

My House Burned Down: Home and Relinquishment

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My house burned down
But anyway, it was after
The flower petals had already fallen.
(C. Hokushi, cited in Luska, 2004, p.167)



Abstract

This article, originally presented in the context of and following a dance performance, discusses how the author, also the choreographer/performer and a dance therapist, works with movement and meaning as part of the therapeutic journey. Following some discussion about dance, the language of dance, and dance therapy, the article presents the view that the concept of relinquishment, as represented by the title of the paper, is intrinsically linked to the concept of home, and that, without recognising the significance of relinquishment, we cannot fully know or understand the concept of “home”. Both the dance work, represented in pictures in the text, and the paper itself explicate this link between home and relinquishment: presenting the idea that by recognising and embracing relinquishment we come closer to knowing wholeness and wellness. The article also describes how the performed dance *My House Burned Down* can be interpreted

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as a therapeutic process and, as such, can be seen to move through struggle to a new perspective on presently held ideas about 'home,' 'self' and the capacity and potential of one's self.

Ko tēnei tuhinga, taketake ake i whakaatuhia i roto i te horopaki whakaari kanikani, ā, whai muri mai i matapakihia i pēhea tā te kaituhi, me te kaiwhakarite/kaikanikani me tētahi kaiwhakaora kaikanikani, whakamahi i ngā oreorehanga me ngā tikanga hai haerenga whakaora. I muri i tētahi matapakinga kanikani, ko te reo kanikani, me te whakaoranga kanikani, ka whakaatuhia e te tuhinga te aroro tuku, e ai ki tā te ingoa o te pepa, e mau pū ana ki te aroro mō kāinga, ā, inā kore e mōhio i te takenui o te tuku, kāre tātou e mōhio whānui, e mātau rānei ki te aroro o "kāinga". Takirua ko te mahi kanikani whakaahuahia nei i roto i ngā whakaata kei roto i te kupu, me te tuhinga tonu e whakamārama ana i tē hononga o te kāinga me te tuku: he whakaaturanga i te ariā mā te kitenga, tauawhinga tukunga ka tata atu tātou ki te mōhiotanga o te kotahitanga me te orange. Ka whakaahuahia anō hoki e te tuhinga me pēhea te whakaaritanga kanikani I Wera Taku Whare e taea ai te ki he takinga orange ā, ka kitea te wheta ki tētahi tirohanga hou tae atu hoki te tētahi whakaarohanga hurihanga.

Keywords: dance; dance psychotherapy; home; relinquishment

Introduction

The author is a dancer, choreographer and dance psychotherapist. Dancing is core to who and what she is. It is as natural to her as breathing and, over the years, it has become a way of dialoguing with herself about the deepest questions, the unanswerable paradoxes and the unfathomable silences of her life. A quote from a practitioner of 1627 alluded to this:

But by what means may the animal be moved by inward principles ... by means of what instruments? Let us compare automata ... Is the first instrument of movement spirit, or natural causes ... like the movement of the heart? (W. Harvey, quoted in Sacks, 1986, p. 83)

A choreographed dance work can be understood as a kinetic (moving) metaphor, expressing particular themes or ideas that the choreographer wishes to communicate or explore. The performed dance *My House Burned Down* expresses the theme of centre as home/home as centre, foundation, springboard. The dance shows a process of the dancer/therapist laying herself bare: not projecting herself but, rather, exposing and relinquishing herself to the experience of herself dancing "home" and then, "enlarged by the appropriation of the proposed worlds which interpretation unfolds" (Ricoeur, 1973, p. 327), holding that new understanding of her process will be obtained — and potentially available to herself, her audience, her clients.

Core to the choreographer's process, and equally part of the kinetic metaphor is that, within the dance, there is a stillness, a "still point" as T. S. Eliot (1963, p. 121) put it, that is the heart of the centre, the foundation and "home". I propose that this sense of "home" may be

discovered as something of wonder (“Have we really done something?”) and, that wellness and inner stillness are states that we — author, choreographer, dancer, watcher, reader — do not manipulate but have a life of their own: they are given and we are co-participants. We choose to participate, which is an act of will, yet will is relinquished. When we relinquish something, we “receive ourselves enlarged” (Ricoeur, 1973, p. 327), and may enter into and appropriate — take hold of “proposed worlds” (Ricoeur, 1973, p. 327) — which may be new perceptions, outside of the “already always”. Indeed what we may glimpse in these “proposed worlds” is a place of *communitas*, that is, “home” as the transcendent space wherein we are freed from the boundaries of lived social order into a great joy (Turner, 1969).

