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# Doing It Alone: Supporting a Single Mother Through Authentic Movement (An Artistic Inquiry)

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**DOING IT ALONE:  
SUPPORTING A SINGLE MOTHER THROUGH AUTHENTIC MOVMENT (AN  
ARTISTIC INQUIRY)**

**Lucrecia Platt**

**Thesis submitted to the faculty of Columbia College Chicago  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Master of Arts  
in  
Dance/Movement Therapy & Counseling**

**Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling Department  
December, 2012**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to take an in-depth look at the human experience of single motherhood and how authentic movement, a body based movement practice used in dance/movement therapy, can play a role in supporting one single mother cope and navigate through mental, emotional, and physical struggles. This study documented my experience, illuminating the relationship between single motherhood and authentic movement. Heuristic methodology was used to collect data and took the form of personal journals. This data documented my authentic movement experience.

The creative process method of artistic inquiry was then used to help further analyze my experience on a body level, which culminated in a performance film. This external representation of my experience combined movement, music, spoken word, and visual images. This research has helped to inform my role as single mother, student, and therapist.

## Acknowledgements

“When we become more fully aware that our success is due in large measure to the loyalty, helpfulness, and encouragement we have received from others, our desire grows to pass on similar gifts. Gratitude spurs us on to prove ourselves worthy of what others have done for us. The spirit of gratitude is a powerful energizer.” — Wilferd A. Peterson

I want to give many thanks to the following people

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My Advisor, Kristy Combs: I am so thankful for your patience and guidance.

The Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling faculty at Columbia College Chicago

My classmates, The Fabulous Fifteen: Your love, kindness, support, laughter, tears, and hugs carried me through this journey.

My parents, James and Sarah McClinton: Your belief in me helped me to move mountains.

My brother, Chopper Platt: There were times when I doubted my ability but you always knew I could do this.

My husband, Mario Duncan: It was our divorce that led me on this journey but it was our reconciliation and your love and support that held me together at the end of my thesis process.

And most importantly my beautiful children, Mario and Anita: When I look at you both I am overjoyed and inspired to be the best I can be.

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis was to take an in-depth look at the human experience of one single mother. This thesis explored how the body-centered practice of authentic movement, used within a dance/movement therapy (DMT) group setting, played a role in helping a single mother cope and navigate through mental and physical struggles. In efforts to balance and maintain a healthy family structure, single mothers typically face a myriad of issues. Robbins and McFadden (2003) highlighted the factors that strain the single mother. These factors included reduced income, lack of social support, lowered self-esteem, and increased pressure on time. These factors cause stress which can lead to physical, mental, and emotional problems. Various forms of support for single mothers are a common theme in the literature.

In this thesis, I explored my experience as a single mother through authentic movement. I am a single mother of two young children. Although my role as a mother is very rewarding, it has definitely had its challenges. The daily life stressors for me were juggling motherhood, school, and work. This was a recipe for stress. In 2009, my children and I packed our belongings and moved to Chicago, where I entered the Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling program at Columbia College Chicago. I found myself many miles away from my central support system of friends and family and added a new role to my single mother plate: graduate student. My life became a mix of early morning school preparation for three, a full day of classes, mad dashes for after school pick-up, chaotic bedtime routines, and late night paper writing. In that mix, where did I find a chance to breathe? I found this opportunity when surrounded by my classmates as we participated in our weekly simulated Chacian DMT group. Marian Chace, the mother of DMT, created the first DMT approach and focused on the constructs of body action, symbolism, therapeutic relationship, and group rhythmic activity (Karkou 1992). In a group setting, these



principles created an opportunity for group members to engage with self and other. It is within this intra- and interpersonal process that group members fulfilled the need to communicate. The Chacian group experience in graduate school offered a hand-on learning process for my classmates, and it became a place for me to relax, relate, and release. It was this experience that led me to my initial research question: Can DMT be a positive support for single mothers?

I believed that DMT could help single mothers cope with lone mother challenges. I first wanted to work with other single mothers, but I ran into a number of obstacles including participant reliability and selection. I decided to focus on my own experience. By exploring my own experience, I would gain increased awareness of myself. This increased self-awareness could help support me as a mother and a therapist. This heuristic study would illuminate my role as a single mother by allowing me to formally explore my experiences and feelings while working with a dance/movement therapist. With help from my advisor, I was introduced to a dance/movement therapist, Susan Cahill, who is also an authentic movement group facilitator. She invited me to participate in her authentic movement group. This experience led me to shift my research once more. I believed that authentic movement in a group setting provided a space for me to explore my single motherhood experience on a deeper level. I also believed that it may provide that same opportunity for me to relax, relate, and release that I found in Chacian DMT groups during my graduate studies.

Unfortunately, my story of single motherhood is not a unique experience; many women find themselves in the position of raising their children alone and are find it hard to cope with the stress and lack of support. According to the US Census Bureau, as of 2011, 11.7 million families in the US were headed by a single parent, 85.2% of which were headed by a woman. Single mothers are taking on a two person job, and they need tools to help them cope with chronic

stressors in a healthy way. I was motivated to do this research to help single mothers like me add another tool to their tool box to help create and maintain mental, physical, and emotional health and stay connected to self.

This study aims to answer the question: what is my experience as a single mother? This question will be explored through the body based practice of authentic movement in a group setting. This question then leads to my second question: Can authentic movement, a body based practice used in DMT, support single mothers as they attempt to balance work and family? The findings of this study are presented in the form of a short choreographic performance film based on the journals that I wrote throughout the research process. There is also a written portion detailing my experience, my creative process, and my findings.

## **Literature Review**

### **Single Mothers**

The idea of the traditional family has evolved. The trend of single parent households headed by women began in the 1950s. Hill (2011) asserted that single mothers are faced with alarming obstacles. These obstacles include economic and social hardships that can affect how they raise their children. In the past 20 years, single motherhood has increased. The idea of marriage and couple cohabitation has also evolved since the 1960s. The percentage of married women decreased and cohabitating couples increased. Many children are born to cohabitating couples. A vast majority of these cohabitating couples break up by the time the child is 15. This leads to a drastic change in economic and social status among the parent left to raise the child alone. This economic and social decline leads to psychological distress in the form of depression (Hill, 2011).

### **Social Support, Stress, and Depression**

Cairney, Boyle, Offord, and Racine (2003) discussed the significant impact of a social network and life events on the mental health of single mothers. Compared to married women, single mothers are more likely to suffer an episode of depression in a 12 month period. Cairney et al. (2003) also reported that single mothers have lower levels of social support and suffer from stress caused by recent and past life events.

Single mother families have been on the rise since World War II. The road to single motherhood includes divorce, widowhood, separation, and having children out of wedlock (Cairney et al., 2003). This is an alarming trend, but the most important issue is the significant social and financial deficits that these single families face. It is these factors that lead to psychological distress and mental health issues for single mothers (Cairney et al. 2003).

Cairney et al. questioned the relationship between the stress of negative life events on the single and married mother family structure. Past studies have recognized the effects of stressful life events on the well-being of both single and married mothers. This thesis prepares to explore that relationship even further.

Cairney et al. (2003) also focused on social support. They noted that differences in social support may have an effect on the high rates of distress in single mothers. The married mother's central support comes from a husband or common law partner. The social network looks different for a single mother (Cairney et al., 2003). Single mothers' social networks are comprised of family and friends.

The impact of social support on psychological well-being may be different for single mothers as compared to married mothers. For example, the absence of a supportive network may produce more psychological distress for single mothers than for their married counterparts, who at least benefit from the social and financial support of a partner (Cairney et al., 2003, p. 443).

As sole caregivers, single mothers may experience a decrease in contact with friends and participation in social events. On a more positive note, family members tend to offer support to lone mothers in the absence of support from a spouse or partner. More contact with family members could lead to lower level of depression (Cairney et al., 2003).

Cairney et al. (2003) examined and identified various stress components and their relationship between depression and single mothers. They found that both past and recent life events have an impact on depression levels in single and married mothers (Cairney et al., 2003). Specifically, they measured the effects childhood trauma, chronic strains, and life events all at once as it relates to depression levels in single and married mothers.

In addition, the study uses three different measures to examine social support, which had not been done in previous studies. Those measures were: perceived social support, actual social involvement, and average frequency of social contact (Cairney et al., 2003). The result of the study indicated a relationship between stress and depression in single mothers. Single mothers interviewed for this study reported more chronic stress, life events, and childhood trauma. The study reinforced the results of other studies that focused on a wide range of stressors. Single mothers have multiple stressors that stem from different areas and events (Cairney et al., 2003).

