

# Root Images of Healing in Dance Therapy

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Dance therapy is both a modern and an ancient art of healing. For modern dance therapists, the understanding and practice of healing practices is enriched with echoes of ancient images and practices. These echoes provide both humility and perspective on practices carried out in mental health clinics, nursing homes, schools, and other settings today. "Root images" in this paper will be used to refer to those ancient practices which prefigure and continue to echo in contemporary dance therapy work. By listening to the echo of these images, dance therapists can increase their sensitivity to the cultural and historical contexts of their own profound work.

## Dance as Sacred

**O**riginally, there seems not to have been a split between sacred and profane movement. Once dance expressed the human relationship to creation and to the gods, it was already mythological:

The dance, as the corporeal image of growth and disintegration is the most ancient form of magic. Mythologically, the coming of light, the beginning of the world, denotes the discovery of subjective reality, the ability of man to reflect, stand apart and look on evolution, the capacity to perceive his actions in relation to the sacred, the awareness that he is circumscribing the unknown from many sides (Wosien, 1974, p. 19).

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Early human beings understood the divine by imitating the motions of the celestial order. The body, its movement, and its patterns all echoed sacred forms. Food, drink, breath and sexuality were all regarded as sacred channels for the power to enter the person, and the body's sacred power was expressed in the symbolic ornamentation of the body (Wosien, p. 21).

Through the movements of dance, the mysteries of creation were celebrated. The earliest religious experiences were physical, in which the deity was felt to enter and transform individuals. The early Greek writer, Lucien, noted in his book *On Dances* that all mystery inductions were associated with dance, and that Orpheus had prescribed that those being introduced to the mysteries should be received with dancing (Backman, p. 1). Through dance, one understands through direct participation, in which action and understanding are not separate. Direct experience is an opening to an encounter with the gods.

As the forces are experienced, they are differentiated and named. Naming them gives one a sense of power and lessens terror:

As soon as man knows the god's name; i.e., his special function and power, he begins to be able to do something about him. In this way, *mythology is born*. Every experience of power thus leads to its being given a form, and every god who is established as such represents so much consciousness gained (Wosien, p. 14).

Dance therapy places an emphasis on naming the action. As vague movements chrySTALLize into form, the therapist helps to clarify them into clear statements of emotion, intent, or image. Making the unconscious conscious is a central aspect of the dance therapy process; at these times, it is possible to hear echoes of the early magical and naming practices of sacred dance.

As the movements chrySTALLize into form, the forms repeat and form patterns. These patterns represent daily life, and also celestial and cosmic patterns. The earliest patterns signified generation. Lucien noted:

*With the creation of the universe the dance too came into being, which signifies the union of the elements. The round dance of the stars, the constellation of planets in relation to the fixed stars, the beautiful order and harmony in all its movements, is a mirror of the original dance at the time of creation. The dance is the richest gift of the muses to man. Because of its divine origin it has a place in the mysteries and is beloved by the gods and carried out by men in their honour.* (Wosien, p. 8)

Early dance celebrated this creation over and over—the creation of seasons and spring and agriculture, of new babies and the stars—of form emerging from chaos, and dissolving into formlessness again, of generation and regeneration, of birth, death and rebirth. In this way, the early

dances of birth, puberty, weddings, seedings and harvesting were all manifestations of the divine.

When dance therapists today help participants rediscover the seemingly repetitive archetypal motions of scattering and gathering, of rising and falling, of stomping and clapping, they are reconnecting the person, through the movements, to a sacred perspective.

Essential to the sacred origin of circle dances was the importance of the circle and the center. The circle connected the human to cosmic patterns:

According to Lucian, Plato related that the dances of the Egyptian priests round the temple altars and the dance formations which they executed were intended to represent the movement of the planets, the constellations, and the fixed stars in the heavens. Lucian in his work associates himself entirely with this symbolism. He says that the march cadence revealed by the stars, the conjunction of the planets with the fixed stars, the harmony and the euphony of the movements, the heavenly bodies are the models in which the art of dancing has its origin. (Backman, p. 2)

The floor plan of ancient churches still reflects the movements of procession around an altar, while the repetition of pillar and arch induce an altered state of consciousness in the participants.

The Ring Dance was basic to all mystery celebrations in the Mediterranean. The celebration of the Eleusian Mysteries, for example, "was combined with a ring dance which appears to have begun when the spirit emerged from its symbolic underworld journey and reached the splendid fields of the blessed" (Backman, p. 3).