The dance in this presentation is offered as a therapeutic dialogue/intervention in a personal journey, and the message of the author/choreographer/dancer/dance therapist is similarly “offered”: it has no necessary outcome and it is not targeted towards one specific client; it simply “is” — for whomever might wish to receive it. In this, therapist and client, dancer and viewer, and, in this context, author and reader are co-participants — or not.

Dance as Language — The Language of the Dance

Dance works with movement and meaning. What is meant by “movement” is the four fundamental aspects of kinaesthesia: effort, shape, flow and time (Laban, 1966). These include posture, stance, gesture, locomotion, rhythmic awareness, spatial awareness, and the dance vocabulary itself. By “meaning” what is meant is: expressivity, intentionality, emotionality, nuance, energy, interpretation.

The dance *My House Burned Down* employs a contemporary dance vocabulary, comprising the elements of the dance language named above, plus the energy dynamic and expressivity. These elements are combined in a particular, considered and chosen design — the choreography, which can thus be understood as the sum of the form and expression of the dancer dancing. The movement occurs in dimensions that are physical, visual, kinetically tangible and actual, and in forms that could be called meta-dimensions because they are archetypal, even eternal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Whilst the dance is original and, therefore, demonstrates something “new”, it also reveals something recognisable, known, even remembered — this is because the audience — and, in this case, the reader already have meanings and interpretations for these forms and what they signify. The woman, arching, kneeling, with her head thrown back, outstretched arms, pleading hands, halting steps, fingers scratching, scabbling, the foot brushing, perilous balances, reaching, dashing from side to side, the body fallen to the ground, the face lifted — these are all examples about and for which you, the reader, indubitably already have interpretations.

In working with the languages of dance and words there really is no way of perfectly and precisely expressing what the one language says in terms of the other language. Nevertheless, we seek a link, a kind of synesthesia (literally, a together sensation) and here a “felt” response is noted, a visceral sensation of muscular and fluid consonance. This kinaesthetic consonance is also known as mimicry (Foster, 1986). Researchers (Langer, 1953; Sachs, 1963; Foster, 1986; Grove, 2003) have noted that that the person watching dance will experience triggers at a neuromuscular level providing a physical

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sensation that gives the sense that s/he “dances” with the dancer, as distinct from first seeing and then understanding, or trying to understand through cognitive processing. Mimicry is like a translation from one language to another. It describes a relationship, one through which the watcher is enabled to feel the dance and the message of the dance in such a way that a kind of dancer-watcher “coupling” or co-participation takes place, a coupling that can be sufficiently intimate for the watcher to experience actual sensation — a “psycho-physical” understanding.

The Language of Dance Psychotherapy

Dance psychotherapy is a therapeutic modality with a distinct principle and *modus operandi*. Based on the empirically-supported premise that body, mind and spirit are interconnected, the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) has defined dance/movement therapy as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual” (ADTA, 2012).

Foundational to dance psychotherapy is the concept that embodied communication is a form of communication, and that it opens the way for deep exploration of emotions, ideas, symptoms and personal spirituality. In this presentation the choreographed dance was the medium through which these aspects were shown. In *My House Burned Down*, principles of the therapeutic process, such as admittance of struggle, acknowledgement of the self-in-process, choosing and prioritising, the journey towards awareness, and relinquishment are symbolically demonstrated.

