Chapter 7
Reclaiming our innate vitality: Bringing embodied narratives to life through Dance Movement Psychotherapy

Caroline Frizell

Introduction

In this chapter I explore how biography can be brought alive through dance, movement and kinaesthetic awareness, and in particular, through in-depth connection with the landscape and the other-than-human creatures inhabiting the earth. This sensitive and often subtle approach to biography underpins my work in the disciplinary area of Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP). Biography is a process of reflecting on, giving shape to and often reshaping the stories that make up our embodied life experience. Our stories are etched in the physicality of the body, and the relational process of working therapeutically with dance, movement and kinaesthetic awareness provides an opportunity to excavate the embodied biographical narratives that define our lives. What goes on inside each one of us, on a deeply personal level, is also part of the wider collective story of our times, and each will impact in some way on the other. Dance Movement Psychotherapy practice supports the process of reclaiming and re-telling our life stories towards evolving a biography that helps a client, on the one hand, make sense her or his internal conflicts and personal struggles, and, on the other, helps her or him to feel more connected and empowered in relation to wider contemporary stories that shape the reality of our lived experience. Here I present a number of sensitively attuned, culturally aware and earth-centred case studies, where the landscape, earth and all those life-forms dwelling within the ecology, play a central role in the process of therapy, as clients find a way to become more familiar and more fully engaged with all the dimensions of themselves. Within my
work, I help clients to explore and create narratives that are aligned to the wider
web of life, drawing on the intelligence of the living body and earth to guide that
exploration. The live portraits presented in this chapter have arisen from research
designed and conducted in accordance with best practice and ethical standards in
order to protect the interests of participants. Permission to share these stories has
been obtained and pseudonyms are used throughout to protect confidentiality.

An inclusive approach

The principle that underpins my work is that of inclusivity. Inclusion is a complex
notion and for me it is about striving to offer a place in which all voices in our
communities are heard and each of those voices is afforded a value. As both a
community dance artist and a dance movement psychotherapist, I have found
myself working with marginalized members of the community, whose voices are
overlooked or go unheard. I opened to the real meaning of inclusive practice
when I attended a gathering to explore ‘Inclusive Education’ in the 1980s. At this
conference, I was deeply moved by many painful stories of exclusion shared by the
parents of learning disabled children. I began to experience how, on an unconscious
and visceral level, inclusion is ‘[…] deeply disturbing for it challenges our unexam-
inined notions of what “ordinary” and “normal” really mean’ (Forest and Pearpoint
1991: 2). A common theme connecting these stories was the painful awareness of
not meeting the criteria for belonging. In the uncomfortable, thick fog of diversity,
some of these families seemed to be clinging on to the edge of their communities,
feeling like unwelcome wild plants in a cultivated landscape. In examining those
notions of ‘ordinary’ and ‘normal’, I was intrigued and concerned about how we
meet with otherness. The seed was sown for my life-long pondering on questions
such as: to whom do we afford the right to belong? Where is the threshold between
the ‘me’ and the ‘not me’? What is our relationship with life-forms that exists
beyond the threshold of our immediate species? Who and what do we embrace as
our kith and kin? It seemed that I was hearing how learning-disabled individuals
expose a fear of difference in a culture that prioritizes independence, achievement,
success, productivity and profit. Yet, the gifts that these children seemed to bring
to their communities were those of compassion, cooperation, collective support
and teamwork – not least because of their very dependency.

The concept of inclusive community brings to the foreground inter-dependence
that hovers in every breath we take. Each breath that I inhale and exhale is impacted
by whatever you or I pump into the air. Our individual identities are embedded in
‘the intricate web of co-arising that links one being with all other beings’ (Macey
1991: 63). The idea that we are independent, separate beings is surely an illusion.
As a species, we are dependent on each other and on the whole earth community for our survival. Within my work, I help clients to attune sensitively to their narratives as they are aligned to this wider web of life, drawing on the intelligence of the living body to guide that exploration.

