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Freedom, Gravity, and Grace pt.1

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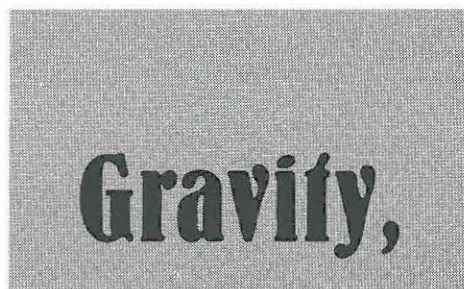
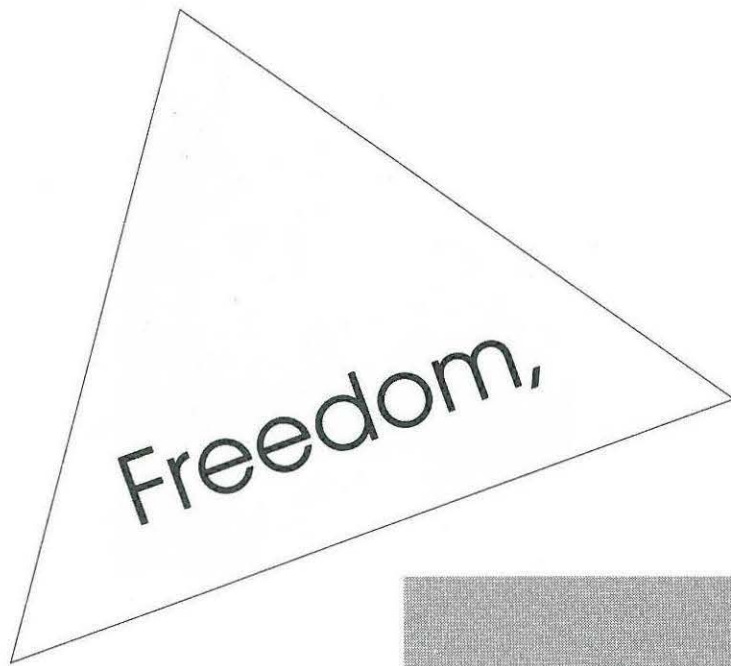
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Part I

by Sondra Horton Fraleigh, M.A.

To come down by a movement in which gravity plays no part . . . Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight? Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace, and the descending movement of the second degree of grace. Grace is the law of the descending movement.

—Simone Weil, 1952, p. 48

I was sitting in a chair in the patent office at Bern when all of a sudden a thought occurred to me: If a person falls freely he will not feel his own weight. I was startled. This simple thought made a deep impression on me. It impelled me toward a theory of gravitation.

—Albert Einstein, cited in Pais, 1982, p. 179

The Friendliness of Gravity

If intention is embodied in the volitions of dancing, it is also gracefully transcended. Where will was willingness of the movement to be in its particular path and order, will is finally surrendered—as the dancer realizes her (his) intention:

*(to move here with a shoulder,
or there in a fall,
to reach behind another dancer,
to see where three other dancers
are moving
so she can weave around one
and between the others,
to feel a new directional pull in her body
space, and how it touches surrounding
space).*

The specificity of her intentions are lost to the flow of the whole, and her body's memory organizes the dance effortlessly.

(Gravity becomes her friend.)

She moves with gravity, not against it. She moves a gravitational, corporeal, relativity.

The dance in its free essence arises as a vibrant presence beyond the effort of will. Then the dancer can simply be present in the stream of her dance, its possibilities and circumstantial gravity. Her consciousness centers, and she moves freely. Dancer Patricia Simmons describes it:

“When I dance, I go to another place. A place where there are no words to describe things, a place where sens-

ing is most important. I go to my expressive self and let her out, as if she could only come out then. I become the music when there is none, and when there is. I am taken over by something else. I am left looking at me. I become fully expressive. My thoughts and feelings are exposed in a manner more satisfying to me than words.

“I reveal myself when I dance. I can be anything I want to be. I can wear any face, and yet not like a mask that adds another layer, but more like a peeling down or taking down of one to see what is underneath. I am free—I am bound—I can do whatever I want to.

“I finish each moment fully—some-

times resting in it, sometimes releasing it with hesitation. Time stands still and moments flash by like Polaroid snapshots. I let go if the choreography is complex, and let it be. I don't 'perform'—I assimilate it. I am fully involved, yet I do not count. I'm not sure where I am in the music, yet I am there with it. Everything melts into one and gels. The 'ends and means' disappear. I'm never lost, yet replaced. I return rested" (Simmons, 1993).