We may look upon the body and its movement as a symbol of being: living, visible representation not only of muscle and movement, choreography and steps, story told in gesture and expression; we may also see it as a vehicle for mental constructs, as language for concepts, as words of a metaphor in a poem or essay. Let us then, as part of our seeing, as part of our responding in the wordless physicality of mimicry (Foster, 1986), let us *read* this dance, for *seeing* it is just the beginning. What do we see? What we *see* is technique, a combining of steps, rhythms, spatial patterns, form, flow, effort. What we *see* is feet standing in first, knees pulled up, muscles tightened, muscles softened, arms extended, legs lengthened, thighs taut, shoulders dropped, head lifted; softer, stronger, longer, faster, hold it, release it, suspend it, lift, drop, open, move, be still. This manipulation of the form through effort and shape has appeal — but let not this physical appeal blur or seduce us away from that which, though allusive, must also be answered: *what* do we see? Perhaps initially, confusion! We watch and a myriad of thoughts flowing from the conscious and

the unconscious is initiated. There is a psychological pull here between the known and the unknown, the dualities of the familiar/unfamiliar, the neither/nor, the “enigmatic engagement” as Martin (2010, p. 6) put it — and, in the psychological need to reconcile or find unity, we seem caught or suspended in a space of liminality. The space of liminality can be regarded as a “spatio-temporal interface,” an idealistic and temporal transitory space that does not allow the viewer to remain locked in a continuous struggle with contending elements in the psyche indefinitely — it is not a place we can reside. Just as the dancer cannot stay poised in precarious balance for more than a few moments, heady and thrilling though it may be to do or watch, neither can the human mind in this luminal, enigmatic space stay indefinitely without resolution, echoing Jung’s belief that cleavage and tension of opposites seek compensation in unity (Martin, 2010).

Rudolph Laban (1879-1958), the first dance therapist, described this:

Movement is man’s magic mirror, reflecting and creating the inner life in and by visible trace-forms, in turn also reflecting and creating the visible trace-forms in and by the inner life. The simplest visible element of this startling and paradoxical operation is the plate between the axial-stable and the surface-mobile bodily movements, or, in other words, the struggle between the binding power of a knot and the loosening power of an untwisting line with an intermediary lemniscate (Laban, 1966, p. 100).

In the experience of the author/dancer/dance therapist, struggle is essential for change to occur not only in the body but also in the psyche, an hypothesis echoed in the work of process-oriented psychologists and psychotherapists, Arnold Mindell (Mindell, 1984) and Max Shuhbach (Goodbread, 1987). The struggle between liminality and resolution becomes a therapeutic pilgrimage towards *communitas* (the spirit of community), in which there is acceptance that the opposites of the conscious and the unconscious can co-exist and struggle is relinquished — perhaps a task beyond the rational mind. The dance, formed from the co-existence of consciousness, the known and the unconscious, thus can transcend the rational.

What we see then, is a dance in its physicality, technique and mental concentration, its discipline and mindfulness of “continual aligning of awareness to the here-and-now experience” (Epstein, 1996, p. 147), its struggle between liminality and resolution, and its relinquishment of struggle — the dancer’s working through, and the dancer’s “givenness” to this process.



Altogether, these give an immediacy and muscularity to the way dance may be understood and how its performance be of therapeutic value. It is a fierce dynamic, enabling and energizing us to ward against the explanatory schemes and themes to which we are so used and which, therefore, “lull us into overlooking or trivialising vast mysteries” (Efran, Lukens & Lukens, 1990, p. xiv). There is little room here for any kind of amniotic suspension of consciousness or mindfulness.

And there is a spiritual aspect, not greater or more important, but invested with the same muscularity, and best described as tapping into a dimension where it could be said that body and mind are not separate in function and understanding, but one. This other dimension is more attuned, and less directive. Mind, body, the dance, and the quest of the work flow without one or other aspect dominating or leading. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described this as a state of flow, an “optimal experience” (p. 9).

Relinquishment

“To make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from” (Eliot, 1963, p. 221). Near the end of *My House Burned Down* the dancer falls to the ground, outstretched; the running, leaping energy relinquished, we wonder if she is at her end. Let us beware of making an interpretation based upon preconception or the illusion of purity of vision (Bal, 2003). Such preconception robs the experience of its dynamic, energetic engagement, of any potential for the liminal insight; neither the dancer nor dance psychotherapist can afford for the experience to be, as Eliot (1936/1963, pp. 192-193) put it:

Here is a place of disaffection
...
Filled with fancies and empty of meaning
Tumid apathy with no concentration
...
Not here the darkness, in this twittering world.

But when the author/dancer/dance psychotherapist experiences disaffection and twittering — which she does, because the process is never smooth, and frustration and the blank page are never far away — what arises are such questions as, what is this? Is this an end — or a beginning?