In contrast to the social support findings in the Cairney et al. (2003) article, Nelson (2005) illuminated the significant impact social support can have on the psychological well-being of single mothers, especially in regards to depression. Nelson developed the concept of social economy. This concept is used as the framework for her study with 68 women in rural America (Nelson, 2005).

Compared to single mothers in urban areas, single mothers in rural areas have further to travel to meet their families' required needs. These needs include access to food, family, and friends. The rural population of single mothers creates a network of social support to survive (Nelson, 2005). This network includes relationship exchanges with men who can give rides or fix cars. Family and other single mothers make up the main pieces of the social network. Single mothers rely on other single mothers for social and moral support. This component of the network begins to turn into a community of need (Nelson, 2005). Mothers, who are unable to reciprocate after a helpful exchange and also try not to over-burden other single mothers, turn to family members for help (Nelson, 2005). The services provided by family is much appreciated but come with negative and positive implications. Family members can add the increased pressure of reciprocity or responsibility. Family members and friends can also be distracting by

encouraging single mothers to engage in activities such as partying and drinking. These circumstances lead to feelings of guilt and anxiety, which in turn affects the psychological well-being of the mother (Hawkins, 2010). Positive support from families takes the form of childcare, transportation, food and shelter. Loose connections are also a part of a single mother's social network. According to Hawkins (2010), these connections included service providers, landlords and teachers. Single mothers can build perceived relationships with these loose connections that help to increase their positive perception of social support.

Cairney et al. (2003) and Nelson (2005) examined stress and social support from different angles. The research strongly suggested that there is a relationship between these two concepts and the psychological well-being of single mothers. A third concept, income and employment, was briefly touched upon by Cairney et al. Although the research findings around income were less significant in their study, Cairney et al. (2003) stated, "Previous research had found poverty or financial hardship to be the principal mediating factor in the relationship between lone-parenting status and psychological well-being" (p. 447). According to Belle and Doucet (2003), poverty is one of the most prevalent factors in depression. Low income mothers with young children commonly display high levels of depressive symptoms.

Similarly, Samuels-Dennis (2006) examined the relationship between employment, stressful life, and depression in single mothers. Samuels-Dennis stated, "Single mothers receiving social assistance (SA) are at a particularly high risk for psychological distress because of established relationship between mental illness and family structure, poverty and life adversities" (p. 62). This helps to support the research that suggests being a single parent, in itself, is not a risk factor for poor health. Rather, a mother's employment status, educational

status, income, etc. can make her vulnerable to stressors and strains that may lead to developing depressive symptoms (Samuels-Dennis, 2006).

Samuels-Dennis (2006) highlighted the social programs available to mothers to prevent troubled pregnancies and increase healthy parenting skills. At the time of this study, Samuel-Dennis (2006) reported that few studies had focused on employment as it relates to depression in single mothers. The knowledge gained from such research can inform the creation of prevention programs and interventions (Samuels-Dennis, 2006).

In previous articles examined in this literature review, stressors were contributing factors in psychological distress. Samuel-Dennis (2006) also examined the effects of stressors through the stress process model. This model breaks stress up into three different categories. Those categories include: stressors, stress moderators, and stress outcomes. The use of this tested stress theoretical framework sets the Samuel-Dennis study apart from previous studies examined in this literature review.

Samuels-Dennis (2006) also hypothesized that SA recipients will report higher-level stressful events than single mothers with jobs. SA recipients will display greater depressive symptoms than their working counterparts, and employment status and stressful events combined will create depression among single mothers (Samuels-Dennis, 2006).

After surveying 96 SA recipients, the results of the study provided strong support for the first part of the hypothesis. The financial strain was so great among SA recipients that significant life stressors such as difficulty paying rent and threats of evictions were common (Samuels-Dennis, 2006). As predicted, SA recipients experience higher levels of depressive symptoms than employed mothers. Sixty-six point seven percent of SA mothers reported depressive symptoms compared to 14.6% of employed mothers. These mothers who receive SA

experienced depression at 11 times the rate of the general Canadian population (Samuels-Dennis, 2006).

In addition to the study's findings, Samuel-Dennis (2006) brought attention to the social-selection hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that mental illness keeps single mothers from obtaining or keeping a job (Samuels-Dennis, 2006). The origin of the mental illness could be traced back to childhood and this could lead to lower economic status in adulthood (Samuels-Dennis, 2006).

This study was very comprehensive. As in previous studies outlined in this review, this research adds its piece to the puzzle. Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, and Glassman (2000) article examined the relationship between employment, depression, and parenting. They investigated many of the same variables (financial strain, social support, etc.) as in previous studies. However, Jackson et al. examined the education of the mother along with parenting outcomes. Sparked by the Welfare Act of 1996, which put a time limit on cash assistance, the study focused on African American former welfare recipients. This was the first research of its kind, because previous studies specifically targeted those mothers who were currently a part of the welfare system (Jackson et al. 2000).

Jackson et al. (2000) predicted that low-wage jobs and financial strain would affect preschool children indirectly through the psychological well-being and parenting behaviors of their mothers. Jackson et al. (2000) stated, "Our expectation with regard to depressive symptoms—that is, that higher levels would be related directly to the quality of parenting and thereby to children's development—are informed by studies that have found that maternal depression is associated with diminished nurturance toward children and less adequate parenting." Just as in previous research, this article addressed the importance of social support.



The authors referred to it as instrumental support (Jackson et al., 2000). Those mothers who receive high levels of social support are more nurturing toward their children. This social network can help to reduce financial strain as well (Jackson et al., 2000).

As a result of testing 188 mothers and their children, Jackson et al.'s hypotheses and expectations were supported. Education and financial earnings were linked to financial strain. Financial strain led to depressive symptoms. These depressive symptoms can, in turn, lead to poor parenting (Jackson et al., 2000).

### **Economic Support and Parenting**

In reviewing the literature, I have found that the employment aspect of single motherhood centers around welfare recipients and the negative impact of poverty, low income wages, and government support. This instrumental support in the form of employment has a significant impact on the well-being of single mothers, which can subsequently affect parenting skills and family structure. According to Gorlick (1988), financial difficulties become a social as well as an economic issue. This can potentially have an effect on relationships formed inside and outside the family structure. The level and type of financial support a single mother seeks and receives can affect her self-esteem and shape her perception of satisfaction with her single parent status. Those mothers who applied for government assistance displayed less self-confidence as opposed to those who looked for employment. This perceived level of confidence can inform the parenting process and style of the lone mother (Gorlick, 1988).

Woody and Woody (2007) examined the relationship between social support and parenting in regards to single African American mother and reported that African American families traditionally experience high levels of social support. This rich tradition of social support gives low income single African American mothers the space to adapt to the physical,

emotional, and mental struggles of single motherhood. The ability to adapt can greatly inform the parenting process. Support can take the form of housing assistance and childcare. Sympathy and encouragement from family and friends provide much-needed emotional support, as well (Woody & Woody, 2007).

### **Treatment and Interventions**

Each research study surrounding single mothers builds upon and supports the aforementioned studies before it. Much of the research about single mothers has focused on the psychological implications of chronic stress and lack of social support and depression. It is also important to consider the research based around treatment and interventions to help single mothers who have depression. According to a nationwide study conducted by the UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health, more than 65% of depressed women do not receive proper treatment (Jerving, 2009). In many cases, social stigma and lack of insurance interfered with mothers' access to treatment. Mothers who received government health insurance were three times as likely to receive proper mental health treatment (Jerving, 2009). Single mothers experience financial strains and having mental health treatment paid for through government insurance helped to encourage lone mothers to engage in treatment.

Peden, Rayens, and Hall (2005) noted that depression is the most preventable form of mental illness. Their study assessed a cognitive-behavioral intervention program and its effect on preventing depression in at-risk low income single mothers. (Peden et al., 2005). The authors' research supported many of the same variables that cause depression in single mothers already discussed in previous articles in this review. However, their research focused on negative thinking. Negative thinking about self, the world, and the future can lead to a decline in psychological health in the form of depression of single mothers (Atkins, 2010).

Peden et al. (2005) combined thought stopping techniques with affirmations and positive self-talk as a way to control negative thoughts and decrease depressive symptoms. A unique component of this prevention plan is the user-friendly structure and portability. The method is easy to follow, and the program can be facilitated in any community-based setting (Peden et al., 2005). The group aspect of this program became a key component, as well. The group provided the opportunity for single mothers to connect with other peers in similar situations. These connections helped to reduce isolation and to increase opportunities for psychological change through meaningful engagement with others (Peden et al., 2005). The four-week program yielded positive results. The cognitive behavioral technique helped to reduce negative thinking among the female participants (Peden et al., 2005). The program's main goal was to stop depression before it starts. At the 12-month follow up mark, only one participant reported a diagnosis of depression (Peden et al., 2005).

