

Dance, Stillness and Paradox

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Abstract

This article is about stillness, a singular stillness, occurring within movement yet also framing, holding all movement. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological theoretical framework and drawing on my Masters research 'Dance and Stillness' (De Leon 2005), the poet T.S. Eliot, the phenomenological and philosophical writings of Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, Smythe, de Chardin and others, notions of equipoise and hysteresis, the potential therapeutic value of this stillness is discussed. Information is presented about the essence of the danced/ watched experience, with attention given to what constitutes stillness, its therapeutic value and how it could inform therapeutic engagement.

Keywords: stillness, paradox, equipoise, therapeutic, transformational, dance-movement therapy

Introduction

To begin I ask, 'what is the lived experience of this stillness'? My intention is to explore the experience of stillness, determining whether it be therapeutic, transformative, or both. I examine what it means to be still. And what effect stillness may have in the journey towards emotional healing and for its possible application to the practice of dance therapy/dance psychotherapy.

When we are born, one of the first things we do is breathe. Our tiny body gasps and shudders, twitches, reaches, stretches, curls and unfolds, gulping great in-breaths of life-giving air. Breath is thus the first dance, and this 'dance' continues as the fundamental kinetic impulse for the rest of our lives.

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The breath sustains our bodies, the equation being breath + body = movement. There is no client, dancer, watcher - indeed any person, who comes to therapy independently of breath, body or movement. Preceding and containing whatever the issue a client brings to therapy, are breath, body and movement. Every person presents with distinct characteristics of breathing, body and movement. So what then does it mean to be still in the midst of movement?

There is stillness and there is stillness, and that chosen from the whirl and turbulence of the dance is different from that which is simply sitting down. My Masters research (De Leon, 2005) looked at what happens psychotherapeutically 'in a moment of time, for that moment of time gives the meaning' (Eliot, 1972).

The research involved creating a dance work, *Stillpoint*, examining this stillness. A fundamental premise is that all movement is contained within stillness and further, that stillness is, at the same time, also the core, the central axis of all movement (De Leon, 2005).

Dancers and watchers participating in the Masters research were questioned about

their experience of stillness-in-the-dance. (This was not psychotherapy, so data about interventions, process and outcome was absent). The research indicated that the dancer who understands and allows the experience of stillness to inform her or his dance is accordingly closer to also achieving the stillness 'at the eye of the paradox' (Donaldson, 1977), the 'stillpoint'. Further analysis of the findings revealed themes such as relationship with chaos and with each other, symbolism of design and time and the importance of authenticity, awareness, focus and release.



Stillpoint
Photo: Eva Karlsson

Why an inquiry into stillness?

Life seems often an irreconcilable paradox: urged, pulled, goaded one way and then that; we want to do this and end up doing that; we wish for this and the other is what happens. It may be likened to oppositional currents, a current and its undertow (undertow: a current under the surface of the water; any current not apparent on the surface: Chambers 20th C Dictionary). Within this tension the result is often a place of distress, and sometimes far more: profoundly deep distress that manifests as disease, chronic depression, even death.

The idea presented here is that not only

are these currents profoundly symbiotic, they cannot in fact exist without each other. This is not to say solved, resolved, or cured, but held, held at the 'still point of a turning world' (Eliot, 1972). And that this moment in time is timeless; a moment in which lies realisation, potential for personal growth; a moment that ultimately is transformative.

Also proposed is that containment for such paradox and its attendant tension may be the dance, and the dance of paradox is potential for an experience timeless and transforming.

The stillpoint

The poetry of T.S. Eliot for me epitomises the stillness with which this study is concerned. I suggest it is a stillness known through the grace of sense, and when thus felt it is lifted and moving, and as dancer, choreographer and dance movement therapist I feel, I know the still point at the core of the dance.

*At the still-point of the turning world.
Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still
point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And
do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered.
Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline.
Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there
is only the dance....
.. a grace of sense, a white light lifted
and moving*

T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', 1935

What is expressed here? For me, Eliot's poetry speaks of the suspended, timeless moment / state that is neither this nor that: a moment that is neither a coming towards nor a departing from. I interpret

Eliot as giving words to the experience of a particular suspended stillness at the peak of the up-breath, the 'ah', a moment aware, conscious, mindful, yet *given*, unorchestrated, unmanipulated, surrendered. My research (De Leon, 2005) showed that the felt experience of this moment contributes to well-being, to a qualitative shift that is transformative, life-changing.