In “East Coker” Eliot (1940/1963) described a journey through relinquishment. Here I paraphrase and expand that passage because it seems to reflect the personal pilgrimage upon which I, as a dancer have set myself: this journey through dance-psychotherapy-healing.

I find myself now, trying to find words
Trying to make dance, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start and a different kind of failure.
I have learned to construct this dance
For the thing I no longer need to say, or in the way in which

I no longer need to say it. And so each *enchainment*, each movement and phrase
Must be a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate and the ineffable —
A daring to find the unexplored step,
The move I did not ever do before in quite that way ever before.

I work the movement out in my own body and find now, at the age of 57, that my
attempt to effect this raid and this ineffability is done with shabby equipment,
always deteriorating, as my body reaches a limit to physical tension and
extension. My body expresses an imprecision of feeling, an undisciplined
emotion.

And what there is to conquer, to achieve
My search for the elusive glimpse
The transient glory that pitches the psyche
Into a place where choice and possibility become potentially present or even
actually present again, has already been achieved
Once or twice by choreographers or dancers or therapists whom I cannot hope
To emulate — but there is no competition —
Except perhaps with myself,
For the aging dancer fights to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and here I am before you now, in
circumstances
That lie betwixt academic and poetic, thought and embodiment, flesh and
imagination.
It is not about gain or loss: it is about the journey. The rest is not mine.

Eliot (1942/1963d) could be describing the author/dancer's commitment to her personal discipline, which is also the journey; it seems he *knows*: "A condition of complete simplicity | costing not less than everything" (pp. 222-223). Similarly, the author finds that to be in that place of complete simplicity, free from complexity, facade, artifice, the place of finally home, a condition of utter relinquishment is called for. Despite any clinging, or penury of ownership, the dancer/psychotherapist cannot claim possession over her body, nor attempt to establish fixity or security by that means, for there is no denying, as (Eliot, 1940/1963b, p. 203) put it: the "shabby equipment always deteriorating":



°The houses are all gone under the sea.

The dancers are all gone under the hill. (Eliot, *ibid*, p. 199)

— or, as Hokus (cited in Luska, 2004) put it: “my house burned down” (p. 167). Thus, concepts of self-possession must also be relinquished for in the end, “What I own is what I do not own and where I am is where I am not” (Eliot, 1940/1963a, p. 201). So the dancer leaps, traversing the space from side to side, reaching for something, anything, and then falls, her body to the ground, her hand turned palm down to the dark: her house burned down now, the deterioration of her “shabby equipment” inexorable: she is given, given over, relinquished ... but is she given up? Is relinquishment the end?

I suggest not, for then, at this point in the dance comes, as Jung put it, the “impulse” (cited in Miller, 2004), even the “epiphanic” call (Martin, 2010, p.2) which prompts the turn of the dancer’s hand, as if reaching “Into another intensity | For a further union, a deeper communion” (Eliot, 1940/1963b, p. 204): the symbolic new beginning. The author/dancer/dance therapist “has the artistic self made available for self-scrutiny” (Green, 2000, p. 43); and, whilst she exposes a vulnerability that on one hand may be hard to watch, she is, on the other hand, offering and inviting both herself and her audience/clients/readers/co-participants to participate in the letting go, the relinquishment, that allows or makes way for the transcendent impulse, the transforming moment that would, paradoxically, set us free *and* bring us home.

Interpreting the Dance in terms of the Conference Theme: Home is Where we Start From

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot, 1942/1963d, p. 222)

My House Burned Down was originally choreographed to express the theme of relinquishment: a movement metaphor about a giving over but not a giving up. It was adapted for the Conference and, while keeping the theme of relinquishment, expressing a deep connection to core strength and groundedness or home as symbolic of the Conference theme. The dance also expresses a profound paradox: there is something irreconcilable and eternally restless about arriving and yet not ceasing. Is the traveller home or has s/he further to go?

What exactly is meant by home? “Home” is not so much a proper noun, an object, as it is, as a fellow choreographer put it (personal communication, 2007): a “by-product of an intense, lived and intensely creatively lived process.” For the author/choreographer/dancer “home” is largely constructed from experience of the intense interpersonal relationships that existed and exist in her life. In this sense one is always home, as the

most intense interpersonal relationship one has is with oneself; but, equally, since (my) self is elusive and sometimes I feel lost from myself, one is never home and it thus becomes something from which one is always and only starting.