In the fifth century B.C., a group of itinerant healers in Greece known as the orpheotelestae danced around the sick, usually in the form of a ring dance. Ring dances appeared in the Middle Ages, according to a fourteenth century manuscript, to protect the newborn child against evil spirits (Backman, p. 5). Midsummerdances, which are still performed in Scandinavia, originated in pagan dances before the tenth century in which dancers would go to the streams, dance in a circle around a fire, heap flowers and leap through the flames, purging themselves with smoke and fire. This dance was both a curing of illness, but also preventive medicine intended to bring good health, harvest, and immunity from sickness.

The circle is still used extensively in dance therapy to start sessions, to give participants a sense of boundary and inclusion, as preventive health for the community, and to provide closure. Groups which are cohesive can form circles and often do so spontaneously, groups which are fragmented cannot form circles. Whether the circle is directed or spontaneous, it is a sign of health of a group or a community, and is an echo of the sacred circle of healing practices.

Forms besides the circles also represented divine order. For example, line dances also had sacred origin. In the first century BC, a Jewish sect

called the *Therapeutae* would eat a sacred meal, have a night watch, then perform a dance in which two choral groups, one male and one female, stood facing each other. Alternating singing with stillness, moving forward and backward, they would imitate and celebrate Moses' crossing of the Red Sea.

Certain modern dance therapy practices, such as the movement choirs pioneered by Rudolf von Laban and brought to the United States by Irmgard Bartenieff, repeat these forms of lines, processions, and spatial patterns. Having whole communities move together in synchrony, as Laban did in Europe in the 1930's, was a form of preventive mental health and brought people into increased harmony within themselves and with their social context.

### Dance as an Altered State

Early dance suggests a time where thinking was not yet separated from feeling or from action. This form of knowing is ecstatic, and involves cyclical rather than linear time, a reverie state, and transformation. This knowing was direct and intuitive, and, as the knowing of awesome powers, was revelatory:

For early man, each thing had its own mysterious incalculable aspect; it might at any time challenge him, overwhelm him through its 'appearance'; that is, persecute him with an experience of revelation. Such revelatory knowledge is direct, deeply emotional, and inarticulate, the 'I' remaining passive. The experience of awe indicates the tension of the relationship between the power and the man: to fear, love and serve the god appear everywhere as related concepts. . . . We respond before we question; and every 'appearance' of the power, which man has come to worship as sacred, expresses itself in a deep commotion within the soul of man, which then results in movement (Wosien, p. 11).

The inability to connect to these unconscious or immediate forms of knowing characterize the symptomology and alienation of much of the psychic distress of the modern and post-modern age. Dance therapy plays an important role in recovering the intuitive and imaginative powers to make persons whole. Insofar as dance therapists work with the observable splits between thinking, feeling, expressing, and action, they echo the ancient healers.

The last element of ecstatic knowing is transformation. Dance was magic, alchemical, a process in which different qualities of movement and emotion were intensified, leading to new combinations of qualities and personal characteristics:

Transformation of matter, through the heat generated in the ecstasy of the dance, becomes most evident in the alchemy which transforms the human personality. . . . All growth and development presupposes transformation; which on a psychological level is equivalent to lying to one's previous existence: the god is revealed behind the mask of the animal. The ecstatic experience which gives birth to the mystery is that of passing beyond the 'death' of the body to become transfigured like the god (Wosien, p. 21).

In dance therapy, a client may begin as confused, dissociated, and unsure. As the client moves, a gradual shaping and certainty about how the dance needs to take shape and power visibly transforms the whole person. Even if the content of the change is not yet conscious, the transformation is apparent in the shifts of energy and focus. This shift is like Gendlin's "phenomenal shift" of the felt-experience during focusing, in which change is perceived as a shift in consciousness rather than in content.

In summary, dance is a heightened form of life which has its origins in its original relation to the gods, its connection to the sacred through form, patterns, and transformative consciousness. It is the original form of devotion:

The dance is the mother of the arts. Music and poetry exist in time; painting and architecture in space. But the dance lives at once in time and space. The creator and the thing created, the artist and the work are still one and the same thing. Rhythmical patterns of movement, the plastic sense of space, the vivid representation of a world seen and imagined—these things man creates in his own body in the dance before he uses substance and stone and word to give expression to his inner experiences (Sacks, p. 5).