The earthing of our biographies

Biography brings us closer to the telling of our ‘naked truths’ (Pinkola 2008: 370), transporting us to a place of increasing authenticity. In his book *Soulcraft*, Bill Plotkin suggests that,

> [e]ach of us is born with a treasure, an essence, a seed of quiescent potential, secreted for safekeeping in the centre of our being. This treasure, this personal quality, power, talent, or gift [...] is ours to develop, embody, and offer to our communities through acts of service – our contributions to a more diverse, vital, and evolved world. Our personal destiny is to become that treasure through our actions.

(2003: 39)

An exploration of biography enables us to sit at the hearth of our experience in search of that ‘quiescent potential’ (Plotkin 2003: 39), glimmering in the embers of our own history. As we begin to explore our biography within the relational context of therapy, we discover those liminal spaces between the conscious and the unconscious, between you and me, between one species and another. As we each bring our own particular biography to consciousness, we can become our gifts through our actions, towards a healthier collective biography. As we dare to mourn personal losses and grieve for planetary losses, each of us becomes more able to reach an altruistic hand towards the Earth and all its inhabitants with greater compassion.

Kinetic Listening

In order to nurture that seed germinating at the centre of our being, therapists need to become practised at listening. Jill Hayes notes that ‘dwelling in the body through deep inner listening and empathizing with organic processes’ (2007: 23) is central to exploring those dreams harboured in our bodies. The deep inner listening of the therapist can serve to offer a sacred space in which unformed, hidden parts of the client can be allowed to find a space in the realm of his or her awareness.
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This process of listening can itself serve as a catalyst for transformation (Neville 2012). The biographical exploration as a relational experience invites that which is hard to express and not-yet-making-sense into the potential space to reveal itself from the unconscious. The therapist’s capacity to listen, patiently and attentively, invites that which has been ‘secreted away for safekeeping’ (Plotkin 2003: 39) into a place of awareness. This capacity to ‘listen’ requires that we shift our attention to all our senses, noticing, for example, subtle changes in the quality of a sound, a shift in muscle tension or focus. To be open to the presence and diversity of other ways of being requires the capacity to shift from the conceptualizing mind into the sensing feeling body. As our existence is increasingly characterized by urbanization and technological obsession, and as we move further away from land-based living, our sensory integrity can atrophy like an unused muscle. Those communities who live close to the earth are necessarily more practised in exercising a ‘collective embodied knowledge’ (Sewall 2012: 274) that knows the world in a way that is sensitive to the many subtleties and layers of different ways of being; both human and beyond human.

As a movement practitioner, the process of listening can be thought of in terms of ‘kinetic invocations’ (Abram 2010: 239) of the other. An example of this at play is illustrated beautifully in David Abram’s book, Becoming Animal, where he documents this type of learning from a medicine person (2010: 206). Abram describes how he learns to ‘dream himself into the wild physicality of that Other’ (ibid: 239). As he turns his attention to a raven, he finds his way into the experience of the bird, and at the same time finds that he is meeting up with, and reclaiming a part of himself. It is clear that Abram’s efforts to understand and attune to this takes time, focus and patience.

As we befriend that not-yet-known phenomena inside ourselves and become open to connecting with otherness, we realize the relationship between each of us as an organism in the environment is connected to all living things through an ecological system. The body, then, becomes more than a physiological ‘self-enclosed sack’ (Abram 2010: 229). Rather, the body becomes ‘a realm wherein the diverse textures and colours of the world meet up with one another’ (Abram 2010: 229). Opening our awareness to our dynamic ‘animal nature’ can bring us closer to our individual identity (Hayes 2010: 73).

I remember walking in the wilderness of Dartmoor with a valued colleague and friend. I noticed that her eyes were cast down on the path in front of us, yet her body echoed the intensity of the wild, breathtaking landscape. My eyes searched keenly outwards at the hills, the magnificent sky, the colours and the wind blowing through the bracken. Our walking boots crunched rhythmically on the path and a soft autumn breeze brushed against my skin. I wondered why she wasn’t looking around, and I observed out loud that her
eyes were downcast. ‘I can sense the beauty of the land through my body’, she responded. She seemed to have become part of the landscape and, at that moment, experienced her body as part of the earth. Touched by her words, I softened my gaze on the world and awakened my receptivity to the vitality of life through all my senses, joining my colleague in a state of awareness that connected us to the voice of the land.