Dancing is the art in which we may realize that corporeality is the origin and basis of freedom. The "I cans" of dance manifest in bodily spontaneity as we achieve our purposes and move according to our intentions. It is then that grace also appears, and gravity becomes friendly.

I want to question the typical view of grace as a matter of defying gravity, as though gravity were the enemy of the dancer. I hold that there are relationships between freedom, gravity, and grace; that grace (and therefore freedom) lies in cognizance of gravity and realization of nature. Grace, as epitomized in classical ballet, has been inculcated in terms of man's defiant mastery over gravity and nature. It is significant in this respect that men, with few exceptions, have been the choreographers (authors) of ballet. The male choreographer attains mastery over the ballerina's natural body; he cultivates and composes it in his art.

Man's mastery over nature and his own primal instincts in ballet are made clear as we listen to A. K. Volinsky lecture on "the vertical: the fundamental principle of classic dance":

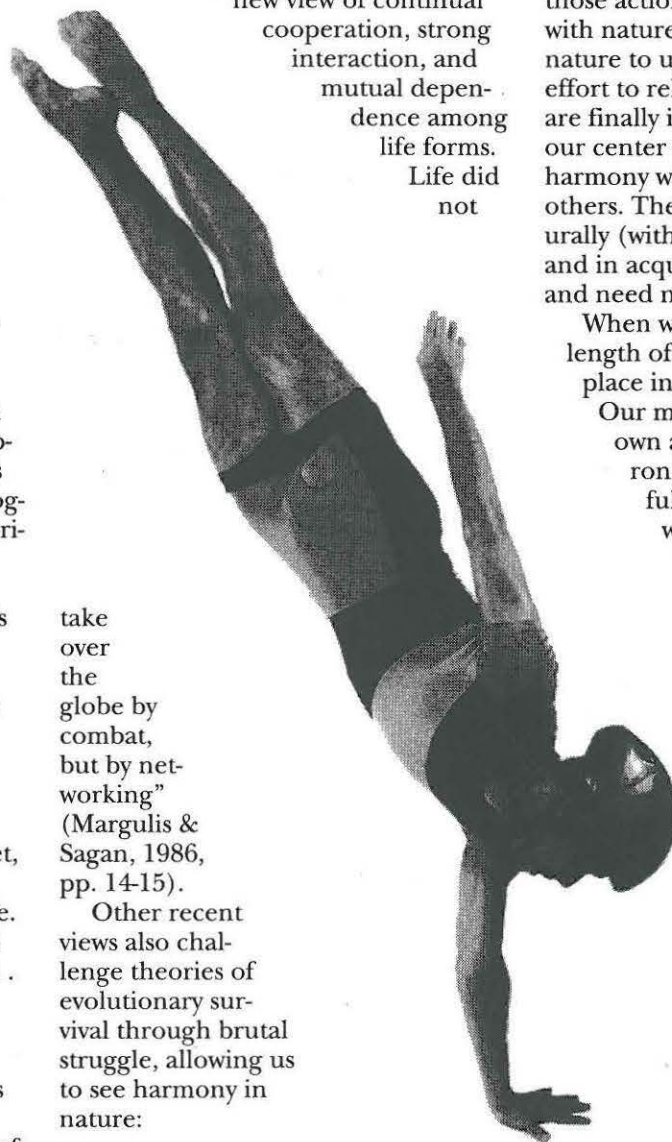
"In ballet, ballerinas commonly dance on their toes. . . . To understand so important an aspect of ballet, one must investigate the nature and meaning of the vertical in human life.

"Once man crept on all fours and lived in the trees as the apes do now. . . . After a development process of many thousands of years, he came down from the trees, stood upright and straight on his legs and freed his arms for a deliberate battle with his environment. This was the moment of the greatest bloodless revolution in the history of mankind. Man ceased to be horizontal and became vertical. From this time on he is identified as a man, not an ape or a primate resem-

bling man. At the same time he acquires dominion over nature and becomes its master. This lordship is the result of the fact that man becomes conscious of his liberated arms and hands, he engages them usefully, and perfects his means of battle. . . . With the vertical begins the history of human culture and the gradual conquest of heaven and earth" (1985, pp. 155-156).

The contemporary view of microbiology conceives of evolution in more amicable terms:

"The view of evolution as chronic bloody competition among individuals and species, a popular distortion of Darwin's notion of 'survival of the fittest,' dissolves before a new view of continual cooperation, strong interaction, and mutual dependence among life forms. Life did not



take over the globe by combat, but by networking" (Margulis & Sagan, 1986, pp. 14-15).

