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## Freedom, Gravity, and Grace pt.2

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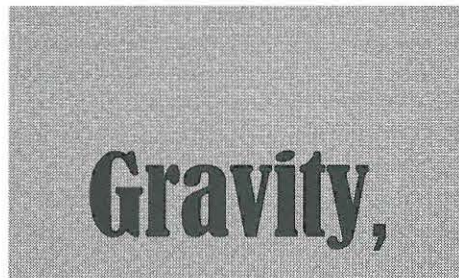
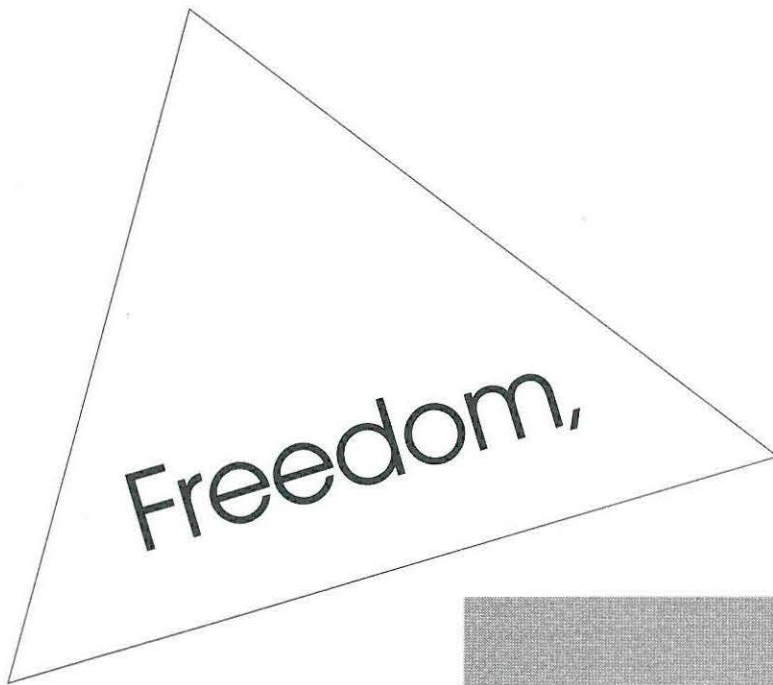
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## Part II

by Sondra Horton Fraleigh, M.A.

*In this article, the author concludes her exploration of the relationships between the elements in the title, and shows how the dancer utilizes them to expand the range of freedom and art.*

### Falling Into Presence

Simple presence (*existing in the flow of present time, not looking back or forward*) comes with difficulty for most of us. (*Our nature is in need of constant rescue.*) We get thrown off-center, out of the-present-at-hand, falling behind, or stumbling ahead. We are impelled by gravity's circumstances and a-need-to-control that reveals our efforts to get a-hold-on-the-world. (*Our graceful alignment with gravity is fragile.*)

"And when I saw my devil, I found him serious, thorough, profound and solemn: It was the spirit of gravity. Through him all things fall."

— Nietzsche (1995, p. 41)

"... escape from necessity? like children? But one would lose the value of life."

— Simone Weil (1970, p. 22)

When we dance, we build a world

beyond effort, supporting the quality of ease in our experience of freedom. But there is an acknowledgment of weight that grounds such freedom, substantiating necessity. "I like to see people fall down," dancer/choreographer Viola Farber would say, allowing falling to enter into her works through the elemental wonder of gravity. For Heidegger, things could also fall down without distress:

"An *existential mode* of Being-in-the-world is documented in the phenomenon of falling" (1962, p. 221).

Falling was admitted into the vocabularies of modern/postmodern dancers through the work of women. (*We lost our fear of falling.*) Doris Humphrey's dances in the early to mid-twentieth century used falling paradigmatically in showing the full spectrum of movement that had been disallowed in classical ballet (*when we danced upright in vertical lines of other-worlds.*) She made it the hallmark of her work in marvelous spiraling falls, not debating gravity (*the ground—and netherworlds.*)

"We would misunderstand the ontologico-existential structure of falling if we were to ascribe to it the sense of a bad and deplorable ontical

property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 220).

