

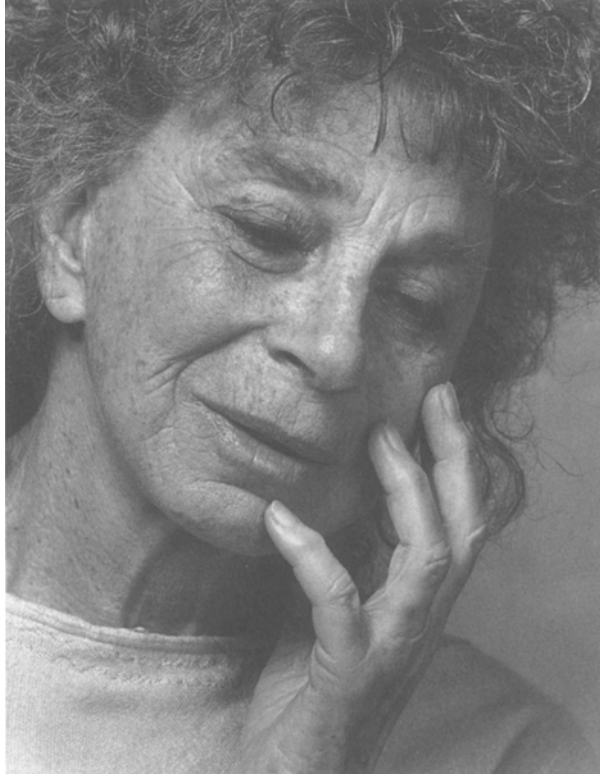
Interview with Anna Halprin

Ilene A. Serlin

This interview was done in honor of Anna Halprin's 75th birthday at her home in Kentfield, California. Anna Halprin is one of the early pioneers of therapeutic dance, and is still working with people who have life-challenging illnesses, by developing rituals, and training people from around the world. The following interview focuses specifically on questions of her own teacher and lineage, and of the role of spirituality in her movement work.

Serlin: Your work has influenced me during the last 25 years, and I am only still growing into an understanding of its power. But at this point the question I'm asking has more to do with the spiritual than the psychological aspects to your work. In my own work with women with breast cancer, I have observed how the body can be such a source of spiritual wisdom, and how movement can open people to this aspect of spirituality. So I'm extremely interested in hearing how other movement teachers describe how spirituality shows up in their work. My question, therefore, is: How do you work with spirit, through the body, in your work? Is there a spiritual component in your work and, if so, how would you describe it?

Anna: That's a difficult question in the sense that the word spiritual tends to be isolated, and I don't think of it as being isolated any more than I think of the mind, body, or spirit in isolation. If you're talking about studying mechanical aspects of the body and movement, whether it's anatomy of massage, focusing on a mental response or a purely physical response, then I think you can look at separation. But when I think of dance, I think of it as a holistic experience, *And, if in fact, it is a holistic experience, then I think the spiritual component is intrinsic to*



Anna Halprin

the experience. In my own experience as a dancer, I feel this connection in the feedback process between movement, feeling and association (imagery). The integration of those three acts takes me to another level, like a symbiotic relationship. Hopefully, it can take you to another level where you would feel the universality of your experience and how that universality connects you to the context of everything around you, whether it is elements in nature, or human compassion, or the sadness or grief you feel not only for yourself but for the larger world. Your total resources are being activated, whether the activation is initiated by a movement, or whether it's initiated by an association. It doesn't matter, so long as the feedback process between all of those components works in harmony.

Then there's another aspect that is important to me, and that is who you dance for. Why are you dancing? I tend to look at spirituality through that lens as well. If you are dancing to bring about positive change in yourself, between people, or between people and the environment, I consider that a compassionate action, and compassionate actions

have a spiritual dimension. I would define spirituality from a pragmatic level as well. The purpose of your dance goes beyond your own personal gratification and that's part of your intention—it may not be spiritual, but it has a spiritual intention, and whether it is, in fact, spiritual is very subjective. The criteria would have to be very different than our contemporary attitudes about performance. The criteria would need to be, whether the dance did, in fact, create change. *Did the dance change the dancer?* Are people able to feel that their health level has changed, that they were somehow or other able to face some aspects of their own dark sides, or a life-threatening illness, be it cancer, AIDS, or whatever it is, and are able to face it with a greater sense of aliveness, a greater sense of living their lives more fully? Are they able to bring that aliveness into their lives? That would be a criteria of whether or not the impact of the dance fulfills spiritual intentions. It's not whether the dance looks pretty or receives good reviews; those are not the criteria that one would use. The criteria would be a very different criteria if the intention is one of spirit.