### **Dance as Shamanistic Practice**

The word "shaman" for a practitioner of healing rites is said to be either of Siberian (Murphy, p. 56), or of unknown origin (Heinze, p. 7), since it was coined in the oral tradition. The shaman's main task was to mediate between the sacred and the profane (Heinze, p. 1). Either male or female, the shaman received a "call," underwent severe initiation, and in a vision, captured his or her "spirit familiar." This spirit was usually in the form of a walrus, a polar bear, or an arctic animal, and was the shaman's guide in healing rites. To be qualified, one needed to be "thin," i.e., to seem to know things that other people did not, to be able to "see things." This ability brought prestige in the community. The one who was called would "go crazy" for five days, wander around and go through the crazy-

ness. Eskimos distinguished temporary possession from psychosis: "They go out of mind, but not crazy" reported one Eskimo lady. When improved, they "straightened up in their minds what was bothering them" (Murphy, p. 56).

Shamans were healers who were especially needed when the relationship between humans and the universe was weakened or interrupted (Heinze, p. 6). Today, there is a growing literature on the relation between the healing arts of shamans and psychotherapists. Walsh notes that shamans "have been called humankind's first psychotherapists" (p. 184). Although some shamanistic practices are physical, such as the cleansing of wounds and the administration of herbs, many shamanistic practices are psychological. For example, shamans, like all healers, use suggestion, expectation, and rituals to evoke placebo effects. In addition, therapists have often gone through their own soul-searching, breakdowns, or shamanistic initiatory crises, and can therefore diagnose and understand their clients intimately. This allows them to stay close to client's symptoms, without fearing and thus containing the intensity.

While shamans were gifted, they were also reputed to cultivate special abilities and ambiance. For example, they might ask a large fee and require that family members undergo certain participatory exercises to insure their high level of investment in the process. Shamans might turn away difficult cases and boast of their successes to cultivate their images in the community. Having a good reputation increased the faith factor in the healing, just as it does in the modern version of transference. Finally, the shamans' training included ventriloquism and legerdemain, and other dramatic devices. A session might begin in a darkened room, with the singing and beating of drums. Audience participation would rise to an intense level, at which point the shaman might fall down in a seizure and rise possessed, with a changed face.

Dance therapists also use dramatic elements in their work to heighten emotion and transference, and use their own energies to inspire, mobilize, quiet, and connect. Dance therapists are not blank screens, but "resonating chamber(s)" (Geller, p. 368).

Before treating the illness, shamans carefully diagnose and differentiate symptoms. Clements has identified five causes of illness identified by shamans: 1) Soul loss: a belief that the soul has wandered off when the person is asleep or sneezes 2) Breach of taboo. The shaman uses telepathic perception to discover the nature of the transgression, and prescribes public confession and acts of expiation 3) Disease sorcery: The shaman counteract black magic with his or her own forces, using secret spells, rituals and potions. 4) Object intrusion. Symbolic purging was the cure: "the shaman told his patient to eat five pebbles, saying that, when the stones have passed through his system and been rejected in the stools, the

patient would be purged of his illness 5) Spirit intrusion: the shaman must detect the spirit's identity through its voice. Otherwise, the spirit might be the spirit of a recently deceased person. Disease was thought to be a material or spiritual substance invading the body of a person, and cure involved the removal of the harmful substance: "There seems to be a fairly clear-cut belief that a disease is a defined entity that cannot be in two places at the same time; it is either in the body of the patient or it is not. Its removal can be effected by the sucking, blowing, and brushing techniques" (Kiev, p. 70).

The shaman needed to carefully differentiate the various causes of illness, because the treatment would be very specific to the kind of illness. When dance therapists listen to the verbal or non-verbal communication of people possessed by illness, when they dance with, and dance out depictions of illness, they can be seen as "acting out sickness." Taking illness metaphorically rather than concretely, dance therapists often find sucking, blowing, and brushing (in Laban's terms flicking, slashing, etc.) to arise spontaneously in client's movements. These movements act out the purging of negative states, and can lead to new experiences, insights, and behavioral changes.

In shamanism, the verbal and the non-verbal are not separate: ". . . the distinction between physical therapies and psychological components like verbal and non-verbal communication with the patient does not hold in shamanism" (Kiev, p. 79). Murphy characterizes seven elements of holistic healing in shamanism: 1) Gaining acceptance. The shamanism is connected to a whole series of beliefs about the nature and causes of illness and cure, which is told through folk tales. 2) Group participation 3) Focusing awe 4) Possession 5) Diagnosis 6) Treatment 7) Involving the patient and the use of symbolic change. The shaman many prescribe acts of atonement, follow-up measures to stabilize the cure, change the name or even the sexual identity of the patient—all of which help the patient to feel that he or she is rid of the disease and is returning to a state of health. (Kiev, p. 78).