Freedom is real in experience.

*(We hold things,  
and allow them to go.)*

It is real as we live it bodily.

*(We pull things apart,  
and weave them together.)*

Dancing is an art in which we realize that the body is the origin and basis of freedom.

*(We circle twice and drop to the floor,  
falling into our hands.)*

Because dance fulfills nonderivative experiential values, it is its own reason.

*(We dance for the dancing,  
Going nowhere, accomplishing  
nothing.)*

Because we are embodied in our dance, when we accomplish our purposes in dancing, whether flying (*our feet never touch the ground*), or falling

*(swooning and laughing),*

we are accomplishing our bodily-lived freedom.

*(We move with weight  
when all wants to float.)*

This is the freedom we experience as a purification and deliverance from



effort, as the core of our natural body emerges

*(from where it was hiding).*

*(All wants to fall, and we float free.)*

Curiously, culture rears its head here, for mastery, an aspect of culture and of cultured bodies, is manifested in bodily spontaneity as we achieve our purposes in dance and move according to intent. *(We become skillful in our craft.)* It is then that grace also appears. *(We know it's a gift; we feel unburdened.)* Culture and nature have a reciprocal relationship in dancing and in the skilled motions of all arts.

*(Our body is our memory.)*

Mastery in dance, movement ability acquired through training and cultural challenge, does not rest on willful domination of ourselves (*mind over movement*), but on discovery of efforts in harmony with intent. *(We match the movement, and rid ourselves of willful mastery in favor of personal best.)* When we go beyond our intentions or fall short of them, we fall out of the open center where intention is dissolved.

*(We move ahead of  
or behind our selves.)*

When we cannot retrieve movement  
we have thrown out . . .

we fall off-center.

The Feldenkrais Method® of movement awareness holds that functional (*graceful*) movement is reversible. That is, a movement so overbalanced or thrown away that it cannot retrace its path (*return to its origin*) disintegrates. On the other hand, a movement that can change its mind (*and it has a mind*) might stop midstream or continue. Reversible movement has the choice of going many different places, finishing where it is, or returning home at any point. This doesn't mean that it cannot be fast (*or thrown off-kilter, or thrown into space, or funky and fun*), just that it stays acquainted with itself and saves something of where it came from.

Functional (*time/space reversible*) movement does not live in the wastelands of overdrive, but in being fully present. *When we pay attention*, we can slow down or speed up, we can soften or sharpen our thoughts, and we are kinder. There is elegance and integrity in such everyday functionality; this is our birthright, we came here to *be here*, and we deserve to be here. Grace and freedom appear together when willfulness disappears, as not troubling our energies, we also become

more functional. Reversibility is the path of effortlessness in movement. Retrograde, the literal motion-picture reversal of movement in music and dance, is another matter. We can pounce or doodle and still remain whole; we can produce the next movement, or return home, or dive right into the headlong spills of gleeful dancing. The reversible motion of grace in dance movement and in life's movement is a vital point in consciousness, not a kind of movement. Strong movement can be just as effortless as light movement when effort is in phase with intention, and we can step forward (*stop*) or roll backwards (*go*) at any time with equal ease.

Freedom is functional—not an abstraction—it is a grace we realize in action and experience bodily. Of all the lived qualities that the dancer distills and projects in her art, freedom is valued most. In its purest form, freedom is a dancer, because the dancer is a sign for our ability to move freely, choosing and changing without regret.

“When I dance my body changes shape to be in this place. I explore my skin, I feel my heart beating and my feet—they stroke, they make music, they slide. When I dance I am circling, falling, finding. I am light and dark. I look inside my body to find what urges, flows, pulses, extends, flies, shimmers, stops my moving. When I dance I feel alone or connected, joy, anger, sorrow, sexy, beautiful or awkward—I *make changes*. I know air, fire, salt, earth, bone, hair, friendship, water. When I dance I am spirit. When I dance I can love you” (Karen Bond, Workshop, 1994).

