. I believe that she can she goes right into the root, right into the womb, right into the birth, and - and then you can dance from that place. That's... magical, I think.

Speaking of the last session in general, she added:

So, that last session for sure, for me, was like... I was loving myself completely in that moment. I was...I mean if I could have taken... (gestures 'all my clothes off'). And probably other women might have been feeling that too but, I was just like...I don't know...I just felt so free.

Lib was another woman who fully enjoyed the sensuality offered by the sessions. She describes the following as a highlight:

I remember one of the... You said...'move as if the air is caressing you'. And...I *loved* that one ...The honey one...I liked the honey one. I liked the sensations... I haven't danced for a long time...so...The ...air like honey, the seaweed, the ... air caressing you...I found it very sensual...and...that added to my life, made me feel awesome...and ...but ok. I want more...! (Laugh) Time to step up the dating thing, maybe!

Elysse also enjoyed being beautiful in the class. A highlight for her was “feeling beautiful with (her) pregnant belly, loving moving with it, dancing with it, feeling the movements inside.” In her first pregnancy, she had been able to take time to fully enjoy that experience. Now, with a little one at home, she felt more disconnected from the experience of being pregnant. The sessions allowed her time to have a relationship with her unborn babe. (The only male allowed in the class, as it turned out).

Tissa, who had been feeling depressed and “numb”, experienced an embodied “remembering” of the unlimited strength and energy she had enjoyed dancing in her living room as a teenager:

My body... says, 'I can do this...! I can dance again, just like I used to when I was a teenager.' (Laughs). Because a lot of the time the person that you saw dancing there *was* a teenager. It wasn't me. It wasn't a 51 year old woman, it was the teenager part of me. (laughing). 'Let me out!'

Finn, who, within the last year had experienced two potentially devastating events in her life, said, in reference to one of the Gabrielle Roth rhythms, “The lyrical! When I started ...I don't know where lyrical *went*. But I got lyrical *back* in this class. Lyrical came fully - like,

right back. And that's *child*. And that's *play*. And that's *innocence*." Finn reclaimed an entire aspect of herself – a part that she values deeply.

The Water Can Make Us Weep

“Joy and passion are infused with mourning”

Isadora's journal

Sometimes, the very act of coming home can be as a rose with thorns. Isadora, whose chronic health issue had included an acute movement disorder said:

it was bringing stuff up from a place...where nothing was hard. Way back when. ...Avenues I haven't explored in ages and ages, let's put it that way... And since that time, of course, things have *drastically* changed and I've gone through all kinds of stuff that was quite limiting physically and so ...this was...quite a revisiting of all kinds of ...stuff.... But that's years and years and years ago - 20 some-odd years ago. I haven't ... (danced) since then.

Remembering is laced with the bitter truth of being unable to return and the knowledge that some things can never be the same. At the same time as the women were regaining part of themselves that had been dormant, they were sometimes grieving the memory of a time forever past.

For some women, the grieving had to do with a renewed awareness of how much had been sacrificed. Cora, a singer and dancer whose life had been drastically altered over the past year and a half as a result of a life-threatening illness in the family, reflected on the losses she had experienced in her life and the process of “re-calling” that came from the sessions:

So it was...a remembering for me. And ... I think it just... it reminded me... how much I ...absolutely *love* to dance... I didn't know how much until.... And same with singing. Right? So....hoo, hoo hoo (pretends to cry, gentle tears, laughter). This helped me remember... who... well not necessarily *who* I am, but a part of me that... I completely let go of....

It was she who had put out a prayer not long before the sessions began, both for her own return and for something to assist this return: “I just started asking,” she said. Asking for...myself to come back... for whatever was left... to come back.”

“Who I am” is often contrasted with “who I was”. Loss and gain are both considered within a context of the passage of time. A previous state of being, what van Manen (1990) refers to as “the morningness” of youth (p.104), is experienced as newly present or infinitely far away - or both. It appears, we taste it again, know ourselves to be truly this, and then, as suddenly, we feel time in our bodies and feel the trickster at work. As the woman physically re-members the morning self, she effectively holds time within her. She re-members and grows young, she feels time’s ravages and grows old. The boundless strength, energy and health of the younger self are still felt within the body and yet are only partially or temporarily accessible and are mourned. Through the return to a conscious embodiment, time is personally understood and lived. As our maturing Isadora reflected so beautifully in her journal:

Need to find the joy in my limits for now. Within.
I am mourning possibilities.
Crossing boundaries I have not subjected myself to for quite sometime...
Joy and passion are infused with mourning on all levels.
Such beauty.

Isadora moves both ways in time, remembering a past she both mourns and welcomes back, and daring to hope for a future of increased well-being to which she refers in her diary as “the carrot the donkey may never have.” Time traveling from the Here and the Now to a self she has been, or might be, can bring a fuller, deeper relationship with the physical self and greater sense of vitality. But within this gift lies an awareness of how far we’ve traveled and how difficult or impossible it may be to get back, even if we should. As we bend to smell the rose of our body’s beingness, we are pricked by the thorn of passing time.

The Intimacy of “I” and “Thou”

Sourcing the Here and Now seemed to require being in open relationship with the self, the body, the moment, much as one would lay oneself at the feet of a lover - with openness, vulnerability and growing trust.

Mischa’s journal

The experience of embodiment was also described in terms that reminded me of a relationship with a loved one - an old friend or lover perhaps, who has returned home after a long absence. In a sense, the body was put into the role of “thou” and the consciousness was the “I” that beheld it (see discussion of Buber’s I-thou in the Discussion chapter, p. 150). Women spoke of “being in their bodies” as opposed to “up in their heads” as if the body could somehow remain uninhabited. Obviously, we are always in our bodies or they would be lifeless on the floor, but embodiment means more than having a body by default. It means enlivening the body with our consciousness.

A renewed and more intimate relationship with the body grew out of this conscious cherishing for most, and probably all, of the women. Eartha said, “I felt like I sort of discovered my arms and my elbows, actually, in the sessions...And I had no idea how much I’d enjoy them.” Her elbows and arms are rediscovered and enlivened through her delighted awareness of them. Later in the same interview, Eartha talked about how she thought of her spine:

I think I didn’t really fully have a sense of how inflexible my spine was...and then actually, in the last session...your wording was ‘that beautiful, undulating spine’ and I thought... I don’t think of my spine like that... even though... obviously it is. I bend down, I stand up, that kind of thing...I realize that... I think of my spine as stiff ...thing! I think of my spine as a stiff thing to keep me upright...when it comes into my mind. ...I don’t think about it as being this beautiful, flexible thing. And so, I really tried thinking about it like that yesterday ... and it made my movement ...easier.

Eartha recognized the limitations of her present relationship with this core part of her body and reclaimed her relationship with her spine by bringing her consciousness to the fullness of what it could be - not only a stiff support but a supple, alive thing.

Ironically, viewing the body as the “cherished other”, dichotomizing the self into I and thou, seemed to bring a greater integrity of being. Women talked about being “more present”, “calm” and “empowered” when they were, as many phrased it, “in their bodies”, as if they felt

more settled and integrated on all levels. At times, the integration between the somatic, emotional and spiritual states was overtly expressed. For example, one woman spoke of her shoulders - how they had begun to soften and neck pain had disappeared since taking the sessions. And then later, speaking of a having gained a greater sense of balance in her life as a whole, she said, “I don’t know why I’m referring to my shoulders but - for a long time I was kind of like *this...*” and physically demonstrated a pushing forward from the shoulders on one side only. There was an attempt to gesturally communicate a holistic shift that had taken place. A more aware and intimate relationship with her own physical balance of left and right side seemed to be related to and to affect her sense of “balance” and harmony in her life as a whole.

Body Intelligence: A Physical Imperative

In a way it was...letting my body choose for itself.

Thena (post-session interview, December, 2008)

At various points, the women encountered what Tissa described as “body intelligence”. Referring to what she thought she might be able to take away from the sessions and incorporate into a daily personal practice, she said:

(I could) put on some music and ... let my...body parts move me... let the feet do what they need to do and then move up to the knees and then move up to the hips and then to the spine and then finally to the arms and then to the head... Or to the hands, just let the hands do the dance and then the rest of the body follows...I’d like to explore that somewhat...on a regular basis, because...that’s dealing with body intelligence, I think. Because you really have to trust that...each part has a specific need and you have to get in contact with what that need is.

The experience of physical knowing separate from mental knowing and the physical imperative to be or move in a certain way was quite a revelation to us all. This was perhaps most explicitly demonstrated in the Authentic Movement activity in the last session, as well as the 5Rhythms® activity in the third session. Both activities invited participants to be receptive and allow the

body to move in accordance with the somatic impulse. Authentic Movement, as has been seen, went further and introduced the idea of stillness and waiting as an option in the process of listening for the emergence of the physical imperative.

As with all the movement activities, I gave no intellectual explanation of this physical imperative. I simply invited the women to still their minds and let any movement emerge naturally. In the interviews, it was clear how liberating it was to receive “permission” to do nothing. Here is Eartha’s experience recorded in full:

When we did the authentic movement, I thought, I’m going to just stop and I’m not going to... I’m just going to listen. You know, like your instruction...just don’t move... and I was perfectly fine with not moving until I felt compelled to do so and for some reason, when I hear music and I start moving to it, the movement always starts in my hips. So maybe I had this preconceived idea that, if I was going to move, that’s where my movement would come from. So when I listened, I actually heard a noise. And the noise was sort of like a - babhvoom- and I guess a heart beat sort of thing, right? It was like a ba-bhvoom, ba-bhvoom, ba-bhvoom and that was my noise and that was my rhythm. That was what I was responding to and then – and it was my head... (surprised) then, that started moving. And I have a bad neck. I’m very careful about moving my head so that I don’t put my neck out. And then, you know, my head was moving on my neck. And it was sort of a circle, and then it was a babhvoom to the side and a babhvoom to the (other) side and then my shoulders became engaged in it too. My partner was observing and I didn’t ask her, was it ugly. I have the sense that it was probably not a very lovely movement. Like when I watched *her* movement, it was very beautiful and very sensual, with her eyes closed, you know, almost seductive and I had the sense that my movement wasn’t - that my movement was very jarring and very ugly, but I don’t know. I didn’t care. I didn’t really give a fuck. So then my head moved into my shoulders and it felt like, ok, just letting my body do what it wanted to do and it was like a balancing. So, it moooved into my shoulder, and it moooved into my shoulder. And then it was like I had a certain amount of movement to do, then, with my shoulders. And then from there it moved into my hip and my hip. And interestingly enough when you said, ok you’ve got thirty seconds, now and I was observing my partner, that she stopped almost immediately after you said 30 seconds and brought her movement to stillness. And I noticed that I was you know, witnessing myself that I was the opposite. It was like, ‘ok I’ve got 30 seconds. I’ve got certain amounts of movements that I need to get out.’ That’s what it felt like. It felt like an expelling. Certain amounts of movements that I need to get out with my hips. So it was like, ‘Ok. I’m over here. And I’m over here. And I’m over here.’ And I managed somehow to get the movements that I wanted, out, from my head to my hips? But I felt like I could have taken it all the way down to my feet and then it’s like I would have been cleansed or something.

Body intelligence and agency is very clear in this description, as if there was a physical imperative to “expel” or “cleanse” through movement and the body “knew” precisely what needed to be done.

Rising From the Root

The body’s response to conscious witnessing seemed to be directional, as if a transformational journey was taking place that moved from the somatic level to other levels of being. In the last session, during the heart dance, Cora was overcome with emotion and left the room to get a drink of water and regain control. In her interview, she had described the period of time where her child was gravely ill. She said, “I surrendered *everything*. Even... I think... even part of my soul. I don’t know what happened there but it was very interesting. And I just said, just... whatever... *use me.*” Joining the sessions was part of her journey back. Moved by the music and the moment, her dancing self somehow conjured an embodied experience of her worth and she fully felt how she deserved to have herself back. But her comprehension of her worth did not, could not, have come out of a cognitive experience. It was a result of going, as she put it, “right into the root, right into the womb, right into the birth...and then ... danc(ing) from that place.” Her understanding of her self-worth was an embodied insight that “nailed her” at every level.

In the sessions, Cora and others experienced these occasional moments of transformative flow where the body seemed to be “the dancing root”, sending life force streaming upward. I think there was something happening that is difficult to verbalize. I did not analytically probe these experiences in the interview. As I write, I find myself resistant to any attempts I might make to do so now. Let it instead remain simple: dancing from the root in response to voice and sound and rhythm, as Cora was, feels damned good. There is pleasure there, and sensuality.

There is powerful emotion that comes - joy with tears - because there is a breaking open; a bursting. What Cora experienced involved her full self: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual.

There was a holistic *apprehension* that took place for Cora and for others. As Eartha said many times throughout the project, she was thoroughly surprised by the “aha!” moments that accompanied this dance experience. “Who knew?” she kept saying. “Who knew that I’d have so many revelations in a movement class?” Sola put it a different way. “I liked the fun (of) bringing out the thoughts, the ideas. So I was automatically relating it to other things... as we were doing these fun things.” Each woman had her way. But there seemed to be some kind of transformation taking place and the direction of this inner alchemy seemed to be from root to sky.

Rea also experienced some kind of emotional catharsis that had its origins in movement. She described how the 5Rhythms® movement practice in the third session “shook (her) to the core” and in the final slow and meditative rhythm, entitled “Stillness”, she described a “ball of something in her chest area” which, as she allowed herself to explore it, grew and transformed into weeping as she continued to move.

Again during the 5Rhythms® movement meditation, Eartha found that she was having real difficulty with the “lyrical” rhythm, which is quite breezy and playful. She noticed resistance as she danced and was surprised by it, as she considers herself to be a playful person. In my guiding narrative, I then referred to the rhythm as “childlike” and she experienced a sudden surge of emotion, recognizing that the resistance was coming from a long-stored emotional hurt from childhood. Moving in this playful, innocent way stirred up a resistance in her body that she did not understand. It was as if my words were a catalyst that triggered a shift in understanding. She continued to move through the emotion until it settled and dissipated.

Here, the work or transformation was just begun. The sessions were not designed or equipped to provide adequate therapeutic support for this kind of deep emotional work.

All the women who experienced these emotional surges arising out of movement chose to stop what they were doing in order to allow the emotion to recede somewhat or continued to dance through it. In the interviews, when I asked the women how they felt about continuing to move through the experience without full emotional catharsis, they all felt that it was fine. Some would have like to continue the work in a different context (private space and/or more support) but, knowing the parameters of this particular group experience, all accepted that this was not the “time or the place” to have a full cathartic experience. Some even appreciated that the circle was not going to include this kind or level of work. Having issues arise from physical movement, acknowledging it and then choosing to continue moving was, for some of the women, beneficial in itself. It was, however, a powerful indication that, as Cora put it, we are not “in control”. The physical and emotional imperative can rise up within us like a wave if we open up fully to our dance. It provides a great deal of food for thought regarding the possible benefits of group experiences where the necessary support and expertise are available to more fully explore these waves of physical and emotional impulses.

It was truly remarkable to witness the uniqueness of these “alchemical journeys”. Some women experienced a shift on a purely physical level - bodies feeling expansive, physical energy increased. More often, women reported a swell of emotion in tandem with physical manifestations. Rea described a transformation that seemed to cycle round completely. It began with the guiding physical imperative, moved through emotion, developed into a mental “story” and ultimately merged into a highly evocative image that was particularly physical! Although we laughed together about her experience at the time of the interview, it was (and remains) an

important guiding image for her as well as one about which she feels a certain “shyness”.

Gratefully, she allowed me to include it here:

Rea: “I didn’t move at all at the beginning. I just waited. And then, I started moving. And then, I hear your voice inside my head about...if it isn’t authentic movement, you know, basically ...don’t do it. Like just, just wait, you know. And so I’d hear that and it would be like a check – a check-in, you know, as I was moving, it’s like, that voice would come on and it, and it would be a little moment of – check - and say, yup, authentic movement, and we can keep going with it. You know, just move it where it.... and it was just, and a story came out about the hairy balls (testicles).”

Me: The what?

Rea: (whispering very closely to the tape recorder so it’s really loud)

“Hairy balls.... So the story came out... (My partner) was there... and I was pushing against him. He was...the force I was pushing against and, and I could feel it because...it came from my throat...I had a sense of the energy there. A fullness, a tingling. A sensory awareness of the throat chakra and it made sense. As things were moving, it was a speaking up, right? And... the...vision... the image of (my partner) in my mind, was representative of the father figure, you know, always battling that and... there was a moment there when I was battling my father and Rain, my dog, was right beside me and ... I was screaming at him...planting my feet.. and on no uncertain terms I was stating what I needed. And my poor dog was right there. She was just a pup but she was... glaring at Dad. And he heard me. You know, he had to hear me. So this... the story that was (playing out in my mind) and ... this action came and it- it just moved and the pushing and pulling and...I can’t remember and then the... hairy balls.... dropped! One at a time and it was just like: Kachung. Kachung. And the poor woman that was sitting in front of me.... maybe she saw exactly... because it was so real! You know?”