Thinking into otherness: Identifying with the earth

This sense of identifying with the earth was brought to my attention some time ago by 3-year-old Leila. Leila and her mother attended a community group for pre-school children and their parents and carers. In our enclosed, urban space we were travelling across a wild terrain to ‘The Bear Went Over the Mountain’.

In this rhythmic, repetitive song, a bear goes over the mountain to see what he can see, and all that he can see is the other side of the mountain. Adults and children embodied all kinds of bears: fast bears, slow bears, fierce bears, shy bears, ambitious bears, resistant bears and more. In the centre of the room stood Leila, an assertive young girl with a fiery temper. Her body was expanded and open, her feet were planted firmly on the ground securing a broad base with her arms out-stretched. Leila’s mother approached her, wanting to encourage her to move with the group, but Leila waved her on. She held an intense magnetic presence in her tiny body, which intrigued me and stood out from the many different bears sharing the space. Somehow, I couldn’t place Leila in the active narrative that was unfolding. ‘I wonder what it is like to be your bear, Leila’, I said. She looked at me with indignation in her eyes, which told me in an instant that I’d got it wrong. ‘I am not a bear’ she said, ‘I am the mountain’. Leila was a child who was rarely still, yet she had connected to a powerful resource inside her, channelling her vivacious energy down into the centre of the earth. My sense was that Leila was not standing ‘as if’ she were a mountain, but rather, she was the mountain; it was an intrinsic part of her identity.

Environmentalist John Seed suggests that ‘to survive our current environmental pressures, we must consciously remember our evolutionary and ecological inheritance. We must learn to ‘think like a mountain’ (Seed et al. 1988: 38). Leila, it seemed, knew intuitively that by connecting to the mountain, which she had instinctively embodied, she was connecting to a part of herself.

Discovering our identification with Earth through our embodied presence brings us closer to our animate selves, as creatures of the earth. Our vitality is awakened as we find ourselves acquiring ‘the capacity to feel the ambient physical sensations of unfettered energy and aliveness as they pulse through our bodies’
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(Levine 2010: 279). This rekindling of our attachment to the earth as part of our identity is an essential dimension in our process of becoming whole, towards a fuller biography.

I embody this identity when, for example, I sit on the shoreline at high tide, watching the waves thrown against the rocks with a mighty thud. As the wave is sucked back into the well of water, white foam shivers over the pebbles. Another wave heaves against the force of gravity, rises and then plunges against the weathered stone. Thud. Its booming voice echoes through the cavernous rocks and ripples through the bones of my spine. Smaller waves then converge to break against each other, falling sequentially on the sandy shore and hissing back across the pebbles to return to the rhythmic swell of the relentless tide. Another wave surges with an energetic force, exploding against the rock into a cloud of white spray and I enjoy the droplets of salty water on my face as I anticipate the next oncoming wave. At that moment, I feel as though I have entered the Earth’s theatre of becoming. I am part of the body of the earth.

Welcoming other: On learning from a woodlouse

The spontaneous and creative expression of the body can unveil our personal calling and move us a little closer to the essence of our soul. In our post-industrial context, this animal self, which is dependent on Earth as home, becomes obscured as we are increasingly separated from our place as creatures of the earth. In Franz Kafka’s short story, ‘Metamorphose and Other Stories’ (1961), Gregor’s embodied identification with otherness has drastic consequences. Gregor wakes to find that he has become a giant insect. He lies in bed and lifts his head to stare down incredulously at his armoured, segmented body and his insect’s legs waving helplessly in front of him. Gregor’s human mind is locked in the body of an insect and he is unable to communicate with his repelled, shocked family, who cope by distancing themselves from the reality. As a result, Gregor is shunned by those who loved him. He is kept shut away from the world and suffers pitiful neglect.

In my clinical work as a therapist, spontaneous encounters with otherness have provided catalysts for insight and growth. Eric was a young lad of 7 years who came up against otherness within our work together. Eric had significant learning difficulties and he found the world a confusing place. He had moved from one special school to another. Family relationships at home had broken down, and it was hard for him to experience any sense of belonging. Eric was a troubled child, who never seemed to fit in. At school, he easily became anxious and he was referred to me for individual Dance Movement Psychotherapy sessions. In the following vignette, Eric encounters a woodlouse and this small window into our
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work together illustrates how an encounter with the other-than-human seemed
to bring Eric closer to his own biography.