The dancer moves free of necessity.

*(Traced in the curl of her palm.)*

She creates a possible-world  
of freedoms.

*(The rhythm accelerates.)*

She is freedom's instance.

*(And speeds.)*

Dancing is another word  
for freedom,

*(Love's body politic.)*

erasing effort,

turning behind it.

*(She forgets her body  
and falls into presence.)*

### Uprightness

Barely . . . had

we said these words when Necessity  
stood before us . . .

impartial and indifferent . . . like a

closed door. Under her influence we  
resisted disappearance.

*(We thickened with weight.)*

The gravity of our flesh pulled us  
down (*was disgusting*)

we were taught, so we

struggled against it.

*(In our uprightness.)*

We thickened into silicone and  
plastic.

We designed rattan bodies, woolen  
bodies,  
pleated and wrinkled bodies, broad  
and thin thin bodies.

*(We sliced into icy and wormy  
bodies, dissected green and yellow  
bodies. We got our bodies right under  
the knife and met deadlines . . .)*

In the next moment . . .

we saw Relativity

*(We tensed, a little, and were  
sweating, but would not be  
intimidated)*

where Necessity had been standing,  
and spoke with her.

“Gravity [Relativity stated more  
pleasantly than we expected] is not a  
downward drain, or a lower part of  
ourselves. [We contradicted moral  
uprightness; we found the flesh  
beautiful.] Rather it is the centering  
aspect of movement. [We got down-  
right sad and angry.] Gravity moves  
with us, changing locations in our body  
as we move.”

The tone of Relativity's voice relaxed  
us.

*(We were lying on our back like a  
baby and decided to move all our limbs  
in the same direction; we rolled over  
easily;*

*it was pure pleasure.)*

“I love rolling into the floor”

(Roberta Carvalho-Puzon, Dance  
Aesthetics Class, 1996).

We crawled on all fours for a while  
(*just for the fun of it*); then slowly, as  
we came to our feet, we heard the  
voices of Uprightness.

In 1925, A. K. Volinsky<sup>3</sup> wrote in his  
*Book of Exultation*: “Only in ballet do  
we possess all aspects of the vertical in  
its exact mathematically formed univer-  
sally perceptible expression. Everything  
in ballet is straight, upright, as a taut  
string that sounds a high note. Of  
course, I'm speaking of classic dance  
and not character or social dance,  
which purposefully and in keeping with  
their character permit all manner of  
crookedness. But in ballet, everything  
—the dances on the ground and in the  
air—is the direct heritage passed down  
to us by the sublime, proud, and pure



antiquity. . . ." (cited in Copeland & Cohen, 1983, p. 257).

"And now we have got to that vital Kantian conceptual link between personhood and *dignity*. To be a person is *not* to be born of woman, nor indeed to be born at all, but to spring forth from some fertile noumenal field of Ares fully formed and upright. . . . It is not our ability to tease and play (an ability which infants display better than most adults) but our upright stature, our would-be commanding presence, our pretensions to importance, that are decreed by the founding and sustaining members of the fraternity of persons to be the qualifications for membership. Persons, especially if they are men, matter, and decree who and what matters. . . . Aristotle, who of course did fairly straightforwardly profess the belief that persons had accidental mothers but essential fathers, launched a still flourishing tradition of finding moral significance in our upright posture. . . . We are the descendants of *homo erectus*, we are told by our wise men, the anthropologists. (Could it be that men have a thing about uprightness?)" (Baier, 1994, pp. 316-317).

"Man is the first freedom of creation; he stands upright" (von Herder, 1800, p. 92).