This was not the only time highly evocative physical images, sensations and movements came to women, bubbling up out of somatic intelligence and seeding the mental landscape. In Cora’s interview, for example, she very suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere said, “and the word that came to me, I don’t know why, but ‘boobies’! The first thing that came to my mind was boobies, I don’t know why!” In fact, the entire interview with Cora was a fascinating demonstration of the physical and emotional imperative struggling for expression within the mental landscape of words. I noticed that it was often challenging for her to put her impressions into words, although she also had moments of real eloquence. She would search for words to

describe physical or emotional states, but would often end up sighing, making sounds, laughing or shedding tears. It was not that Cora was incapable of communicating, but rather, that what she was experiencing did not fit easily into words. In fact, there was a kind of communication taking place that I found quite moving but which cannot easily make its way onto this page. It is my thinking that these blurred images, sounds, laughter, tears, and physical gestures which peppered her narrative, were the very indications of the somatic and emotional states that she wished to describe. Quite likely, if I had asked her to sing or dance her experience, she would have found this easier.

Eartha described the relationship between bodies in the room with another physically evocative image: “mostly we were together but...like...sperm floating around in the same thing, you know what I mean? All connected and yet, not really touching each other, I guess? You know, a glance here, a touch there”. Another wonderful image came to Lib while she was witnessing her partner’s kneeling body and tapping fingers during the Authentic Movement activity: “and as I was watching her fingers I just felt this joy inside...because, you know, she’s just tapping her little fingers, and they looked like little people!” Finn’s dread at the thought of winter felt like “vomiting inside herself.” Although often elusive, the body intelligence speaks loudly on occasion - in images or sensations that we do not understand and may even find disturbing or embarrassing. Although we may want to send them back where they came from, these images, narratives and sensations may well be as important to us as the so-called rational information that we typically use to guide our decisions and choices in our everyday lives.

Witnessing Time and Space Through the Body

The experience of witnessing the Here and the Now was the foundation upon which the sessions were built. Time and space were also at the core of the sessions, with the theme of the

first two sessions being “Encountering Space” and “Encountering Rhythm” which is, after all, repeated time patterns. In spite of this unabashed focus on the internal/external experience of time and space, it was notable that few women spoke of their experiences with space, for example. The exception was Elysse, who commented that as she imagined breathing into various parts of her body, she could “feel the stuckness shifting”. In witnessing her internal space, rigid constrictions began to shift and flow, much as a river might break up in spring. In general, internal space was referred to metaphorically: women described ‘being in a good space’ or ‘a bad space’. Space was translated as “state of being”; a generalized sense of well-being within the environment. Again, the exception was Elysse, who noticed and enjoyed experiencing space as a “something”; in other words, consciously witnessing the phenomenon of space itself.

Internal time was alluded to more frequently, as when Eartha described the heart-beat like “Bha-bhvoom, bha-bhvoom.” Interestingly, her internal sense of time was, near the end of the Authentic Movement exercise, in direct conflict with clock time. She pushed herself to get the seemingly pre-ordained movements out before the arbitrary tick-tock of the clock spelled out the closing of this window of opportunity. Still, even these encounters with time did not emerge from my prepared “encountering rhythm” activities, but were naturally interwoven into the experience of being receptive to the authentic movement impulse. Time - or rhythm - was being experienced as the language through which the body was speaking as opposed to some discrete and abstracted thing.

External time and space, however, were more often described in an abstracted, discrete form. As Finn said, “Once that door closed in that class it was like we were in this ...void! ... The empty void... the place of pure potentiality. Like ... pre-creation. Like before - the beginning of the beginning.” External space was somehow both timeless and empty for her.

And again, she says, “So, it’s because we did a lot of things in that hour and a half to take us to different places.... It’s... the space, the way that we use time – it’s almost surreal. For Finn, her personal experience of residing in the present moment was most describable in terms of what did not exist; of the void. The door closed and in that cauldron of possibility, if one was open, anything could happen. Although *potential* is often used in the sense of unused or latent energy or ability, it originates from the Latin, *potentia* or power and as late as the beginning of the 20th century, was used to mean, “possessing potency or power; potent, powerful, mighty, strong; commanding”. Finn and others in the room were conscious of how situating themselves within the present moment was full of potential and thus, full of power. She said, “I don’t want to invite the kids in. I don’t want to invite the laundry in. I don’t want to invite anything else because it’s kind of this sphere. It’s this other sphere. And it’s not going to be penetrated by anything else.” She and every woman in that room, including myself, recognized that this conscious and focused witnessing of our embodied selves within the present moment was a precious opportunity.

It was difficult, and perhaps not even useful, to think about both the internal and external experience of time and space in discrete terms. They always seemed to be described together and to mirror one another. The conscious witnessing of time and space was experienced holistically. Finn described the external time/space conditions that gave her the internal freedom to “focus and ... go inside for awhile”. She sought out this freedom from space- and time-clutter, allowing external emptiness to her inform her internal reality: “I went to ... the open, empty spaces....” she said, “because I can fill it all up.” She also chose to occupy the low spaces, and kept her dance close to the earth. She says:

It’s really important for me to not always be like hoooooooooooo! (up in the air) and I need to get really super-earthed, so I found the class very earthy... like, *very* earthy. And at times, part of me wanted to go really *up*, but I told myself that that this was - I was going to be learning about rooting and grounding.

An embodied experience of time and space reciprocated between the internal and external, the one continually seeding the other. External time and space influenced internal states and vice versa. The women experienced time and space through the body and experienced the body through time and space.

Conscious Play: The Active Principle

Just as the sessions were a manifestation of *conscious witnessing*, they were also very much about *conscious play*. In the women's descriptions of their experiences, instances of both the receptive, witnessing principle and the active principle of conscious play were shared. However, like so many other slippery notions of experience, the receptive and the active principles of experience were interwoven and interdependent. The women could not have been open without actively choosing to do so and they could not have played without being open. These two opposites interacted continually throughout the sessions, a living demonstration of the Taoist symbol of yin and yang, or feminine and masculine principles of the universe (Needleman, 1989, p. xxii). A large part of my role, in fact, was to fabricate moments of surprise in order to facilitate an ongoing interaction between not knowing and active response. In this sense, the play began with me. I set it up and then the women would ride my wave and make it their own.

Renewed Relationships with the Lifeworld: Deconstructing Old Patterns

The desert that is described earlier is a numbed-out relationship to everyday life; an absent sleep-walking through one's days as opposed to being vibrantly alive to the moment. Most, if not all, the participants knew what it was to walk in that desert and had a keen desire to become more alive. Being consciously aware and receptive allowed the women to listen for what lay dormant but there was a more active side to their experience as well. In many of the activities,

participants could actively and playfully deconstruct old patterns of relating to the lifeworld and then consciously construct new and enlivened ones within the context of the present moment. Session 1 was about encountering space in a fresh way, session 2 and 3 focused on discovering time from the perspective of one's inner rhythm and the phenomenon of intentional repetition or ritual. Again, there is no solid division between what could be considered passive witnessing and active play. Instead, the playfulness permeated moments of witnessing and conscious witnessing permeated moments of playfulness. Awareness and response were both necessary aspects of play.

Rea's comments about the "sound bath" which "disintegrated" into random verbalizations, animal sounds, and a great deal of laughter, point to the dynamic nature of conscious play. This sound activity was entirely organic and wild. Rea suggested that this activity, if anything, should perhaps have been recorded for posterity but then she changed her mind:

Yeah that was wild. That was absolutely wild... Women laughing, hey? Internal joke, looking at each other, no words, just peels of laughter. That would have been good to have recorded, just that laugh. But then, then you know... even right now... there's a feeling that it's not the same. It can never be the same.

Recording that experience could not bring the experience back. She was aware that some of life's wildest, most dynamic moments cannot be held in space and time and still retain their vibrancy. They are only completely alive and available in the ever-flowing Here and Now.

Playing with Space and Time

Many of the activities provided opportunities to playfully bring space and time into awareness and develop a renewed relationship with these constructs based on a conscious encounter. The Equilateral Triangle activity was a wonderful example of the imagined reconstruction of in-between space. Here are Rea's impressions of the activity:

It was funny how it (the triangle) would move and move and move and then it would slow down and it would stop and then it would be like this...molecules vibrating, right? Starting from that very level, and then all of a sudden it would grow and grow and people would start vibrating and then little wiggles and then people would start moving around again and then it would slow down... it was like... winter, spring, summer, fall, you know, with the molecules and how they are in water, you know. How they freeze and flow and move and ...Ah!... That was wild.

Thrust into a crystal clear demonstration of interconnectedness, Rea's previously assumed sense of solidity vanished. Suddenly, she was experiencing the deeper energetic vibrations of life and the incessant change of state as interconnected molecules freeze or flow. Time wore its seasonal coat, in relation to the degree of freeze or flow of motion.

The women played with rhythm or time patterns in the same way. They took on each others' rhythm patterns and then changed them into their own. I moved around the room, touching a part of them that I intuitively sensed might need or want some enlivening and those body parts "took charge" and danced the body. They also chose their own leading body parts: spines snaked, feet led the way, elbows, heads, buttocks, responded to the rhythms of the music, building movement patterns of their own or stealing one another's.

Playing with Opposites

Playing with opposites was one way to bring attention to dynamism. The Stillness Dance, for example, highlighted the relationship between movement and stillness. To review, I invited the participants to move slowly from a state of movement punctuated by stillness, to one of stillness punctuated by occasional movement, ending in the experience of complete stillness (see Appendix A). For Tissa, this was particularly powerful and resulted in one of those "aha" moments that laterally affected the way she thought about time as well. She shared the Stillness Dance with friends at another gathering, giving them an opportunity to reflect, through their bodies, on the cycles of time in their lives: "when they're moving and when they're busy and

when they can take time to be still again”. As shall be described more completely in the section on Conscious Connection, this cycling round of movement and stillness created ripples of meaning for her that extended outward into a powerful, embodied honouring of the larger cycles of life and death.

Keeping it Light

Conscious play allowed the women to reconstruct their relationship to the lifeworld in a light-handed way. Sola, in particular, appreciated the role of play in the sessions. She said, “You know, even when these things are fun, they’re working on a different...level at the same time.” For her and a few other women, “seriousness” was a little suspect. If there was a perceived pressure to experience something “deep” or trade identity or agency for some expected outcome, the door to a fully surrendered experience of the present moment closed and ways were sought to assert individuality. As Sola said of seriousness in the sessions:

it ...brings to the surface stuff that I know about myself- you know, as far as individuality goes, because I’m still resistant to those... the flocking stuff and the mirroring and the taking someone else’s moves and (dancing them) yourself.

For her, play felt less prescribed and less threatening to her sense of individual identity and agency whereas what she perceived as serious or non-playful activities left her vulnerable to external influence. She said:

I like (being playful) *better* than...(when) you’re feeling *serious* the entire time, really. You’re feeling like you’re supposed to be bringing out serious things ...through serious measures... but...that’s why I liked the fun, or the... playing... because I think that could actually hit a chord ...much *easier*, especially with people like me, who are a little resistant to the...seriousness of it.

The difference between what Sola experienced as excessive seriousness and the playful touch she referred to is described subtly but perfectly by her in the following statement, “I don’t need to *set out* to seek something but I do like to *seek* things.” She was aware that Conscious Play

allowed her the necessary distance from any expected or prescribed outcome so that she was free to push the boundaries in her own way and consider what might be going on for her in terms of being vulnerable in a group or getting in touch with herself at a deeper level.

Play allows the individual to continue to assert herself in the midst of surrender to the collective experience. Lib was another woman who expressed moments of resistance to “following passively.” She said:

When we walked in a circle...at the beginning...I would try and walk the same direction that everybody went. I couldn't.I felt very disturbed. (laughs). I could *not do* what everybody else was doing. I had to do it the opposite and I thought, ‘are you just being difficult?’ and I was like, ‘no, I can’t do it’! It was weird! When I did it, it felt wrong. Sometimes I’d walk the opposite way or sometimes I’d go through the middle, you know, you know whatever...but if I just followed everybody, it felt like I was caught in... something.

Perhaps Lib was resisting surrender to the collective experience or perhaps she was perceiving the unconscious movement habits of the group. Either way, Conscious Play allowed her to get out of what felt like a rut and consider other movement options, demonstrating that “serious play” is sometimes a more powerful way of working than “high seriousness” - a distinction demonstrated in the play of children.

Child’s Play: the Role of the Imagination

Children
Can easily open the
Drawer

That lets the spirit rise up and wear
Its favorite costume of
Mirth and laughter.

Hafiz (Trans. 1999/ p. 66)

The women journeyed not only through the open places of awareness, but through the rich realms of the imagination. Space became large and empty or small and dense in response to

the women's imagined manipulation of it. In response to my movement narratives, air caressed them "like a lover" or became thick as honey. The women transformed into snakes, seaweed and cloaked statues.

Many women mentioned that the effect of playing with space and time and the body was that they felt like a child again. Often this was quite unexpected. Lib described her reaction to her partner's movement during the Authentic Movement activity (see Appendix A):

and...(my partner) had her hands on the floor and she was sort of in child's pose and she just ... drummed her fingers...and as I was watching her fingers I just felt this joy inside...because, you know, she's just tapping her little fingers, and they looked like little people!

and of the Fabric Ritual (see Appendix A), Finn shared:

... I can almost close my eyes and see exactly how the fabric was moving... it was like little waves on the beach like hugging the sand, like these little waves were coming up you know when the ...It just kind of crawls up it's not like whoosh whoosh it was just like this little like, almost like a little child with their little tiny toes and they're just kind of pattering along...and it's not intense at all. It's just like, subtle, very subtle, almost it almost moves you more than a big whoosh. Because you're not just carried away! You're just kind of ahhh! It's like anticipation almost...and I can be a child in a class.

This sense of subtle anticipation, created by the simple movement of fabric conjured up images of child-like play for Finn as she allowed herself to be transported into this quietly playful space. As she said, "Lyrical came fully – like, *right* back. And that's *child*. And that's *play*. And that's *innocence*."

Some of the women described the child-like joy of being given permission to playfully imagine themselves as other creatures. With her young children, Rea has watched "Finding Nemo" a staggering number of times and had a fully developed visual understanding of seaweed. She was thrilled when, in my movement narration, I invited the women to become seaweed. She said, "I could be seaweed! Because I knew how!" And then she was back in the seaweed moment, describing her experience:

I could really get into this, ohhhh, there's my head, ooohhhh, oh yeah, the water moves up? There we go, ohhh, *big* ocean, *big* wave (laugh). Tidal wave! I could have played with that one for a *long time*. (laughing). I was almost in giggle fits.

It was enjoyable because she *knew* seaweed and could fully enter the playfulness and sensuality of being moved about in tidal waters. As with imagining the body as 'intimate other', there is a paradox here: imagining the body as entirely other - in this case, other than human, resulted in a fuller, more integrated sense of embodiment and, therefore, presence in the moment.

Taboo

Conscious play meant being "given permission" - not only to become like children again but to try other things out that would have been taboo outside the sessions. Of the witnessing role in the Authentic Movement dyads, both Lib and Finn mentioned that it was "freeing" to be able to look closely at people - to *see* them, with their full knowledge and permission. Finn described her mother's chastisement of her as a young child for her tendency to stare at people on the bus:

Because... just the way that our culture interacts... to... sit and really look into someone's eyes and to really look into their face... I used to get in so much trouble from my mom for staring at people. Because I would... be gawking. And I got in so much trouble for like looking at people. I didn't realize I was reading them but... my eyes would go out of focus and... to be able to do that without there being someone saying you can't do it.... And to realize there are certain spaces and times for that and ...maybe on the bus isn't one of them (laughs).

If 'witnessing-in'(paying attention to our internal experience) is something we *forget* to do in our daily lives, 'witnessing-out' is something we must *not* do, for fear of invading another's private space. It was refreshing for her to be in a situation where she was given full permission to fully witness her partner.

In an overarching sense, the sessions gave the participants the permission to break "the Big Taboo" - to be themselves. Each woman was not only allowed, but encouraged to witness

her moments, inhabit her body, make space for her authentic and natural movements, allow her inner alchemy to move through – in general, follow her own journey. Related to this naturalistic orientation was the permission to be unapologetically primal; to experience her sensuality or be playfully aggressive. In the Chakra Journey, Finn described the third chakra, solar plexus dance as, “that ooga booga schmooga total ridiculous tribal kind of cave (dance).” To the beat of high energy drumming and with a great deal of sound and laughter, women danced toward each other, meeting in the middle and asserting themselves with their chosen sound and movement. Many women appreciated the opportunity to safely and playfully experiment with being assertive and primal, something that, for women in particular, is typically taboo in everyday life. This was one of Sola’s favorite activities, Eartha felt she almost liked it *too* much and Finn said:

The thing is that there’s been so much around power and that we can have healthy power. That power doesn’t have to be this thing that people don’t know how to use in a healthy safe way, so those were- those were examples and experiences of healthy power...a celebration of the power. Celebration of the sun. Healthy power.

Consciously playing with these natural and primal aspects of the self that are so commonly shut down in our overly appropriate and regulated lives gave women a sense of freedom, and release and possibly a greater sense of self-acceptance.

Play and Energy

The word “energy” was used often in women’s descriptions of their experiences. For my part, I referred to the women’s specific energies in my journal, using descriptive words such as slow, grounded, joyful, light, sensual, wild, hesitant, contracted, childlike and free. Certainly, it seemed the individual energy of the woman at any given moment had a quality to it which would shift and flow through the body and out of them. I also noticed energy in the room. It sometimes felt thicker in certain areas of the room where women hesitated to go (for example, in the centre

of the room) or thicker around the periphery when women were tending to be hesitant and uncertain.

