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The Ways We Communicate: Somatic Dance and Meditation as a Bridge

By Sondra Fraleigh, M.A.

Why would a dancer and somatic movement therapist, yoga and meditation teacher be interested in issues of communication? Nonverbal communication infuses dance and movement in three of their functions: play, theater, and healing, although this may not be immediately apparent. Nonverbal messages are always present in our body language. Dance distills the hidden (or taken for granted) messages of body and makes them more apparent. Yoga and meditation also provide avenues to cellular memory and often spur unspoken stories.

For over forty years now, I have been engaged in the heart of listening. When I teach any kind of movement, I cultivate a reflective style that I would like to share for use in everyday communication, both verbal and nonverbal. I have learned the most about non-invasive communication from the techniques of dance movement therapy and from meditation in yoga and Zen. These techniques depend on incremental learning that starts where you are, beginning with self-awareness. My views on communication have developed over the years through various studies including seminars in "Effec-

tive Communication and Relationship Building" with Selwa Said in Monterey, California. These aid my adaptations of somatic principles to communication, as in the text below.

In the following, I use descriptive phenomenology (in italics) to develop a self-reflective voice stemming from first-person awareness, and I address the reader directly in a conversational style, using questions wherever I can.

The Smartest Kid in the Class

We often learn competition in communication, as we also do in movement activities such as sports and dance. If this applies to you, can you stop "upping the ante," so that you can practice listening without thinking of what you will say next?

When I dance, as when I move across a room, I can make the choice to be present to myself, trusting that others will like me just as I am.

When I meditate, I give up competition. I practice silence and composure, being at home with my surroundings wherever I am.

Witnessing from the Heart Space

Witnessing others is more than listening; it involves the heart space, the

central energy vortex of the body, or what is called the central chakra in yoga. The heart has wings, extending through the beauty of the arms ascending, just as the head has the capacity for understanding. Don't we need both?

*When I witness the emerging dance of another, whether in movement or in words, I can practice listening to my feelings and connect to the other without judging. This is the first principle I teach in *Depth-Movement Dance*, a bodily form of depth psychology pioneered by the late Mary Whitehouse at UCLA that is practiced more generally as "Authentic Movement." Whitehouse originally use the term "Movement in Depth."¹*

When I meditate, I follow my breath with my mind until I release all need to grieve the past or anticipate the future. I can be present in the moment. I practice self-forgiveness; thus, I am not trapped in negativity. My heart is unburdened, and I can more easily perceive the heartfelt truth of another.

Clearing

Can you clear away your own stories and worries to see and hear the story of another? Can you avoid "stealing

the story” by immediately telling your story (something similar happened to me)? When you substitute your story, you interrupt the flow and power of the speaker. Suddenly it is all about you. I know many of us do this, and sometimes it is helpful and reassuring to the speaker, but try waiting until everything is stated if you feel your story will truly support, and not subvert, the speaker’s path toward a solution.

When I dance with awareness of others and my surroundings, I release the muddy waters of expectation, and move into aliveness. I let go and prepare for surprise.

When I meditate, I open the doors of sensation and invite the silence to teach me. I don’t need to go to the mountaintop or sit in the snow. I can achieve silence at my kitchen table, living amiably there with my faults. Garnering gems, I can let go of my inner victim and critic, not getting stuck in self-destructive narratives.

Responsiveness and Being Present

If you are responsive by being present to the speaker, her story can morph toward the answers. Can you practice being present as a witness for the story of another, listening until the end, however long it takes? Then when you respond, you will be more apt to speak without judging. Remember that people want to be heard; much as they might think they want advice, when it is given, they usually reject it, as not quite right. Why? Because the only advice that works is the advice people give themselves by talking through their issues to better understand them. Brainstorming is good. Considering possible solutions without the need to find closure also works better than advice giving. (If the advice doesn’t work, then what? Will you be held responsible for the failure?)

When I dance freely, I am present in the moment, trusting a deeper source than I can consciously control. It can be useful to give up the quest for answers through intuitive dance or in gentle yoga, letting the body be the guide, not the controlling mind.