We thought it great to be upright when we wanted to be, but not like a post or a robot, nor as evolutionary apotheosis. We could in fact experience our full height and an upright ease that amazed us. We found this out through experimenting with postural sway, our natural and ongoing functional sensitivity to gravity. This perceptual capacity of the constantly changing status of our body to gravity is one that robots do not possess (*which is why they fall down*).<sup>4</sup>

We found out that balance holds sway over gravity in the influence of uprightness. (*Later we validated this finding with cybernetic and movement sciences*).<sup>5</sup> When we leaned forward and passed the center of gravity in our bodies (*that place where we are not prone to fall over*), the extensor muscles of our backs began to work hard to keep us upright. Likewise, if we leaned behind our center-of-balance, our abdominals needed to work.

The same thing happened with our heads. They got very heavy (*and we got pains in our necks*) if we were leaning forward (*reading for instance*) for long periods. In these instances, our bodies

were not aligned harmoniously with gravity. Indeed (*in terms of work and overwork*), gravity became our enemy (*because we wanted to find balance*). "In cases where movements are not perfectly adjusted to gravity, the body's passage through the stable position is not clearly defined and the muscles continue to perform superfluous work" (Feldenkrais, 1977, p. 74).

But we discovered we could be graceful in our forward and backward leanings if we were cognizant of gravity and made it our friend. (*We shuddered slightly*.) We could recover balance through such consciousness, and need not struggle. (*Being upright was a piece of cake*.) Awareness makes a difference to grace, for grace is alive to the moment and intuits through the body the right moment to right the body. (*Our perfectly designed vestibular system worked in tandem with gravity*.) We experienced an easy balance, our ears set us right, and our voice came all the way up from our feet.

"Then we shall have 'returned' to the stage in which all conscious muscular effort to maintain equilibrium disappears, for this equilibrium is maintained solely by the older parts of the nervous system, which will find for us the best possible position compatible with the individual's inherited physical structure" (Feldenkrais, 1977, pp. 75-76).

### Weight

Gravity and grace are not antagonists. They are distinctions on a continuum that sometimes coincide in space:

"Moral gravity makes us fall toward the heights" (Weil, 1952, p. 48).

Grace belongs to the whole of life and bears a relationship to gravity (*colored by a first and second order*). Gravity, we know, provides all animate and inanimate bodies their property of weight. For the human being, however, weight is more than a property: It is an experience (*coloring the implicate order*). All wants to rise when I feel weighed down. Everything goes up, but I don't. Trudging around, I shuffle and stutter. Bearing my weight, I lay myself everywhere, and spill myself out. (*My body speaks the explicate colors*.) I dip my brush and paint.

Certainly, we feel and move with weight. But this is a weight that is relative—to how we feel in the moment—to our purposes and projects—to our health—to our attitudes. When we pay

attention, we can choose to move with more or less weight within the range (*of our control*) of our own body weight. Grace appears within this volitional range when we experience the plunge of gravity through the center of our motion. This is the ecstatic center of motion—because it allows, and does not withhold gravitation. Gravity withheld is unwanted tension. In admitting the reality of gravity through our body's weight, we can work with it, and come to know it (*implicitly*), not in dreaded dead weight but in weight that is alive and mobile. (*We can paint the air with our arms*.)

Because grace exists at the enlivened center of motion, it is responsive. (*We have learned how to listen*.) Its responsiveness constitutes its open character and spontaneous essence. (*We can listen*.) The dancer is not graceful simply because she rises above the earth on brittle points (*we disappear too easily*), nor when she pretends that she is weightless. (*Were we there when they needed us?*) She is graceful as she responds to the earth, moving in harmony with her intentions and the truth of her gravity. (*Did we love and celebrate all our ages?*) Then she moves freely. (*Like grass in the wind*.)

### Innocence

"Take not a maiden who, when she sees a man of bronze,

Loses possession of herself.

A girl owes it to her dignity to wait until she is wooed" (*The I Ching #4, "Meng/Youthful Folly," 1977, p. 23*).