The group organism had a kind of energy as well. I noticed that if we stomped, any feeling of group disconnection would disappear and the energy of the group would feel more “grounded” in the physical. Eartha and I both noticed that when there was sounding (spontaneous or guided production of sound), the energy in the room and in each one of us, would build up. As mentioned, I danced among the women during the body parts dances and tapped the women wherever the movement seemed contracted and off that part of them would go - freed up and energized. Energy in this sense seemed to be a kind of “essence”- a certain quality of movement that could intensify and seemed to have a trajectory, not only through the body, but through the room as well.

Often, energy was understood and described by the women themselves in terms of the original sense of the word, as derived from the Greek, *energia*, meaning “vigour or intensity of action, utterance, etc. Hence as a personal quality”. To the women, energy often meant their ability to be active and to express themselves forcefully or strongly. As seen earlier, there was a sense of returning to a more youthful state with less limitation.

Here too, energy could be “stirred up” and this is where the connection to conscious play comes in. With the combination of sound, movement and assertive intention in the tribal dance, for example, some of the women had the sense that the energy had been stirred up to a degree they found uncomfortable because there was no clear place for it to go. Energy is a force that is, by its very nature, a directional phenomenon and the lack of clarity about what to do with this stirred-up energy actually led some women to comment that they felt agitated. Rea said:

I was relieved that there wasn't any more time for it? Because I didn't know where it was going to go from there. and I felt a lot of agitation inside of me.... I... didn't really

know where it was going to take me. I would have probably had to step out of it anyway and say, I'm done and I've had enough, because I ...didn't know what the feelings were that were coming inside of me – I can't put a name on it, other than to say I'm glad it ended when it did! (laugh)...I didn't know what was going to happen, like it was a, it was like a confused, not knowing place... It started out like this.... Movement and then sliding past and then we got it so we were bouncing off each other and when we did that it was like, ok....! (snort) alright.....! Now what? (laugh). ...grab each other and wrestle to the floor?

Another woman shared that she was a little taken aback by how much she enjoyed that raw feeling of “football player aggression” and was aware that perhaps she might have to be aware of that within herself! Other women simply enjoyed the activity and let the energy disperse through laughter.

Sola loved everything energetic about the sessions and, in fact, described one of the most significant benefits of participation as being a sense of release afterwards. For her, this very physical release of energy resulted in being what she described as in “the zone” for some time after each class. She would leave the class and return home, feeling calm and harmonious. Paradoxically, stirred up energy, channeled in certain directions and then released resulted in an eventual calmness and sense of peace. The parallel with other cycles of build up, climax and release such as the sexual cycle, the musical phrase and the common story cycle, is obvious. Playing with energy can take on many forms with different intentions, but in all cases, the energy will build, want to move and, eventually, need to resolve.

Kahmariah taught us that in African dance, you take the energy that you generate in your movement and you give it out. From the context of the chakra system, the directional flow of energy is not solely based on stirring up the power centre (the solar plexus), but also on the principle of giving and receiving (the energy associated with the heart chakra, Judith, 1999). Whatever energy you give out will then flow back to you even more strongly. Accordingly, African Dance movements are focused on the solar plexus and the chest area, expanding and

contracting these core body parts as one might work a pump. African music reflects this focus on the power and love centres. It consists not only of the power songs of the drum but also warm, sunny, melodic music that, to my ear, comes straight from the heart.

Concentrating the movement focus in the area of both the solar plexus and the heart created some intense energy shifts. Tissa, the woman who had been battling with depression and who had been told by a body worker that her chakras or body-based energy centres had “shut down” experienced a powerful energy surge after the African Dance session. She shared:

and you know, it was true! What ... she said ... about ...the more you bring the energy and stir up the energy, the more energy you're going to have? It was true! I was just flying at 9, 10, 11 at night! I couldn't get to sleep. Because... I had *so* much energy after that. So it was absolutely true what she said. (laughs). It surprised me. I'm sure it was at least midnight before I could even *think* about going to bed. Which is amazing.

This was the same youthful energy and strength she had felt as a teen-aged girl and she danced in her basement.

I had a similar experience in the African Dance class I attended in preparation for the sessions. In my journal, I wrote about being awakened at 3 a.m., not only fully energized but also with a noticeable sense of contentment and well-being. I got out of bed, danced around the house for about 10 minutes and then returned to bed, to fall straight away into a deep sleep. This is not a familiar experience for me upon awakening in the middle of the night. More typically, I wake up between 3:30 and 4:00 a.m. with a sense of tight anxiety gripping my belly and chest and with my head racing with worst-case scenarios. I can struggle to get back to sleep for close to 2 hours once this begins. Energetically, I might describe the energy in my core as constricted and the energy in my head as spinning and excessive. In contrast, the experience of increased energy after the African Dance was situated in my body, rather than my head and my mental state was alert but relaxed. It was clear to me that the concentration of movement in the areas of

chakra 3 and 4 both increased the energy levels and the feelings of well-being. Tissa had shared this experience.

Stirring the “energy pot” through conscious play and active movement provided many of the women with a sense of well-being that lasted long after the sessions had finished. Sola felt a “release” after the sessions, Eartha described herself as being “looser” and “taking up more space” when she moved and Finn shared that the sessions had “really changed the energy dynamics of (her) body.” Her friends had noticed a difference, she said. “They felt the shift in me...they felt a difference...in my energy levels and a difference in my focus....” Other participants saw sensual fires rekindled. To stir energy is to stir the vital force; the life force. To be fully energized is to be more fully alive.

Conscious Connection

The third “leg” to this study deals directly with the experience of connection in the sessions. Not surprisingly, given the invitation to come dance with other women, the experience of connection was pervasive in the sessions at many levels: internally, within dyads, or between the individual and the group as a whole. Whether a woman was relating to her own movement impulses or her “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1981, p. 10) of internal space, or whether she was connecting with the woman across from her who might be confronting, avoiding or playfully engaging, she was constantly riding the isolation/connection continuum. The group consisted of “12 cats rolling in the dirt of experience” as Isadora put it; all consciously relating to the here-and-now experience of inner and outer; self and other.

Expressive Connection with the Self

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

William Butler Yeats (1927/1996, p. 215).

As noted previously, the women experienced a “coming home to the self” (see p. 72). Their knowledge of themselves as beautiful, creative and worthy beings was stirred by their attention to their inner dance motivations in response to carefully chosen pieces of music. For most, if not all the women, this expressive reconnection with the self was a central aspect of their experience.

Tissa said:

I think that... anything in terms of the arts will help to connect with yourself so that's a really great...reminder of that truth. I think it's a truth. You know...if you can express yourself in some way ... it makes your whole life more ... meaningful. Or it does mine, anyway. (laughs) Must be why I'm an artist and a musician! (laughs) Otherwise, my life has no meaning. This is... how I feel... a lot of the time actually.

Art and self-expression are where Tissa finds her meaning in life. For her, return to the source is, in large measure, a return to a process of self-expression; creative connection with the self, whether through dance, visual arts or music.

The sessions provided an opportunity to connect to aesthetics not only through active movement expression but through absorption of sound. Music selections featured pre-eminent artists from several musical traditions around the world and was carefully chosen to correspond with the movement activity (either to arouse or settle the physical and emotional energies).

Finding the music was a labour of love for me and it was described as “phenomenal”, “beautiful”, and “awesome”. Vera commented that she was “attracted” to the music and that it resonated with her more than in other classes she had taken. Lib was sometimes moved to hum or sing quietly as she moved. She said, “I loved the lights off and just going inside yourself. ...just listening to the music, some of the *beautiful* music, and I'd just go...it was awesome. It was like a break.” Angela wanted *more* music in the sessions. She said, “The music kind of opened me up creatively. Got back in touch with that (the creativity). You know, it just felt good.”

Several women wanted more opportunities to be expressive with sound as well. Eartha and Rea could have done the Sound Bath (see Appendix A) more often, perhaps even every week. On the other hand, Thena found sounding overwhelmingly uncomfortable and perhaps intimidating. Sound production was too far out of her comfort zone. Some of the women (including me) would create improvisational sounds while moving. The creation of sound *is* movement, in fact, and its therapeutic potency, particularly in conjunction with improvisational movement, is substantial (Newham, 2003).

Another aspect of music listening in the sessions was the respite from exposure to continuous verbalisation. Eartha noticed the gradual shift from expressive movement in silence, to the introduction of music with no words or words in a different language, to an occasional song in the last session that had words she could understand. She appreciated relating to the pure sound (or to the foreign language lyrics as sound only). On the last day she said that she felt that they had “graduated” to an exposure to words and that she was “finally ready for that”. It seemed that avoiding the mental associations that words bring meant that she and others in the room could allow the pure sound to be absorbed at a more somatic level.

As we have seen, Cora experienced more than one moment of profound inner connection through her expressivity. In the final session during the Heart Dance (see Appendix A), the connection that she felt between her creative self-expression, her body and her sense of worth was beautifully expressed. Speaking of women moving expressively, she said:

...because I think that's what a woman taps into when she's dancing. I believe that she goes right into the root, right into the womb, right into the birth, and - and then you can dance from that place? That's... magical, I think...so, that last session for sure, for me, was like... I was loving myself completely in that moment. I was...I mean if I could have taken... (all my clothes off)! And probably other women might have been feeling that too but, I was just like... in that place of...I don't know, just feeling...just felt so free.

Cora's state of being in that last session could be described as ecstatic. If we look up the word *ecstasy*, it is defined as "rapturous delight, an overpowering emotion or exaltation; a state of sudden, intense feeling. ...a sense of being taken or moved out of one's self or one's normal state, and entering a state of intensified or heightened feeling" Etymologically, *ecstasy* can be traced to the Greek "to put out of place" or, in other words, to be "beside oneself". These etymological roots point to the essence of the experience. The individual is carried out of, away from their regular placement. In Late Greek usage, ecstasy described a "withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance". Whatever word is used to describe Cora's state of consciousness, whether ecstatic, rapt, exalted, or entranced, she was experiencing something outside the normal or everyday consciousness. She says:

...and the funny part is... I'm in control but I'm not in control, you know? ...there's just that fine line between what we think (laughs) we're in control of I was *so* full of... that grat(itude) again, you see? That thankfulness, that... 'oh ok, I *do* matter and I *am* valuable...'

She shared that she was overcome with her rapture to the point that she was really not prepared, by her own description, to hear the words I spoke afterwards or participate in the next activity. Self-expression elicited a visceral remembering of self worth and wholeness for Cora and others.

In many of these instances, however, there appeared to be more involved than a renewed appreciation for the self. Perhaps Yeats' question "how can we know the dancer from the dance?" is a useful one here. Along with an intensified appreciation of self, there seemed to be the experience of something greater than the self. Subsumed within some larger field of what Cora described as "joy", "beauty" and "freedom", the person cannot but feel the worth of everything. The self is seen for what it is - a part of this greater and sublime whole. The state of consciousness in these moments seemed akin to Dienske's (2002) "unifying experience"

(para.37) and this demonstration of wholeness and unity appeared to have arisen out of the visceral.

Rapture, another word to describe the state of being carried beyond oneself by music, love, spiritual fervor, shares the power of the word *ecstasy* but includes an aspect of carnality (typically describing the rape or abduction of women). Cora's experience stands out as a possible expression of the feminine version of rapture; containing an expression of both the physical and the spiritual. Her description of her experience; of going "right into the root, right into the womb, right into the birth" struck me as a strongly embodied description of something greater than the self. Wanting to shed one's clothes and revel in one's beauty - not merely one's physical beauty but, as both Cora and Eartha described it, the sensuality of being fully present and fully alive, could be seen as "carnal" by some and "spiritual" by others. Interestingly, in the online etymology dictionary, *ecstasy* is grouped not only with *rapture* but also with *nymphomania*, which is described as "a female disease characterized by morbid and uncontrollable sexual desire". Perhaps the embodied nature of a woman's ecstasy is an overwhelming, frightening and confounding thing through the eyes of one less "rooted" in a sensual, somatic experience of the Here and Now.

Self-Advocacy: Standing Up for Self-Expression

Connecting with the self involved an active reclamation. Setting aside this time was a way of honouring themselves; of sending a message to one's self that connection and relationship with the self was a priority. Thena said, "The most important was the fact that it was a time to stop and spend time with myself. I forgot completely who was there. I just went and I loved it." For Angela, the whole point of taking the sessions was to have the opportunity to reconnect with her creativity. She said:

I think I needed to open up... and really find... who I am.... Be centred...but at the same time, be expressive. ... to be able to express myself through movement and by doing that, I also find the centre of my power ... My creativity is part of my power.

Of the sessions as a whole, Rea said, “It’s just one more opportunity to create space for myself and to stand up for myself and demand that space....” As a mother of young twins, the issue of claiming personal space in her life is an ongoing and important challenge.

Finn encountered some resentment on the part of male friends about the fact that the sessions were “women only”:

...and it was interesting because I had some males in my life who were, ‘Hoah! How come it’s just a women-only class?’ And they were feeling really left out and I was like, ‘well, this is a day for the sisters.’ It was *very* interesting that that came up. There were 2 or 3 guys that *wanted in* on the class and I was like, “no...” And I think I even harassed them about it every now and then after I’d come home from a class, I’d be like...
ahhhhh.....

It was a “day for the sisters” and conveyed two messages: that each woman was worthy of a time and space reserved for her and that getting together just with “the sisters” to consciously dance and move was an important thing to do.

To claim space and time for oneself is a status issue. The roots of the word, *status*, come from the Greek root *histanai* “to cause to stand, set, place”. At its root, *status* suggests being set in place or standing firm. There was an element of standing firm in time and space every Sunday as these women left families, friends and mundane concerns behind and stepped through the door. With some gentle teasing to those left temporarily outside, each participant was reclaiming her *status* or her *position* as a woman who was worthy of closing the door on others’ concerns for a time, in order to revel in expressivity.

The Zone of Vulnerability

The other side of the coin of ecstatic delight is raw vulnerability. The very act of inhabiting the present moment and being expressive in the face of the unknown can be, as

Isadora put it, “daunting”. The participants were challenged on many levels. They were exploring new territory and being pushed to their limits, sometimes physically, sometimes psychologically. This “zone of vulnerability” as I refer to it, brought not only the greatest challenge but the greatest sense of satisfaction for many of the participants. The women encountered themselves and one another and these encounters inevitably brought the participants to the edge of their comfort zones from time to time.

Physical Challenge

The women had come to the sessions, in part, to get active and, as Sola said, “sweat a bit”. They enjoyed being pushed in this way – to the edge of their physical limits. The African Dance session was a highlight for perhaps everyone for that reason. For Isadora, however, getting active was a much greater challenge and rendered her deeply vulnerable. Although she did not discuss the particulars with me, she had been suffering from a condition for several years that had brought her close to death and resulted in a severe movement disorder. She had fought her way back to relative health, but joining the sessions constituted a reclamation of her sense of vitality and physicality and a great deal was riding on this physical claim she was making. She wanted her body back. There was no sense of this being a gentle nudge towards some relatively safe next destination. Her language in her journal reveals this. She said, “At times I felt like the person who was being *thrown* into the waters and saying, sink or swim” and added, “from that spot (of disability) to this spot is like... entering the eye of the hurricane again, you know?”

She had to, as she said, sink or swim:

I think it was just....amazing to me that I was able to get through, and so... it was one of those things where I felt, like, yes...it’s either I could do it or I couldn’t and the fact that I *could* do...(it) suggested that I might be able to get past some of these boundaries eventually. It was almost like the fence thing, you know. You need to jump the fence. No matter what.

I was awed by her courage. I had no idea that it was that difficult for her. What I remember about watching Isadora dance was the smile on her face. She described the African Dance session as “a thoroughly taxing and joyful experience.” For Isadora, the challenge of physical reclamation must have been frightening and, as a result of actively facing those fears for the first time in many years, equally potent and joyous.

Isadora claimed more than her physical self. Because she had suffered from a movement disorder for many years, the sheer act of being physically expressive challenged her on other levels as well. She was emotional in her interview at times and she told me:

I had a massive movement disorder so...I was not socially appreciated on many levels. And so, if you've ever been in that spot, out of that comes... it's like the total opposite of coming through a spot where you're completely on display...So, it's huge, huge, huge. To sort of shed and go forward...

Expressing herself, taking up space, and making strong physical statements was a loud declaration of selfhood. Isadora is a reflexologist and, as a healer, she had not been exposed to this kind of assertive self-expression for many years. She commented:

Healing on a spiritual level is - is, is not really *you per se*, you know what I mean? Whereas *dance*...is extending yourself in... almost a selfish manner, you know what I mean? It's a healing of a whole ... different fashion and I think... you need to be able to give and ...receive but also to be *completely* selfish and explore *how* we move and *how* we interact and ...and it's a very aggressive sort of way of healing... It's right out there. It was a whole different level of feeling that I hadn't - I hadn't done in so long...claiming...claiming *yourself*. Your personality.

Having a movement disorder that made her physically unacceptable to others required a retreat from the physical. The sessions, in their unapologetic focus on the body, movement and uninhibited, natural expression forced Isadora to emerge from retreat and dare to move expressively within a group. The challenge must have been amplified by the fact that, as a young woman, she had identified with one of the greatest examples of free and natural movement of our time - Isadora Duncan. Such a reclaiming. Such courage.