Epstein (1996, p. 101) names this moment 'equipoise.' Stephen Donaldson, in his epic trilogy *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977) returns again and again to the theme of living at the eye of paradox. I think of it also as hysteresis.

Equipoise

Epstein links his 'equipoise' with Freud's notion of sublimation, where inborn, instinctual cravings and impulses are sublimated, transformed into wisdom (Epstein, 1996, p. 79). He informs us that 'meditative equipoise' is achieved when the attention is turned towards conscious stillness:

*Firmly grounded in awareness
of breath and body...learning to
surrender to the ebb and flow of
breath, a stilling into one's body...
stilling the mind... then approaching
some sense of open space...
surrendering to the flow
(Epstein, 1996, 145-146).*

Does this not sound like the beginning of a dance...?

In intentionally directing the attention inwards, to the centre of stillness, stillness within the whirl, stillness within the tumult, lying within the choreography itself, then, in the moment of its recognition, the perceiver (dancer, client) is ready to surrender to the flow. It seems in the recognition the perceiver (dancer, client) is,

to some greater or lesser extent, releasing, surrendering, saying, 'Yes'.

Hysteresis

This stillness is the moment of neither this nor that: neither a coming towards nor a departing from a hysteresis. The moment between contains a stillness; a moment of exchange, interchange, between the movement that goes up then down, in then out; wide then narrow, tightened then released, curved then straightened. Variations are so many; and in this moment is the time/no-time when consciousness is occupied with neither coming nor going, haste, urgency or imposition, but simply being.

Phenomenologist Heidegger (1962) referred to this state of being as *dasein*. The *dasein* concept is related to the nature of being; of being-in-the-world, being in, being there; a lived experience; something concrete, literal, actual and daily. Since the salient point about *dasein* is that it can wonder about itself as existing, (as suggested by Steiner, 1989 and Smythe, 1998) then the *dasein* moment – the hysteresis, the stillness moment, is also the time when Questions such as 'What am I?' 'Why am I?' 'What does my existence mean?' may be asked.

I suggest that in the hysteresis of the dance there is a profound therapeutic opportunity for these questions to emerge and be mindfully considered. Furthermore, that this hysteresis in the dance, this hysteresis of *dasein* is not manipulated or engineered through disconnection with the before or the after. It does not require deliberate choreographed stillness. It is dance without announcement of and no grand preparation for stillness. It simply happens, simply is. It is not extra to, it is simply part of the dance. It is as if we dance Heraclitus' notion that all things change, yet

nothing ever becomes disconnected (Koch, 1994). Neither is the stillness dormant or fixed, for change occurs even in the time of stillness.

And there is yet more: for this stillness / hysteresis / *dasein* / still point exists within a cosmic holding together of constant change. As soon as we observe, recognise, become aware of this moment, it has passed. But, in that moment, of felt, embodied consciousness, we are wholly present, wholly attending, wholly here. It is not to be confused with a stillness that is unmindful and that people call boredom, or nothing to do. Is that not a stillness misperceived and has become a state fixed, antagonistic, meaningless?

The symbolic

The research (De Leon, 2005) indicated that the stillness experience provided opportunity for encounter with the symbolic.

In the dance, our bodies and the shapes and sequences made by them are innately symbolic. The symbolic expression is a kind of ebullient overflow, expressive of the orgasmic joy of creative experiencing (Milner, 1987). Milner suggests that in mystical and creative states one finds elements of joy, union, ecstasy, absorption, loss of self-consciousness and loss of sense of time, and that both states undo the over-fixed separation between self and other caused by the tyranny of the conscious mind (1987). I salute this place where the over-fixed separation is undone; it is a place of timeless suspension, an equipoise that occurs between movements. Milner (1987) holds that symbolic experiencing has many phases: agonising, depressive, dead, empty, thrilling, high, emptied, and still.

This symbolic experiencing allows a person to attain the stillness wherein the state

of paradox, affirming I and not-I, self and no-self may be contained. Raab (2004) declares this is psychologically beneficial. The symbolic dance tells the story that we cannot say in words and says it more powerfully.