Grace appears first in nature (*as the world materializes in our senses*) and in our bodily spontaneity before we reflect upon it.

(*We loved with innocence; this was the law of the ascending movement*.)

Secondly, it appears in that which we learn how to do well

(*we practice, we call it discipline, the law of the descending movement*)

with effort perfectly suited to the intended action.

(*We landed our leap without weight*.)

We call such actions second nature because they attain anonymity. (*They just happen*.) We move backwards to the beginning—because we move with nature (*she is one of us*), having attained an easy rapport with her. (*We have called her by name*.)



"My son was born singing, new swaddled, snuggled in my armpit, he sang to me, welcoming me into welcoming him, a song I would not hear again for another year. The cleaving of our bodies was and is, pure grace. We have survived our birth and are partners in the dance of time and space" (Margaret Eginton, Dance Aesthetics Class, 1996).

We see innocence in good dancing. It does not admire itself, but neither is it self-effacing.

*(She neither develops nor contrives; she does not wait, nor does she strive; she does not woo; she is happy just to be.)*

But this is equally true of any skill we acquire or field of endeavor that becomes part of us.

*(We recognized her face from our stay in the womb.)*

There is no true grace possible to us in any of our undertakings when we are cut off from our sources in nature. Grace and nature are one as they share the characteristic of spontaneity.

*(Neither are conscious of themselves.)*

They are time's median.

*(They have no need, knowing nothing of their own folly.)*

Grace is a gift and cannot be willed.

*(She has charm—the magnetic glue of the universe.)*

If she is pursued directly, she recedes.

*(When we try to grasp beauty.)*

But she can appear in our work, and in our dancing, when we are fully given to the task at hand, not dualistically divided against it. Then we can merge fully with our intentions in action,

intending as we act (*not before or after*) without anticipation or regret. Such action is in harmony with nature because it arises spontaneously (*freely*) in the present moment, and from our gravitational center, physically and emotionally. (*We are merely ourselves, and do not squander the power that lives in our bones.*)

The ability to center, to be present-centered in motion, is both physical and emotional. It entails the ability to hear, see, and externalize rhythms in the spatiotemporal placement of motion. Grace and rhythm are inter-related in dancing. Grace and good rhythm contribute to our recognition of the dance phenomenon, because they are necessary to movement skill, and to each other. The dancer's ability to place movement rhythmically in consonance with her intent, we perceive as her grace. (*At home in her environment.*)

The dancer is one who matches movement by gaining control (*lightly*) over her own movement (*is there any other whose movement she could control?*), as she intentionally formulates it and expresses it. Indeed, the dancer is the artist who develops an encompassing range of movement skill, pressing the outer limits of her human powers to move. (*She soars, melts, materializes, spins on a dime, and falls in an instant.*) She learns how to direct physical and psychic tension and relaxations in movement. (*She lifts her eyes and lights the stage with her courage.*) Moreover, she learns how to place the movement in space and time. (*Passing*

*here and now/ harmlessly/ and over there/ losing her footing and recovering it/ through a crack in time.*) Good rhythm, like grace, grows out of present-centered consciousness.

*Perhaps it is time to push things ajar.*

"When I dance I . . . move, touch ground, feel ground, eat ground, leave ground, am drawn back to ground . . . underground and through ground. When I dance I sweep air gather air try to catch air in between arms and legs inside lungs. I fight air thrust myself through the solid air hit air like a brick ocean and fall back to welcoming ground. When I dance I am a shadow seeking other shadows, clinging to the curved shadows my body wants to release. I watch the shadows form, weaving webs on the insides of my arms, on the pavement as I pass the lamp posts dancing. And I can feel the shadow of another before I feel another's body that joins me, pushing me again to ground" (Kirsten Kaschock, Dance Aesthetics Class, 1996).

Grace and (good) rhythm contribute to dance ability.