Thus both shamanism and dance therapy are essentially holistic:

Although these Eskimos recognize that some illnesses are predominantly physiological and some predominantly psychiatric, the therapeutic procedures of shamanism were uncompromisingly psychosomatic in approach. It did not seem, in other words, that physical treatments were exclusively employed for what were considered primarily physical disorders, not even in treating a frozen foot, for example. Nor was psychotherapy limited to psychiatric disorders. It seems wise, therefore, not to try to untangle one from the other but rather to view the process of shamanism as "whole man" therapy and to attempt to draw out the discrete facets of this orientation that makes shamanism effective (Kiev, p. 78).

## Navaho Psychotherapy

The social aspect of shamanism is clearly shown in Navaho healing. Illnesses are considered to be shaped by an interrelation among: 1) Ideas about nature and the cause of mental illness 2) The actual illness 3) The method and theory of treatment and cure. Central to this understanding is the 'soul concept' (Haile, p. 205). All natural phenomenon have visible outer forms and inner forms (be' gisti'n—one who lies within it). The inner forms exist independently of the outer shell and control it. The inner form within human beings is called the "wind" or the "wind-soul." According to Father Bernard Haile, there are seven kinds of winds: white, blue, yellow, dark, small, left-handed, and glossy. The winds give humans breath and life. No one wind is associated with character, or thought or action; the combination determines personality: "In his language, at least, the Navaho expresses the connection that the union of his body with the wind-soul results in the being that is he" (Kiev, p. 206).

This wind-soul is not a material element, but represents qualities and movements. Through the metaphor of the wind-soul, we might hear the basic movement qualities called "efforts," which are the fundamental elements of Labanotation. The basic efforts are time, weight, space and flow. They appear independently, but most often appear in combination which are affinity-based, and which characterize movement, speech and personality.

Navaho therapy, like that of the Eskimo shamans, is more holistic than Western therapy. It does not cure by focusing on an isolated symptom or on character change, but focuses instead on the restoration of harmony between two forces: personal or magical powers, and restoration into the social order. Restoration of personal power does not necessarily involve insight or analysis into parts: "Navaho therapy takes into account the patient's physical self, attitude, social-group membership, and the other elements distinguished by western man—but without as much abstracting and compartmentalizing. This holistic orientation also tends to minimize the distinctions between physical and mental illness" (Kiev, p. 221).

In Navaho therapy, it is neither the doctor nor the patient who cures. Rather, it is the supernatural forces, which are set in motion and aided by the doctor. This image of healing is close to the archetypal image of healing, where the third force (the gods) do the healing.

A significant implication of the view is that the patient does not need to reflect on his behavior or examine his motives, conscience, or reactions in order to be helped. There is not exhaustive analysis of intrapersonal dynamics; he need only place himself within the curing system, which, once set in motion, proceeds almost automatically. Another implication is that, for the Navaho, man stands in a basically co-operative relationship with the supernatural. The gods have sup-

plied him with the clearly stated means for marshalling supernatural power. Man uses these means as his intelligence directs, and when he follows the procedures correctly, the supernatural, in effect, does its part (Kiev, p. 221).

Many movement therapists help empower their clients not by breaking their personalities down into parts, but rather by working systemically to build on strengths. Therapists go where they observe stirrings of life or creativity, and support that strength. This non-analytic mode of working is characterized by psychotherapist Geller as: "They believe we are living in a time where interpretation is stifling, not liberating, that it actually dulls the senses, is a reminder of an earlier Freudian time which was overly analytic and schizoid" (Geller, p. 368).

The community is essential to Navaho healing. Not only does the social environment generate prevailing concepts of illness and disease, but also sick patients affect the entire community. Their cure, therefore, becomes a community event. Success is marked by the extent to which they are re-integrated into the community. Psychotherapy, therefore, has two main aspects: 1) convincing the patient and the community that the "bad stuff" has gone, and 2) re-affirming the solidarity of the community and "indeed of the whole pantheon of Navaho deities with the patient" (Kiev, p. 228). The patient receives protection from the group and re-enters it, which stabilizes his cure and thus restores stability to the whole community.

In many modes of dance therapy, particularly those derived from the Chace method, re-integrating the patient back into the group through the use of group rituals is central to healing.

## Apache Healing

In Apache, like Navaho, mythology, there is no basic good or evil force. The basic attribute of a supernatural force is its potency, which must work through human or objects. By participating in dances which invoke these forces, people can find their healing power. For example, dancers may wear masks and paint their faces to invoke the mountain spirits (ganheh, jajeeh), which are some of the most powerful supernatural forces. Those who have danced in such a ceremony can repeat the healing rite in times of sickness or disaster. Witchcraft is combatted using a witch's arrow made from parts of the dead person, and invoking phrases from the dead or old memories to bring back the ghosts which cause the fear and psychic disturbances.