Negotiating the Tidal Zone

“See, what I love, because it’s challenging, is when we are put in situations where you do have to... you know (*be*) with another person...where I have to look at another human being. Because the eyes are the ...windows to the soul. (Cora)

Just as there seemed to be an upward movement from the physical root to the other levels of emotional, mental and spiritual expression (see *Rising from the Root*, p. 80), so there seemed to be an “outering” that occurred, where what was brought from below was then shared round, much as water brought from the depths after a long journey might be shared out among women. Within the sessions, there was a junction between internal and external experience and here lay another zone of vulnerability: the self-in-relation or, as Sola described it, “the individual within the whole”. And, like all shifting, dynamic states of being, experiencing the self in relation could be both turbulent and powerful. In oceanic terms, it was akin to the tidal zone, where worlds converge and there is a dynamic stirring up of what might be more stable and yet less teeming with life in the deep waters or on the dry shore. As Isadora said, “the partnering up was where interesting, more interesting (things happened) - challenging and working with being slightly uncomfortable. Learning to trust. That kind of thing.” In spite of her natural proclivity toward solitary movement experience, she welcomed the opportunity to move toward the fertile zone of social vulnerability.

For some women, like Thena, there was very little tension between public and private. In her interview she shared that she accepted her perceived place as the more solitary one in the group and let herself enjoy being mostly introspective and independent, while enjoying the group presence “in the background”, assuming that the other women would accept her choice also. Eartha described participants as “sperm floating around in the same thing... All connected and yet, not really touching each other,” and added that she didn’t need it to be any different than

that. For her also, being more internally involved within a group felt fine. For most, however, the fertility of being in – relation was accompanied by an awareness of a certain tension between the contradictory tendencies to carve out one’s space and yet, be part of the circle. Angela, for example, arrived early on occasion and danced alone in the space before others arrived. For her, this was a time to “find that circle within (her)self” so that she could effectively and safely expand it to “allow others to enter that circle.” This was a highly perceptive strategy of self-management in order to be better able to surrender to the group experience.

The tension between private experience and social interaction also included the potential loss of control one might have over the quality of one’s conscious attention and openness to the present moment. Just as walking alone in nature is qualitatively different from one shared with another, so too was the transitional zone prone to dilution of experiential quality. Finn commented on session break-time, where we would take a few moments to rest and rehydrate:

I care nothing about visiting.... Because I’m still kind of locked in on the internal stuff ... I like to stay kind of quiet at the water breaks ...Because I don’t want to invite the kids in. I don’t want to invite the laundry in. I don’t want to invite anything else because it’s ...this other sphere. And it’s not going to be penetrated by anything else.

There was a need to protect this deliberately-created, conscious “sphere” of collective exploration from the patterned and obligatory social connections often found in groups.

Whatever a woman’s choice at any given moment about inner versus shared experience, all of the women’s comments revealed that they were highly cognizant of both the challenges and the rewards of moving into the “tidal zone” and that their choice to move forward or retreat was being done consciously as opposed to habitually.

The uncertainty of sharing oneself in an open and vulnerable way and the need to be accepted as one of the group was foreign to no one. When one woman was asked what was difficult about the sessions, she said:

the same thing that's difficult in my life. And that is... some of the people there are very outgoing and ...they connect well with others and easily and all that sort of stuff. Whereas I'm more reserved. Always have been. And so sometimes... I found that difficult.

Speaking of women within the sessions who she felt were able to express themselves more freely and openly, she reflected:

... it takes me soooo much longer to get to that point... so I was just aware... I wish I was more like that... and...I became aware of how I present myself to a group of people and how...my whole life, I've sort of observed all the time instead of taking part, like right *in* and... it felt a little lonely sometimes.

Two or three other women mentioned feeling a little lonely and separate as well. Perhaps all of us are prone to an incessant and contradictory tidal tug: craving a place within the circle of community and then retreating at the first sign that our individuality may be subsumed by the collective. This retreat, though safe, leaves us feeling "outside the circle": a touch hollow, separate, and, as some of the women bravely communicated, more than a little lonely.

Schopenhauer's porcupine, the symbol of the human tendency to seek connectedness and then activate the quills of defense, (Luepnitz, 2003) would no doubt nod knowingly at this point.

Private spaces / Public places. Space was enormously influential in the struggle with the contradictions of personal versus social experiences. Exploring entirely private activities in a public context was difficult for certain women. Angela described her difficulty in letting go during the activities of session one:

"When I do meditation I need absolute privacy. I need to be in my own home, I need to have the lights dimmer and there was activity. I could feel the other people, even though they were quiet and doing their own thing..."

It was difficult for her to go inside when her environment was so public, regardless of the private focus of everyone else in the room. Even more challenging was the ongoing shifting between private and public space that occurred in the sessions. Although the focus was predominantly on

interior experiences, these experiences not only took place in a group setting but, at times, evolved into partner or group activities. Isadora described what she observed happening when private met public:

I was amazed at how quickly everybody let go of the 'shoulds' ...but you could see everybody just focused on ... their little space and that would be the area where they could really let go. And the minute that little space was penetrated and we had to think of others, it became ... a whole other thing. You could see that happening quite a lot.

These meetings with “the other”, within the context of having been “opened up” by the private work one might be doing, increased the level of vulnerability and uncertainty at certain times.

Isadora described the scene:

...all the unique energies ... quickly moving in whatever direction they're wanting to move, I guess (and) body language is huge. You know what a person is feeling and so...some people you knew were open, and some people, you knew were not and so - I find it an interesting sort of daunting experience, all at the same time....

The women would “surface” and tentatively touch each other's moments. Isadora compared this process of testing out relationships with her experience of savouring the piece of fine chocolate at the start of the third session:

“The chocolate experience... that's the kind of opening and experiencing and assessing and closing (that) seems to happen with every inter-relation...you go through the same thing of tasting, testing, evaluating.... That was what came to me when we were doing that...”

As the women moved through the room, they were tasting intimacy and testing their sense of connection.

The eyes are the gateway. If the eyes are, as both Cora and Rea noted, “the gateway to the soul”, they are also the gateway between the separate spaces of private and public. Women shared that closed eyes often helped them express themselves by shielding private space from public influence. Eyes shut indicated that we were in the private zone of experience. Eyes open signaled that we had entered the public arena.

If the eyes are the gateway to shared experience, deliberate and sustained eye contact is even more fully intimate. We did not play with direct eye contact in the sessions, but even when eye contact was incidental, as in the “tribal” 3rd chakra experience in the final session (see Appendix A), one woman found it slightly unnerving. It made her uncomfortable to “walk towards somebody, making eye contact with them, trying to figure out what to do”. Discomfort and vulnerability were also encountered in the contrasting situation, where one openly witnessed one’s partner moving with eyes closed during the Authentic Movement activity. Women were surprised by the fact that they were more uncomfortable not in the role of mover but of witness. Closed eyes were signaling a private experience and they were watching. Elyse captured this perfectly when she said:

I felt like...I was...watching something really...personal....and ... I felt uncomfortable about...watching it. And... I think it’s because when I ...go into those places where I feel very vulnerable.... when my inner... life is coming out, *I* choose to be alone in it.

Elyse’s words, “when my inner life is coming out” powerfully expressed the “outring” experience. To witness such an intimate act, even with full permission and within a safe context, was an unfamiliar and even disturbing phenomenon. Some of the women automatically felt guilt for watching instead of considering that for their partner, being witnessed by someone who was fully present and non-judgmental was a rare and powerful experience. Although strange and somewhat discomfiting, the experience was ultimately liberating for most of the women. As Sola mentioned, there were times when the participants were challenged and stretched “beyond their comfort zones”, bringing the inner life out to be shared and be truly seen by supportive others.

Group Connection: A Ground of Feminine Sharing

Most of the women came into the sessions in part because they wanted to dance with other women. Many had already been in women's circles, had birthed in a circle of mostly women, had raised children in a community of women, had sung, played music, healed, made art, and danced with other women. For many, being in a circle of women was one of the most valuable aspects of the sessions, even though very few of the activities were directly focused on building a strong group. There seemed to be a ground of inherent satisfaction in simply being with other women. Tissa said, "I think that everything I do with women, whether it's singing or playing music together or...dancing or doing work together, it doesn't really matter, as long as there's that connection. It's a very helpful thing- to have connection."

I believe that conscious connection through the simple act of sharing time and space is nothing novel or foreign for most women. Finn described her connection with some of the women that she has known in the greater community for several years:

...there's a connection that I have with those other women that isn't ...a verbal connection... it's the earth mother. – it's ... the deepest places you can probably go as a woman. And ...just the reverence and respect that you have for one another.... that's another reminder. Because I ... hang around with a lot of guys- I *like* masculine energy. So...to be there with just women? Was like... ahhhhhh.

For her, although she spends a great deal of her time with men, being with other women felt like balance and rejuvenation.

Through the sessions, Cora was reminded of a time in her life when she shared her song and dance with women more often:

I need to dance, I need to sing and I need to... *express myself*...with other people! ...with other *women*. Even way back.... when I wrote that song when I first met you, 'Holeah' (sp), and the circle of women. ...and the women, the women, the women, it was all about the women!

Cora saw the sessions as an opportunity to find her way back to the time when it was “all about the women”; when she shared time and space with other women on a more regular basis and was physically, emotionally and spiritually fed by those encounters. The experience of shared being (and for her, the act of expressively sharing) with other women was perhaps most profoundly felt in the final session, during the 2nd chakra dance to Middle Eastern music (see Appendix A). As we began, I shared with the women that in many cultures, women *only* dance for one another-never men (unless it is for their husbands). In her interview, Cora reflected on how receiving that knowledge was for her:

That’s what they did, they danced with other women! (sharp intake of air- sort of an appreciative gasp) Oh! And I felt sensual and sexual and very... beautiful, like, not *beautiful* – it’s, like, this inner feeling of... ahh, I don’t... yeah! Everyone is dancing... individually, yet... we’re... we’re all dancing together.

I experienced the sensual nature of shared being a few weeks ago, at a woman friend’s birthday party. There were men and women there and at the end of the night, after dancing and eating, many of the women were lounging on the couch and on the floor, semi-entwined, languorously stroking hair or rubbing feet. I believe that women crave each other’s presence, regardless of what is done together. There is joy in simply being. Together.

The Butterfly Effect: Connectedness in time and space. The equilateral triangle activity rolled out a litany of associations for the participants. To Elysse, this activity was a demonstration of her sense of connectedness and her place in the grand scheme of things:

I was so affected by that...because there was a moment where... it was about to come to rest, and I realized, oh! I’m not in a perfect equilateral triangle with my people...so I just took one little...an insignificant movement, you know. I took one little step and then I felt- I don’t know *who* adjusted, but someone adjusted... and then there were more adjustments and then all of a sudden we were running around the room again and it was like...it was *wild* for me, and we were running - really running around the room, and then, it took a while for it to come back to this, like, balance, or - I guess it was always in balance because we were probably always turning or maintaining that balance even while we were moving, but, a rest, more of a still place. ... And what I received from that...or

(the)...things I already know... (is) everything is connected.... Because it felt like the most insignificant movement (and) you can ...start to feel that about yourself. These little things you do... don't really mean that much. Then, to just...have that realization-have that *experience* within this exercise that – oh my gosh, something seemingly insignificant, this tiny little step that *I'm* doing.... It is *felt*.

By itself, Elyse's movement was miniscule, but it started off a chain reaction that rapidly had the entire interconnected group running madly about the room. Bodies became metaphors for how, through the literal interconnection of everything, one small movement can ripple outward to affect an entire environment. Every individual act is significant within the whole.

One plus one makes three. One of the most intriguing aspects of the sessions was what one woman referred to as “entrainment”. In the 17th century, a Dutch scientist first noted the phenomenon when he placed two grandfather clocks near one another. He was surprised to find that after a time, the two pendulae began to swing within the same rhythm. Entrainment is popularly defined as the synchronization of two or more rhythmic cycles. An interesting example in daily life that has been unofficially noted by many women, is when two or more women, living in the same house, experience the synchronization of their menstruation cycles. During the Fabric Ritual (see Appendix A), a few of the women experienced a sort of movement entrainment and were intrigued by this process of wordless synchronicity. Tissa describes her experience during that activity:

I was working with Vera and ... we've done yoga a lot before, Vera and I, but to actually do something that was ...purely about colour and shape and form and repetition was...really magical in terms of the feeling of it. It just released all these....kind of wonderful, peaceful feelings that were really.... It was something about the repetition, you know. When you do something over and over...with *intent*...it becomes something more than itself. All of a sudden we'd come up with a *new* movement.... Like all of a sudden, we'd be doing one thing and then suddenly that was it. It had to change. So one of us changed it and then we'd do that movement and so that happened ... 4 or 5 times, actually, that the movement spontaneously sort of changed – almost as if it changed between us.

Tissa's description of the fabric ritual revealed something further about this state of entrainment. Not only did she experience synchronized intent with her partner, Vera, but also the creation of a *third thing*; something that went beyond the two of them to become something else. This combination of two elements into something new is termed "synthesis" and finds examples in both philosophy, where two separate intellectual positions on a subject result in a third and resolving synthesis of the original ideas (dialectics), and physics, where two colours combine together to form a third. For Tissa, a kind of synthesis had occurred, where the repeated movements that she and her partner fell into together, belonged to neither one of them, but, as she said, spontaneously changed "between them", as a third, shared option. The state of consciousness required to create this "magical" experience, seemed to be brought on by the pure colour, shape and form of the cloth they were moving between them. That she was partnered up with another visual artist might have been significant. Together, they shared a movement synchronicity that emerged out of the alignment of their intent, their surrender to colour and form, and the repetitive nature of the activity. This "synchronicity groove" is evident in improvisational music as well. In jazz music, for example, combined musical creation arises miraculously out of pre-existing individual musical impulses. Some of the women seemed to experience a modest version of this same phenomenon.

Entrainment and synthesis are states of what could be called *high play* between two people. Simple raw materials of movement repetition, a piece of fabric and two wordless human beings seeking a mutual intent, converge to create not only a simple patterned movement but a shift in perception: a wordless unity, and through this union, the simple movement becomes, as Tissa said, "something more than itself". As we move into the arena of shared experience, the openness to the dynamic flow of the present moment must now include a willingness to open up

to the other human being who is playfully sharing this moment with you. To be in such a place is rare, perhaps most often experienced by trained improvisational artists. But Tissa's experience shows that, under certain circumstances, entrainment might be open to any one of us. The product generated by coming into alignment in this way may be humble but the process and the gentle but profound release of positive feelings that accompanies this state is accessible to us all.

Sacred gifts and blessings. Some of the inner alchemy created between partners was experienced as almost a sacred act of blessing. Elysse's experience with Rea was an exquisite example of this. In the following description, she had just discovered Rea standing over to the side of her, with the beautiful deep blue, sheer cloth draped over her:

And I went over, and I sat down in front of her...she was standing and sort of leaning on the dance bar...and she just put the scarf...over me and the corners of it landed in the palms of my hand.... And it instantly just felt like a blessing from another mother.... And then I... took it. I accepted it. I had a moment where I just was with it...and I took it all... and I handed it back to her. So it was- the scarf was becoming like a sacred object. It felt really powerful. And ... I was amazed. I was amazed at how I just - you know... she just... Because I felt nervous again. It was like, 'what are you going to do with the scarf?' 'Ok, who's going to go first?' 'How are we going to work this out together?' And then, ...and then how easily it just... she just...did the motion and ... I understood something from it andyeah, yeah! My hands just went ... she placed the corners in it ... it had detail to it. It was so subtle but it was precise and perfect.

Elysse was deeply moved by this blessing from another mother and amazed at how it emerged from their moment together performing this repeated movement pattern. There was a calmness about their simple, deliberate movement together and the sheer cloth was like a sacred veil. In entering into the moment along with Rea, Elysse experienced not only the synchronicity of intention but the mutual giving and receiving of conscious connection.

The Next Step: Increasing Intimacy

Because the space felt safe, women quickly moved into a connected arrangement. Eartha described the connection between women as "palpable" by the second session and others

mentioned a level of connection they had not felt elsewhere. Yet, Eartha described participants as “all connected and yet, not really touching each other.” Although I had managed to facilitate a level of connectedness, I had not necessarily facilitated the development of intimacy within the group. Intimacy was conspicuous in its relative absence from the sessions and its relative presence as a topic of discussion in the interviews. If intimacy is simply connection deepened, was the level of intimacy simply a reflection of short time we were together or was something missing from the mix? Further, is intimacy something qualitatively different than connection? What follows is a consideration of these questions and of some of the influencing factors in the development of intimacy in the sessions.

Honouring timeliness. Timeliness has been mentioned in reference to several aspects of the sessions. Some participants described the timing of the initial invitation to dance as auspicious and others were aware of the perfect timeliness of certain connections that occurred within the group. Finn said, “And there were specific exercises... when I was paired up with certain people... It was the perfect person to be paired up with. And there was so much flow and there was so much harmony to it”. Another woman spoke of the perfect *imperfection* of some of the pairings:

Inadvertently, ironically, universally, I was paired with the very person I was having a difficult time with... and then at the very end of it, the *very* end of it... I saw her. She let me in just, just *this* much. And *what* a gift. *What* a gift. Because all of a sudden, she exposed a little piece of herself.