Most of the literature in this review has focused on the cause of depression in single mothers. Peden et al. (2005) tested a prevention program that helps to fight depression. Their method is very clear and can be reproduced in any setting that provides treatment or social services for single mothers. This is extremely relevant material in the campaign to help support single mothers. Cognitive behavioral techniques are just one of the mainstream psychotherapy treatments used to help reduce depression symptoms in single mothers. There are other, less traditional or alternative therapies for treating depression in single mothers. For example, expressive therapies may be beneficial.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy and Single Mothers**

In my review of the literature, I found no DMT research specifically focused on single mothers. The previous research examined in this literature review has highlighted the impact

that chronic stressor have on the psychological well-being of single mothers. Therefore, I expanded my search to include depression and stress in relation to DMT.

In their very concise yet limited article, Ernst, Rand, and Stevenson (1998) outlined therapies that are categorized as complementary and alternative therapies (CATs). The purpose of this article was to review the research regarding the effectiveness of CATs on depression. Data was collected by random computerized searches of several databases such as Medline and CISCOM (Centralized Information Service for Complementary Medicine). Articles and information were also given by other colleagues and discussions were held to clarify any discrepancies in data or results. As a result of the randomized search, Ernst et al. (1998) list relaxation, herbal remedies, and exercise as the most widely used CATs. DMT was also featured in their study. They provided brief description DMT and cited two case studies. Ernst et al. (1998) stated, “A dance therapist aims to involve patients through encouragement to express themselves in movement and therefore enhance well-being” (Ernst et al., 1998, p. 1029). In spite of Ernst et al.’s (1998) acknowledgement of DMT and its use in depression treatment, my research yielded very little literature on DMT in relationship to depression.

In her talk given at the Marion Chace Foundation Lecture, Dr. Penny Lewis (2003) spoke to the power of movement and the therapeutic value of expressive movement in support of decreasing stress.

Documented research has identified that movement decreases stress and helps prevent some diseases including coronary heart disease, osteoporosis, arthritis hypertension, vestibular dysfunction, diabetes as well as other diseases such as aging and depression. Active body movement influences the production endorphins, the body’s natural mood elevator. (Lewis, 2003, p. 35)

In her master's thesis, Columbia College graduate Swarth (2009) studied stress in the work place through the lens of DMT (Swarth, 2009). The causes of stress in the workplace are similar to those risk factors found in single mothers. These factors included life events and level of social support (Carney et al. 2003; Swarth, 2009).

Occupational stress can be caused by life events, work and self, and available support systems (Maxon, 1999). Swarth's (2009) review of the literature found there was no specific method to treat stress in a work setting. Swarth created her own protocol that involved DMT techniques, Laban Movement Analysis concepts, Jacobson's Relaxation Technique, and emotional self-awareness. Participants in her study reported a greater awareness of their bodies. Swarth's method may be effective with single mothers to help them cope and reduce the effects of chronic stressors.

At the 2004 International Research Colloquium on Dance/Movement Therapy, dance movement therapist Iris Brauning presented the results of a study about DMT, its use as a method of stress management, and its impact on quality of life (Koch & Brauning, 2005). The results of her randomized study found that DMT:

- Improved quality of life with several short-term and long-term effects and that DMT was more effective than non-treatment in all dimensions
- Reduced stress with several short and long-term effects. Again DMT was more effective than non-treatment
- Improved stress management strategies, by reducing negative strategies
- Acted as an effective treatment modality with short and long-term effects on psychological stress reduction.

The study further suggests that specific DMT interventions are suitable, whereas others are not, for improving quality of life, reducing stress, and minimizing psychopathological symptoms (as cited in Koch & Brauninger, 2005). Both Swarth (2009) and Koch and Brauninger (2005) strongly suggested that DMT has a positive impact on reducing stress. Stress has a major effect on the psychological well-being of single mothers and DMT could be a tool for stress reduction.

### **Authentic Movement and Single Mothers**

Mary Whitehouse, a DMT pioneer, developed the body based practice of authentic movement. This practice has its roots in DMT and is often used as a DMT intervention, although it also stands alone as its own discipline (Mason, 2009). Whitehouse combined DMT with Jungian psychotherapy principles to create an improvisational expressive movement practice which involved exploring self and other. This practice involves two parts, the mover and the witness (Mason, 2009).

The role of the mover focuses on interpersonal and intrapersonal development. The mover explores the outer witness through the desire to be seen and validated by others. Adler (2002) wrote,

Because we weren't seen enough or seen with enough acceptance or seen with enough love or seen with enough consciousness we arrive into adulthood with the longing to be seen by another. There is a felt need, so profound in the West, to be seen as one is, doing what one is doing. Sometimes we arrive because we are ready to deepen our capacity to love, to forgive, to accept ourselves and others. These yearnings are what bring a mover into the presence of a witness. (p. 19)

The mover also works to mold the inner witness. This becomes a process of connecting the inner self through the body. The mover builds a relationship with her moving body to cultivate her presence and conscious awareness of self. Adler (2002) stated,

The inner witness learns to honor that which the body directly knows. The body is our sensation, our felt emotion. The body is our experience of ourselves, our temple in which the light of our spirit burns. Unconscious worlds, luminous worlds, worlds with high order and worlds with no apparent order can become known within the body because of the body. (p. 20)

The mover follows the fluctuation of the intra and interpersonal nature of this movement practice. This structure allows the mover to independently discover the movement and in the presence of the witness brings what is in the subconscious into consciousness (Adler, 2002).

The witness observes and creates a safe physical container for the mover to explore. The witness is not only engaged in the mover's process, the witness also tracks her own inner response to the mover's experience. This fluctuation of internal and external awareness creates an environment for the witness to learn from and be supportive of the mover. The supportive, compassionate, non-judgmental nature of the witness extends into helping the mover process the movement dialogue. This quiet reflection process can take the form of art making or verbal narratives. The witness offers her own inner response to the movement thus creating a sense of empathy and support for the mover (Mason, 2009).

Specific research based on single mothers and authentic movement does not exist. In this study, I hoped to address this gap in the literature. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how this movement based practice can play a role in the supporting the single mother. Through the

findings of my study, I aimed to contribute to and extend the literature by exploring how movement based interventions can have a positive effect on the lives of single mothers.

The literature examined, acknowledged, and substantiated the struggles that single mothers face. Each study creates an increasingly clear picture of the risk factors that threaten the psychological well-being of lone mothers. Those risk factors include chronic stress, lack of social support, and economic status. DMT may help single mothers learn how to recuperate through connecting to their bodies. DMT in a group setting may create opportunities for meaningful social engagement with others.

This thesis contributed to the literature by focusing on body based interventions to help support single mothers. I explored my own experience by answering the question: what is my experience as a single mother? I used the body based practice of authentic movement to answer this question and deepen my own awareness using a tool that I intend to use in my work as a dance/movement therapist. Furthermore, examining my own experience in authentic movement helped to answer my second question: how can authentic movement help to support single mothers?



## **Methods**

The literature has demonstrated the need for support among single mothers. This support takes on different forms and can prove to be invaluable to the lone mother who receives it. This qualitative study examined my own experience of single motherhood and my own need for support. I used the qualitative methods of heuristic methodology to internalize my experience on a body level. Using the creative process, I then used the methodology of artistic inquiry to create an external representation of my findings.

### **Heuristic Methodology**

The research of one's personal experience is known as heuristic research. Moustakas (1990) described the heuristic research process as a scientific method of deep self-inquiry into a human experience. In this case, the human experience was my journey as a single mother. A heuristic study requires a person to submerge themselves in the phenomena to find the deep currents of emotions and value that lies beneath (Moustakas, 1990).

In order to submerge myself in heuristic research, I asked the initial research question: What is my experience as a single mother? I explored this through the body based practice of authentic movement. Next I asked the question: How can authentic movement, a body based practice used in DMT, support the single mother? As the literature suggests, everyday stressors can have an effect on the psychological health of lone mothers. I wanted to explore authentic movement as a healthy mind-body practice to use as a coping strategy for stress. The group component of this study addressed the isolation that I experienced as a single mom. The group provided a supportive space both verbally and non-verbally level. I explored these research questions with my own self-dialogue.

This self-dialogue can take the form of interviews, art work, journaling, etc. The researcher then goes through a process of immersion to analyze the data (Moustakas, 1990). For the purposes of this study, my self-dialogue took the form of journal writing. This inner dialogue illuminated my mind-body experience by keeping me grounded and connected to the present moment.