Invoking old traumas and memories is central to the psychotherapeutic process. In a movement session, the physical enactment will often reani-

mate earlier memories, which allows fears to be ventilated, shared, and dissipated.

Diagnosis must include careful differentiation of images of the state of possession. For example, if power manifests in objects, then the patient must be very careful not to treat objects disrespectfully and offend that god. If a patient stepped on a spider without praying to the spider "boss," then the disease symptom might manifest as tiny spider web-like cracks in the skin. The three most basic illnesses each had a different cause and required a different action. A ghost as cause required appeasement or exorcism. Witchcraft required a battle with the specific sorcerer who had been hired to harm the sorcerer. And if the cause was an offended boss, then a shaman was needed of that particular power. The astute diagnostician, therefore, hears the symptom speak, and locates the trouble with the appropriate god.

Apache shamans also worked to normalize the whole community. Their healing rituals and use of dream material contained psychic energy, and brought significance to changes of seasons, to planting and harvesting, to births and deaths and other changes. Dance therapists also choreograph rituals to celebrate changes in a group, mark rites of passage and developmental passages. In a time where many people are alienated from nature, from changes in time and season, and from meaningful rituals to mark births and deaths, dance therapists echo the role of shaman as community healer.

### Community in Cochiti Healing

Fox emphasizes the importance of the social context of healing in Cochiti medicine:

The sociocultural system of which the individual is a member provides the stresses that cause the illness; the medium of expression of the illness; a theory of disease (spirit possession, soul loss, witchcraft, or attack of gods, ghosts, or germs); the basis for mobilization of help for the patient; a cure; and, in varying degrees, insurance that the cure will be permanent; that is, that there will be no relapse. In many primitive societies, fine balances have been achieved among these factors (Fox, p. 174).

This "fine balance" is breaking down. Modern medicine is bringing new diseases and imbalances, and isolating the sick person in hospitals. His symptoms are treated out of context, and without meaning:

Primitive societies and religious healing groups often have edge of hospitals in that they more often incorporate the sick person into the society and indeed often *utilize* the sickness in some cultural sphere (Fox, p. 175).

Dance therapists often involve the whole group, or the whole clinic center staff and patients, as they choreograph rituals to celebrate new members, old members leaving, change in community and season. Ritualizing events give them significance and place, helping to restore a sense of coherence to patients who have torn lives.

Cochiti clans are organized as "kivas," which are important social units. These units provide dance teams for public ceremonials, and may remind us of the spontaneous gatherings of teen gangs and dances. Membership in kivas is marked by symbolic washing or naming, and clanless immigrants are adopted by the clans. The clan mother is the symbolic nurturer and protector of the social order: "We get our clans, like ourselves, from our mothers" (Fox, p. 175). Fox notes: "The idea of uterine kinship is the most popular in explaining the notion of clanship. Clansmen ultimately come from the body of the same woman. If we couple this sentiment with the already mentioned extreme dependence on the mother herself—especially in women—we can begin to see both the source of the nonwitch disease and the basis of its cure" (Fox, p. 175).

The image of the mother is central to Cochiti healing. Women have actually been important shamans and healers from the beginning: "It has been conjectured, for example, that professional shamanism developed out of family shamanism and that, in cultural history, female shamanism preceded male shamanism (Kiev, p. 73). It was said that at first, each family needed a healer, and women took the job. Then, men took over the work of healing. Finally, professionals took over. Certainly, most dance therapists are women, and function as nurturing healers. Dance therapy is a peculiarly female combination of medicine, art, and family.

## Conclusion

Dance therapy is not one technique, or even one theoretical perspective. Rather, it combines a number of modern and ancient images of healing practices. These images are of early dance, which linked the physical world and the world of spirits, using communal sounds and the body as instrument to create group rhythm. All members participated; this was before the professionalization of roles of a spectator audience, professional performer or detached doctor. Sacred healing dance connected the individual to the larger context of the community and the gods, helping to bring a sick person back into harmony with tradition, social order, and the cosmos. As ritual, sacred dance named the divine powers, marking cycles of generation and cosmic creation. The patterns which emerge in the dance celebrate cosmic patterns: circles, lines, and actions of planting, gathering, rising and falling. The dance therapist as shaman is a community healer who is close to the sacred sources of healing, and who combines art, ritual, diagnosis and treatment to restore the individual's

lifeforce within the context of community. Re-awakening and re-imagining the root images of dance therapy practices can gain insight and perspective into the ancient art of the use of dance for healing.

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