In this case, the gift of intimacy, however small, was perhaps greater because of the ironic timing of its arrival: at the very last, perhaps after she had let go of it ever happening.

Honouring timeliness seems to involve both the receptive and active principles of listening and then taking action in response to something that “feels right”. True listening must include the possibility of *not* taking action, as well, based on what message is received from the

inner voice. After the heart dance, Cora obeyed an inner voice that said, “This is not the time. Drink your water.” She heeded the message of timeliness and spent the next activity squatting by the dance bar, breathing her way through to a more settled place.

Besides being an inherent and positive part of the process of listening and responding, timeliness may also point to the fact that there needs to be sufficient time in order for the process of “learning to trust”. Many women said that there just wasn’t enough time: not enough time in each session, not enough sessions, not enough time at the end of each session to share. Perhaps developing trust *is* like eating chocolate, as Isadora suggested. At best, it is a slow process of tasting and testing. The women needed to move slowly, first sharing what was easy and seeing if the waters were safe before venturing further and allowing the difficult, vulnerable places to emerge, in time.

The perception of a lack of time affected the simple and joyful act of sharing their beingness. Eartha said, of the final session in particular:

I would like ... to have had the time to go out and eat with all those women afterwards ...to solidify that. I would have liked for us all to go out and share soup together or food. (It) would it be almost an honouring of those connections that we’ve made over the 5 weeks.

I believe this is a testament to the powerful connection between “taking time” together as women and sharing food; breaking bread, as it were. Perhaps the development of intimacy involves recreating the circle through shared delight and shared vulnerability, time after time. Perhaps simple womanly rituals, through their repeated doing, build and deepen the intimacy in women’s relationships.

Quality of space. The issue of time was interwoven with the quality of space in determining the degree of intimacy. The women spoke of the sessions as being a “safe and welcoming space” and yet, they felt that this was not the place to become entirely vulnerable and

exposed. Partly, this may have been because of the research element of the experience. Perhaps women felt some constraint knowing that I had some investment in the outcome as a student and did not want in any way to jeopardize the project. More likely, however, they were responding to the tone I had clearly set at the beginning of the sessions, where I emphasized the limitations of the group and the necessity for each of them to take personal responsibility for their psychological and physical processes. Either way, the women kept their personal and public expressions of difficult emotion to a limited palette. It was as if there was a great deal more presenting itself than was being processed, either individually or through verbal sharing within the group. Vera put it best in her interview:

In the talk back sessions or sharing circles, it was all very positive, right? And nobody brought up their issues, saying, oh I had real trouble with this one - or whatever. I never heard that, you know. I mean there was a high level of enjoyment... but I'm sure... I know that there were things *I* had ...more of a challenge with - to get my body or my mind or whatever just to go there. Some things came really easy - of course, you love doing those - and then, some things are more of a challenge. And we didn't talk about those challenges - going into those harder places. So I noticed and wondered ... what that was about. Because often, that may be some of the work we need to do!

Vera felt that the sessions were a place “you could come and be ok” but that when tears or challenges came up and were experienced, people did not share this with the group. For her, it felt okay to have emotion, but somehow, not to talk about it in the sharing circle. Or at least, she said, women *did* not, and she wondered why this was.

Flibertygibbets and soul gazing. Perhaps the two processes of *journeying in* to source and then *journeying back out* into a conscious communal sharing of the private experience need to be deliberately merged somehow if they are not to cancel each other out. Rea and Cora wanted more opportunities to “soul gaze” or look into one another’s eyes – to move into this very intimate one-to-one space. We did only a few contact improvisation activities because I was concerned that too much contact might be too threatening for people who are new to

expressive movement experiences. But several of the women wanted more of this, even as they acknowledged they would be the ones quaking in the corner!

Other women, like Tissa and Vera, felt it was important to *verbally* process their experiences. I wonder if verbal processing might, in fact, be the necessary resolution to non-verbal experience. Perhaps words are like hooks on which we can hang our experiences. Certainly, verbally sharing movement experience is an integral part of many movement practices, including contact improvisation and authentic movement. The other day, as I sat in a friend's garden, sharing homegrown iced tea and talking about everything from politics and relationships to the herbs that had made their way from my friend's garden into the bottom of my glass, I thought about women and "gossip". The word *gossip* comes from the Old English "godsibb" or godparent and around the 14th century, referred to "any familiar acquaintance" or, in a more particular sense emerging around the 17th century, referred to "woman friends invited to be present at a birth." At around that same time, the word gossip was used to describe "a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a news monger, a tattler". Well before that, however, the word *flibbertigibbit* (1549) referred not only to a "chattering gossip (and a) flighty woman" but also to a "devil or fiend." Historically, women's verbal processing was obviously not always seen in a positive light. Perhaps it is, nonetheless, an important step in creating intimacy within a circle, and most particularly one in which there is so much happening at a non-verbal level.

The underbelly of intimacy. Some of the participants might have been seriously challenged by a greater degree of intimate contact and sharing. As is perhaps typical of any group, the women were all at varying degrees of readiness and there may have been a degree of

ambivalence in some of the women about sharing what was difficult. Many women, in fact, wanted *more* of what was fun and *less* of sharing in a “serious” way.

As facilitator, I also found the thought of verbally processing what was difficult within the group to be, as Isadora put it, a “daunting” prospect. Intimacy is as slippery a state of being as any dynamic process, and intimacy gone wrong can hurt, as some of the participants themselves expressed. Lib, for example, said:

There was one class where I felt the community of women. And I realized in my life that I don't feel that a lot And it felt really, really healing. ...I remember I had this job where these two women hated me as soon as I got there, and they made things really, really difficult....and....so to feel the community part of it was pretty awesome and I wish there was more of that.... Everywhere.

The sessions had provided Lib with an opportunity to heal past relational hurts. I felt it was my ethical duty to avoid further hurt and so I trod the terrain of intimacy with a careful step. But Lib was not the only one whose previous hurt in group contexts was affecting her experience. I recognized from the beginning of the project that, combined with my professional ethical concerns as a researcher and therapist in training, my own negative or difficult experiences with groups in the past were creating a culture of caution when it came to relational risk-taking. In my life, I had personally been on that slippery slope of group “intimacy” and had ended up in a heap at the bottom. Sharing can result in a big, mucky mess and, without being aware of it, I was not certain I wanted to let people start playing in that mud. I harboured a belief that female relationships were not only potentially rich and beautiful, but also dangerous.

That the sessions proceeded more slowly down this path of intimacy was neither wrong nor right. Many of the participants appreciated the safety and the clarity provided by the level of personal responsibility and the relational carefulness inherent to the project and were quite satisfied with the connections made. Honouring timeliness and the limits of our capacity in any

given moment are not signs of failure but, as alluded to earlier, a sign of deep and responsive *listening* to the contingencies of the lived “Here” and the lived “Now”. For all of us in these vulnerable places, instead of willfully dictating what we should be capable of at any given moment, we can let go of the calendar of self-improvement and the agenda of change and *allow* the process of relational trust, to which Isadora alluded, to unfold in its way. Action is placed within the context of being, as opposed to the other way around.

Ripples and Reverberations

It’s relatively impossible for me to not share, like, when something has affected me deeply....because you want to keep that energy going. You want that that to keep going so that other people are touched and that other people are moved.

Finn

One of the most powerful messages for me to hear from the women was how what we did in the sessions seemed to reverberate out into their lives, in both small and larger ways. Sola, for example, talked about how, in her peaceful and relaxed state after each class, she was able to more fully enjoy time spent with her children. Cora experienced a significant shift in her life after the sessions. In her interview, she shared her plans for the upcoming month: “What this has done for me... (is), some time in January, I’m going to put on another healing voice / dancing spirit workshop. And I had totally let that all go...” She had come into the sessions to reconnect with herself and had not only done that but was planning to share her love of dance and voice work with others in the community. Finn was also deeply affected by the sessions. She said, “what was going on in the class was really important because it wasn’t just about the class anymore. There was a lot of transference into daily life....” And again later in the interview:

Yeah, the weaving.... I can see that room and I can see these strands that came out of that room and that ... took root. They took root. And when (a friend) said ‘here’s a bunch of money for the chocolate stuff, make some chocolates and start selling the chocolate’, another ripple was created because I was listening. Really listening to my

heart ...so those strands, they did start in the class and then I did weave them back out into my life.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this reverberation was when Tissa shared one of the activities we did in the sessions with another women's circle. Here is her description of that shared experience in response to my query about what she considered a highlight of the sessions:

Well, I think that being able to share that dance with other women was one of the best. That silence meditation that we did...the Stillness Dance...it was very good to be able to share that.... and have...my whole other room full of women at the women's gathering enjoy that...because I had to do a memorial service that day actually, for a friend who had passed away... So, to have something for the women to move *into* was, I think, a really good way of thinking about the whole cycle of life and death... and birth and rebirth... You know... everything comes in cycles, right? For them to connect individually to their own... cycles where they're still and when they're... moving and when they're busy and when they can take time to be still again and relate that to ... the overall cycles of life and death that we all have to face. It was an excellent way of starting a memorial service. It really worked. And to do the ...feeling each other's pulse and listening to each other's heart beats ... for rhythms? That started the ceremony and moved into the stillness dance. ...just what we had done, actually ... It was really easy to use what we had just done.... So thank you for that.

It was an honour for that activity to be brought out of our circle and shared with another women's circle and to know that the practice of experiencing the cycles of movement and stillness was able to translate into a loving observance of the passing of a friend. Truly, our heartfelt offerings ripple out in the most beautiful, creative ways. Here again, I see sessions such as these, where women come together to explore their conscious connection with themselves and with each other, to be, as Finn put it, a "powerful medicine" that can keep rippling out into the world, one circle at a time.

A Verbal Post-Script

Rea: There were a lot of really neat women (in the group). It was really... really a good reminder, like, it's one thing to read the books, like the Red Tent ...and all these books about women gathering and ... talking about it and then actually, functionally doing it

M: mmmhmm

R: in reality. And what we, we are actually up against. Because in our own mind, it's almost like ...talking about meditating and being on the band wagon for meditation and all the Eastern practices and then actually trying to do it, you know? (laughs)

M: yeah

R: you know, it's not unlike that. We can talk a blue streak about how important it is to connect with our sisters and do all these wonderful things together and then when we actually do, what we come up against and how much judgment is there...or *not* there – or about ourselves or other people. I found that really interesting, it was a good exercise....

M: mmm

R: it was a good exercise.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss what I considered to be the most salient and essential aspects of the present study's findings and how the contributions of authors discovered both prior to and during the analysis phase of the research resonated with the women's descriptions of their experience. Further, I discuss the implications of the present study for research and therapeutic practice. Finally, I delineate ways in which the present study was limited in its scope and format as well as suggest possibilities for future research.

Revisiting the Findings

The experiences of the women in "Returning to the Well" were rich and complex. Each woman's experience and understanding of her experience was unique and I have attempted to retain the raw vitality and originality of the women's individual voices. However, just as the small well accesses an entire aquifer, I believe that the women's individual experiences accessed something greater as well. Not only were the waters communal at the surface, as water is shared round through conscious relationship, but also, at a deeper level, one could say that the waters come from a collective source; a collective aquifer of association and meaning from which we all draw. This was the more overtly hermeneutical aspect of the present study and, like a diviner of meaning, I hold my willow wand and move slowly across the landscape of the experience, seeking signs of water.

Source and Resource

There is a Zen proverb that says, "All instruction is but a finger pointing to the moon; and those whose gaze is fixed upon the pointer will never see beyond. Even let him catch sight of the moon, and still he cannot see its beauty." From the beginning, with the choice of the image and title, "Returning to the Well", I have been drawn by my curiosity about the act of dancing back

to source and, in calling out to the greater community of women, have found that the image has resonated with others. But still, in attempting to talk about the “source”, I still find myself circling the idea, pointing to the moon, peering into the dark and cavernous well to hear the pebble drop a long way down and thus gain some idea of the nature of that which lies in those deep places. I have been unable to intellectually deconstruct what seemed to be the fulcrum of the experience, only obliquely referring to the processing of sourcing through the women’s own testament of their experience and what it meant for them.

In the latter stages of research, I explored the etymological roots of the word, “source”, and found my understanding of the journey we took together enriched in the process. “Source” comes from the Old French *source*, “a rising, beginning, fountainhead”; “the spring or place from which a flow of water takes its beginning,” and from the Latin, *urgere*, “to rise”. This notion of something original, existing at a deep, unseen level and feeding the surface waters that derive from it, points to the sense that there was some original, life-affirming wellspring that we were thirsting for and which could be accessed through dancing and being together as women. The notion of power also enters into the definition of *source*. In physics, for example, a *source* is described as “any point where, or process by which, energy or some material component enters a physical system.” In the same way, the *source* as apprehended by myself as researcher and by the women was a place of increase and of personal power. Finally, the source waters that feed the metaphorical well of my study, lie deep underground; unseen and largely unknowable. We cannot see or touch the water at its place of origin but must patiently draw it up to the surface. In the same way, all of us, myself as well as the women, have attempted to connect with, understand and describe this source that we cannot see. In different metaphoric terms, it is akin to Plato’s dilemma in the cave or the Zen finger pointing to the moon.

The word *resource* shares etymological origins with *source* and reveals several important characteristics of the process of “returning to the well”. *Resource* is described as the “means of supplying a want or deficiency; a stock or reserve upon which one can draw when necessary”. Reference to “the means” highlights the action orientation of the word, something that is also reflected in the fact that in the Old French, resource appears in verb form, as *resourser*. *Sourcing* in the sessions was a process which re-established access to the deep, original supply of what is needed.

What is interesting about the word *resource* or resource, is the linguistic reference to it being a return. It is a *re-sourcing*, a return journey to an original place or state; some larger supply from which the individual has somehow become cut off. However, the “stock or reserve” referred to in the definition is something that is not separate from, but endogenous to a system. For example, a country’s natural or financial resources are, obviously, found within or belonging to the country. At every level, resources are either found *within* a community, *within* a family, or *within* the individual. Framed in this way, the means to replenish one’s supply are entirely in the hands of the individual, family or community; at some systemic level, coming from within. Following both the etymological clues and those provided by the women’s descriptions of their experiences, *sourcing* seemed to be about re-establishing access to one’s own internal resources as well as one’s communal resources; a process over which the woman herself, and not an external authority such as a therapist, had ultimate agency (see Implications of Research, p.146). In responding to the invitation, participating in and reflecting on their experiences in the sessions, the women were active and empowered agents in their own journey. They understood that they were their own diviners of water: finding the source and bringing it to the surface.

As a final addendum to this etymological exploration, the word *surge*, coming from the same Latin verb *surgere*, points not to the characteristic of this internal journey but to the effect. *Surge* has the sense not only of a powerful rising of waters but also an emotional surge. In the sessions, women spoke of a surge of physical vitality, a sudden outpouring of emotion, a flood of insight. Again, the image of water is useful not only in pointing to the source itself and the process of accessing it, but also the effects of that re-sourcing upon individual or group vitality and well-being.

The Nature of the Source: Encountering the Authentic

The process of sourcing in the sessions was that of repeatedly returning to the existential “encounter”; the experience of oneself within the lifeworld. One definition of *encounter* is “a meeting face to face.” This definition sheds light on the nature of the source waters being considered – both within each woman and between women, as they dance together within the space. To begin with, being “face to face” suggests nothing in the way, a stripping of masks, an end to diversion tactics. In this sense, a true encounter would seem to be, above all else, authentic. *Authentic* is defined as “‘authoritative’ and ‘original’, in other words, to return to some “true” or original essence of who one is. The women’s desire to return to source is, in part, a desire to return to the fullness of one’s authentic selfhood. Perhaps it was this feeling that one has momentarily come face to face, in an immediate, unbounded way, with who one “really is” that generated the intense feelings of relief, gratitude and joy described by Cora and others.

Lost Puzzle Pieces

The attempt to grasp and express essential beingness in the lifeworld has, I think, been a major impetus behind the creation of art. Music, dance and visual images are representations of something essential or authentic in our experience of being. In the sessions, the women often

had image-oriented experiences or made meaning of their experiences in imagistic terms.

Perhaps humans mark the flow of experience with expressive landmarks. Evocative and richly laden, an image can act like a hook or an anchor, providing a conceptual anchor of sorts. Many of the women spoke, in one way or another, of “getting a piece of themselves back.” Let us look at what those lost pieces of the essential or authentic female self might, in fact, look like.

The authentic feminine. Experiencing authenticity within the context of the sessions was not a gender-neutral phenomenon. This was not simply a dance class, but one that was centred on the idea of “being women together”. Yet, it was not simply a women’s group, either. The women came to the sessions to be themselves, dancing; surrounded by dancing women. In other words, the women joined because it allowed each of them to be expressive as a woman *within* a circle of women.

In the previous chapter, I described being fully and naturally oneself (being authentic) as “the big taboo”. But perhaps the greater taboo is being fully one’s *female* self, without censure and judgment and with support. To “up the ante” even further, the women were given permission to be their *physically expressive* female selves. In contrast to what is possible outside the studio, the women were encouraged to revel in physical and sensual exploration: being tactile, experiencing their bones and breath and rejoicing in the open encounter with hips and thighs, breasts and pregnant bellies. To be a woman dancing in a free way was to “taste” oneself as a sensual being; an embodied being.

