

A DANCER'S JOURNEY

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Modern woman cannot go back to the Dionysian mysteries, but she must make the journey into the regions below and back again. She too must experience the light in her own darkness. Somehow she must find again the sacred mystery within her own body and revere it both as sacred and as a mystery. Dance is one practical way of listening to the body. (Woodman, 1980: 111)

In her book *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter*, Marion Woodman writes about the therapeutic and artistic value of dance. She quotes one woman who revered creative dance as a way of dealing with her inconsolable feelings of grief. As she became increasingly involved with the dance she found she was able to express things about herself where words failed.

I too have taken a similar journey in dance and would like to share with you some of my observations and feelings. Interwoven with my process of discovery are several exquisite passages from the book.

Nine years ago when my first-born was six months old and I was feeling considerably weighed down by the unrelenting sense of responsibility and routine monotonous tasks that needed to be addressed, I was encouraged by an extremely intuitive friend to dance. I chose to dance in the daytime. It was light, I still felt reasonably fresh and energetic. The form of dance I selected is called creative dance. Through improvisation, its inspiration arises from the music and from yoga. At first I delighted in the sheer physicality of moving. Simple things like walking to uplifting music, Mozart perhaps, warmed me, made me feel strong, joyful and part of the group. I watched my body swing and flow. Curiously, sometimes it obeyed my commands, sometimes it eluded them. After each session I felt relaxed, excited, so much so that a sense of elation entered every fibre of my being. The dance had served to integrate me and I left changed. As I walked in the street, I felt lighter, my body moved with a newfound, al-

though temporary confidence and I felt I could face what I perceived to be an often hostile, confusing world.

Dance - God, I am lucky to have it! That, more than anything will bring my mind and body together. If the body is the unconscious then perhaps grief can be danced out of me, just as joy can be expressed. Dance puts the mind right into the body. I must think and feel every part of the human being and perhaps in that way it can release or bring to consciousness the grief within. I am tangling with the concept of the core of one's being. That is where my ache is. There is no rational thinking there - it just is. (1980: 111-112)

As time passed, I moved into another level of exploration. The sense of physical well-being was no longer enough to sustain me, and quite unconsciously I began listening to and watching new happenings inside myself. Intuitively I knew the real work was just beginning. The dark side of my being emerged more and more. Doubts about myself plagued me at every turn. Who exactly was I in this group of dancers? What position did I expect to fill? In some classes all I could do was follow, I was incapable of making independent decisions. Sometimes I felt completely invisible; I wanted to run away perhaps in order to attract attention to myself. Infrequently I initiated and it was at those times that I observed a force outside myself take over and every movement made me feel complete. A sense of union within the group and clarity of intent on my part were the overriding experiences. Tearing feelings between wanting to lead (dare I say control) and to utterly disappear preoccupied me.

This ambivalence aroused overwhelming anger inside towards myself and I often projected it out in silence to individuals in the group. The ethic was to dance and not to talk, confront or accuse, hence the responsibility for my dark feelings was ultimately always assumed by me and I had no choice other than to deal with it. This process has taken a very long time, years, but the slow, thorough, often painful resolutions have been worthwhile.

Few modern women, especially intuitives and feeling types know anything about 'becoming the dance'. Their highly developed consciousness allows them to enjoy social dancing, but to give themselves up to their emotions and the music and thus experience their own corresponding depths terrifies them. (1980: 113)

So my journey through the layers of body and psyche continued. I watched vigilantly. I touched deep, anguished parts of my being. I acknowledged feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, disappointment, ostracism, fear, rage, even boredom. I remember well assuming a detached, defensive position, a role of non-involvement, simply going through the motions of dance but not being prepared to commit myself fully to it. Inevitably, I would leave the class feeling empty, neither having given nor received. Later I understood that I was robbing the group of vital energy by assuming this position.

By keeping the balance between psyche and body, she was able to recognise both as divine and to build her own ego in relationship to them and at the same time surrendering her ego demands. (1980: 113)

In all the classes I attended, the notion of the 'ego' or 'I' was addressed time and time again. On an intellectual level, I understood this notion well. The surrender of the ego needed to be truly felt before I could become the dance and move into a non-personal dimension.

... a world that speaks directly to her heart, instead of to her head, a world where she can experience wholeness and harmony. ... in dance she can surrender ... her body as a vessel through which divine power can flow. Thus she can experience herself in a totally new way; she is literally transformed. (1980: 113-114)

The journey is not finished, but for me, no movement could be made without the struggle. Each painful, perplexing layer has had to be entered into fully before I could shed it. All the while I knew that I must never abandon it.



Only in the last three years has the dance moved beyond the therapeutic journey, but it is this necessary path that has freed me to enter the artistic realm both in my teaching of the dance and in my own expression of it. I watch confidently the mind touching the body, the body touching the mind and I feel that the flow of artistic expression is always within reach. I trust it can attain unlimited dimensions. The journey continues, but it has lost its loneliness, for I no longer struggle or look for nourishment of my person in the dance. I enjoy the artistic expression for its own sake.

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Reference

Woodman, M. 1980 *The Owl Was a Baker's Daughter*
Inner City Books; Toronto