When I meditate, I enter into a fully responsive state, I learn to wait without answers and find resilience in immobility. Likewise, in movement meditations, I can respond to a chain of nonverbal meaning, waiting for the next impulse to move, then the next, until I am carried beyond my habits of thought and body. I learn that my life is in my own

hands; I can live the answers, building capacity along the way. I suspend expectations and absolutes and polish the moment.

What You Say, and How You Say It

In your bones and your glance, what you say is not as important as how you say it. *The intention is everything.* Speak with kindness and without judgment. Your response is what the speaker wants if he or she is earnestly engaging you. So be yourself, whether witty or serious. It might seem obvious to avoid “you” statements that accuse or assign blame to others, be they friends, family, or co-workers. Invasive questions that dig into sensitive matters are also not a good idea. But haven’t we learned that questions are a good thing in communication? Yes, but questioning is something of an art (as Socrates knew). It depends on whether the questions support the speaker’s journey. Pose your questions to help clarify the story. Stay with threads of thought and meaning, as you encourage the speaker’s discoveries.

When I dance, my body sings and stutters its meanings. I experience expression at its source, even when I’m awkward. When I dance for others, I am happy for their reflections, especially when they tell me what my dance brings them, a gift of meaning, or even a feeling of sadness. I am content to connect with others, and in the wordless space between us, to feel our common humanity.

When I meditate, I give up all intentions, purify my thoughts as they arise (they will), and observe them pass by. Then I learn something my habitual thinking cannot yield—that my suffering is not unique. It also connects me

to others. If I continue to meditate as I grow older, I experience the companion of suffering—joy.

Not Judging or Advising

Can you let the words and gestures of the speaker stand as they are without imposing your corrections? We grow up learning how to judge, just as we learn how to get better all the time, and to compete. I understand the need to improve, but does it belong in every interaction? I think not. We cannot connect with the thoughts and words of others if we are always finding a better way to think, act, and speak. Non-judgment can be difficult, but we can learn it through self-observation.

My mentor, Ohno Kazuo, a Japanese butoh dancer who died in 2009 at the age of 103, continued dancing well into old age, finally just moving his arms to music of Elvis Presley. From him, I learned not to judge myself in dance or in life. When I was young, it made me quite sick to live in constant fear of making the wrong move. It was much later that I met Ohno-sensei (respected teacher). In dance classes, he would ask us to change a direction or intention in order to explore a new potential, but he never corrected or judged us. Eventually I applied this approach to my relationships with students (after spending years critiquing the dance works of college students and writing dance criticism). Working with non-judgment in family communications is perhaps the most difficult. One of Ohno-sensei’s famous dances about his mother is titled: “I Shall Not Correct It.” Sounds like “I can’t fix it,” the co-dependence awareness mantra, which teaches self-responsibility and non-fixing behavior in relationships.



Eastwest Somatics workshop, Angela Graff, student, center.

When I meditate, I improve quite naturally. I practice the techniques I have learned in a non-threatening way. No one makes me meditate, I choose to. I make friends with myself, and learn the value of making friends with others rather than making judgments about them. If I can't fix others, can I pay attention to my attraction to the perceived problem and turn it around? Can I show compassion for myself and others—and in so doing, influence those close to me in a positive way? Put simply, can I own my part of what seems to need fixing and let it go with love?

But how about my responsibility to assist people as a therapist and teacher? The same principles apply. If I want to effect positive change in another, I need to work on myself in the process. If I want to help someone float her head upward as an easy extension of the neck and spine, then I need to float my own.

How About Me?

I have learned in my studies of communication skills that listening is the most important skill of all. But how about me? How about those times when I need to be heard? I only hope that when I need a listener, she or he will not interrupt constantly, impose her own interpretations, and ask invasive questions that make me want to cringe. This happens, of course, but then comes that rare compassionate person who can really be present with me while I evolve. One of my best friends so bubbles over with enthusiasm for life that I forget to have problems in her presence. Her golden smile is contagious, and she listens.



Eastwest Somatics Dance Experience, Amy Bush, student.

When I dance, I evolve, ever changing in my essence and movement. I become the meaning I seek.

When I meditate, I enter aloneness, but am never lonely. I find strength in solitude, the kind that helps me to make conscious choices in acceptance of my freedom and limitations. I also understand my connections to others, and ask for help when I need it. I don't forget to be joyful and grateful because I am not alone.

