

# Sacred Dance as a Form of Dance Therapy

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*The following paper is offered as a foundation and introduction to the specialised area of Dance Therapy within a Christian context. Within this context it presents a descriptive account of the philosophy and principles, and concepts of dance therapy. The movement system, Harmonics, as founded by Bill and Paula Douthett, of Sacred Dance Ministries International, will be discussed. This movement system has been implemented within Christian circles all over the world during the last 30 years.*

## Introduction

The framework of Sacred Dance offers an effective model with which dance therapists can work either on a group or individual basis, however it is most effective when conducted in a group. The Sacred Dance model offers a group dynamic which is supportive, unifying and safe. Self-exploration and expression is facilitated leading to a level of holistic healing, touching the emotions, thoughts, body and spirit.

## Definition and Description

According to the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Brown, 1993) the definition of 'Sacred' is: "Consecrated to a ... god; deserving respect as of something holy; protected from violation; sacrosanct."

Sacred Dance within the Christian community refers to when a person dances with the aim of communicating directly with God. The dance is an expression of the person's inner state as well as a vehicle of interaction where the person is encouraged to be open, in order to receive from Him. The premise behind Sacred Dance is that, as Creator, He can communicate in infinite ways. Dance is a gift or talent which has been given to humankind as a means of expression, a means of

joy and satisfaction and a means of healing (Lyons, 1981; Schroeder, 1994).

Using Sacred Dance as a model for dance therapy requires a basis of faith and a belief system which is founded on the Bible. The Bible is seen by Christians to offer the foundation by which a Christian lives their life. It is believed that God demonstrated His love for each human being through the embodiment of a human named Jesus. Jesus encapsulates human expression for a Christian in that He understood all feelings, all modes of expression, all desires, all hopes and all frustrations and conflicts (Douthett, 1996).

Having this as a basis of belief and faith means that this model of dance therapy will not be suited to all individuals, but only to those who feel comfortable with the above-mentioned belief systems. Having established this, it is important to note that Sacred Dance is not the only way Christians practise dance therapy. Becoming aware of the client's frame of reference and belief systems offers assistance in choosing the most appropriate approach to therapy. If the client is also a Christian, then it would be suitable to integrate some aspects of the Sacred Dance model into the therapy situation. Otherwise, it would be left out.

As in a psychodynamic approach Sacred Dance uses a type of free association in movement. In fact, improvised movement is the basis of all Sacred Dance as dance therapy, believing that what is expressed in movement is coming from the depths of the person's inner state. While improvised and individualised movement is the basis of the movement vocabulary for Sacred Dance, many symbolic props and gestures are also used to facilitate the pursuit of particular issues. The use of props and suggested gestures goes hand in hand with the improvised move-

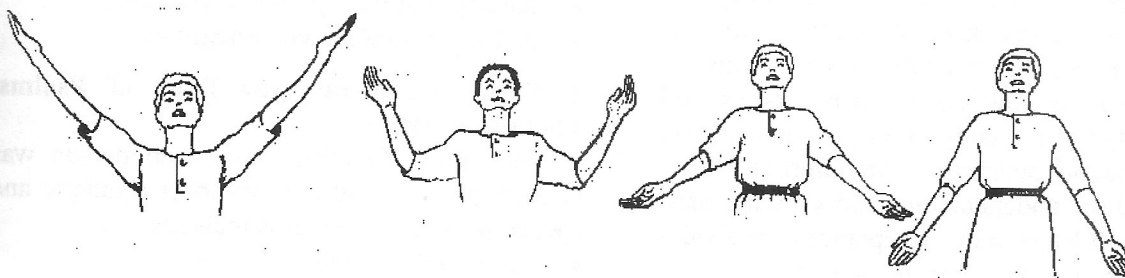
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ment, providing a powerful process for expression and subsequent healing. Examples of props used in the process are:

- The cross – which is placed centrally in the room as a reminder of divine presence, as well as a place to articulate in movement meaningful expressions of deeper issues. It is also a place where stillness is encouraged against the rest of the room where there may be a great deal of movement;
- Materials of significant colours – black for burdens; red for the need for forgiveness and disclosure; purple for healing and white for freedom. These materials are used as props for individual improvisations or for assisting a person to receive and open up by dancing with another person, with the aid of the material. The material serves to make gentle contact offering a soothing and safe means towards expression;
- Flags of bright colours are also used when there has been a release in the person. Flags provide a wonderful means to express the newfound freedom and joy;
- Other props such as candles, water and oil are also used within the context of biblical principles which assist the person to meditate and clarify issues pertaining to their belief system.

The gestures in the dance are founded on the Hebrew tradition of movement and their use to express their beliefs. Some of these gestures are illustrated below (Jones, 1988).

They are particularly used in group movements and dances to provide a sense of unity in purpose and expression. They are also used to break through any blocks which are being faced. When improvisation becomes difficult, these movements enable a person to continue and move to a deeper level when ready.



Throughout this process there is the belief that God is present and being a witness. This belief system creates depth in safety, trust and confidentiality. It also creates a sense of peace that upon leaving the sacred space God leaves with you, continuing the healing process through daily life.

While this model of dance therapy follows a psychodynamic model, the use of the props and gestures add a unique dimension to the therapeutic process. Free expression in movement is not only facilitated by these tools but they also become an extension of the movement having meaning in themselves.

### Harmonics Movement System

This system was founded and developed by Bill and Paula Douthett of Sacred Dance Ministries International and within the framework of Sacred Dance, Harmonics can be used as a form of therapy. The system is based on the study of Natural Laws as researched by Isaac Newton and placed within the framework of God as Creator and His Creation (Douthett, 1993).