### **Artistic Inquiry**

In addition to heuristic methodology, I incorporated artistic inquiry into my thesis. Artistic inquiry uses artistic forms of expression to gather, analyze, and present data and results through the creative process (Hervey, 2000). I took the journals generated from my authentic movement sessions—which were of a heuristic nature—and analyzed them, broke them down, and used my own creative process to piece the experience back together in the form of a performance film that included movement, music, and poetry spoke to the dancer and artist inside of me. Hervey (2000) described this form as an aesthetic response to the collected data. It is within the process of turning my journals into movement that the fluctuation of mind and body experience extended into a deeper richer meaning for me.

### **Participants**

I was the only participant in this study. I am a 35-year-old African American woman. I attended five authentic movement groups offered twice a month at a yoga studio in Evanston, Illinois. Each group varied in number of group members. For the purposes of this study, I did not include the group members' names as I collected my data. Throughout this paper, I will refer to the other group members who I came in contact with as movers. Although the verbal and non-verbal contact with other movers in the group shaped my experience, the intent of this study was to focus on my experience only.

## **Procedure**

Over the course of five months I attended five authentic movement workshops. The workshops were offered twice a month and, like many single mothers, several variables factored into what workshops I could participate in. One variable was the affordability of childcare during the time I would be at a workshop. The health of my children also played a role; I could not attend one workshop due to needing to be home with my sick daughter. These same variables may limit other single mothers who are interested in group authentic movement sessions or other group-based treatments.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection took the form of journal writing throughout each 3-hour authentic movement session. I wrote a total of five entries, each containing in three parts. The first part documents my initial thoughts and feelings as I entered the yoga studio and movement space, the second part reflects upon my experience of moving in the session, and the last part documented how I felt after the session.

## **Authentic Movement Session**

Each workshop maintained the same structure. The sessions began with a warm-up. Movers were encouraged to individually warm-up their bodies in preparation for the movement session. I took this time to journal my thoughts feelings and body sensations before I began to stretch my body. A candle was then placed in the middle of the room and the movers created a circle around the fire. This marked the beginning of the body meditation section. The circle provided a safe container for movers to express their thoughts and feelings, and the candle acted as the focal point. Movers were asked to notice any feelings and bodily sensations that were present. Movers then had the choice to speak about their intentions for the movement session.

This could take the form of a verbal expression or non-verbal movement or gesture. My responses to this section of the session fluctuated. Sometimes words could not express my thoughts and intentions for the session. There were moments when I felt the need to express myself through a movement gestures. In each instance, I felt supported by the other movers. This was evident in their facial affect and direct eye contact. As I listened to others speak their intentions, I offered my non-verbal gesture of support and there were times when another movers' intentions aligned with my own. Through these connections, I felt validated. Even though we did not know the details of each other's stories, we shared common issues. I was not alone.

Collaborating together, the group decided the structure of the session. Safety guidelines around touch and sound were established or reaffirmed. Movers were reminded to use verbal or non-verbal cues to signal to another mover if they did not want to be touched. We were instructed that any sounds we make should start off soft and build gradually, because strong staccato sounds could startle other movers. Movement should be experienced with the eyes closed or at soft focus when moving through the space. With safety guidelines in place, movers were then able to confirm their role in the session. Group members could choose to be a mover or witness.

I chose to be a mover in each of my sessions. I felt that I needed the consistency of being the mover in order to explore my experience for the purpose of this study. I stated this intention while standing in the circle and making eye contact with each individual in the group. The facilitator assumed the witness role for the entirety of the session. The space was then cleared as we moved to the outer edges of the room. We were encouraged to observe the space then move into it when we were ready. This moment was also marked with the sound of a bell.

The 40-minute movement dialogue began. During this dialogue, movers followed their internal impulses, feelings, and bodily sensations. They shifted from conscious thought to the subconscious mind. Movement was driven by the inner self and, therefore, was considered authentic. Movers closed their eyes to help promote internal awareness. It was during this section of the authentic movement groups that I was able to explore internal thought and body awareness. In the beginning, shutting down the running tape of my conscious mind was a challenge. Mundane thoughts surfaced, and I found it difficult to remain in the present moment. With each session I became more in touch with my inner self, and I found myself connected to the others movers. More details about my response to this are included in the results and conclusion chapters of this thesis. After 40 minutes, the witness prompted the movers to slowly bring their movement to a close and rang the bell to signify the end of the movement dialogue.

The movers were then given an opportunity to journal and/or draw about their experience. The second stage of my journal writing took place during this period. I transferred my movement experience into words. Processing the experience through my journal added an extra layer of depth to the experience, particularly because the experience was still fresh and in my body. Recalling significant moments on paper created space for more creative thought and theme development. I would often hear songs in my head that coincided with my movement experience.

After journaling, everyone returned to the circle for verbal reflection. Movers chose to speak about a part of their movement story or about the journey as a whole. As the group members talked about our experiences, we spoke in the present tense. This allowed us to reconnect to the thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations we felt in specific movement moments

from that session. When movers were ready to speak, they touched the earth and began. Touching the earth also marked the end of a mover's narrative.

There were moments when I was apprehensive to share my experiences. At times, I wondered about judgment from the other movers. That worry dissipated in response to their reactions to my story. They gave me non-verbal responses such as head nods, smiles, and eye contact. Sometimes, I received verbal responses in the form of laughter depending on the comedic nature of the narrative. The layer of support continued with the next segment called "echoes."

After movers verbally processed their movement experiences, they had the option of accepting echoes from the group. When sharing echoes, group members repeated parts of the mover's narrative that spoke to or resonated within them in some way. This effective listening process further validated my experience. I felt seen and heard, and it also illuminated moments of my experience that I had forgotten about. The group processing continued with the speaking witness.

Susan, the group facilitator, then shifted from the witness role to the speaking witness. Here you are also given the option to hear witnessing. I always accepted witnessing, wherein Susan described her own thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as she witnessed my movement. Susan's interpretive intuition provided another layer of validation and even illuminated meaning that lay beneath the movement. As Susan shared her verbal interpretation of her inner witness to my movement experience, I was able to further process my experience and increased self-awareness. There were moments when her witnessing experience aligned with my own. This made me feel that, although I was moving by myself, I was not alone because she shared the experience with me.

When all movers had spoken their “golden nugget,” as Susan liked to call it, and received echoes from the other group members and witnessing from Susan, we moved into moving witnessing. This section allowed movers to speak their responses to other mover’s experiences. Listening to others’ responses and perspective again deepened the moments. I saw how other movers’ related to my experience, and I offered my responses to them in turn. This interaction created and strengthened group cohesion. As I said previously, even if you did not know the details of a mover’s story, the mover/witness structure allowed you to support and relate to one another both cognitively and kinesthetically.

The session would draw to a close as the candle became the center of the circle again. The movers were asked to meditate on a final thought. Once everyone had a thought, indicated by everyone raising their hands, we all blew out the candle together. This ending ritual punctuated the session, and my final thought carried me into the week with a powerful thought that supported and anchored me. The third stage of my journal process took place at this time. I reflected on my response to the witness, echoes, and moving witness section of the session. Again, I noted body felt sensations, thoughts, and feelings. I also marked any physical, emotional, and mental shifts that occurred during the authentic movement session.

### **Data Analysis**

With my data collection complete, I began to analyze each journal entry. As I reflected on the experience through my journals, I began to pull out themes and forms of symbolism present in the text. Although these themes were strongly rooted in my experience in that moment, they also represented my single motherhood as a whole. Each journal entry was unique, but a common theme threaded them together. As I analyzed my data, I then began to turn the written dialogue, themes, and symbolism into movement.

I approached this movement-making stage using my personal creative process. My process around creating movement has always involved music. In these instances, I chose pieces of music that embodied the themes of each journal entry. This extra layer of music helped to heighten the emotions connected to the written words and helped me to further kinesthetically embody each theme. The movement session began with a five minute silent reflection on the journal entry. This allowed me to focus my mind and center myself on the themes represented. I observed my bodily sensations and my thoughts before the movement improvisation. After this short meditation, I improvised a movement sequence accompanied by the music that I chose for the journal entry. I repeated this process for each journal entry, with one of journal entries being broken up in two parts. This was documented by video using a flip camera that I set up myself.

I then analyzed each video for emerging movement qualities and movement themes. I also documented how I was felt on a body level during each movement period. I used these movement themes and qualities to set specific choreography for each journal entry. In the end, I had six set pieces of choreography. Each piece became a reflection of the journal entries. Illuminating moments of creativity surfaced as I plunged into the words, movements, and sounds. These moments highlighted significant moments of understanding that helped me to internalize my experience. The artistic response began to take form as creative ideas formed and the mental picture of my final performance video began to assemble.