Thomas Merton says that the symbolic within the created work contains in itself that which makes us aware of the inner meaning of life; of reality itself. He says a true symbol points to the 'stillness at the heart of all being' (Merton, 1958, p. 48). I do not think that all created works are authentic emanations from 'the stillness at the heart of all being'. But I do suggest that in conditions of humility, receptivity, of resonance with the tenet that the essence of our existence is the passion to create (Moreno, 1959), that the symbolic language of dance can arise from nowhere other than the stillness deep in the dancer's being. I believe it is possible that the dance - being utterly symbolic, may contain in its own way the stillness at the heart of all being.

Symbol, stillness and healing

One could ask, shall we dance, or be still, one, or the other or both? My research suggests that the stillness is throughout and in the spaces between, the dance and the stillness have become indivisible.

What happens when, in the midst of the turbulence, right in the ebb and flow of the dance, the dancer becomes still, when she is conscious, self, other, and context-aware, and still in a way which truly is 'neither arrest nor movement', neither 'fixity', 'neither movement from nor towards, neither ascent nor decline' but still, 'at the still point?' (Eliot, 1935).

Teilhard de Chardin describes the moment of stillness: 'Awakening from the dream; the world, this palpable world... we stand still, for this is in truth a holy place, and

we did not know it' (de Chardin in Venite, 1968, p. 112).

Matthew Fox similarly uses a biblical reference (John 4: 6-29) to speak about stillness that stirs in us the energy of creativity. 'The suspended moment at the well, at the source of being, of images, of creativity...That power from which the dance...comes, is silence, and stillness' (Fox, 1988, p. 60).

I ponder that if we dance therapists were to guide our clients into and towards this experience then perchance the divine would be perceived.

Literature from the world of dance

In the area of dance writing, the work of dance therapists and body workers includes profound insight into the subject of stillness within movement. Amy Kaplan, a process-oriented psychotherapist dance movement therapist in her Masters writing *The Hidden Dance* (1986) speaks of the unfolding nature of authentic movement, 'You wait in the stillness, and watch the creative spirit of nature unfold' (p. 73).

This idea of 'waiting and watching' is reinforced by other dance therapists. Joan Chodorow, dance therapist and Jungian psychologist comments, 'movement is followed by a period of natural stillness and continuing inner attentiveness... sometimes the transformative experience simply cannot be expressed in words' (1991, p. 196).

Rudolf Laban, physicist, dancer, philosopher, perhaps the first movement psychotherapist, is one of the gospel writers of dance. In Laban Movement Fundamentals terminology, Laban captures the essence of dance and stillness, the moment caught!, the moment that permits the next to be seen:

Movement is man's magic mirror, reflecting and creating the inner life in and by visible trace-forms, in turn also reflecting and creating the visible trace-forms in and by the inner life. The simplest visible element of this startling and paradoxical operation is the plate between the axial-stable and the surface-mobile bodily movements, or, in other words, the struggle between the binding power of a knot and the loosening power of an untwisting line with an intermediary lemniscate
(Laban, 1966, p.104).

A task for dance therapists and for the human race

In the midst of living, we are dying and the client seeking psychotherapy is essentially afraid (Jung, 1965). I here pool all presenting problems, reasons, manifestations and issues into the one core issue, fear: of living, of dying. Is not one of the questions of *dasein*, if not *the* ultimate question of life, this knowing that we are dying and therefore, how shall we live?

Indubitably therefore, I suggest this must also be perhaps an, if not the, ultimate task of dance therapy: to create an environment wherein the fear of living, of dying, may be brought into the open, where it may be met, and the life lived again. What is required then is a therapy that dares work with clients who are afraid, dares confront the terror, dares admit the paradoxes and the unanswerable.

James Hillman (1975) comments that the significance soul makes possible derives from its special relation with death. Then if psychotherapy is to do with the healing of the soul, then it must be a psychotherapy that has relationship with death.