‘Enemy!’ shouted Eric. He jumped up, knocking down his construction. Eric
had built a fortress with some large plastic covered shapes, and he had invited
me to share his home. An unsuspecting woodlouse had crawled across our path.

‘Kill the bug’, shouted Eric, picking up the largest bright red plastic cube. Hold-
ing it above his head, he knelt down in front of the woodlouse. ‘Going to kill you’,
he shouted. Eric’s face was red with fury, his muscles quivering with rage. The
woodlouse froze. Momentarily, I found myself abandoned by my inner reflective
therapist, suppressing an urge to act in defence of the woodlouse. I positioned
myself strategically, in anticipation of diverting the plastic shape, should it come
crashing down. My body was on emergency alert, poised to avert the impend-
ing catastrophe. I consciously released my breath and felt my weight drop down
through my torso. The woodlouse stood motionless before us and I looked at Eric,
who was holding the plastic cylinder above his head.

Gradually, Eric’s expression began to change. The tension in the air began to
soften and I noticed that Eric seemed transfixed by the woodlouse. He tilted his
head to one side and slowly lowered the plastic shape, placing it next to him on
the floor. Eric’s brown eyes were intense – ‘dead bug’, he said. We sat in silence,
Eric staring at the woodlouse. His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘Wake up, bug’
he said quietly. At that moment, the woodlouse took a few steps forward. Eric
took a deep breath in, with an air of surprise and relief. ‘Perhaps you thought
that she’d died of fright’, I said, wondering if Eric had thought he’d killed the
bug with his rage. Eric sat quietly for a while. ‘Bug, come in’ Eric said, making
an extra space in his ruined fortress, his words opening a door to a shared world.
We sat in quiet contemplation, watching the woodlouse crawl slowly and steadily
along the wooden floor of the gym. Eric heaved a sigh and we smiled at each
other; there was an unspoken knowing between us. It was as if the wisdom of
the tiny woodlouse had exposed the futile destructiveness of human rage. For
Eric, this seemed to be a moment of insight that brought his powerfulness into
his conscious awareness, whilst at the same time identifying with the vulnerable,
defenceless insect.

After this initial encounter with the woodlouse, Eric remembered her when-
ever he built a home, making a potential space for otherness in the process of our
work together. That potential space for otherness became a part of Eric’s own
biography. The woodlouse allowed Eric to widen the dimensions of his identity
and, in subsequent sessions, to explore his own sense of belonging. As his expres-
sion changed from rage to interest and compassion, Eric seemed to realize that
he had choices; that his impact on the world held significance and that he could
use his powerfulness in the interests of himself and others. His fortress became
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more welcoming of difference as he shifted cautiously beyond the fear and shame that was preventing him from letting his true vitality have a voice.

*Awakening our innate vitality: Heeding the wisdom of the tree*

If we can awaken those not-yet-fully-known stories that reside in the muscles, joints sinews, tissues, skin, blood and bones of the collective that we know as our body, we can open a space for the ‘vital animating core of our embodied selves’ (Kalsched 2013: 10), which Kalsched suggests is our soul emerging. We can move a little closer to the spirit of our true selves. Our vitality is that life force within us, connecting us to the vital sensations that are the ‘interface between inner and outer worlds’ (Sewall 2012: 266). Dance as the spontaneous kinetic expression of experience through the body can serve as a bridge to those unconscious layers of our biographical narratives within which our vitality resides. Individual life events, such as early relational traumas, as well as social, cultural and political oppressions can mute those ‘dynamic forms of vitality that are fundamental to all felt experience’ (Stern 2010: 8). The vitality in our bodies is a channel for our expression. Stern suggests that our experience of vitality is embodied and ‘dynamic forms of vitality’ animate ‘the narratives we create about our lives’ (2010:11).