My final artistic response to my research experience has evolved over time. I first wanted to analyze, highlight themes, and use those themes to create a poem. As an adolescent, I loved to write poems about life as I knew it. As I got older, I wrote less and less until that form of written expression was no longer present in my life. My experience taking the shape of poem



would take me back to my passion for the written word. But as I went deeper into this layered experience, I began to feel that the experience required an equally layered artistic response.

In addition to the written expression of poetry, I incorporated movement expression in the form of dance, audio expression in the form of music, and visual expression in the form of using city landmarks that have been prominent fixtures on my journey as mother and student. These images later served as the backdrops of the film to showcase the poems, music, and movement. This multimedia artistic response represented the fact that my journey has layered dimensions. The themes that have emerged speak to that truth. I then thought to bring these expressions together in the form of a short performance film.

I began to search for videographers who could help me take these three forms of expression and help me translate my work to video and make my vision a reality. I took referrals from friends and searched the website [www.craigslist.com](http://www.craigslist.com). The latter turned out to be the best. I found a production company on Craig's List that fit my artistic vision. I researched their work by watching videos on their website and Facebook page. I set up a meeting with one of their videographers to discuss my ideas.

I wanted to work with a videographer who could understand my vision and also feel confident enough to share his own artistic ideas. The instant the meeting began I sensed his enthusiasm for my project. This was evident in his exuberant affect and the shifts in his body position as we talked about the film. I walked away from the meeting feeling like I selected the right videographer. We communicated through emails and set up a specific schedule. We would shoot the film over the course of two days and he took a week to edit the film. On July 6, 2012 we began the first day of shooting. This was the hottest day of a heat wave in Chicago, and most of the shots took place outside. Due to another commitment, the videographer asked if we could

shoot everything in one day instead of two. He offered a monetary discount as an incentive. I gladly agreed and we started shooting at ten in the morning and finished at eight that night. It became a full day of shooting in what ended up being the hottest day of the summer.

## **Results**

The single mother's journey is layered with obstacles, triumphs, needs, and struggles. The literature review documented and supported the complex experience of lone mothers. What is my experience as a single mother? I explored this question through the body based practice of authentic movement. My personal juggle with being head of the household, caregiver, and member of the workforce paralleled the journeys of the mothers whom I read about in the literature. Their experiences of stress, isolation, and support resonated with me, and I wondered what tools might help me maintain psychological, physical, and spiritual, emotional health as I navigated these struggles inherent within my varied roles. Can authentic movement, a body based practice used in DMT, help support the single mother as she attempts to balance work and family? The heuristic journey I took for this soul searching research, led me to the artistic result for this question. The artistic answer evolved into the form of a performance film. The film is structured around the themes and symbolism pulled from the journal responses written throughout the research process. Just as a single mother's journey is layered, my artistic response to the research data became a layered visual response of dance, spoken word, and music. In the methods section, I gave a broad overview of my research process. The results section contains specific details of my experience, feelings, thoughts, and bodily reactions based on each section of the performance film. I have titled each segment of the film and have broken down the segments into authentic movement experience, journal analysis, improvisation exploration, and choreography and final movement results. The film is also included as a part of the results section.

### **Section One of Film: Stand Here**

**Authentic movement experience.** The first section of the film is based on my response to my first authentic movement group. Previous experiences with authentic movement as part of the DMT courses at Columbia College Chicago gave me some idea of what to expect. This would be my first time meeting with Susan Cahill, my therapist, and other movers. I arrived at the yoga studio and what I came to call “the yoga smell” hit me. I was greeted by Susan and introduced to other movers as they arrived. I was pleasantly surprised when I recognized one of them. The warm and inviting verbal and non-verbal responses of the movers made me feel welcomed in the space.

Throughout the warm-up, I observed the others as they engaged in their own warm-up process. Susan gathered us together to begin the check-in. I began to feel a little nervous. This was evident in an increase of my heart rate and tension in my upper body as I sat in the circle. I engaged in a fluctuation of active listening and internal dialogue of what I was going to say when it became my turn. I pressed my hands into the earth to signify my readiness to share. Instead of giving a verbal response to how I was feeling, I offered a movement response. Although I was starting to feel connected to the group, a movement response in that moment felt emotionally safe. I was quickly validated by the non-verbal responses of head nods, eye contact, and smiles by the other movers.

Susan gave an explanation of each step as we moved through the session. We came to the 40-minute movement dialogue and each member found their places in the room. Susan rang a bell to mark the start of the forty minutes. As I later wrote in my journal, I “felt the urge to travel” as the session began. I moved across the floor with arms reaching out into space and then brought my arms back into my chest. The movement stopped when I connected with a wooden support beam. I began to hug the beam, feeling that “it was a sense of comfort to have this

support beam to cling to.” I released into the beam and gave it all of my weight. The urge to move began to resurface. My mind wanted me to stand still and continue connecting to the beam, but my body was urging me to keep moving. “My days are filled with keeping things moving,” and the urge to keep moving manifested during the session. I followed the urge to move and traveled for most of the session. I continually fluctuated between being in the present moment and feeling conscious thoughts pulling my awareness towards my daily mental check lists and wondering how my children were doing with the sitter.

Moving into the verbal reflection and witnessing section, the same nervous feelings that surfaced during the check-in returned. I actively listened to movers as they shared pieces of their movement experience and offered verbal echoes of their experience that resonated with me. I touched the earth when I felt ready to share. I chose to process my connection with the support beam. As I spoke of the movement experience in the present tense, the body felt sense of giving my weight to this beam resurfaced. I welcomed echoes from the movers and heard the reflection of my words repeated with kindness and non-judgment. I felt seen and validated with each echo. I accepted witnessing of this support beam moment from Susan. Susan sensed that I was hugging my beloved as I held onto the beam. I had an instant body felt reaction to Susan’s response. I started to nod my head in agreement with her response and the tears began to flow. My connectedness to this beam during this session signified the lack of support from a partner or significant other in my life. In that moment of illumination, the non-verbal empathetic gestures of the other movers were supportive and validating.

The end of the session was marked by the movers blowing out the candle, the circle’s focal point. In this shared space and shared experience, I felt connected to each mover. I thought to myself “Oh, the power of movement.” The movers began to gather their belongings

and talk amongst themselves. I engaged in one on one conversation with other movers and sensed my presence in the circle today was appreciated.

**Journal analysis.** When I analyzed this journal entry, support—specifically in the form of a significant other—stood out as the main theme. Another underlying theme was recuperation. I wanted to give the beam all of my weight because I was tired. I felt mentally and physically exhausted, but I had to keep moving in order to keep my household running. The focal point of this movement experience was having a partner to share the load and to recuperate with.

As I continued to reflect on this journal entry, I was reminded of nights when I would put the kids to bed and I would be all alone. There were nights when I would become very anxious. I would find it difficult to sit alone with myself. I would have thoughts of walking out the door and never stopping. In my isolation, I wanted and felt the need to connect with someone else. These nights, I danced in my living room or drew helped to release that anxiety. The image of me in my living room longing for a partner to connect to became the setting for the first section of the film.

**Improvisation exploration.** The improvisation session for this journal entry began with a five minute silent reflection, and the same thoughts and feelings discussed in the previous paragraphs emerged. I selected a piece of music that matched the sense of heaviness and longing that I felt on those nights. During the first moments of the movement, I was very much in my head. I said to myself, “How is this going to look, technique-wise?” and “How long will I be motivated to move?” These thoughts and questions began to fade as I became more present in the moment. The song was 6 hours and 27 minutes in length and I moved for the entire song. Movement themes included arms reaching out to explore the space in front of me and the space

on my sides, then bringing my arms back into me, walking in circles, and rocking. There was tension in my upper body, where most of the movement originated. This tension was accompanied by a shallow connection to my breath.

**Choreography and final movement results.** I pieced together the choreography and included the movement themes generated from my improvisation session. My living room was chosen as the setting for this performance section and I incorporated the support beam in the front of my steps. This beam became a metaphor for not only the lack of support from a significant other; it also represented the other positive forms of support that were present in abundance in my life. The opening movement finds me clinging to this beam. In life, I have embraced the support that I have received from others with love and gratitude.

### **Section Two of Film: My Blanket Covers Me**

**Authentic movement experience.** My fifth and final authentic movement session for the purposes of this thesis became one of my most transformative sessions. During this session, I experienced a clear mental, physical, and emotional shift. I approached this session “feeling stuck and frustrated.” I also felt anxiety about money and wondered if I could I really afford to be paying for this session and a sitter. This stuck feeling tangled with these negative emotions manifested in my body as tension in my head, chest, and shoulders. The moment that I walked into the yoga studio and smelled that “yoga smell,” I instantly began to relax. It was as if my body was saying, “I know what that smell means! It means it’s time to let go!” I was happy to be there. It was my time to “re-emerge, re-boot, and release.”