Other recent views also challenge theories of evolutionary survival through brutal struggle, allowing us to see harmony in nature:

"Life works with the environment, not against it. . . . Every living thing is beautifully attuned to its environment. Effort is . . . minimal because each animal and plant is so well designed" (Augros & Stanciu, 1988, pp. 138-139).

Neither is graceful movement a battleground. It lies in our attunement with the nature of the body in its intelligent design, as this also implies an affirmation of the many colors and varying shapes of bodies. Grace likes curved lines, crooked and horizontal lines, as well as straight ones. Grace is not straight, light, and weightless verticality only; it is realized in relation to intention, and has a wide range of shapes, lines, colors, and weights.

Grace is the freedom we feel in those actions we perform in harmony with nature, those that become second nature to us, having passed through effort to release us from effort. These are finally integral actions; they rest in our center of gravity, and bring us into harmony with our surroundings and others. They have found their way naturally (without undue exertion of will and in acquaintance with surrender) and need not impose control.

When we find the full and easy length of our breath, we find this place in our body's consciousness.

Our movements proceed of their own accord, alert to their environment. We can be in a room full of people, or on stage with others, and know without looking around where everyone is. We won't bump into them. Our quality of awareness is such that we are sensitive to the presence of others and respect their space as our own. We are graceful, because we are fully present with no need to control others. We are at ease in our environment with no wish to be elsewhere. Our movement is self-regulating, secure in its emergence, not interfering, not manipulating, not apologetic. It radiates from the core, and includes others. When we move from our own center of gravity, we move gracefully.

Augusto Soledade in Hale-Bopp, choreography by Susannah Newman.

Photo: Jim Dusen

Knowing the Dance

“... knowledge and movement are more fundamentally and more basically bound together than a concerted voluntary effort can bring about. Here the mental and physical *Cogito*, thought and movement, bring about an undecipherable unity, beyond effort”¹ (Ricoeur, 1966, p. 249).

When that which originally required effort ceases to be an effort, bodily spontaneity, freedom, and grace appear. Then I move as one with myself and my world. Not needing to exert myself beyond the desired effort for the movement I am performing, I can experience gravity as my partner and friend. My own gravitational center becomes alive to me, expanding and continuously shifting as I lightly control the mobile center of my action. Even when the movement is intensely energetic, I can control the center of it with ease when I have thoroughly embodied it.

I no longer need to concentrate on how to do it, or where it goes. (*It is consonant with my consciousness.*) Then I can live it as of myself, and not as a form that as yet eludes me. (*It is no longer an “it.”*) When I can accomplish any movement with surety because I know it well, I say it has become second nature (*a part of me*). I know the dance (*it has sunk into my nature*), and there is nothing left to remember. It is not, however, buried in the set of habits that regulates my life. My dance is somatic knowledge of another kind—attained through keen adaptations and attunements of my personal body in movement that can be revisited consciously and with ease.

My habits, on the other hand, escape my ordinary attentions and visitations, or they wouldn't be habits. Bodymind habits (*good, bad, or indifferent*) are indistinct because they are constants embedded in automatic behaviors. When I chance upon a habit through exploratory bodywork, or when one declares itself for some good reason (through the warnings of pain that signal a poor postural habit, for instance), then I can become attentive and begin to transform its solid forms and tendencies. At this point habits enter into a fluid educational process, so to speak; they cross over into a range of movement (and consciousness) that approaches skill. I can learn how to become aware of my

habits and *skillfully transform* the nature of them. I can change my habits when I can see potential benefits, but this requires first that I become acquainted with them (get to know their nature), and second that I give conscious attention to change.

Then I can enter a process of bodymind learning and renewal. When I acquire a new movement (or a new idea, or change an attitude), the object of my movement—that to which I have applied myself—dissolves in consciousness, and sediments in my nervous system. Then I move freely (*I become the dance*).

(*I can become the dance of my endeavors.*)

The actual processes of dance and movement education through the somatic disciplines of movement and bodywork make the kinetic structures of learning clear. When the object (the objective) of newly acquired movement becomes consonant with my body consciousness, it sediments as knowledge, as the etymological derivation of *consciousness* through *con-science*, or *with knowledge*, would indicate.

(*My body knows the dance.*)

I know the dance, and this is both a knowing-how (the technique of it) and knowing-that (the dance itself, the object of my awareness in motion). Moreover, my knowledge has a somatic basis, for I live it as I perform it.

My dance is a feeling-how

(*I feel the tautness of my leg
and the twist of my ribs*)

and a feeling-that

(*shattering into pure experience
of you,
dancing with me*).

When I know my dance I can forget it
(*in the fire of the tango*).

Impressed in the soma of my sensory-motor system as somatic knowledge², having dropped into the effortless non-doing of the involuntary, my dance may then be called forth in dialogue with intentionality

(*as of my own nature*).