As we befriend that not-yet-known phenomena and realize our connectedness to all living things, we get greater clarity about our service to the world, located in a place of humility, respect and reciprocity. The spontaneous and creative expression of the body, using imagery and imagination, can unveil our personal calling and move us a little closer to the essence of our soul – that animating core emerging through creativity (Kalsched 2013).

The following vignette from Hassan’s story illustrates how he was able to discover and feel the painful reality of his story of loss, and this was the beginning of moving beyond the narrative that had defined him for so many years. This biographical excavation within a therapeutic relationship can address the emotional pain that becomes defended against and displaced through somatic symptoms. Leader (2016) notes how deep attachment involves the real possibility of loss, yet we are increasingly encouraged to let go and move on to the next thing in our consumer culture, thus avoiding the prospect of feeling the real grief of loss, preferring to rush to find a solution to the sadness. Facing those feelings of loss and sitting with the heartbreak is an essential component to understanding our biographical narrative.

Hassan was in his late thirties and had suffered from depression for many years. When we began to work together, he said that it might be difficult for him to sustain the work because although he loved to move, he had constant pains in his
body that were getting worse. Hassan had been to his doctor countless times and was told that there was no basis for his physical suffering. Hassan’s anxiety was intense, and his sympathetic nervous system seemed to be in permanent overdrive. Hassan was particularly responsive to imagery. During one session, he contorted his body in pain and discovered that he strongly identified with a tree that was withered and dry. He stayed with the image of the withered tree, starved of life and neglected, mirroring Hassan’s early life with a family that struggled to manage. A long time passed, and it was hard to stay with Hassan in that neglected place. Hassan breathed painfully through the withered branches and the tears began to roll down his face. The tears seemed to bring a fluidity to his body, and I witnessed how he began to relax. His contorted limbs began to flow with life, at first almost imperceptibly. On reflection, Hassan said that in that moment he had been able to access a deep bodily connection with the image of the tree. He sensed the capacity to draw the nourishment he needed from the roots and enliven the vitality that had been so dormant in his life. This exploration helped Hassan to take a step towards finding an ‘adequate biography’ (Kalsched 2013) that enabled him to create a narrative comprising ‘not only the influences pushing us from the past, but something deeper or beyond the ego that “calls” us into the future’ (2013: 196). Hassan’s traumatic early life experiences had become encoded at a body level, manifesting in the painful somatic symptoms that couldn’t be identified. Once he had established enough trust in our relationship, he was able to begin to align psyche and soma both internally and externally. Hassan said he found a particular tree in his local park that he began to visit regularly, as a reminder that he was part of a larger universe. When we finished working together he brought a feather that he’d found under the tree, offering it to me as a symbol of our work together. Hassan said that whenever the pain in his body returned he was able to turn to the tree inside him and find that his pain was considerably reduced.

**Investing in the animate body: Land-based listening**

As a practitioner-therapist, I am aware of participating in a process of co-creation with clients. As facilitator of this process, I need to ensure that I maintain my own connection with the deeper layers of the psyche. Hayes advises ‘it is vital that the therapist feels earthed in her own animate body for the shared therapeutic journey to take place’ (2013: 99). Hence, as a dance movement psychotherapist, it is important that I remain in touch with my own biographical narrative. That process comprises meeting regularly with colleagues to explore and share practice and meet with the earth. I seek wild places to foster my own connection with the earth, as well as to reflect on my own embodied relationship with my work and
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the dynamic interface where my work with clients meets with my own biography. On these occasions, I practice a slowing down and listening attentively in order to access the deeper layers of embodied experience. Whilst engaged in such movement practice, the mind serves to focus my immediate awareness, rather than describe, analyse or narrate (Poyner 2014). My final vignette is from my own practice of earthing myself in my own process of exploration, as I process the power projections of the client work.