*(She moves with control.)*

They implicate control in the placement of motion.

*(And she can be out of control.)*

They are created through actions taken

*(She danced in sacred groves and conjured the spirits of animals—and not taken,*

*intoxicated with the night and the feel of dew on her nipples.)*



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the skillful placement of aesthetic tensions and resolutions.

*(She spiraled in arcs  
pressing her face through  
starlight.)*

Grace and rhythm  
are abilities that the dancer  
possesses  
*(she moves with air and earth);*  
and as such, grace  
*(being present-centered in motion)*  
and rhythm  
*(the desired placement of  
movement in timespace)*  
become essential to our recogni-  
tion of the dancer's art.  
To be present-centered in motion, is  
to grasp it fully  
in the moment of performance  
*(repeatable, yes,  
and responsive).*

This implies that the dancer owns  
her own movement  
*(how could she not  
own her own movement?):*  
is alive to the gravitational center of it  
*(not conflicted).*

Her will coincides with the forms of  
her body  
*(realist or romantic)*  
—she owns herself.

Supple and free—in the spirit of  
Delsarte—she wears ballet slippers  
laced at the ankles, but her dance is  
more innocent than classical. Young  
Isadora's costume is said to have been  
made from curtains belonging to her  
mother.<sup>6</sup>

She stirs the space and is still.

### Yes

"Wordless, moving out of the blur of  
pain that is *Rainforest* (it is the last day  
of the world, Merce says), I stretch up  
and uncurl my fists toward the face of  
my Merce/mother. The space between  
nourishes me now, even as my skin is  
ripped away. Afterwards he says to me,  
'Almost Meg, we almost did it.' I  
understood then, but only now have  
the words to say it. He too is looking  
for the yes.

"One day I asked him how I was  
supposed to stay up in the air so long.  
Just stay, he said, go up and stay. I did,  
we do . . ." (Margaret Eginton, Merce  
Cunningham Dance Company, Dance  
Aesthetics Class, 1996).

In the achievement of graceful  
rhythmic movement, the dancer balan-  
ces between control and abandon (tak-  
ing hold and letting go), willing his

motion (in the moment) as consenting  
in it. He is both making and letting the  
dance happen (self-possessed and free)  
in his power to initiate, to control, and  
express his dance easily (He extends  
his palm and sticks out his tongue).

"When I dance, I try to find that  
balance between control and express-  
iveness. I am to give the dance life and  
meaning, hoping that I can express the  
intended meaning of the dance—  
beyond the stage and into the audien-  
ce. I want the audience to enjoy  
dancing with me" (Bryon Davis, Dance  
Aesthetics Class, 1996).

As his movement becomes free,  
he extends the realm of his  
experienced freedom.

*(Yes.)*

He does not remain divided against  
movement he consents in.

*(No.)*

*(He thinks it more graceful to go on  
foot,)*

Indeed . . . as he merges fully with  
his intent, *he is consenting* in his  
action.

*(than to arrive under false pretenses.)*

Those actions which he consents in  
arise from his freedom.

*(Stepping-yes/ into yes/ and yes.)*

They bear witness to it.

He does not stand apart from his  
performance,

but is fully present.

*(He does not pursue the grace  
of external brilliance, but returns to  
simplicity.)*

Spontaneity implies present-  
centeredness, the congruence of time  
and space in the aesthetically right  
motion—one that fulfills its purpose  
and is therefore indistinguishable from  
it. Such motion becomes, then, the  
desired form of intention: clear and  
thus expressive. The dancer is graceful  
when he moves as he intends to; and  
since he does, we do not mark his  
intention, nor does he. His dance has  
become free and spontaneous because  
his intentions do not strive—neither do  
his mistakes—they are dissolved in the  
dance. Then he does not intend his  
motion: He dances.

"When I dance I am all passion,  
Pressing through my very bones  
As though the marrow were in  
Flood tide.