This is a conversation between doing and non-doing wherein (I learn) I am not the doer,

(*that movement is huge,
and my body's memory is
bigger than I am*).

Ricoeur's existential phenomenology provides an explanation of the foregoing realization, as it underscores the experience of freedom in the ecstatic and effortless bond between the voluntary, as based on intention, and the involuntary, which he sees as based in

nature, not within our control. Skilled imaginative motion, such as dance is, provides a model for understanding the conciliation between the voluntary and the involuntary as the basis for what we commonly call second nature. Actions become “ingrained,” we say. Habits form. Skills are acquired! They actually take shape in the body as kinaesthetic circuits that marry movement to the nervous system become traveled again and again.

When we move, we embody (*we become*) the shapes of our movement, for embodiment is also a circuit: Our embodiment of movement shapes our body.

But skill is more than habit; it is acquired with care, not carelessly or unconsciously ingrained. Skill has exacted a conscious refinement of the nervous system in carefully practiced movements that eventually sediment; they become automatic, but are brought to attention again and again through further practice and fine tuning. Unlike habit, which is by definition unaware of itself, skill can be revalued in every act of awareness.

(*The ingrained, sedimented body gets to know itself, and maintains a healthy self awareness.*)

“When I dance I . . . let the elements flow through me. I let my bones and muscles feel the floor. I breathe. I'm not sure it will work. There's this moment of wonder at reconnecting with movement. Then I realize the movement was there all along. I live the thick space and shape, the time. I banish my demons. I feel momentum and flow and joy. I turn my head inside-out and let my muscles slide away from my bones. I wobble, and take off again. I flow; sunshine, water, air and smooth floor. I am more me” (Kozel, 1994).

Ricoeur saw that the model for understanding motor intention lay in particular intentions that we can seize through a spatial and temporal memory of them. Such intentions operating on the level of imagination, he felt, were the key to the problem of voluntary motion. Dance participates in this model to the extent that at some point it requires a recall of movement through the kinaesthetic imagination, or what we often speak of in dance as movement memory. It would be a mistake to call this muscle memory (as we sometimes do), for muscles have no memory by themselves. (How could they?) Muscles respond as part of the

whole organism and in relation to the nervous system, which is intertwined with the tactile/kinaesthetic senses of movement and touch.

(Our body remembers as a whole bodymind and one-body-of-motion.)

Second Nature and the Core Self

Memorizing movement (getting to *know* it) is an aspect of acquiring skill and expanding the body's repertoire of movement, one of the processes of learning how, and knowing how, to dance. It is most significant that such knowledge, as it expresses the mental/physical *cogito* of voluntary action, is also grounded in the involuntary autonomic nervous system, our predispositions (or innate abilities) to move (and to come to rest) prefiguring the will itself. Will presupposes ability. It springs from a background of movement and freedom, and poses the threat of inertia. Intention as an aspect of the will ensues from such pure possibility. It comes from a free place in experience. It might go in any direction, or nowhere at all.

When she improvises, the dancer's consciousness taps this freedom:

"When I improvise, I just pick some eccentric thread that passes by and go with it. Sometimes I talk to it or through it, but it/I still don't know what it is. My face means nothings to me. Sometimes it waits for my arrival and at other times I drop it. Nevertheless, it is the dance and not I.

Of course, I never remember where I was because it talked to me always distracting me from my daily habits, and the toil and troubles of breathing and walking just stopped" (Suarez, 1994).

Voluntary motions, especially those of dance that develop a high degree of skill and direction of intention, summon the will, and give us clues as to how agency is constituted. As a movement sediments, it transforms the will, because the movement (*it is never singular, by the way, except in language*) now belongs to the involuntary. The movement in its sequence/shape has now become natural, residing in what Ricoeur calls "the structural involuntary of an acquired gesture" (p. 328); the movement no longer requires direction of the will.

Agency, our ability to act, stems from the will as an expression of freedom. (How and to what ends we express agency is another matter; burning buildings is easier than constructing them, and they may both represent our free agency.) When we dance, we utilize the entire process that "being able" assumes—we study (as we undergo) various degrees of "can do." Through daily application, we feel ourselves spreading into skillful, effortless agency.