The expression of female sensuality and embodiment was core to the encounter with the authentic self. The French have a saying, *je me sens bien dans ma peau* which means, literally, “I feel good in my skin” or “I feel good about myself”. Possibly every woman there, and certainly the majority, felt that connecting with the source had something to do with their

femaleness; *being* their bodies, *reveling in* their natural movement impulses, and *sharing* this source water of female embodiment within the circle.

Resacralizing the feminine

Confession

Apprehended on the slant
Of air between two trees
Crow-fractured morning
After morning, I would
Name you if I knew how.
I don't. Know how
You leap over naming,
Sidle under, squeeze around,
You lilac, thistle, burr,
Belonging to no species,
You chipmunk-sudden,
Slug-utterly unaccommodating-
You rainfall prism beautiful,
Earthquake terrifying,
Still of night-deep darkness
Comforting,
You rock, you rock,
You unnameable, unknowable known
How you scamper/ swim
Creep/ crawl soar/sink
Stride/fly-you mountain, you
Desert, delicious, delirious
Madness-making
You ocean, you faucet, you ripple,
Erupt! Spray! Spout, you silence,
You suggestion, you
Impossible, unbelievable
God

Schneider (2004, p.184-185)

Each week, most if not all the women danced their way “into the root”, as Cora put it. Whether they ever arrived or not, almost every woman there was dancing into some kind of visceral, feminine place. In her interview, Cora referred to how this transformative practice of

embodiment has something to teach the world at large; that if it were truly valued and witnessed, the world would be a different place. In her opinion, women are the “keepers” of this transformative embodiment and hold the key to an idea and a process with a transformational potential that could ripple out at both a local and global level to fundamentally transform reality.

Although the sessions were in no way framed as a religious or even spiritual journey, but simply as a chance to quench the thirst for dance and womanly connection, there was an important spiritual component to the majority of the women’s experience. For many of the women, I think, this experience reflected and, more importantly, contradicted a long-standing religious denigration of feminine spirituality.

In Christianity, Islam and mainstream Judaism, God reigns alone as a male deity, in Christianity, a mother remains a virgin and in Greece, Athena springs fully formed and fully armed from her father’s brow (both birth and the lengthy process of mothering a child to full development being absented here). The concept of god in most religions around the world reflects a long-standing split between the physical (the “profane”) and the spirit (the “sacred”) (Raphael, 1996, p.21). In the patriarchal paradigm, there is a continual message that to be divine is to transcend the manifested realm (Raphael, 1996). The feminine, so inextricably bound to manifestation through the bodily experiences of menstruation and birthing is degraded at both the symbolic and mundane level. Reuther (1990) writes:

Patriarchal religion is built on many millennia of repressed fear of the power of female bodily processes. Any effort to admit the female in her explicit femaleness as one who menstruates, gestates and lactates, will create psychic time-bombs that may explode with incalculable force. One can expect cries of ‘witchcraft’, ‘blasphemy’, ‘sacrilege’ and ‘idolatry’ to be directed at those who seek to resacralize the female body.” (pp. 18-19).

In patriarchal societies, there have been several practices that reflect this degradation of the feminine. Treatment of uncontrollable female “hysteria” through hysterectomies, female

castration, the veiling of women, and, in the west, the unspoken prudery regarding public breastfeeding while female bodies are promoted for objective pornographic consumption, all indicate the patriarchal discomfort with the power of a woman's body. Separating a woman's physical beauty and sexual allure from the natural powers of procreation, for example, serves to limit the association of a woman's primary function to her visual consumption by men (Raphael, 1996). A woman's body becomes either sexual currency or a spiritual liability as opposed to a vessel for mothering the next generation or, more to the point, a means to a woman's own joy and transformation.

When women dance together, they can heal the rejection of the feminine. In contrast to body-denying transcendence, expressive movement within a circle of women is *immanent*. The Oxford English Dictionary describes immanent as "indwelling, inherent ... abiding *in*; remaining within." In philosophical terms, immanence refers to the divine as something "permanently pervading and sustaining the universe, as distinguished from the notion of an external *transcendent* creator or ruler." Whereas transcendence denies or minimizes the physical, an immanent orientation rejoices in things earthy and elemental, recognizing that the spirit of life permeates not only every object of creation but the universal processes of life itself.

In Kabbalism, (mystical Judaism), divine immanence has survived in the form of the Shekinah. *Shekinah* comes from the Hebrew *Shakhan* "to dwell" (Johnson, 1992, p. 85) and signifies "God as She-Who-Dwells-Within" (p. 86). The Shekinah is the spirit of God in the natural world and is a powerful symbol for the immanent experience of the sessions. A celebration of the Shekinah is a celebration of spirit inherent in matter. By embracing the indwelling nature of the Shekinah, all of the generative (and destructive) processes not only of nature but of a woman's body are understood to be not filthy or inferior but powerful and sacred.

The cycle of generation and destruction as played out in the woman's womb and the milk of care that issues from her breasts are no longer seen through the dualistic patriarchal lens of consumption and degradation but as something of inherent worth and beauty.

In Hellenic terms, the dichotomy of immanence and transcendence is viewed not in strict masculine/feminine terms, but rather, in terms of raw primal energy versus rational thought, epitomized by the contrasting gods, Dionysus and Apollo (Easton, n.d.). Both are gods of creativity, however, Dionysus is a sensual god, associated with dance, the cycling of life and death, intoxication, ecstasy and...mad women. The Maenads are women in the possession of erotic Dionysian ecstasy who are forever running through the forests naked, devouring animals (and, in some accounts, human men). The purpose of the carnage is to incorporate the physical energy of the animal within them. In contrast, Apollo is a god of light and is "sober, elegant, and eloquent; he plays the lyre; he is *never* ecstatic." (Easton, n.d.). Apollo and Dionysus represent the rational and the irrational, the elevated and the embodied, the transcendent and the immanent.

In society, Apollo's ordered, rational energy creates social order, but within the sessions, the energy of the earthier, more sensual god came to the fore. The taboo against such sensual creativity was temporarily lifted and the "dancing maenads" found their way to the forest (minus the ingestion of animals or men). At moments, (for example, when Cora danced the second chakra dance on the last day or when Eartha danced and was reminded of the sensuality of being on the nude beach with her friends), their dance felt not only natural and beautiful, but erotic as well. This is Dionysian energy – where eros is stirred and is allowed to permeate the dance and the dance space, without either restriction or manipulation.

The iconic images found in various religions and systems of thought all point to what Whitman (1855/2007) referred to as the "procreant urge of the world" (p. 22), that source of

immanent and sensual creativity that seemed to be coming up through the dance and through the simple experience of being embodied. Perhaps it is no wonder the women felt more alive and beautiful when they got out of their heads and back into the most elemental part of themselves. They were able to experience what Raphael (1996) refers to as the “aesthetic power of the sacral body” (p. 114). This rooted, core beauty is not conditional on some external “I” or “eye”, but is experienced as a direct and personal connection to the energy, vitality and creativity of eros. A swift consideration of the images of women in any culture would suggest that the phenomenon of a woman being sensual for no one’s delight but her own is rare and another example of “powerful medicine”. Experiencing the sacred in one’s own earthy, juicy self enabled many of the women to fall into themselves and let the critical voice that made them question their worth, go. Reminded of her sacral beauty with such visceral certainty, Cora was dismantled, Elysse connected with the miracle of her rounding belly, Eartha was taken to a place of warm sun on skin and Rea delighted in becoming seaweed gently moving in the tidal waters. I think that some of the women became the living iconic presence of the Shekinah or the wild, dancing maenad for others in the room. The definition of *sacred* is, “connected with a deity and so deserving veneration; holy.” If dance that welled up from within allowed some of the women to glimpse their own “holiness”; their immanent sacrality, then perhaps that dance can be seen as sacred. Can it be said that in the moments where one feels this unifying experience - the self merging into the sacrality of the elemental world - that one has connected with source? Church comes from the Greek *kuriakon doma*, meaning “Lord’s house”. Is it possible that any place where one encounters the sacred, whether in a cathedral, a dance studio, or one’s own dancing body, is a church?

This rising dance of immanence points to something important that came out of the sessions. However instructive, the conceptualization of the Shekinah still indicates a “top-down approach” (god descended), and pure immanence suggests a biological sufficiency that precludes the human urge to transform or transcend. Many of the transformational moments in the sessions, however, seemed more complex and subtle. The dancing body seemed to act at times like a bridge; perhaps translating the sensorial encounter with the lifeworld into other levels of experience, whether that be emotional processing and release or movement into an insight state (see *Rising from the Root*, page 80). This is not to say that this was the case for every woman at every moment in the sessions. However, highlighted moments often involved the interaction of the polar opposites of carnal and sacred. As Eartha said, “who knew that I’d have so many revelations...in a movement session, or a series of movement sessions!” It is possible that women have a predilection for experiencing transformation from an embodied as opposed to an ascetic angle. As mentioned, the womb is the meeting ground for the carnal and sacred. A woman gives birth to the divine through the vessel of her body and also experiences the death of cosmic potential each month with the sluffing off of the unused lining of her own womb. Denial of the body is perhaps an even less practical or authentic option for a woman than it is for a man.

Rising from the Root is a transformational approach that has a more than credible precedent. Taoism and Tantra are two ancient traditions that provide not only the theory but the practice of an embodied approach to transformation. Taoism describes the process as “internal alchemy”, a psycho-spiritual process whereby physical energies are utilized and transmuted, a metaphoric changing of the “lead” of the sensory world into the “gold” of transcendent reality (Kazlev, n.d.). Of all the mystical traditions, Taoism is perhaps the one most clearly grounded in the feminine. It is written in the *Tao Te Ching* (1989), “know the strength of man, / But keep a

woman's care!" and again, "Know the white, / But keep the black!" (chapter 28, p. 30).

Masculine and feminine energies, respectively termed yang and yin, and referring to both the active (light) and passive (dark) energies are both considered essential energies within the cosmos, but the feminine energy is viewed as the ground of being, from which any (masculine) action should emerge (Needleman, 1989, p. xxi). Within the sessions, Finn, Eartha, Elyse and others described the sense of calm that came from reconnecting with this ground of being. The experience of "listening" to their bodies, their hearts, their creative centre, or in whatever way they described being in a receptive, open state is informed by this Taoist understanding of receptive yin and active yang.

Tantric Buddhism recognizes the role of the body and, in particular, kundalini energy, in the process of inner transformation (Feuerstein, 1998). Tantra (and in fact, Taoism as well) specifically describes a system that reflects the phenomenon of rising from the root.

Transformation occurs through the gradual unblocking of the flow of energy through the chakras from lowest to highest (in Taoism, this flow of energy is conceptualized as making a full loop so that the flow is not uni-directional but cyclical) (see Chang, 1997; Saraswati & Avinasha, 1996). What is remarkable to me is that in just five sessions, what would seem to be the age-old process of "rising immanence" where the somatic experiences are not only honoured but utilized to affect transformation on all levels, was beginning to make its presence known.

Standing in Relation

The most living moment comes when
those who love each other meet
each others eyes and in what flows
between them then.

Rumi (Trans.Barks, 2002, p. 189)

As fertile as the revisioning of the authentic feminine might be, it is not a complete, or perhaps not a completely accurate, description of what women experienced in the sessions. Linguistics provides a useful way to describe the required shift in understanding. As mentioned in the previous chapter (p. 64), *source* becomes transformed from noun to gerund verb (sourcing), to reflect the process-orientation of the women's experiences moving and dancing. So what, then, is the fate of *authenticity*? When held up to the light, authenticity also reveals itself as more of an action than an objectifiable noun; more of a process than an essential, quantifiable "something". Who one "really is" seemed to emerge out of the act of encountering the lived world "face to face"; fully present, conscious and alive. With the word *encounter*, the focus is not on the experience of something but on the meeting itself, possibly "unexpected," or even "conflictual", but always relational.

For all the talk of experience, I have come to think that the sessions were not fundamentally about experience at all, but about relationship. Looking back, the seed of understanding was there in the original discussion surrounding the research question (see page 11), but it was the participants' experiences that assisted in coming to a fuller understanding of the role of experience versus relationship. *I* created experiences and the women had relationships. *I* plunged into experiential explorations and relationality kept pulling focus. *I* avoided certain daunting aspects of relational reality and heard about it from many women in interviews. They noticed. Relationality kept rearing its fascinating but frightening head in the research. It would not be paid lip service. It would make itself known...intimately.

Buber (1970) describes this important distinction between experience and relationality in his work, "I and Thou". In an authentic encounter, we do not *experience* one another, ourselves

or some “thing” such as time or space as much as we are in relationship with it. Of experience he writes:

We are told that man experiences his world. What does this mean?

Man goes over the surfaces of things and experiences them. He brings back from them some knowledge of their condition- an experience. He experiences what there is to *things*.

But it is not experiences alone that bring the world to man.

For what they bring to him is only a world that consists of It and It and I, of He and He and She and She and It.

I experience *something*.

All this is not changed by adding “inner” experiences to the “external” ones.... Inner things like external things, things among things!

I experience something.

And all this is not changed by adding “mysterious” experiences to “manifest” ones, self-confident in the wisdom that recognizes a secret compartment in things, reserved for the initiated, and holds the key. O mysteriousness without Mystery, O piling up of information! It, it, it!

For Buber (1970), to merely “experience” is to remain at the level of “I-It”. To “stand in relation” (p. 55), however, is to transcend to the level of “I-Thou”. My understanding of my own personal journey, my methodology of research, and the actual content of the sessions themselves, all grew out of a general preoccupation with *experience*: embodied experience, sensory experience, expressive and improvisational experience, even the experience of coming together as women. And yet, as such, experience as a “thing” did not exist, or did so only superficially. Instead, what I found was relationship; an ongoing *orientation* to experience. According to Buber (1990), only when one is functioning from a relational perspective can there be a true encounter. Otherwise, one has slipped into I-It objectification and what takes place is not a dialogue between two subjects but a monologue between the self and another human “object” that is there to play a role and serve the “I”.

The women repeatedly described things in terms of relationship and tended to find most meaning in moments that revealed relational connectedness, whether to the self or to others. The

experience of time or space, for example, was generally memorable in as much as it revealed the miracle of relationship; thus, the enduring impact of the Equilateral Triangle activity, where connectivity and one's place in the scheme of things is thrown into stark relief. Even individual, internal experiences were understood in a relational sense. Authentic Movement, for example, had such impact because it revealed the relationship between the conscious and subconscious aspects of the self.

Of course, to reach Buber's level of encounter is, in all likelihood, a life-long quest and far from what was experienced as the norm in the sessions. Objectifying others, as he would suggest and any self-investigation would support, is the average human's habitual stance (Buber, 1990). I believe that we often decide the worth of others based on what they can give us or how we can better see ourselves through our association with them. However, the women's description of what occurred in the sessions suggests that they recognized on some level that their *experience* of being and dancing emerged as a function of *relationality* as opposed to the other way around.

Intimacy

What does it mean to "stand in relation?" Relational theory suggests that in a society that devalues the feminine and functions out of disconnection, coming together as women for support and nourishment is an imperative (Fedele, 2004; Jordan, 2004). Spontaneous feedback during the interviews was that the women were particularly aware of "relationship" in the sessions, whether they described themselves as wanting more chances to relate or not. In fact, almost all of us were simultaneously drawn to and yet somewhat terrified by intimate encounter. The same woman would describe feeling "connected" and yet, also "isolated". What was difficult in the sessions, some said, was "the same as in life": being oneself within a circle of others.

Women wanted more “intimacy” in the group or, at least, made the observation that it was somehow lacking. The sessions were “a place come and feel ok”, as Vera said. Women described feeling “free” while still telling themselves that this wasn’t the place to process overwhelming emotion that emerged as they danced. This relational impasse is understandable when viewed through the lens of self-in-relation theory. According to counselors and authors at the Stone Center (the Jean Baker Miller training institute), in order for a group to experience increased connection, it must experience disconnection. As Vera said, participants must “do the hard work” together, in order for the group true trust and safety to become established. I had created a safe space and, paradoxically, the safety I provided was limiting women’s ability to move beyond things being “fine” to things getting “real”. This is not to say that it was inappropriate for me to develop the group in this way. As suggested in the previous chapter, intimacy and trust develops “in measure, time and place” (Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, V., IX, line 40). Much about the “complexity of connection” (Fedele, 2004) was revealed in the tension that we all experienced between the motivational intensity to connect and the ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding the moment-by-moment challenge of standing-in-relation.

Dynamism

The various feelings engendered by the relational act in the sessions: joy, fear, vulnerability, excitement and so on, point to the underlying dynamism of standing-in-relation. Relationality is a dance. In this way, the sessions again echo McLuhan’s statement, “the medium is the message” because the medium of the sessions, expressive movement, or dance, described not only the activity of the sessions but an underlying process of being. A more subtle understanding of the nature of the dance of relationality is revealed through consideration of the words *movement* and *motion*. According to the Random House unabridged dictionary (2005),

whereas movement is “always connected with the person or thing moving”, motion refers more to the act of *change* (of position in space), usually considered either “apart from, or as a characteristic of, (the)...thing that moves”. That is, movement can be seen as the observable symptom of the underlying principle of motion or change. This subtle differentiation is helpful in understanding the levels of experience described in the women’s interviews. At one level, there were the expressive movements which, from an external valuation, would not necessarily be considered either technically or artfully impressive (by whatever standards one might choose to judge such things). At another level, there was the *experience* of being in a state of expressive motion which, as described by the women, seemed to reverberate on various levels: physical, emotional and spiritual for the participants as well as affecting the women’s lives outside of the sessions. This is perhaps reflected in the now obsolete definition of motion in the Oxford English Dictionary Online, “A prompting or impulse originating from God, *esp.* a working of God in the soul.” In the sessions, there was some value or quality to the experience of moving which had less to do with the physical movement produced than with the experience of motion itself.