Resilience and Mindsight

My toaster is resilient. Just when I think it is broken after all these years, it turns out a perfect piece of toast. Most machines don't display resilience, but humans do. In my study of somatic movement therapy, which I now teach, I encountered the theory of resilience: Resilience is the human capacity to reorganize and adapt to disruptions while retaining the ability to operate purposefully. Scientists and social entrepreneurs are exploring the theory of resilience for new ideas in restoring ecological and social systems. If the social includes communication, and it certainly does, it applies to our present discussion.

As Daniel Siegel (2007) says in *The Mindful Brain*, there is a link between the practice of looking inward and connecting with others. He calls this "mindsight," the capacity for seeing the mind in others and ourselves. We can learn how to stop top-down invariant judgments in communication through internal mindful attention, and develop social resilience. Then others will find joy and solace in our presence. Top-down judgments are those that constantly monitor situations for the



Sondra Fraleigh, M.A.

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right or wrong thing to do or say, and they monitor what others do and say also. What if there is no one right way to do something, one right thing to say or think? Moshe Feldenkrais taught that if you don't have three ways to do something, you don't have a choice. Engaging alternatives requires resilient thinking and interactive communication. How then does one prepare for such resilience? Research in neuroscience, Siegel says, shows that we actually alter the structure of our brain in mindfulness meditation—especially those areas of the brain responsible for empathy and self-observation, the keys to effective communication.

When I dance, I am at once both vulnerable and resilient.

When I meditate, I develop mindsight.

Shin Somatics® and Resilience

Shin somatic movement therapists trust that the human being can attune naturally to gentle movement patterns introduced with clear intentions toward integration of the whole organism. In other words, we believe in the body's natural capacity to restore and heal through movement. *This is resilience.* In individual work, we introduce gentle hands-on movement patterns to clear away the clutter of the nervous system, relieving stress and trauma at a cellular level. Group movement classes in somatic yoga also focus on movement patterning for postural ease and pain recovery, leading to better function of the whole bodymind unity—the soma. We practice a somatic form of yoga re-

lated to infant movement development, "Land to Water Yoga," that we have evolved over the years.²

I enter an introspective state in partnership with my class or my client—as in my teaching of meditation, paying attention to the senses, how the breath moves the body, and where it is felt. Sensory stimulations may have been there before, but have gone unnoticed. When I use movement as a primary stimulus, I start to notice the student's bodily organization, what propensities or habits of movement are apparent. Together we work to increase awareness of habits and to expand movement potential beyond habits—thus the functioning of the nervous system, which I define as "whole body responsiveness."

I use dance for its intrinsic values, not its theatrical potential. I enjoy helping others find their inner dancers. We all have the capacity to dance, but this gets somehow subverted for many of us. My challenge is to help people use simple improvisational methods of movement and expression to recover vitality and wholeness. For me, the body is spirit and mind at once. The physical is never just physical. The body is our primordial memory, and we can heal without words through gentle movement and intuitive dance. Sometimes the most significant dances we do are in stillness. Dance is in its core not for show, but for pleasure. I like to coax out the pleasure principle in dance and movement. ❁

Notes

1. Whitehouse originally used the term "movement in depth" for her work, according to her long-time assistant and friend Joan Englander, who took a course with me in Santa Barbara in 2009. Whitehouse, who was strongly influenced by the depth psychology of Carl Jung, also used his term "active imagination" in her teaching, involving active imagination in movement. Her work, along with that of Marian Chace and several other dance therapy pioneers, eventually became known as Dance Movement Therapy. I saw a demonstration by Whitehouse and heard her speak at Mills College in 1968. I never forgot her grace and insight, or her ability to move people in dance processes. Her staged demonstration with a few participants didn't seem to be about movement and authenticity, but dance as therapy, fully emerging in the moment and emotionally charged. Dance is more than movement. The "more" part can be defined in so many ways, as expressive, beautiful, symbolic, transformative, connected, flowing, and much more. I claim the words "dance" and "movement in depth" in the intuitive dance processes I teach, and let these words morph in many directions.

2. In book form, Sondra Fraleigh, *Land to Water Yoga* (New York: iUniverse Press, 2009). See also several videos of this form of somatic yoga on YouTube and at www.eastwestsomatics.com.

Reference

Siegel, D. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

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