I arranged to meet with a colleague on Dartmoor, which is an area of moorland in Devon, the South West of England. Dartmoor is an ancient landscape, with remains dating back to Neolithic and Bronze Age times. This particular meeting followed a national referendum that had resulted in a vote for Britain to leave the European Union. The Prime Minister had resigned. Other prominent ministers and officials were either resigning or jostling for a place in the shade. Overnight, it seemed, our world as we knew it had been turned upside down. Earlier that week, a client had entered the studio clearly distraught, bringing her shock and intense grief at the prospect of the demise of our membership of a European community. Her partner had not long settled in the United Kingdom and she now feared for their future together. She carried in her body the weight of enormous sadness and palpable distress. Standing in the centre of the room she threw her arms forwards and upwards lifting her head to stare with fierce, unseeing eyes at the wooden beam above. Reaching upwards, she bent her knees and, as if surrendering to a downward force from above, she began to sink to the ground where she lay in a crumpled heap and sobbed. In an article in the Guardian, Susie Orbach (2016) named ‘the fear, the dismay, the feelings of shame, of being unsafe, of being misplaced and unwanted’ that had been unearthed for some by this historic referendum. It seemed to be experienced by this client as an assault on her very sense of self, her identity and her sense of community. This situation touched a fundamental core vulnerability in the client, unearthing a primitive anxiety about eligibility to belong and fear of exclusion.

This session had left me with a whole range of feelings that lingered as my colleague and I trudged through wet springy grass to reach the tor. The question of belonging rang in the silver song of the skylark as he hovered above us with quivering wings, calling into the wind. The shrill song of that airborne pilgrim ascended and descended effortlessly. Wild ponies munched the grass, one ear cocked to the wind. New-born foals on spindly legs stayed close to their mothers. Two athletic ponies grunted menacingly and ran at each other; frisky, nervous and volatile.

The rocks at the tor greeted us with their permanence. We would spend some time alone, we thought, before checking in with each other. I felt a weight pressing on my shoulders and I dropped down onto the springy turf, crawling on my hands and knees before clambering up onto a rock. A strong wind blew wispy clouds.
across an expanse of blue sky. I settled back into a rock, feeling the rough granite surface through my clothes. I put one hand on the soft springy grass by my side and slid my other hand across the lichen, feeling comforted by the distinctively contrasting textures either side of me.

In my peripheral vision, I was aware of three strangers approaching the tor. They disappeared almost as fast as they had arrived and later I discovered that they had left a memorial plaque and some flowers, dedicated to deceased parents. I thought of my client feeling so abandoned by her political parents. The rock behind my back felt solid and supportive. I felt held in this ancient landscape and the great sadness of our time surged through me as I contemplated the social divisions and unrest that had become unearthed.

I pulled up my knees and rested my feet on a ledge, shifting my attention out into the landscape. A semi-circle of rocks rose up from a small hillock directly in front of me, curving and descending anti-clockwise. Time yawned, stretched and turned towards the wind. The gently sloping moorland drew my gaze to a road, where ponies gathered in clusters with shaggy mams billowing in the wind. A small foal picked up her hooves and crossed one spindly leg across the other. She wobbled, caught her balance by jolting into a firm open gait. She turned her head to locate her mother. Another skipped downhill, jumping sideways and lifting his nostrils to the wind. The sun broke through the clouds, throwing its light on distant hills beyond the ponies. The clouds brushed their shadows softly over the undulating landscape. The granite glimmering in the light caught my eye, calling my attention back to the rocks at my side. A skylark landed a few meters away, and then another. Together they lifted into the air, dipping, diving and twittering across the moor. I softened my focus and shifted my attention to the warmth of the grainy rock that held me. I enjoyed the stillness, listening to the continuous melody of the skylarks. I could smell earth and horse, and I sensed the longevity of this land. I remained in this curled up place, reluctant to move.