A renewed appreciation of the principle of motion, dynamism and change is key to understanding the possible experiential value of expressive movement. In his book “Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Centre of Life”, Schneider (2004) refers to this change state as “the fluid center” (p.11). He writes:

The fluid center is a pause, a pivot point, and a space between. It veers between constraint (structure, reticence) on the one hand and expanse (spontaneity, brashness) on the other. It can be both inner and outer, physical and mental, or it can emphasize only one of these self-dimensions. Choice is the fulcrum of the fluid center. Choice requires both centeredness- focus, accommodation - and fluidity - range, exploration. (p. 11).

The “space between” is the place of fluid relationship and, at the same time, of conscious attention. It is that open and responsive orientation to what is always in a state of motion (or change): the present moment. It is a description of encounter. One of Buber’s favorite words to convey the idea of the true encounter, *gegenwart*, can mean both “presence” and “the present” (as opposed to the past or future) (Kaufmann, 1990, p. 45). Buber’s double meaning mirrors the essential orientation to experience within the sessions. The women were invited to experience themselves and one another through movement. In order to do so, they needed to *be present in the present*; in a state of flowing motion or change. As the present moment is always in a flowing state of change, being present means inhabiting a state of flow oneself. At this level, focusing on a particular phenomenal experience pulls one out of the between-space of change. The dance of the fluid centre, in which the expressive self is entirely engaged, is interrupted for a moment because the mind is attaching to a phenomenal object, what Buber called *gegenstand* (Buber 1957/1970 trans. W. Kaufmann, p. 64) and is busy explaining, judging or categorizing it. As Eartha suggested, the sessions were a kind of meditation; a medium for dancing in and out of the flowing, motional nature of being.

Writing on Buber’s conception of *gegenwart*, Braiterman (2006) states it thus:

Presence is indeterminate by definition. A separate and sensual I and YOU constitute the *sine qua non* of relationship, but neither figure will exercise the ritual place of metamorphosis, the axiological center of relationship occupies an *in between* space as objects lose their character as solid matter. Objects dematerialize into presence, a bare, impossible to define surge between two parties, a mode of pure relating unsullied by determinate, space-fixed and time-bound feelings, contents, and objects. In the syllabic gap between *Gegenwart* and *Gegenstand*, “something happens” to IT. (p.118)

The “surge” described here corresponds remarkably to *surgere*, the Latin root of the word, *source* and of *surge*; that sense of vitality, beauty and aliveness that the women felt at certain moments of “unsullied” and unified relationship with the present moment. Again, women used

different terms to describe this “unity recovering experience” (Dienske, 2002, para. 37) of being fully present: connecting with the creative centre, feeling beauty and worth, being shook to the core, being in the zone, or, simply, listening. These and more descriptions referred, I believe, to moments when the women caught glimpses of the dynamic fluid centre; the between-space of true encounter, whether that be with the self or with another.

Improvisational dance seeks this fluid centre. Unlike structured dance which would seem to focus on the symptomatic external movement expressions, improvisational movement attempts to move into alignment with the principle of change. In his contact improvisation workshop, “Learning to Fly”, Martin Keogh shared that Contact Improvisation is not something “done to” someone else but rather, a relational dialogue *between* two movers. And it is within this relational space, which is unknown beforehand to both, that the occasional moments of synthesis during the Fabric Ritual resided. It felt remarkable to them, perhaps miraculous.

Shapeshifting. Fluidity of identity was another phenomenon that occurred within the sessions. In Raphael’s (1996) book, “Thealogy and Embodiment: the Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality”, she makes refer to this quality of physical, emotional and visionary fluidity as “shape-shifting” (p.111). In the sessions, the women demonstrated an embodied fluency of images and experiences that shifted between masculine and feminine, carnal and sacred, and even at times, human and non-human - whether angelic or of the animal world. Schneider compared this state of playful dynamism to the carnival - a place of childhood, typically, and one that contains images of surprise and wonder as well as disturbing and strange images that shake us out of our sense of normalcy. This sense of shifting identities was a reminder that, as with the carnival, the scope of possibilities are much larger than perceived when one is fully attached to the mundane reality of rigid subject/object relations. The sessions

became a safe environment to loose the conventional stays of identity somewhat and allow a playful flow of image and being.

Paradox: The Play of Opposites

The truth often sounds paradoxical.

Lao Tsu (Trans. 1989, chapter 78)

Something that is understood about carnivals is that they include not only slapstick humour and the teetering tightrope display but also the sad clown whose painted tears and antics stand in sharp contrast. The clown is, perhaps, the incarnation of paradox, reminding the audience that one polar reality always contains its opposite. The play of opposites as experienced in the sessions was particularly expressed by Isadora but felt by many more as they opened up to the embodied moment. As Isadora suggested, opposites danced in the hovering, liminal moments, and the women experienced grief in beauty, limitation in potential, movement in stillness, bravery in vulnerability, memory in presence and calm emerging from energetic release. At the fluid centre, there was a ready supply of paradox emerging like the moment's gold from the alchemical mix.

The paradox of surrender

Yield and overcome;
Bend and be straight;
Empty and be full;
Wear out and be new;
Have little and gain much;
Have much and be confused.

Lao Tsu (Trans.1989, Ch. 22)

In the sessions, the sense of bringing one's whole self to the moment, physically and expressively, was conjoined, from time to time, with the experience of being entirely dismantled. Insight arrived without warning and Eartha was left "undone". A deep, embodied "knowing"

rendered Cora speechless. A powerful connection with her body shook Rea “to the core”. Every moment, the women were required to actively and physically *choose* to surrender. Surrender was described by the women as “hard work”. As Schneider (2004) suggests, this orientation of active surrender is far from a weak position. Dancing bodies become danced bodies and in that fullness, something hits home, rings true and one is altered and fully alive. *Passivity* and *passion* rediscover the common ground of their shared linguistic roots in the commitment to the present moment (see page 69, Results Chapter). The paradoxical joining of movement and non-doing in the sessions; the active surrender to the fluid centre, *danced* women into “the empty places”, as Finn put it. Through the embodied commitment to “becoming the dance”, the mind lost the game and the women were, very occasionally, treated to a direct experience of, an encounter with, the fluid centre of being.

Dancing In and Out: The importance of Static Hooks

Although the transformative moments were an important and, I think, a defining aspect of the sessions for the women, they were certainly not the most abundant. Along with the feelings of unity and flow were moments of retreat, anxiety and separation. No one is perpetually open to dynamic energy. The zone of vulnerability was, as has been described, characterized by discomfort and challenge.

From Schneider’s (2004) perspective, anxiety or reticence is a natural aspect of residing at the fluid centre. He states that the fluid centre “veers between constraint (structure, reticence) on the one hand and expanse (spontaneity, brashness) on the other.” (p.11). Anxiety in the relational process is thus described as an inevitable and even important aspect of relationship as opposed to a block which must be disposed of. For Schneider, permanent spontaneity would be as rigid a stance as permanent reticence and thus, anxiety, separation and contraction is not only

to be expected but accepted. This corresponds with Fedele's (2004) description of the role of disconnection in the process of reaching deeper connectedness (although Schneider's description deals with one's awe-filled relationship to the lifeworld and Fedele's, relationality between women in a group).

Robert Pirsig, author of the cult classic, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) and *Lila* (1991), also refers to the state of restraint as a static pattern (p. 139) that serves an important purpose. According to Pirsig (1991), dynamism is responsible for evolutionary change but, as no individual or society can sustain perpetual dynamism, stasis acts like a stabilizing "hook" that keeps the individual (or society) from falling back into an even less evolved state (two steps forward, one step back, so to speak) (p. 139).

The importance of understanding the role of stasis in the sessions is that it completes the picture of the women's experience of relationality. Although several of the women were quite familiar with the practice of being fully present and found great value in combining conscious witnessing with a movement practice, it is unlikely that they immediately considered the sessions an opportunity to "connect with the Fluid Centre" or "dance in the gap". These more esoteric aspects were experiential discoveries for many of the women (consider Eartha's "who knew?" moments and Sola's inner dialogue: "Great. She's taking us beyond our comfort zone again..."). Instead, the women's more immediate motivations were both visceral and social, belonging more to the domain of stasis than dynamism. As well as going to the fluid space-between, the women wanted to simply talk and eat together. They wanted to turn their transformative somatic experiences into words that could be shared round between one another. They wanted intimacy. Perhaps if the moments of dynamism in the sessions were "peak experiences", stasis could be

seen as a valley experience; a place to find refuge and retreat after the foray into the unknown.

Perhaps this is the feminine face of Buber's I-Thou relationality, grounded in simple, shared acts.

Implications of the Research

“It is just possible that the unheard testimony of that half of the human species which has for so long been rendered inarticulate may have something to tell us about the holy which we have not known-something which can finally make us whole.”

Saiving, (1976, p. 197)

In the 1960's, R.D. Laing (1967) described the state of the modern world as a veritable experiential and relational desert, writing, “As adults, we have forgotten most of our childhood, not only its contents but its flavor; as men of the world, we hardly know of the existence of the inner world: we barely remember our dreams, and make little sense of them when we do; as for our bodies, we retain just sufficient proprioceptive sensations to coordinate our movements and to ensure the minimal requirements for biosocial survival - to register fatigue, signals for food, sex, defecation, sleep; beyond that, little or nothing.” (p.10). According to Laing, we are “radically estranged” (p.11); cobbled together into a jumble of disconnected aspects designed not for a life but for mere survival. Laing (1967) considered this so-called “normative state” to be madness and writes, “we are bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another, and to the spiritual and material world - mad, even, from an ideal standpoint we can glimpse but not adopt.” (Introduction, xv). No doubt he would have viewed the Dionysian maenads in a more favorable light. The effects of this estrangement from ourselves and one another, was, to his mind, nothing less than the collapse of our species.

It seems clear that the effects of valuing productivity and industry over beauty and expressivity are apparent today, particularly in the western world. The arts (dance, music and so on) are, for most, separate from everyday life. We do not have regular occasions to dance and

sing within community. Our nuclear families are busier and more isolated than their counterparts several generations past, where opportunities to gather and celebrate were woven into the fabric of work. Although the point is not to return to some pre-industrial vision of society, there is something to be gained, I believe, in considering what it means to create what I refer to as a “hand-made life”. Consciously chosen, the hand-made life is an organic weaving of what the individual deems to be *meaningful* and of *quality* as opposed to that which is necessary in order to keep one’s head above water in an insane world. This crafted life gives back to the greater society precisely because it has, in its small way, resisted homogenization and helped re-vision what “value” and “quality” might mean for individuals and groups in the post-modern context.

For the majority of women, the sessions were much more than a pleasant diversion. Many of the women joined the sessions because of an expressed need for shared self-expression and connection with the body. As Elysse and others in the sessions stated, the urge to participate felt like a visceral imperative. Most of the women clearly wanted to continue the sessions after they were finished. There was a heartfelt wish to establish an ongoing practice of gathering to dance freely and connect with other women. Although this is a small group and not necessarily representative of the larger population, I believe that their expression of need is not divorced from the larger social reality in the post-modern, Western world.

Considering Wellness

Functionality. In the therapeutic arena, the definition of wellness is often understood in terms of psychological functionality. As L’Abate (2007) stated, therapy typically focuses either on treating existing pathology that gets in the way of functioning or preventing pathology in the first place. A solutions-focused approach, for example, finds solutions to specific *problems*, a

cognitive psychology approach generally addresses specific ideation that is getting in the way of particular goals. What L'Abate (2007) suggests is that there is a third alternative. Rather than focus on the treatment or even prevention of mental disease or problems, he suggests shifting focus to health (including mental health) promotion. It is L'Abate's (2007) opinion that the needs of the general population can never be met by long-term, one-on-one therapy and that a promotional approach could be provided at a fraction of the cost. He identifies certain aspects that exist in an expressive movement group such as the sessions. Expressive movement classes can be provided by trained what he terms "paraprofessionals", those who are trained but whose services are less expensive and who are likely considered more a part of the community than a professional "expert." Aileen Hayden, for example, creates an ongoing group forum at a reasonable rate for her 10 week sessions and there is certainly no stigma attached to attending improvisational dance sessions.

Quality. Obviously, it will continue to be important to find solutions to specific "problems" and to attempt to prevent problems from occurring. However, the sessions were important in reiterating the importance of less quantifiable aspects of the human experience. Wellness is not simply a matter of functionality but a matter of quality as well. As Laing (1967) suggested, functioning well in an insane context is not necessarily a definition of wellness. In 2008, his words ring truer than ever and redirecting discerning attention to issues of alienation versus a deeper experience of being is more than ever a psychological and social imperative. Pirsig (1991), too, directs philosophical inquiry back to what he describes as the presently unfashionable consideration of quality and values. "Returning to the Well" was a reminder of the importance of being able not only to define what quality of life means but to incorporate that into one's life on a regular basis. Quality of life for these women included connection with other

women, inhabiting their own bodies, slowing down and becoming more present, being expressive through movement, listening to great music and having fun, among others. The women were thirsting for these opportunities and the effect on their state-of-being simply by providing these fundamental physical, emotional and spiritual needs, was considerable. It is easy to underestimate the importance of connectedness and creative self-expression to increased well-being, but “Returning to the Well” reminds us that providing these basics can increase the depth and richness of one’s life and so be truly transformative – without the need to consult a professional therapist. Acknowledging the effects of not being provided with the basics for living a life of personal meaning and value shifts the attention to asking what is wrong with the greater cultural hegemony as opposed to automatically addressing what seems to be “wrong” with or “deficient” in the individual who is having difficulty functioning in that culture. Research of this nature can enlarge the conversation regarding the place *quality* can or should occupy in our conception of wellness, in the way we define what is therapeutic and in how we frame our therapeutic interventions with our clients.

In an email interview with writer Julian Baggini, Pirsig (Baggini & Pirsig, n.d.), stated that, in his opinion, philosophy was meant to be applied to real life and, in fact, to reflect it and enrich it and that in the closed system of academia, philosophical ideas become increasingly weak and meaningless. Going further than this *intellectual* reunion of philosophy with the lived world that gave rise to it, “Returning to the Well” constituted, in a sense, an *experiential* inquiry into beingness. What oftentimes felt like the intellectual collapse of the “why”, “how” and “what” of the present inquiry, was, in fact, an important clue to and reminder of the holistic unity inherent not only to the present study but to life as a whole. *Why* I felt compelled to explore experiences of dance and women’s circles, *how* I chose to study the questions that interested me

(the methodology), and *what* I chose to include as experiential elements were integrally related. Although standing in what felt like a hall of mirrors was often disorienting, I retrospectively understand that the inquiry was somewhat akin to the mathematical notion of fractals, where a small part of a curve has the same or similar characteristics as the original total curve. In a parallel way, it is not only the “what” of our lives that influences wellness but the “why” and the “how” as well. Quality and wellness are holistic matters.

The feminine. Gilligan’s (1977) *In a Different Voice* reframed the question of women’s moral and psychological development as something not only gender-specific but equally normative to the androcentric conceptualization of development and psychological health. Through Gilligan’s work, the ethic of justice and the ethic of care were differentiated as male and female developmental propensities and, through this delineation, the feminine developmental trajectory was both recognized and legitimized.

It seems to me that “Returning to the Well” turned out to be an experiential demonstration of Gilligan’s gender-based delineation of human development. Although the point is not to posit a specific and generalizable gender analysis of the experience, there was something about the sessions that indicated a way of being, and being together, that spoke of womanhood and sisterhood. Again, it is less than useful within the present context to say this or that about what is a woman’s experience as opposed to a man’s. Rather, there was, in both the women’s need for the experience and the satisfaction derived from it, a focus or a concentration of desire and energy that permeated the experience of being embodied, being feminine and being intimate. This was clear through both the women’s experiences and their words. Not only in the women’s experiences but in the words used to describe the meaning the experience held for them, many of the women voiced their belief that the world somehow needed women to come

together and *be* this way together: expressively embodied and relational, as if, through this example, the ethic of care (and, I might add, the ethic of integration of bodymind), might thus ripple outward into the world.

It would seem that others share this awareness of the implications for such demonstrations of relationality. Shinoda Bolen, a psychologist, wrote *Urgent message to mother: Gather the women, save the world*, (2005), a plea to women everywhere to bring the power of their personal relationality into the global arena (see page 23). A less likely advocate, the 14th Century Persian poet, Hafiz, also recognized the significance of the ethic of care and integrated relationality that was experienced and expressed by the women in the sessions. He wrote:

Women need
to utilize their superior intelligence
About love
So that their hour's legacy
Can make us all stronger and more clement.
Hafiz (trans. 1999, p.132)

“Returning to the Well” is thus not only a demonstration of a psychological phenomenon but, as the above individuals would suggest, a social one as well. Part of the point of the study was, perhaps, that it is neither possible nor efficacious to separate the social impact out from the psychological. As Hanisch (1969/2006) stated many years ago, for women, the personal is, indeed, political.