On the other hand, sometimes people think of dance or spirituality as being too special, too esoteric. Being embodied, and being spiritual, really also has to do with everyday life. It is about very ordinary things. For example, we were doing the *Planetary Dance* on Easter Sunday. We came down from the peak of the mountain, having welcomed the rising of the sun, and then we walked in a circle, just below the peak, where we could look out in all four directions. Each direction had its own symbology. The South is where life comes from, and the North is where death comes from, and the West is where light goes, and the East is where the light comes from. So, after we did this, people began to share in small groups. I noticed that this friend of mine was in tears. I knew that he had been deeply moved by something. I was curious, so I went over to listen to what he was saying. What he was saying was that he had a sudden realization about the spiritual aspects of his life. He's always been looking for spirituality, something special, so that when he found it, it would be like a great enlightenment. What he suddenly realized at that moment as he faced one of the directions was that what was really spiritually important to him was the way he was able to relate to his workers at the restaurant. I thought: That is so beautiful! Because I've always thought the struggle is always about how you connect the spiritual with the material, the everyday with the extraordinary. And he said it in such a simple way, he was weeping. "That's what it is. It's the way I treat my co-workers, the way we relate, the way we touch each other, the way we talk to each other, how we get our work done, how we cooperate."

Serlin: Anna, when we were talking before you said before something that I'd love to follow up on about being Jewish. So often spirituality is

seen as an inner experience, meditative, or contemplative. It has to do with quiet or clearing space, and some of the schools of dance therapy look at inner impulses as a focus. But the distinction between inner and outer is an artificial and old Cartesian one, and no longer relevant to a holistic way of looking at either an embodied psychology or spirituality. Your description, on the other hand, has very much to do with a total involvement in the world. You've talked about social action, you've talked about a relationship with nature, and I think I heard you say that the purpose of dance is to cross all those dimensions. Holistic really means to be wholly alive, that aliveness isn't just as an inner feeling. In relation to other people, it could be political or social action, care for the environment, taking specific actions.

You're talking about engagement and social change, but in a way you would have been a high priestess or ritual maker in another era. That tradition may be found in Judaism, but it's not in the modern Mosaic Judaism we commonly see. Do you think it's in the mystical or the Chasidic tradition?

Anna: I remember doing a ritual for Beth Shalom in Oakland. They asked me to come and do something to recreate a Friday night service. It was a very natural experience. The congregation took to it very readily, so I think dance has always been accepted in Judaism; it's in the *Bible*. We danced to the timbre and the drum before the Ark. But also my background in Judaism—I suppose people's backgrounds in Judaism can be different—but my Judaism is not based on supernaturalism. There is no such thing as the Holy Ghost and the idea of Mary; that is very foreign to my way of thinking, being raised in a Jewish tradition. It is more about you are what you do; you are your deeds. I think the whole idea of Jewish guilt is very real. If one person is suffering, I suffer, too. This has its good points. As I say, the Jewish guilt part is kind of humorous, but it's there. It's that feeling that I'm responsible. I'm responsible to deal with this. I can't just see people in trouble. I think spirituality in Judaism is based on a mitzvah, a deed. I think that's very traditional. I don't think it's anything unique to me at all. Ram Das is Jewish, but he is also very much into the Hindu theology. His whole *shtick* now is service and compassion.

Serlin: That's the spiritual for you.

Anna: Yes. I was taking it to that level. I would define it, as I called it before, compassionate action, a concern for other people and a realization that wholeness cannot be an isolated scheme. That's not real, or even natural to our species. We are a social species. We're not isolated individuals in the world, so our sense of wholism needs to expand from the self to others, to the many, to the plant, to the world. We need to

begin to have a vision of ourselves being interconnected with all life forms. That is the vision that, for me, the challenge for us to work toward. It is not enough to sit in our own space and find personal gratification. That may be step one, but it doesn't mean it's far enough.

Serlin: I agree with you so much. Somehow dance and movement therapy and creative education can actually move beyond the studio. It's not really just about what you do around the studio; it's about what you do in the world.