I wrapped myself in a blanket during the warm-up. “I felt covered in comfort and security” under the blanket, where I observed the deep connection to my breath. I thought to myself, “I feel like I don’t breathe until I come here.” I was relaxed and in a somewhat playful

mood. I wondered, “Why can’t I carve out this space for myself at home?” This thought ran through my mind as I rolled and stretched with the blanket. This playful state also brought about thoughts of my creative process. This was in direct connection to my thesis process.

I presented my feelings and thoughts about my creative process during check-in, which were received with supportive gestures by the movers in the circle. I was ready to go inward to explore these thoughts and feelings. The questions “What is my creative process?” and “Do I like my creative process?” stood out in my mind. Susan rang the bell to mark the beginning of the forty minute movement dialogue and I was ready to explore.

The blanket became my fort, and the rolling, stretching, and rocking actions carried over from the warm-up. The deep connection to my breath continued as oxygen filled my chest, stomach, limbs and digits. I was energized as I engaged in this fluid motion under the blanket on the floor. Images of Martha Graham emerged. I thought to myself, “I admire those who create and share with the world their hearts and souls through whatever modality they choose, fearless.”

I left this session feeling energized and optimistic about moving forward creatively with my thesis process. The structure of the authentic movement session and the circle of movers created a safe container for the exploration of my playful creative side. I came into to the session being filled with tension created by my single motherhood stressors and walked away feeling relaxed and energized.

**Journal analysis.** Recuperation again emerged as a salient theme when I began to reflect upon this session and analyze the journal entry. Daily stressors had blocked my flow on a body/mind level. This caused the feelings of being stuck. The session created a space for me to connect to my breath and release. This relaxed state allowed me to explore my creative process through movement.



**Improvisation exploration.** Moving into the improvisation session to create movement I used a blanket to symbolize comfort and security. The blanket also represented one of the caregiver's never-ending tasks: laundry. Images of my children's blankets and school uniforms hanging on a clothesline surfaced. Movement during the session included wrapping the blanket around my body, and playful manipulation of the fabric. The blanket I used for my improvising session was a quilt that my grandmother made for me when I was a little girl. As I moved, I thought of her and I thought of the love that she put into making this quilt. It warmed my heart and created a sense of nostalgia that manifested in my body as a warm smile while I moved.

**Choreography and final movement results.** The choreography for this section reflected the emerging movement qualities I created in the improvisation session. These qualities included wrapping the blanket around my body and playful manipulation of the blanket. My movements were infused with the emotional qualities of love and security as I thought about the lengths I go to as a mother to make my own children feel secure. I also thought about how secure I feel with my support system that includes family, friends, and now the movers in the authentic movement circle. Visually, I chose the backyard of my apartment building to film this segment. The clothesline with my children's uniforms and blankets represented this mother's job doing the laundry and caring for my children.

### **Section Three of the Film: I Am the Keeper of the Gate**

**Authentic movement experience.** "I ran here today." I wrote these words in response to my eagerness to attend this movement session. The sessions were beginning to become my escape. My daily life was dictated by external events and circumstances: art projects, choir rehearsals, graduate school papers, dirty dishes, etc. With each authentic movement

session, I got better at bringing my focus inward and making this a restorative process. It became a restoration of my mind, body, and spirit.

Other movers' words resonated with me during the check-in. These words were "heavy" and "escape". This connection through words and feelings with other movers, again, made me feel like I was not alone. An image of me as a warrior woman or goddess with a staff surfaced during my experience. This image represented my duty as a mother to watch over my children: "I protect, I nurture, and I provide." I take pride in being that "warrior goddess" or "keeper of the gate," but the road of a lone warrior can get heavy. That heaviness or stress would affect my mental ability to process and work through issues. My body held a lot of physical tension, and my soul was running on empty. The session provided a few hours of space and time for me to lay down my external baggage by allowing me to connect with myself.

The 40 minute movement dialogue found me connected with the support beam again. I was standing and my mind urged me to melt to the ground, but my body resisted letting go. Eventually, my body released into the ground until I was lying face down on the floor. In this place, my mind and body became still and I became aware of my deep connection to my breath. "It was in this moment that I found the silence," I later wrote in my journal. I was able to relax and recharge in the silence that found me deeply connected to my breath.

**Journal analysis.** The powerful image of the warrior goddess and keeper of the gate stuck with me, and its symbolism became my focus as I analyzed this journal entry and reflected upon the experience of this session. My maternal instincts guide me in nurturing and protecting my children and, which was modeled for me by my own mother. I reflected on the pride I take in mothering. More and more, I began to understand that in order for me to mother in a positive way, I need to take care of myself. This means finding opportunities to recharge

psychologically, physically, and spiritually so that I can continue to carry my staff as “warrior mom.” The authentic movement sessions provided me with these rechargeable moments.

**Improvisation exploration.** The improvisation session incorporated the imagery of the warrior and the proud the mother. Movement included stiff vertical movement reminiscent of a soldier or warrior guarding a gate. This tension-filled movement released into a swinging flow of the upper body as I imagined interacting with my children. The lower body held steadfast in that warrior stance, but my movement did not travel through space; it was confined to one place.

**Choreography and final movement results.** I set the choreography for this section of the film using the movement qualities that emerged during the improvisation session. I imagined dancing in a space with a gate for the film, choosing the gate in front of my children’s school. The school represented an institution of support for my family through education, teacher support, and parent participation. This connection was further deepened by the song “Mother” by Antoine Dufur.

#### **Section Four of Film: Connection, Part One**

**Authentic movement experience.** My second authentic movement experience took place four months after my first session. Family and financial circumstances played a part in the gap between sessions. I decided to break this journal entry into two sections because it was layered with profound personal experiences. The first section, “Connection,” took place on the train as I traveled to the authentic movement session. On the train, our perceptions of personal space can be challenged. The nature of the train does not allow you to pick and choose who will occupy the space around you. On this day, I sat connected shoulder to shoulder with a man. “He was a stranger and I couldn’t even describe his face,” but I felt this pull to remain connected to him. This was not a pull of attraction or intimacy, but a need to be in relationship to another person. .

My personal space had been solely reserved for my children's use, I gave bottomless hugs and I was the human pillow.

**Journal analysis.** As I reflected on this part of the journal entry and the connection made with others on the train, I thought of how important the train has been in connecting me and my children to the city around us. The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) has played a major role in connecting my children and me to places we needed to be and places we wanted to go. I came to Chicago without a car. The extensive public transportation system allowed me to transport my kids and myself to and from school. Every morning there was a mad rush to get my daughter to her daycare, my son to his elementary school, and me to graduate school. The links that made all of this possible were the #22 Clark bus and the Bryn Mawr red line stop.

Public transportation also helped connect us to the wonderful events that this city has to offer. I feel very strongly about exposing my kids to different positive experiences and creating lasting family memories. One of our family's winter traditions has been to attend the opening night of "Zoo Lights" at the Lincoln Park Zoo. This tradition was made possible by using public transportation. The veins of this city are the network of transportation services provided by the CTA, which connects its inhabitants to the people, places, and events that enrich their lives. As a single mother, the system has been an integral part of keeping my family moving forward and connected to the city and those around us.

**Improvisation exploration.** The improvisation session was dominated by the images and body felt sensations of the early morning school drop offs that were aided by the CTA. These mornings were filled with direct fast paced walking and running to catch an incoming bus with kids and backpacks in hand. On these mornings, I felt tension throughout my body, and connecting to my breath helped to keep me mentally focused. The movement during this

improvisation session reflected this tension, as well as accelerating, direct movement. While moving, I focused on my breath as I took moments to pause and breathe. I also traveled forward and explored the space.

**Choreography and final movement results.** Again, I used movement qualities and specific movements from the improvisation to set the choreography for this section of the film. I primarily focused on the tension filled accelerated movement and breath connection. I chose the Bryn Mawr redline stop for the film's backdrop because it symbolized my connection to the city and to others. The music chosen, "Just Breathe" by Telepopmusik, added another dimension that deepened how I internalized my experience.