This system is designed to enhance a person's sensitivity to the physical laws which God created for humankind and for the universe. Awareness of God's laws written within the body enables the person to relax into the natural forces, resulting in an emotional, spiritual and physical harmony which can be tangibly experienced (Douthett, 1993).

The basic premise of the system is that the movements of the harmonic movement system require little effort, as the natural laws which govern the earth also take hold of the movements and allow a freedom of movement to be experienced. The result is a sense of peace and a growth in energy. The force that is operative allows the movement to happen with little effort. Stress and tension is released and freedom to move is experienced throughout the whole body (Douthett, 1993).

The natural influences as defined by Douthett (1993) are:

- Gravity: the pull on every object towards the

centre of the earth. Through exploring gravity, a person's equilibrium or centre can be explored aiming to discover the point of harmony;

- Centrifugal force: an object is caused to revolve around a central point and then fly away from the centre;
- Centripetal force: an object is pulled inward.

Both centrifugal and centripetal forces are a form of:

- Inertia: which is the tendency for an object at rest to remain at rest, and an object in motion to remain in motion. The combination of gravity and inertia causes the *pendulum effect*, or the *swing motion*;
- Momentum is another force which is comprised of velocity of the body multiplied by its mass. Momentum also has direction. Both inertia and momentum make it possible for movement to occur with little effort.

Douthett (1993) has derived six laws from the work of Isaac Newton which are written into a person's body:

1. *The Law of Opposition*, which is unique to the human being, where body parts can move in opposition of one another;

2. *The Law of Upright Posture*, where the human is able to stand completely upright and balance on the relatively small base of the feet. The skeletal structure is such that the body is made in perfect alignment with the ability to take the weight of different body parts as well as ensuring the equilibrium of the body;

3. *The Law of Joint Articulation*, where the body is able to move with flexibility and take a variety of shapes;

4. *The Law of Dynamics*, where the combination of the muscles, and the flow of energy through them, enables the body to move with and through many different qualities;

5. *The Law of Sensory Response*, where with every outer movement there is an inner response or instigation;

6. *The Law of Autonomous Control*, where there is control of the flow, energy, dynamic and type of each movement.

The system of Harmonics seeks to bring into harmony the external laws of creation, with the laws written into a person's body so that awareness can grow in how movement occurs, as well as knowledge of the body in its parts and whole. The therapeutic outcome is an improved body image, and an understanding and growing self-acceptance. It leads to the acceptance of individuality and uniqueness within the person.

The Harmonics system has four basic movements. They are:

1. Pendular Swing;
2. Spiral Twist;
3. Wave Motion;
4. Rocking Motion.

Each of these movements demonstrates the natural laws of gravity, balance, momentum and centripetal and centrifugal forces. Allowing these forces to work within the body, as opposed to resisting them, brings a release to the inner state which in itself can facilitate healing.

The Harmonics system allows all people, regardless of ability, to experience the above movements to a certain degree. The natural forces within the movements allow a sense of risk and return to safety. These movements have the means to release memories of childhood which can then be addressed either in further dance therapy or counselling (according to the client's wishes).

The Harmonics system is a process through which a person can find wholeness, a stronger sense of self-image and a freedom and release to explore deeper issues. The system cannot work alone as a dance therapy movement system but can act as a catalyst for deeper healing to occur. Where healing is not needed, the Harmonics system serves as a wonderful fulfilling experience whereby a person can reinforce their body image and their knowledge of their body as a creation of God.

The following section describes experiential workshop activities which embody the Christian dance therapy approach.

## Workshop

### 1. Breath imagery

This exercise is founded on the belief that the breath is the source of life as likened to the breath of God. As He formed man, He breathed into him.

Becoming aware of the breath enables the person to discover:

- their internal rhythm;
- the depth of their breath;
- the depth of their physical structure;
- and any emotional vulnerabilities.

### 2. Psalm 139 (From the Book of Psalms, Thompson, 1978)

This psalm describes how each person was created in their mother's womb as a unique and special person. The process includes:

- being in the womb;

- coming out of the womb - discovering the world but unaware of others;
- becoming aware of others;
- and finally group interaction as if wholly in the world.

This process can be elongated, or divided into segments of development and used as a process of raising the unconscious to the conscious. Taking it into the context of God being the Creator gives a context for a person's existence as well as a sense of God transcending time. It is believed by the Christian that time is overall to God and as a result He can lead a person into places where healing needs to occur. Taking this journey allows that process to happen, with the focus that the healing will be divinely inspired, meeting the person at the time and place where the hurt occurred.

It is important to note that this process is highly meaningful to anyone who may participate and therefore the process requires a facilitator who is professionally trained to deal with psychological issues which could surface.

### **3. Harmonic swings (From the Harmonics Movement System, Douthett, 1993)**

As described earlier, these movements can be used for the expression of freedom and release. It allows cognitive restructuring to take place where messages of joy, freedom, fun are given through the body's experience. It is immensely difficult to maintain low and negative thoughts whilst engaging in these movements. The movements can be done gently or rigorously, depending on

the person's state of mind. The character of the movements lend themselves to a gentle shift in the mind which leads to:

1. freeing the negative thoughts;
2. unlocking memories;
3. unlocking issues for resolution.

Within a Christian setting these are then dealt with through prayer and pastoral counselling. If deep psychological issues arise, then co-joint work can occur with the pastoral staff and the appropriate professional (clinical psychologist, dance therapist, psychiatrist or doctor).

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