Anna: That's right. I don't necessarily think it has to take the form of performance in the traditional sense. It can take the form of taking your work out into areas where you're dealing with abused children or ecology movements. In very real ways you are bringing about changes and influencing people to make changes, and you put yourself out into the world where you're needed. So there is a sense of service in the work that goes beyond your personal cause. You need to deal with collective cause as well for the balance to be there.

Serlin: Anna, when you talk about this with such wholeness, such authority, what comes through is that you obviously find this truth within yourself and your own search, or that your own dancing brought you to this understanding. Could you say a little something about your own past? What you got to dance? What did dance teach you and how it can still teach you? And finally, who has been your main teacher, and what has been your lineage?

Anna: The story of my dance education is a twist of destiny that turned out to be the best path for me. Originally, I intended to enroll in the dance department at Bennington College. However, because they had Jewish quotas in those days, I was not admitted. The only other dance department was at the University of Wisconsin, and I ended up there. Margaret H'Doubler was my true mentor, and she provided the best dance education I possibly could have had. She was a biologist by training, which gave her the foundation to approach dance from a different perspective than what was being taught by others as dance. She taught me to view dance from a scientific as well as philosophical and aesthetic point of view. She used to say, "Teach the objective principles of dance and this will enable your students to subjectify their experience." What she gave me was a great gift. She taught me to cultivate my own creative expression rather than imitate some one else's style.

The other question you ask is how dance itself has been a teacher for me. Let me give you an example. Once I had an intuition that there was something in my body that needed attention. I went to the doctor and discovered that I had a malignant tumor. I had drawn that tumor

in my body. It was like a diagnosis. It came early enough that I was able to have it taken care of, but that was a great revelation—that I could draw a proper image of what was inside my body and had never seen. This way of working is now called the expressive arts approach, although it wasn't called expressive arts in those days. I was able to envision a kind of dance that had a purpose, a healing purpose, a societal purpose, an environmental purpose. I never really considered myself a therapist, although I may be referred to as a therapist. I consider myself simply a dancer. I began to think of these dances I was making as rituals. I found that the word *ritual* enabled me to move more consciously into the realm of dancing *for* the people, dancing *for* a change to happen in the life of the community, in the life of the planet, in the life of a relationship. This is where dance really became my mentor. It really led me to moving out into the world in new ways and broadening me at the same time as I did that. So I went from working with racial issues, and my own experience with cancer eventually led me to working with other people with cancer and AIDS, which eventually led me to working with large communities dealing with fear, prejudice, and isolation around issues in our community.

One of the issues we dealt with was AIDS, which was generating so much fear and isolation and prejudice. In addition, we addressed the issue of the Trailside Killer (who had killed 7 women) on Mt. Tamalpais, by bringing the community together and developing a dance to reclaim the mountain. Each time that these dance rituals would come to me what would also come to me was a whole new dimension of life that I hadn't know about before. It's been a continuous broadening of my life to plunge into these particular concerns and issues having to do with other people, to deal with not only my personal issues, but issues beyond my personal scope.

I think one of the most delightful experiences was the way in which some of this material has just taken off on its own. For example, it seems so natural to people that now there's a dance called *Circle the Earth* that people do all around the world on Easter Sunday. They know that this dance is being done in Australia, Mexico, France, Germany, Russia, Israel, and on our mountain where it started. In this seemingly magical way, we are able to connect as planetary citizens and use dance as a way to feel our connection and our yearning to be connected to people in a non-partisan, non-nationalistic dimension. With this dance, we come together to pray for the world, for all people everywhere who are suffering, to be able to heal, and to express a concern about the planet itself.

I think that dance happens to be my particular language; it always has been. Any medium can be anybody's language; dance just happens to be mine. It's been a way that has pointed me to directions that I could not preconceive, and that's been the adventure. It was risk-taking for me. You know, I didn't know I was going to be doing a dance about reclaim-

ing a mountain. I didn't know I was going to go to Watts. These things just make themselves visible. This is what's needed, can you do something? was how it came to pass. Can you participate in this? I've had to develop whole new techniques for working with large groups of people, small groups of people, and envisioning not only a collective myth, as maintaining the personal mythology and bringing that into a collective mythology. In other words, how to respect our differences and, at the same time, honor our commonalities. This had led me, forced me, required me, to create road maps which are very objective and enable us to fulfill our visions. So when we talk about spirituality, it's a lot of hard work. It's a lot of hard work.

Serlin: Can you give me an example of this process you've developed?