I had envisioned this dance taking place inside the lobby of the Bryn Mawr red line stop, but due to CTA policy, we needed permission to film inside the station. Instead, the videographer and I decided to shoot the dance outside in front of the station. At first, the thought of dancing on a busy populated street in the city of Chicago made me feel nervous. After some quick positive self-talk and deep breaths, I was ready. The music began, and I started to move. It was as if I was the only one occupying that sidewalk. Just as I had learned how to go inward to myself and my experience during the authentic movement sessions, I went to that place inside me while dancing on the street. I imagined Susan and other movers in the group as witnesses to my experience; the people on the street became witnesses to my story during the filming of this segment.

### **Section Five of Film: Connection, Part Two (She Extended Her Hand to Me)**

**Authentic movement experience.** The second part of this journal entry took place during the forty minute movement dialogue of the second authentic movement session. I was greeted with warm hugs and smiles by the other movers, welcoming me back to the circle after

my four month absence. This warm welcoming feeling continued as the session progressed to the check-in. I actively listened to each mover and experienced the same in return.

The 40-minute movement dialogue found me connected with the support beam once more as I desperately tried to stay present in the moment. I wrote, "I needed to be present in the moment, anchored to this present experience." I was spending my days on autopilot driven by what was going on outside of me. Days and weeks flew by, and I would wonder where the time went. Not only were my conscious thoughts pulling me away from the moment, but I was also distracted by a mover making verbal sounds that reminded me of my children. I was mentally transported back to my kitchen where I was being bombarded by the verbal demands, needs, and wants of my children. In response to this, I focused on my breath and felt drawn to the earth.

I felt the need to feel the ground and connect with the earth. I journaled, "When I felt myself or my thoughts drift, the ground was my anchor to bring me back." I lay on the floor sensing my skin against the earth. I thought, "I am a person and I can just be me." My focus was always on my children, but in this moment it was okay to focus on me. As I lay on the ground, I felt the hands of another mover on my arm. The instant connection to this mover made my inner self say, "Thank you." The touch was very gentle and supportive, and then the mover started to hum. The humming comforted me and further anchored me to the moment.

The mover released my arm; then I felt what I thought was another mover lay across my back. This mover gave me all their weight and I welcomed the connection. Bearing the weight of the mover made me feel as if I was supporting her and this allowed me to reciprocate the support I have received. The mover left my space and I gave thanks for that shared moment. Each contact with a mover helped to keep me present in the moment. We all began to share a

movement experience during verbal reflection and I chose to speak about these moments I shared with the mover.

One of the movers also spoke of her experience connecting with me, although in the moment we had not known each other's identities. She spoke of touching a mover and then lying across her to give this person all of her weight. She was testing her boundaries to see how far she could release into that mover. At this point, it was indirectly confirmed for the both of us who we had connected with. During the moving witness section, we were able to directly talk to one another about the experience and furthered the connection.

**Journal analysis.** Support became the theme of this journal entry. As I reflected on the experience of this session, I was reminded about all the ways I have been supported throughout my journey. I have been lifted and carried by the love of those around me. The right people seem to come into my life just when I need them. Each of these people extended out their hand to hold me up and move me forward. I was filled with joy and gratitude as I thought of my parents who believed in my ability to succeed in being a mother, my girlfriends who refused to let me sit and live in my sadness, my graduate school cohort that held me up as I took on the most challenging dual roles of being a mother and full time student, and the countless others who have indirectly supported my efforts. A tremendous amount of emotions that came to the surface, and tears began to flow while I reflected on this piece of my journal.

**Improvisation exploration.** The feelings of love and support carried over into my movement. In my mind, I could see images of hands, and my movement reflected this. The movement and the energy were centralized in my hands. My arms were wrapping around my upper body as if I was being hugged. My arms were rising and reaching as I sought to bring the support and love close to my heart. This improvisation proved to be my most emotional session.

**Choreography and final movement results.** I again used the specific movements and movement qualities present in the improvisation to set the choreography. Support emerged as a major theme, and hands symbolized all of those who have touched my journey. I wanted hands to be a part of the backdrop for this scene of the film. I did some research online and found a sculpture primarily made of hands called “Helping Hands” created by Louis Bougeois in honor of social reformer and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jane Adams. This sculpture is located in the Chicago Women’s Park and Garden. This Chicago Park District garden and park is specifically devoted to women and houses a beautiful sculpture that directly relates to my experience. I could not have asked for a more perfect setting. On the day of filming, I was overwhelmed with a sense of pride. The peaceful garden made me feel proud to be woman and honored to be a mother. Moving in this ideal setting helped me to internalize my experience of support on a deeper level.

### **Section Six of Film: It Wasn’t Sleep That I Needed, It Was The Silence**

**Authentic movement experience.** “This week has been one exhausting week. Stress has been my friend. It hitched a ride on two sick children.” I wrote this in response to both of my children being sick. My daughter had a neck infection that sent us to the emergency room twice. I was exhausted on all fronts: mentally, physically, and emotionally. “There is a sense of helplessness when your child is sick, loss of control” (L.M. Platt, personal communication, March 18, 2012). The doctor visits had helped to regulate me and give me a sense of relief. I was given the medication and tools that I needed to help my children feel better. “I felt confident in my pediatrician’s ability to help support me in keeping my children healthy.”

Leaving this stress behind, I ran to group. There, I was ready to redirect my focus inward to myself surrounded by movers who I have become connected to. As soon as I walked in the



door for the authentic movement session, I smelled “the yoga smell” my body said, “Ahhhhhh. Here is the moment of rest.” Susan put on music from the movie *Pina*, which it felt great to hear. Music is so much a part of my creative process and has helped in my self-care. I recall thinking that it would have been nice to have music playing during the session. During check-in there was a communal sense of gratitude for being together in the space.

As I moved in the beginning of the session, I felt the need to do recuperative stretchy movements, yawning periodically. I touched and rubbed my face and skin. Towards the middle of the session, I found my way to my beam, my support structure. I found a supportive shape with the beam on my back and my legs wrapped around it. Then I drifted into silence until I was brought back by a hit from another mover. This shifted me into sitting, but I still did not move. My head was in my hand as I focused on the inner silence. I thought, “It wasn’t the sleep I needed it was the silence.” I felt rested, but at the same time tired and not exactly rejuvenated. Within this time, I still felt the need to be in relationship with someone else. Susan spoke of finding an image of support during the check-in, and an image of hands leading me in a dance came to me. Touching someone or having another touch me was present in my mind. This made sense to me because I recuperate well with others. I needed the inner as well as the outer support that day.

**Journal analysis.** “It wasn’t the sleep that I needed it was the silence.” This phrase was a piece of awareness that became the most profound in my journey through this thesis process. This has become a journey in the discovery of self-awareness and recognizing the importance of having the space to recuperate in the silence became the focus of this journal entry. In those few hours spent within the group I became the focus and center of my life. This allowed me to recharge my batteries and return to my job of being a mother feeling refreshed, revived, and

regenerated. I found silence and stillness in the individual collective of the authentic movement experience.

**Improvisation exploration.** This was the only improvisation session not connected to a piece of music; it took place in silence. My movements were slow, sustained, and initiated at the arms. These arm movements stayed near my body. The closeness of the movements perhaps represented staying close to my inner self. I also felt a strong connection to my breath. Images of the beach surfaced as I moved.

**Choreography and final movement results.** I imagined the movement taking place on the beach in silence for the film. Alone on the beach with only my thoughts and movements and finding myself in the silence. Filming took place at a beach on north side of Chicago. The videographer and I found a secluded location on the beach. The only sounds were the water and the seagulls flying past. Near the end of the film the voices of my children are heard. I asked them, “What is love?” My love for my children has been my driving force. I believe my son said it best: “Love is the bond between parent and child.” My son’s answer to the question reflected my own thoughts as I brought this film to a close.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis began with the question: what has my experience been as a single mother? My experience has been a journey of support and recuperation. The literature indicated that these themes are significant for single mothers. I have received an overflow of support from my family, friends, and community resources, but I have lacked the support from a partner or spouse. Being the primary caregiver can be a stressful job that brings about the need for recuperation.

Authentic movement in a group setting became a place for me to recuperate by connecting to my inner self. This question then led to my second research question: can the body based practice of authentic movement in a group setting provide support to single mothers? As I stated in the beginning of this thesis, participating in Chacian based DMT groups as part of my training provided a space for me to connect and release in relationship to others. I was able to express myself through the movement that I generated in relationship to those creating movement around me. Attending my first authentic movement workshop and experiencing the constructs of the witness and the mover made me think about exploring my experience as single mom through this movement medium. Could this body based practice be a tool to help me and other single mothers cope with daily stressors that lead to psychological instability? I believed that, just as I was able to resource through DMT, that the experience could be deepened through authentic movement in a group setting. The journey proved to be a fruitful one of internal and external support.