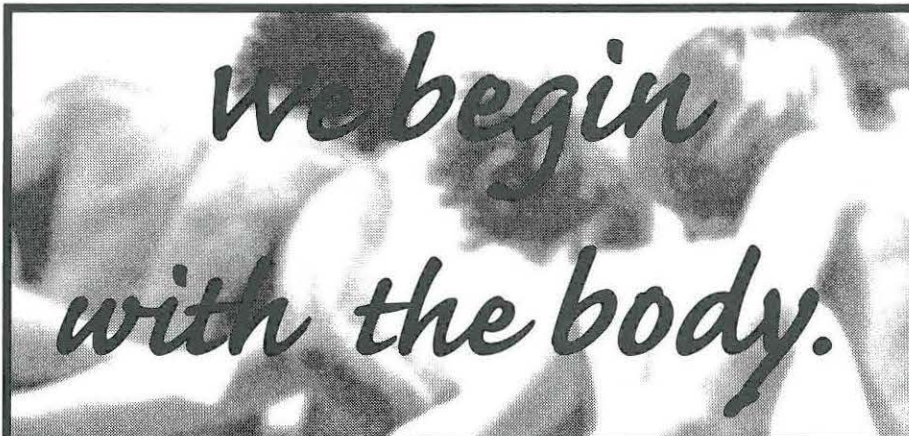
As we expand our degrees of freedom, it is significant that we also expand our nature. We call up and depend on nature. Acquired movement skills, those that have become natural to us, but which have, at some

point, also required an effort of the will, relate to a perceptual schemata in the body, observable in the infant as he or she—without learning to—can nevertheless follow objects, reaching and moving in relation to them. Such pre-formed (innate) movement capacities are available to the will.

Ricoeur's phenomenology and the research of cognitive psychology (as initiated by J. J. and Eleanor Gibson) show that the bodymind has an innate intelligence from infancy on. They testify to a nature of the body, which sees the human being as able. Our body is an able body from the beginning if we are born healthy. Yet even within compromises and limitations, our infant body holds a future unfolding of abilities. (*There can be no second nature without a first.*)

The developmental psychology of Daniel Stern disproves the textual psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, especially his concept that the infant experiences a confused reality. According to Stern, the infant evolves "a core self" quite naturally, on the basis of self-agency, self-coherence, self-affectivity, and self-history, a sense of being a nonfragmented, integrated whole. Stern shows that the natural unfolding of abilities of infancy have been underrated (Stern, 1985; Butterworth, 1983).

We have a nature. (*It isn't evil.*) It is in our nature to be whole and able. (*Things disintegrate—and fall apart—We see what lies lower than chaos.*) We have a



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home in nature. (*We chalk the floor and retrace our steps.*)

Experientially based body therapies such as that of Moshe Feldenkrais trust the healing capacities of movement that is allowed to emerge naturally (along lines of least resistance). Like cognitive psychologists, Feldenkrais also studied infant movement through developmental stages to found his approaches. Awareness Through Movement, simple movement patterns done gently (with ease) and adapted to one's own movement disposition, sustain the method of the Feldenkrais work. Subtly, organically, the patterns are allowed to emerge, less performed than explored. The *how* of the movement is everything; what the movements *are* becomes secondary. Movement is encouraged to grow in consciousness with the least amount of effort. If strain appears, the mover backs off, goes more slowly, and empowers the movement gently. One is not compelled by some outer image of movement to be performed, nor does one compete with oneself. Competition and goal orientation is almost impossible for people to release, however.

Inevitably, individual objectives form (I think I can actually touch my foot here if I push it), or some frustration of competition enters in (I know I can do this better if I repeat it just one more time). But, as in Zen, the mover forgives such lapses, and starts again, detaching from results. Eventually, one can be in a relaxed flow of motion, just present to what is being done, not pushing for or desiring any particular result.

In such somatic movement therapies (as in meditation), we are given a chance to experience the lines of least resistance in ourselves, and to know something of our own nature, so nearly covered over with effort, and willful overdrive.

(Importuning total comfort and non-judgment concerning the movement-at-hand: falling to the edges of sleep is

OK/

or falling in/

or taking a rest/

or employing an alternative related movement/

or finding an easier position for your body.)

The body knows its needs, and changes from moment to moment. If we want to know our nature we have to listen to our body—and simplify.

Through psychophysical bodywork in the somatic hands-on therapies of Moshe Feldenkrais, F. M. Alexander, and Marion Rosen, we can observe the peaceful core of the person as the involuntary rises to the surface of rest. When the efforts of trying and the over-efforting of stress are allowed to subside, the core self shines. This is as true in dancing as it is in therapy. Or perhaps the core self is the place where effortless dancing and therapeutics meet. The apparent pleasures of spontaneous dancing and the shining presence of a truly relaxed breath have much in common. They attest the bond between our willing self (in its subsiding) and our core self (in its manifestation). And they further demonstrate an organic simplicity that speaks of nature. ☺

Notes

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 elaborates 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.

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