Anna: I'll describe for you my workshop process out of which came *Circle the Earth*. In the traditional method of creating a dance, a choreographer takes an authoritarian position towards her dancers: "I'll do the thinking, you do the dancing." I created *Circle the Earth* with a different approach because I want to make dance as accessible as possible to everyone. I want to create dances that anybody can do, and I want to return people to an awareness of movement that I believe is one of our most essential birthrights. To accomplish this, I use a process called "Taking Part", which, as the name implies, enables participants to infuse the dance with feelings and images connected directly to their own individual stories. "Taking Part" also allows each participant to collaborate in the creation of the collective story. I want to tap into each performer's personal experience and story (their "personal myth") in order to create a group myth which expresses a common, human need. In a workshop setting, rather than the usual rehearsal process, each person participates in this exploration, which then becomes a form of collective creation.

Two principles are involved in a "Taking Part" approach. The first is that we learn a common language, and this common language begins with the body. The use of natural, intrinsic movement is at the core of my approach to dance. We begin here because natural movements of the body structure our experiences and our expression. The body's patterns reflect and influence the patterns of our lives. I think of "the body" as a multi-layered energetic form, comprised of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual bodies.

The *physical* body is the materialistic body, comprised of muscles, bones, tendons, and blood. It is the site of sensation, and an attentiveness to this body gives us a continual experience of intrinsic motion. When working with the physical body, I stress ordinary movement such as carrying, weight bearing, leading and following to help people inhabit all their senses and create a common language for the physical body.

The *emotional* body is that part of us which feels and responds emotionally. There is a feed-back process between physical movement and feeling that both illuminates and motivates our bodies. The profound relationship between how we move and how we feel forms the common language of the emotional body.

The *mental* body is made up of the images, associations, and thoughts which arise from movement. During the workshop, we take time to draw these images. The content and meaning of our movement surface in these drawings, and provide us with an externalized reflection of our subjective experience. This is the process I used when I discovered the cancerous mass in my body.

The *spiritual* body is the most mysterious body of all, and it may be that the spiritual body always exists beyond the reach of words to describe it. One way that I think of the spiritual body is that it is the larger, collective body of which we are all a part. It is the body endowed with the capacity to experience our connections to each other and the natural world. It is the body that not only is aware of the mystery of existence, but is most acutely *part* of it. The more I write about the spiritual body, the less able I am to define it. The spiritual body is, in one profound sense, our constant, fluctuating relationship to the divine. My deep love of movement stems from its ability to place me more consciously in touch with feelings of love, compassion, and the timelessness of being, with those spiritual aspects of myself.

The second aspect of the "Taking Part" process is a method of collective creativity practiced through the use of the RSVP Cycles. The RSVP Cycles was developed by Lawrence Halprin which I have been using since the early 70's. This method was used in creating *Circle the Earth*, which welcomed and incorporated the personal stories of each participant. The core of the RSVP Cycles lies in the separation of the four elements of creativity:

R stands for Resources, which are the basic materials we have at our disposal. These include human and physical resources and their motivation and aims.

S stands for Scores. The word scores is derived from its original use in music, which makes it possible to instruct groups of people to carry out prescribed activities. They delineate place, time, space and people, as well as sound and other related elements. What is significant about the use of scores is that they can vary from being very closed (in which all the actions are defied and leave little room for improvisation), to being very open (in which the actions are improvisational and exploratory).

V stands for Valuation, a coined term meaning "the value of the action," or the analysis, appreciation, feedback, value building and decision-making that accompanies the process of creation.

P stands for Performance, the implementation of the scores, which includes the particular style of the piece.

These four component parts are not linear. My method is to use a workshop setting to provide opportunities for participants to discover their own resources, thereby ensuring that the performance will be a collective one.

Serlin: Anna, its now time to end this interview. How would you like to end this story?

Anna: I keep coming back to the thought that what's important is not mastery, but mystery at the heart of life itself. When we tap into the deep regions of the dancing body, we have that wonderful opportunity to tap into that which we have no words for, that which seems to go to a place that connects us to ourselves and each other in a harmonious way.

I would say that anybody who has experienced dance on a holistic level has literally touched on the mystery, that there is an experience you can tap into that goes beyond the rationale of words. There seem to be moments which are unique to the moment when you are dancing, and they don't seem to operate in any other context. I think that's the most important thing that dance has taught me: to accept the mystery of life. There is something beyond what my rational mind can see, there is some mystery to the life force, to the collective body, and to our ability to appreciate that we're all breathing the same air, we're all in this, together.