The role of the body. It was clear that each of the participants experienced several positive and, at times, transformational events within the sessions precisely because of the somatic orientation of the exercises. The unique combination of somatic and consciousness exercises, along with music that resonated with the participants and the permission to expressively “let go” was a powerful mix and had a positive impact on all the women. There

was something holistic about the sessions themselves, both in content and in objective. On one hand, they were grounded in movement and experience of the sensory world, and yet on the other, there was also an attendance to consciousness and presence. In fact, embodiment practices integrate consciousness and the somatic level. Wilber (1996) described this kind of mindbody integration as the “centauric realm” (p. 53). “The Centaur:” he wrote, “the great mythological being with animal body and human mind existing in a perfect state of at-one-ment” (p.53). At the level of the centauric realm, one honours and heeds the body’s native intelligence at the same time as relating to the world in a fully responsive, conscious manner. “Returning to the Well” also considered experience from this kind of integrative perspective and challenged both research and practice to consider the higher levels of human development that can sometimes be forgotten in the focus on “problem-solving”.

The women’s descriptions of their experience of conscious embodiment will perhaps stimulate conversation among professionals regarding the role of the body in issues of emotional release and containment. The women valued both experiences in the sessions. The experiences of release felt powerful and their experiences of emotional containment reminded them of their strength and stability. Many of the women remarked that they did not need to necessarily “resolve” issues through direct therapy but that becoming aware of their “stuff” and allowing it to *be* while they continued to move, was a valuable experience for them. I think these principles of containment and release would be of interest to any therapist or alternative practitioner interested in increasing an individual’s level of bodymind integration and, as a result, his or her quality of life. The reminder of the role the body plays in grief, depression, past trauma, stress and anxiety, all of which were peripherally present within this group of women, is also useful for anyone working at a tertiary level with clients, either individually or in groups.

On the other hand, the focus on consciousness and the importance of the spiritual or metaphysical aspect of the sessions brings spirituality or consciousness studies and practices “out of the psychology closet” and, hopefully, more into the mainstream. It is challenging to discuss what is quite deliberately *not* an intellectualized experience in academic research circles and still honour the original spirit of the women’s experience. To do so is to hopefully enlarge the scope of consideration in research, while still maintaining appropriate academic rigour.

Suffering

The women’s experiences of conscious containment provide an opportunity to consider the role of acceptance in healing. As therapists we tend to think of creating change for the individual and while this is obviously important, helping may sometimes take the form of assisting individuals to witness and accept whatever it is they are currently experiencing. Many practitioners, doctors and educators, however, are teaching the use of mindfulness or embodied awareness to deal with anxiety, chronic pain or illness (see Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (2005) *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*). The present study provides an interesting perspective on balancing the active principle of change and the more receptive principle of acceptance in the process of healing and seeing both as important and positive.

Limitations of the Research

As a researcher, I made choices regarding movement activities that influence the women’s experience. The sessions favoured internal, individual work over group or partner work and, being somatically oriented, non-verbal activities over verbal ones. It would be interesting to increase both the verbal and somatic interactions between participants in a future study, incorporating principles of group work based on the self-in-relation approach of Jean Baker

Miller and the Stone Center. Feedback from the women afterward suggests that this might coincide with women's interest in and need for increased connectivity with other women.

Another aspect of the research process which possibly limited the research was my complex role as participant-facilitator and researcher. A further study might benefit from the assignment of a second trained facilitator. This might have provided the participants with a sense of being able to go deeper in their experiences, knowing that there were more facilitative resources available to them.

The study was possibly too short to adequately explore the relational aspect of the group. The average length of a series of movement sessions is 8-10 and this might have also assisted the women in going deeper into their experiences.

Future Research Possibilities

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the present study for me was the first-hand experience of the hugely important role that the body plays in women's health and wellness. Although I had some knowledge and experience with the therapeutic benefits of both somatic awareness and expressive movement practices, it was inspiring to see the impact that the movement activities had on the women. As a therapist, I am particularly interested in further exploring some of the activities that seemed to act as mechanisms for increased insight and emotional release. To this end, it would be useful to investigate more deeply the movement practices that seemed most inclined to elicit transformative experiences: Authentic Movement, Five Rhythms® or the YogaDance® chakra journey. I would propose to again utilize a hermeneutical phenomenology approach, both because it suits my own sensibilities and is appropriate for the subject matter. It would also be useful to include a trained assistant and to adjust the objective of the sessions to more fully invite and include the sharing of potentially

difficult emotional material. A series of sessions lasting 12- 16 weeks would allow for more time to process on all levels, including verbal and might provide insight into the experience of developing the somatic/movement experience into an ongoing practice.

“Returning to the Well” uncovered a fertile appreciation and curiosity regarding women’s experiences with imagery, whether as stimulated externally or emerging from internal processes. It would be most interesting to adapt and enlarge the content of the sessions so that stimulus came not only from sound and music but from image and story. Playing with archetypal imagery using such activities as creative visualization, use of props, recitation of poetry and mythology would no doubt elicit rich information. As well, it would be instructive to frame the study within the context of understanding the role of chakras in somatic therapy. In all of these studies, it would be important to work with a facilitator who was well versed in his or her area of expertise.

It is a long-standing dream of mine to conduct an inquiry into the experiences of women dancing together in cultures other than our own, in order to gain further insight into what women define as valuable and meaningful experiences in their lives and as well, provide further opportunity to explore and create more solid expressive and relational experiences in our own communities as well. Such a study would need to be conducted with great care and respect, using cross-cultural research methodology combined with hermeneutical phenomenology in order to safeguard the women’s own voices and utilize a sensitive and informed approach to working cross-culturally. A substantially longer time would be needed to complete this project, perhaps as much as 1-2 years.

In general, there is, I think, a need for research in the areas of psychology and sociology that asks qualitative questions regarding the role that meaning-making and quality of life have in individual and community wellness. It seems that inquiry into the benefits of reclaiming a

community-based engagement with the arts (and in particular, expressive movement) has much merit in our world today. Such research could bring support and increased legitimacy at all levels to the many women (and men) who are attempting to create a paradigmatic shift in the way we view quality of life, strength of community and the importance of dance and other expressive arts in human development.

Postlude

It seems fitting, given the nature of “Returning to the Well”, that I come round to where I began and comment on the personal effects this inquiry has had on me - as a dancer, a spiritual seeker and a woman. It is difficult to speak in conclusive terms as the effects of the study are only recently surfacing. I have not yet facilitated another round of the sessions, in spite of requests from the women involved. Neither is my career presently centred on using movement therapeutically. What has occurred, however, is a strengthened recognition of the value and significance of the kind of expressive dance that I have done all my life – not only for myself but for others. It was rewarding to see the heartfelt gratitude in the group for an opportunity to “return to the well”. Standing by my choice to pursue this less conventional topic, creating the sessions, leading the women in their explorations: all of this felt like picking up dropped stitches from the past and giving myself permission to knit them into my life now. So much of what has occurred for me has been, again in a way that mirrors the women in my group, saying “yes”; giving myself permission to be fully present in my body and in my life.

Part of that “yay-saying” has taken the form of pursuing training in somatic awareness. Since the sessions, I have felt emboldened in my decision to train as a somatic psychotherapist and have taken workshops in Focusing (see Gendlin, 1981) and Somatic Experiencing® (Levine, 1997). Perhaps even more importantly, I have begun organizing community “Dance Ravens”

(raves without the “E”) so that I can provide a regular opportunity for myself and others to regularly practice conscious embodiment, connection and play.

Still, these steps sometimes feel like paint applied over a cracked surface. At the end of my masters program, I feel depleted and cut off from my body. If this inquiry has shown me anything, it is that sourcing the waters requires that the “yes” be said time and time again. This is the commitment and the discipline required to show up and open up to a daily practice. I cannot give to others what I will not receive for myself. I have begun to dance more and more. I seek moments of aliveness and increase their numbers among the ranks of the scarcely inhabited. In this modern world, I am fighting hard, like a warrior, to come alive over and over again.

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APPENDIX A: OVERVIEW OF SESSION CONTENT

- Session 1**
- * **Welcome Circle**
- Encountering Space**
- * **Tracking** - enemies, friends, equilateral triangle
 - * **The Outer Space - Take a walk** -notice, push, cut through, space, thick-like-honey space
 - * **Inner Space** - encounter bones, watch the breath, Spine Dancing
 - * **With Music:** Leading with body parts, borrow others' movements
 - * **Free Dance**
 - * **Closing Circle**
- Session 2**
- * **Opening circle**
- Encountering Rhythm**
- * **Find your natural rhythm (inner flywheel)** - circle your hands, take a walk through the room.
 - * **Internal rhythms** - heart, breath, pulse beat with partners
 - * **With Music:** core rhythms/ appendage rhythms
 - * **Rhythm phrases** - your own/ borrow others'
 - * **Free Dance**
 - * **Funky Flocking**
 - * **Stillness Dance**
 - * **Closing Circle**
- Session 3**
- * **Opening Circle**
- Conscious Repetition (Ritual)**
- * **Chocolate Ritual**
 - * **5Rhythms®: with music**
 - * **Fabric Ritual**
 - * **Sound Bath**
 - * **Closing Circle**
- Session 4**
- * **Opening Circle**
- African Dance**
- * **Warm-up**
 - * **To live drumming and taped music-African girl's initiation dance, guided practice of African dance movements**
 - * **Traditional African Women's Sounding**
 - * **Closing Circle**

Session 5

* **Contact Improvisation** - “folding” one another as we walk

Chakra Journey

* **Chakra Journey - to Music:**

Chakra 1 - dance into the feet, into the earth

Chakra 2 - on floor- Spine Dance (seaweed, snake)

Chakra 3 - Give and Take Tribal (meet dancer at centre with your movement, create sound and movement as tribe and meet the other tribe at centre)

Chakra 4 - Heart Dance (Free dance, lights off)

Chakra 5, 6 - Authentic Movement

Chakra 7 - Prayer Dance (dedicate to self or someone else)

* **Closing Circle**

MORE DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

1. Tracking - As the participants moved through the room, I had them chose two people to keep track of at all times without indicating who these people were. We played with tracking in several ways, pretending that the two people being tracked were mortal enemies, and then creating an equilateral triangle with each person as a point of the triangle. The necessity of creating three equidistant points out of the three individuals required the person doing the tracking to shift as the other two moved through the room. This, of course, would affect the equilateral triangle of which the “tracker” was unwittingly a part, causing the tracker of that triangle to have to move. This domino effect of movement escalated until the entire group was running through the room. Eventually, however, all the equilateral triangles would become aligned with one another and the participants would slowly come to a halt.

2. Spine Dancing - The participant is invited to get in touch with their spines; the subtle movements as they breathe and then the larger movements as the spine begins to lead the rest of the body in “snaking” while in a lying position, then crouched, then up to standing. In the final session, the spine dancing took the form of “snaking” and becoming sea weed.

3. Inner Flywheel - This term taken from Martin Keogh's Contact Improvisation workshop, refers to one's natural inner speed and rhythm with which one tends to move. Some have a flywheel moving more slowly and others, more quickly. One way to get in touch with this is through the circling of the hands in front of the chest area. I used this in session 2 to introduce the idea of inner rhythm.

4. Rhythm Phrases - Movements tend to group together into simple, repeated "movement phrases", even though the individual may not be aware of the phrasing. We worked with becoming aware of rhythm not only within the body but also externally, within the expressive movements created by the body, either unaccompanied or in response to musical phrasing. These phrases could then be consciously altered, either individually or on being influenced by another dancer's rhythm phrase.

5. Funky Flocking - Flocking consists of creating a tightly-knit group that follows the movements of whoever happens to be at the front of the pack. When the leader's movement includes a turn, another person naturally becomes the person at the front of the pack and thus, the leader. "Funky Flocking" was my version, with African beats speeding the activity up and tending to create a more light-hearted, humorous version with more angular, sharp movements.

6. Stillness Dance - In this dance, I had the participants intersperse movements with moments of relative stillness (to allow themselves to frame their movement with stillness and become aware of movement through an awareness of its opposite). Gradually, they increased the length and frequency of moments of stillness until it was movement that framed stillness and then finally, the participants came to a rest. At this point, the experience of stillness within movement and movement within stillness moved to the interior world of the body.

7. Chocolate Ritual - In the opening circle, I passed around a plate of fine chocolate (and raisins for anyone who might be allergic to chocolate). The participants were invited to hold the chocolate on the back of one hand (so it wouldn't melt) and with eyes closed, to begin to experience the chocolate, first through touch and then taste. The process was slow and deliberate, touching, licking, placing the chocolate on the tongue and allowing it to melt slowly in the mouth. As everyone's eyes were closed, it could be a fully sensual experience.

8. 5 Rhythms® - Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms® consist of Flowing, Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and Stillness. With the guidance of the facilitator (both through a physical demonstration of the movement style and occasional narrative input) and with the support of music designed to stimulate a certain type of movement, the movers explore the rhythms. In total, the series of rhythms (called the Wave) lasted between 30-45 minutes.

9. Fabric Ritual - The participants finished the previous activity in stillness with eyes closed. I invited them to stay in their final position while I moved through the room and randomly placed a large piece of fabric over half of the participants. Then, I invited those with fabric draped over themselves to remain still while the rest of the group chose one of them as a partner. I then invited them, without speaking (and with no accompanying music) to take the fabric and somehow create a simple movement pattern between the two of them with the fabric that could be repeated over and over again. I allowed this activity to go on in silence for as long a time as possible – probably 15 minutes.

10. Sound Bath - The Sound Bath took place when we came back into a circle at the end of the session. I invited the women to begin with the "Ohm" chant, at any pitch and volume each woman chose and then to allow themselves to make any sound(s) they felt moved to, including interspersing sound with spoken word.

11. Folding - This is a Contact Improvisation activity where the touch of one person's hand on the head of another causes the latter to "fold" or melt down to the floor. The former participant maintains the gentle contact all the way to the floor and then, when the second participant is ready, back up to standing again. The activity is done as participants walk through the room so that there is an uninterrupted flow of motion as the one participant melts down to the floor and then re-organizes herself back up to standing and walking again. Sometimes, the participant who is folding the other, is folded herself by a third individual and must maintain her contact with her partner while she herself is folding downward.

12. Chakra Journey - The final session was based on Kripalu YogaDance, which explores movement through the seven chakra centres, beginning with the root chakra and moving through to the crown. Music is also chosen based on its applicability to the particular dances.

13. Give and Take Tribal - This activity was based on the Big Fat Ass Dance Class® activity by the same name, which began with the group split into two lines at opposite sides of the room crossing over to the other side with a movement that would spontaneously change as they reached the opposite wall. Without thinking they would continue to cross back and forth with new movements. This then moved into the second half of the activity, where the individuals in the two lines moved toward the person coming from the other side with a "power movement". At the centre, the individuals would play with the give and take of projecting their power or receiving the "opposing" person's power move. This was followed by a similar cross-over activity with a movement created by each group as a whole.

14. Authentic Movement - Authentic movement can be done in pairs or as a group. In the sessions, I used Authentic Movement as a fifth/ sixth chakra activity as it tends to involve movement expression and communication (chakra five) and have a meditative quality (chakra

six). (The association of activities with specific chakras as well as the corresponding choice of music is a creative and intuitive process as opposed to something exacting.) The mover closes her eyes and at my invitation, begins to attend to any internal movement impulses. Her partner, the witness, supports the mover by making sure she does not hurt herself or bump into another mover as well as by observing her experience in an engaged, non-judgmental way. Generally, the mover is not told how long she has to move but a 30 second warning is given before the facilitator invites the mover to end the movement episode. Mover and witness then change roles. After both have gone, there is time for each to take turns commenting on the experience of being a mover and/or a witness.

15. Prayer Dance - This was the “chakra seven” dance. The women were invited to dedicate the dance to themselves or someone else, as a kind of movement prayer. The singer was *Jorane*, who combines ethereal voice and cello sounds.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF TRAINING AND CONSULTATION RESOURCES

Training and consultation:

1. Aileen Hayden
 - Big Fat Ass Dance Class® (September 2006 & July 2007)
 - private facilitation training session (October 2007)
 - activities from Big Fat Ass Dance Class® (including activities from such movement forms as Roth's 5Rhythms®, Authentic Movement, Contact Improvisation, YogaDance® (previously DanceKinetics®), Action Theater™)
 - private facilitation training session (May 2008)
 - Authentic Movement
2. Kahmariah Pingue
 - phone conversation re. African Dance (November, 2007)
 - Facilitation of one of the five sessions. (December, 2007)
3. Martin Keogh
 - *Learning to Fly* [Contact Improvisation workshop] (October 2005 & November 2007)
 - Contact Improvisation Master Class (University of Saskatchewan) (observation)
 - Interview (November 2007)
4. Linda Rabin *The fundamental cycle of movement: Yield, push, reach and pull* [workshop] July, 2008.

Books used to plan the sessions:

- Bloom, K. & Shreeves, R. (1998). *Moves: A sourcebook for body awareness and creative movement*. Amsterdam, Holland: Harwood, A.P.
- Callery, D. (2001). *Through the body: A practical guide to physical theatre*. London, U.K: Nick Hern Books.
- Marshall, L. (2002). *The body speaks: Performance and expression*. New York, N.Y: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Tufnell, M.& Crickmay, C. (1990). *Body space image: Notes towards improvisation and performance*. London, U.K: Virago.