Is the dance, with its movement and its stillness, adequate for such a task? I believe there is no one methodology of psychotherapy that meets the need for every unique individual but I hold that the stillness I am exploring is a contribution to the task. I hold (De Leon, 2005) that the stillness within and undergirding the Healing Dance epitomises the greater stillness that undergirds all psychotherapy and all of life's transformative experiences. My inquiry points to this, it is the stillness, the moment caught! in the midst of the turning world, in the midst of turmoil and busyness, that allows the space and the pause to make the psychotherapy work at all.

The Watcher

I refer thus far to the person who dances – what about the one who does not dance, but watches the dancer? What is the experience for the watcher?

I discovered (De Leon, 2005) that those watching dance also become aware in physical, kinetic and mental-physical ways heretofore unknown. There is a cellular response, an innate sense of kinaesthetic empathy with moving bodies to directly receive the dancer's message (Foster, 1986, Langer, 1953), that while not *without* mental comprehension, is yet not dependent on it. Choreography can be a voice for both dancers and watchers: watchers may not learn the movements or the shape of the choreography, yet it speaks for them. Wordless emotion can be expressed, there is a sense that despite (or because of) wordlessness, dancer-watcher, together, share such expression.

While this empathic kinaesthesia can be verbalised, it is something with potential to reach both dancer and audience that is beyond words. My research showed that this level of embodied resonance in the

dance-stillness experience has the capacity to hold and express the *dasein* of both dancer and watcher and that the stillness becomes a vessel, a therapeutic crucible in which healing may take place for *both*.

Further comment

This experience is about a dance that seeks stillness and a stillness that contains the dance: not simply a metaphor for *Dasein*, for being-in-the-world (Grenz, 1996); this is *Dasein*.

This dance-stillness journey is a pilgrimage, a prayer, a way of life. As a choreographer, psychotherapist, dance therapist and human on this earth, my desire is that my work might inspire others to recognise the steps of their own dance, to feel a rhythm behind the words that stirs them to dance on, and a stillness that enables them to rest and restore for whatever follows.

As I continue working, watching, experiencing and learning, I ask myself, *Is it possible that the quintessential essence of dance and stillness are one and the same?* I dare to say that it is in the stillness, or maybe it is in the dance, where lies, not answers, but a kind of reconciliation, or peace to the existential questions I ask, questions that shape my reality and my being.

You have created me with the longing and the hunger - I must dance, or die. Is my art the ultimate distraction; the final cunning of the human soul which would rather do anything than face the gods? - or is my dance the most profound entrance into God's presence that I shall ever essay on this earth?
Iris Murdoch (2005)

The question I find posed in Murdoch's words is one of seemingly irreconcilable

contradiction: a tension of opposites that surely must be familiar, both to ourselves and our clients. The details each time will be unique but I believe the dilemma of opposites is shared.

I suggest that it is in the stillness between movements that we can experience the current and undertow in which we live. I suggest it is in this same stillness we can identify a reconciliation, a peace. It is both paradox and wonder. These two are indivisible, the reflection of each other and yet not so neatly compartmentalised, for in the midst of movement there is stillness and the stillness contains all the movement.

In summary

Because dance therapy is concerned with the integration of body with the thinking processes (ADTA 2009; Bartenieff 1980; Bernstein 1985), I, as a dance movement therapy practitioner, believe dance movement therapy is a powerful tool in the journey to a person's wholeness. When the dance/movement therapy work includes the investigating and experiencing of the stillness described here, perceptions are expanded, noticing and mindfulness are enhanced and physical, kinetic and mental-physical dimensions are brought to awareness, even those heretofore little or unknown. In dance movement therapy practice I advocate, let us notice stillness, as never before.

Lastly, what if, our bodies and their movement in space and time, and their stillness in space and time; what if this dance is the symbol, the gloriously animated earth-real symbol of the living fountain of divine healing, connecting and integrating us, audience, dancers, clients, self, with none other than the divine dance of the Ultimate Fact, the Creator, the One

in whom all things have their source, their existence and their utterance?

This way of stillness perceiving is not the only way. It is the way in the *dasein* - in the experience of my own and my clients' journeys that we have found to be most real. I hold that this stillness stands for not the un-clothing but the re-clothing, revealing not the formless everywhere / nowhere but location and identification, some stillness which will be perfectly, as the present stillness is partially and intermittently, the instrument for the dance and the dialogue between God and all who are engaged in healing, creating, resting, and growing.

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