After a time, my right leg became curious of the space beyond the ledge on which my foot rested. My foot edged into the open space. My weight followed cautiously as my body became tense and alert, holding my balance against the pull of gravity. My mind’s eye sensed an abyss between the security of this moment and falling forever into the darkness of the universe. Tentatively my foot reached a little further, coming into contact with the solid rock beneath me. Testing its stability, I slid out of my granite chair and my left arm brushed across my chest, sliding from one shoulder to another. My hand grasped a rocky protrusion just to the side of my head. With my foot firmly in contact with the rock, I pulled with my hand to twist myself sequentially out of my seat. Leaning into my right hip, I stretched my left leg across to another ledge and turned, profiled like a hieroglyphic figure carved into the rock. My increasingly strong foothold enabled me to push firmly into two
feet and spiral around to face a rounded ledge to my side that invited me to lean on my elbow and winch myself up. My forehead pressed against the warm granite as I looked down. I wondered if I could transfer my position to a nearby platform. I grasped at a tuft of grass just above my shoulder and eased myself a little higher up, reaching out my leg to the rock that was just beyond me. I stepped out, a little farther than was comfortable and with a jump, transferred my position to stand on the platform with my arms free. I stepped up onto a loose rock and cautiously moved it with a clunk, like a see-saw, enjoying the sense of being off-balance and righting myself, whilst also feeling nervous of the unsteadiness beneath me. I found myself then stepping to a safer foot-hold and crouching down, with a sense of powerlessness. I closed my eyes and rested my head on a ledge, wrapping my arms around the rock. I became acutely conscious of how I was placing my body in the space, against the solid surface. I waited, sensing that it was the only option, and found myself sinking further down, to kneel against the granite surface.

At that moment, it seemed, all that I had left was to surrender to being moved. I found myself entering into that state when ‘the ego gives up control, stops choosing, stops exerting demands, allowing the self to take over moving the physical body as it will’ (Starks Whitehouse 2006: 82). It seemed that I had reached a place from which the dance could begin, yet strangely I felt I had come to the end. It was as if I had allowed myself to be led to a place of receptivity, an ‘embodied ecological consciousness’ (Sewall 2012: 281) in which I am able to recover and understand a sense of my own place in the environment. Chodorow suggests that ‘the actual act of moving creates proprioceptive and kinaesthetic feedback, which serves to confront the unconscious with the body’s ego reality’ (1999: 245), and this dialogue between conscious and unconscious elements had allowed my kinetic sense to guide me intuitively from one place to another, negotiating the terrain consciously and attentively, rekindling my own sense of belonging. I had become conscious of my shifting focus between internal and external realities. On reflection, I realized that this process fostered my resourcefulness to meet with the despair of this particular client, who was so troubled by decisions made in a wider context. In moving with the environment, I found a way of disentangling some of the chaos unveiled in my own biography. As I knelt by the granite rock, I was able to sense more clearly those universal, yet deeply personal anxieties about eligibility to belong, to be wanted and to have a place of value in the world.

Conclusion

We are living in times of enormous turmoil and distress. Our capacity to connect and to strengthen our communities in ways that make peace with ourselves, each
other and the earth is needed more than ever before. The particular treasures that we discover within our own biography can resource our personal resilience and can be offered in service of the wider web of connections on earth. The biographical narratives that emerge in the potency of the potential space between narrator (client) and witness (therapist) offer the opportunity to reconnect to an embodied vitality, and reawaken our connection with the earth as a living system. The process of exploring our biography through the body requires that we soften our gaze on life and allow ourselves to sense our way into the world, with perceptive listening. Movement as dance is an act of creation, and as such, has the capacity to manifest in the body both consciously and unconsciously. As we move out of the linear, sequential time inherent in our everyday, pedestrian bodily functionality, we can find ourselves ‘being danced’ by a universal connection (Chodorow 1999: 274). By working therapeutically, with attention to the body we can come closer to ‘body-based implicit memories’ (Kalsched 2013: 115) that open our understanding to the complex dimensions of our biographical narratives.

Engaging with a biographical narrative is to embark on a process that struggles with contradictions, stumbles on the path of remembering and brings into focus the transient, mercurial nature of human experience. As we soften our gaze on the immediately apparent reality and reimagine the stories by which we live, we have an opportunity to excavate the landscape of our experience. In moving, it seems, the body invites us to bear witness to our embodied biography. In moving with and in the landscape, we have the opportunity to locate ourselves as just one of many creatures that dwell within the wider story of the earth. Moving into the story of our own experience can deepen our understanding of who we are becoming and share that becoming with our communities and beyond. The body is the ‘the medium through which we know the world and ourselves’ (Olsen 2014: 227), and as such it is the place where our biography begins. The sensate nature of our experience is in us and around us, and our biography lingers in the nuanced sensory memories of our subjective experience. That experience can find an embodied voice in the symbolic imagery of the dance, bringing us close to who we are and closer to the heart of the world.

REFERENCES


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