### **Internal Support**

A single mom needs to resource and replenish herself in order to give to others. I spend most days focused outside of myself. My children are the primary focus of my energy and

graduate school also took a portion of my internal resources and created a medley of daily stressors. My entire self was pushed to the limit. As the primary caregiver, I had no one else to share the load with me. During one of the authentic movement sessions, the image of a wrestling tag team surfaced. In tag team wrestling, one member of the team jumps in the ring to fight first and when that person gets tired, he tags his partner to take his place so he could get a break. I was tired, and I wanted someone to tag so that I could have a break. The sessions provided the time and space for self-exploration by connecting to my inner witness. By exercising my inner witness, I was learning how to resource from within by shifting my focus to my subconscious or inner authentic self. This process created moments of stillness and silence that allowed me to connect to my breath and gave my body permission to release, and let go of all the “mommy stuff,” and recharge.

These moments of internal support extended outside of the authentic movement group into my daily life in the form of emotional regulation. Instead of lashing out or mentally shutting down in moments of frustration, I created moments of stillness for myself to breath and connect to positive self-talk. These connected moments could last for seconds or a few minutes. They cleared my head, regulated my emotions, and lessened the tension in my body. I was becoming my own tag team partner.

### **External Support**

Susan, the primary witness, and the group of movers provided a safe container for me to verbally and non-verbally explore my experience. Their verbal and non-verbal responses helped to validate the themes that arose during each session. There was no presence of judgment. Instead, there was empathy and acceptance. This was evidenced by a smile, hug, or head nod from a mover. The group structure created the individual collective experience. Individually, we

moved from our inner selves, but the energy of the collective group created a blanket of support that I took into my body. Even though I did not know the specific nature of each mover's journey, I could connect and relate to them through their movement story, and I knew that I was not alone.

During every group, I was overwhelmed and grateful for the support I received within the group. I took advantage of every opportunity to reciprocate. As I discovered in the literature, single mothers develop guilt at not being able to give something in return to those who have helped them. The group structure allowed me to support other group members through their journey by allowing them to share my space if needed during movement dialogue and offering empathetic verbal and non-verbal gestures in response. We may all have different stories, but we all want to be seen and validated by others.

As the primary witness, Susan created an opportunity for all of our stories to be seen, held, and validated with empathy and respect. Susan's witnessing was filled with kindness, love, and reverence. There were times when her witnessing supported my own experience, and then there were moments when her witnessing made the implicit nature of the experience more explicit. I would experience a huge emotional response to these moments of illumination. I would either smile, laugh, or cry, and my inner self would say, "You get it," or, "Yes, Susan you understand." When I was having difficulty verbally articulating what was happening on a body level, Susan's acute witnessing sense brought moments into perspective and helped the underlying theme to emerge.

This was most evident during my first authentic movement session. I was drawn to the support beam in the studio. My kinesthetic response to the beam was to give it all my weight. I wrapped my arms around the beam and began to release and connect to my breath. I was able to

let go and the support beam supported me and held me up. Susan said that, in that moment, it looked as if I was holding my beloved. I began to cry because she illuminated the kind of support I was longing for, support of a spouse or significant other.

In this thesis, I set out to answer the question: Can authentic movement, a body centered practice utilized in the field of DMT provide support for single mothers? My research indicates that authentic movement can, indeed, support lone mothers in their journey. Authentic movement in a group setting provides space for internal recuperation on a kinesthetic level. This allows the mother to resource and recharge through breath connection, thus connecting to herself. This internal breath connection and self-awareness can lead to opportunities for emotional self-regulation to help cope with daily stressors.

The group setting provides a source of external support through socialization. Single mothers are at risk for social isolation, which could increase the risk for developing depression and other physical and psychological issues. Social relationships can counteract the adverse effects of chronic stressors (Atkins, 2010). The collective energy created by the group promotes an environment of acceptance, safety, and togetherness. These supportive group elements could allow single mothers to feel emotionally and physically safe to let go and completely engage in the movement process. It is within this process that internal shifts surface and the journey of the self becomes more profound (Mason, 2009).

### **Future Research**

Through the process of exploring my original questions, other questions surfaced that could be explored in future research. What would an authentic movement group exclusively for single mothers look like? Those major themes of stress, support, and recuperation found in the literature and my own research process would truly be shared by each mover, and I imagine that

the single mothers could support one another through verbal and non-verbal responses. Future research could also explore the cultural implications of authentic movement. As an African American female, I did not focus on or document my cultural response to the authentic movement process. Could reactions to the movement process vary between ethnic groups? Future research might also address gender differences. How can this movement process help single fathers? Men and women differ in how much and how they receive social support. Women have a wider base of friends which leads to more opportunities for emotional support (“Social Support,” 2012). Where do the single fathers find support? How do they cope with chronic daily stressors of being a single father? Can authentic movement be an effective tool to help them cope? Future research can also extend to include teen parents and grandparents raising their grandchildren. Both of these groups carry their own unique parenting issues. Again could authentic movement be an effective tool to help them cope?

### **Final Thoughts**

The heuristic and artistic inquiry nature of this thesis has allowed me to kinesthetically internalize my experience as a single mother. My research allowed me to engage in the authentic movement process that has become a tool to help me cope with everyday chronic stressors of motherhood. Authentic movement sessions allow me to connect to my inner self. These moments allow me to mentally recharge so that I can go back out and give my best to my children. As an emerging dance/movement therapist, my newfound body awareness can help to build kinesthetic empathy towards my clients who are single mothers. This can also extend to those clients who are not single mothers, but have the similar themes present in their journey—such as the need for support and recuperation. My growing kinesthetic empathy can help further build the therapeutic relationship.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Definition of Key Terms**

#### **Chronic Stress**

Chronic stress is long term stress exposure. Constant stressful events and responsibilities can contribute to bad health. Many health problems are caused by chronic stress. Those problems include: heart disease, pain, digestive issues, and obesity. Chronic stress is also a risk factor for depression (Smith, Jaffe-Gill, & Segal, 2010).

#### **Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT)**

“The psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration of individuals” (American Dance Therapy Association, 2009). DMT supports people whereby spontaneous movement is seen as symbolic of unconscious process. It increases self-awareness and self-esteem providing for growth, change and healing within the therapeutic relationship (Payne, 2006).

#### **Depression**

Clinical depression is a mood disorder marked by episodes of sadness, emptiness, loss, anger and self-loathing that negatively affects a person’s everyday life. The exact cause of depression is not known. Researchers believe life events and heredity can cause a chemical imbalance in the brain. A stressful life or major life changing events can cause depression (“Major depression,” 2010).

#### **Social Support**

The physical and emotional comfort given to us by our family, friends, co-workers and others. Surrounding yourself with people that care about you can help reduce stress. A social

network can create a sense of security, a sense of belonging, and increase self-worth. Lack of social support is a common risk factor for depression in single mothers (Gorlick, 1988).

### **Stress**

Stress is the body's way of alerting its self to danger. This is called "flight or fight" or stress response. This stress response also allows a person to concentrate on finishing a race or making a presentation at work. Stress is good to a certain point but can become harmful when someone is under chronic stress (Smith, Jaffe-Gill, & Segal, 2010).

### **Therapeutic Relationship**

It is the means by which the healthcare professional hopes to engage with, and affect change in a client. According to Martin (2000), the therapeutic relationship is the most important part of therapy. A healthy therapeutic relationship promotes supports the clients and helps them reach their therapy goals (Martin, 2000).

Informed Consent

Lucrecia Platt

Columbia College University

Thesis: Doing it Alone: Supporting a Single Mother Through Authentic Movement (An Artistic Inquiry)

The purpose of this study is to take an in depth look at the human experience of single motherhood and how authentic movement, a body based practice used in dance/movement therapy, can play a role in helping a single mother cope and navigate through mental, and physical struggles that lone mothers can face. In this study the experience will be seen and documented through my eyes and will document the relationship between single motherhood and authentic movement

As the researcher/participant, I will explore my experience as a single mother through authentic movement, a body based practice used in dance/movement therapy. I will use the heuristic method to gather data in the form of journals. Then I will use the creative process of artistic inquiry to analyze the data that will culminate in a performance film. The performance film will us dance, spoken word, and music. This film will be part of a vivid comprehensive written report.

I will attend authentic movement group sessions to help with gathering data in the form of journals. Theses journals will be used for the purpose of my thesis only. These groups will be led by Susan Cahill. I will not document the names and experiences of the group members in order to maintain privacy. I will mention Susan Cahill, the facilitator, name as it regards to my own experience.

The gathered data will only be used for my thesis only, a Masters requirement for the Dance/Movement Therapy Department of Columbia College.

**I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study**

**Print Name of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Participant** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Day/month/year**