Sinews, taut like lash lines  
Of a well-trimmed clipper ship,  
Contain the form of clean-cut sails  
Straining against the  
Liquid drag of keel,

Slicing hidden currents  
Below . . .

When I dance . . .

I am a coursing, momentary  
Form, signaling,  
Like one enthralled by ecstasy or  
distress,  
The currents of the endless Deep."  
—(John M. Wilson, Workshop, 1994)

In the achievement of graceful  
rhythmic movement, the dancer balan-  
ces between control and abandon  
(letting go). He lives the self as an  
agent, willing his motion—consenting  
in it. *(He eases the way.)* He is both  
making and letting the dance happen.  
*(Clouds rise in the sky.)* He is self-  
possessed and free in his power to  
initiate, control, and express his  
dance easily. *(He remains quiet in the  
rain.)*

As his movement becomes free, he  
extends the range of his experienced  
freedom. To become free in his art, the  
dancer chooses to engage himself in a  
struggle to expand his powers of move-  
ment and expression, to move beyond  
that which comes easily or naturally to  
him. *(And for this he must wait.)* He  
makes mistakes, but does not decrease  
himself. New freedoms appear in his  
movement and nature is recovered in it  
*(if he is sincere)*—when he has passed  
beyond struggle in the realization of  
his intent. *(Falling through grace.)*  
Then he moves freely. *(Falling though  
time.)*

Nine at the top means:

*Simple grace.* No blame.

"Here at the highest stage of devel-  
opment all ornament is discarded.  
Form no longer conceals content but  
brings out its value to the full. Perfect  
grace consists not in exterior ornamen-  
tation of the substance, but in the  
simple fitness of its form" (*The I  
Ching*, #22 "Pi/Grace," p. 93).

The dancer thus disciplines himself  
in technical training toward the expres-  
sive requirements of a wide range of  
motion. *(Waiting in the wings, his  
breath calms.)* He becomes skillful and  
versatile. *(Waiting in mud.)* He  
expands the range of his freedom and  
art. *(In blood, rushing up and  
forward.)* For, skill, we learn through  
Ricoeur,

*(Momentary form.)*

gives substance to the will and allow  
freedom to inscribe itself in the world  
(Ricoeur, 1966).

*(Waiting in the beginning.)*



She remembers seven flowers  
embroidered

on her dress  
when she was five;  
dancing on the lawn  
in her mother's night gowns,  
and that the boy across the street  
liked to put them on  
and dance with her.

### Notes, Parts I and II

1. Ricoeur's views on the realization of freedom through the reciprocity of the voluntary and the involuntary systems of the body and freedom's implication of movement as second nature are set forth in this extensive study. He extends his thesis holistically to include the emotions.

2. For an extensive treatment of the sedimentation of somatic knowledge in the personal body from an epistemological and phenomenological perspective, see Shigenori Nagatomo's *Attunement Through the Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 215-221.

3. A. K. Volinsky wrote this in 1925. It is part of a full excerpt from "The Vertical: The Fundamental Principle of Classic Dance" from *The Book of Exultation*, translated by Seymour Barofsky (copyright 1971 by American Dance Guild, Inc.). It was reprinted in Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (Eds.), *What Is Dance?* (Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 255-257).

4. "A robot built on the physical blueprint of the human body—one that would engage in multiple, overlapping and possibly contradictory activities—has not been achieved because it requires an adaptive control system that receives constant informative feedback. This is an incredibly complex task . . ." (Goldfarb, 1994).

5. ". . . balance predominated over gravity in the influence of uprightness" is Goldfarb's (1994) summation of movement science reports on experiments with human subjects concerning balance and uprightness in orientation to gravity. "The experience of being upright is not based on some objective, external frame of reference; rather, it is a consequence of ongoing perceptual motor activity" (Goldfarb, 1994, p. 9).

6. This can be seen in two photographs of the young Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), taken by Schloss in New York City in 1898 (Dance Collection, Library and Museum of the Performing Arts).

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