From these ideas of home, simplicity, relinquishment, follow a number of hypotheses:

1. That the notion “home” holds the promise of simplicity (“Ah, finally I am home.”)
2. That, as we must let go of what we hold onto, “home” must also be relinquished.
3. That it is a place to which we come, and are always coming ...
4. ... and, equally, is a place from which we go and are always going.

The dancer presents her body as a metaphor for home. Again, what do we see? We see a dance that demonstrates an embodiment which is “the existential condition in which culture and self are grounded” (Weiss, 1998, p. 240) — the groundedness of that symbolic home. We see movements that are carefully constructed around a stable core or “centre” and the range, fluidity and strength of the movements are contingent upon this stable centre. This is a locus of symbolism in which that which is stable and “home” (bone and muscle, posture and locomotion evidencing technique, practice, more practice) and that which is ephemeral (the transience of the ever-changing dance and dancer’s body) coexist.

Home is where her body started; home nurtured, protected, grounded, shaped and trained her body. But with age, there is contraction, and the consequent loss of hope. The dance demonstrates this contraction and her dancer’s body is as the house burned down. We see the body used, used, *used*, representing the life of the self, until, it seems, nothing is left. Her house (her body, home, life) is “burned down”. One could reckon there is no home left; the home where we start from is gone, there is nothing to which to return. But if “nothing” is left, then, as Lawrence (1929/1972, p. 225) asked:

Whose is the presence
That makes the air so still and lovely to me?
Who is it that softly touches the side of my breast
And touches me over the heart
So that my heart beats soothed, soothed, soothed and at peace?

... and responded:

I tell you, it is no woman, it is no man, for I am alone.

Now the viewer observes (and the reader might imagine) that the “nothing” invites presence for the movements of the dance clearly portray that in the nothing, and out of it, *something* will (and does) emerge. The oft quoted phrase that “nature abhors a vacuum” (Rabelais, 1534/2011) is a pithy way of saying the same thing for, throughout this dance and at the end of it, it is plain for all to see that despite the expressivity of “nothing” and being “finished” life is still, obviously, and profoundly present.

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From deep within the contraction an energy rises that opens the contraction, symbolically representing that passage that is made for what comes next. *What* shall that be? It is as if, in the pause, in the hysteresis (the dependence on present and past environments), between the leaping and the not quite known, she steps to leap again; in the falling and the not quite known, her wrist and hand straighten to touch, as if some sort of ciborium (sacred container) and hope, or *raison d'être* returns, even hope against (what seems) all odds. Here there is a relinquishment but not fatalism, a giving over but not a giving up. As Eliot (1930/1963b, p. 95) put it:

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are.



Conclusion

This dance presentation offers an example of how the dancer's body dancing can be a metaphor for the therapeutic process — the combination of physical and mental consonance, plus understanding at the cognitive and sensory, wordless level is a form of communication that can be effective in the work of psychotherapy. The author/choreographer/dancer/dance therapist has discovered that the dancing of this dance and, through kinesthetic consonance the response inspired in co-participants, allows for engagement with themes of letting go (relinquishment) and letting be (home).

“Home”, as Eliot (1940/1963c, p.203) put it, “is where one starts from”, suggests not only the promise of a resolution, a *communitas* where the opposites of conscious and unconscious can coexist, but also somewhere in which something new may arise. I suggest that the dance can be, as Martin (2010, p. 2) put it: the “metaphoric symbol”, stirring a process that transcends reason, thereby allowing the numinous to arise, and the possibility of the epiphanic experience — and an explanation of how this dance and the union of dance and relinquishment to it can be for us, dancer, viewers, co-participants, transformational; in other words: the something new.

Despite that, the “aha” moment, the intuitive leap of understanding may be beyond the bounds of rational deduction, and, indeed, I suggest that the co-participatory, doing-and-viewing experience can be the spark that ignites such process.

Since it is yet outside the boundaries of the rationally understandable, engaged with the enigma of what is not yet able to be understood, poised to but not yet reconciling the rational and irrational, the conscious and unconscious, *here* the author suggests, we (must) relinquish; only then may we enter the domain of the transcendent moment, the epiphany, the “deeper communion” (Eliot, 1940/1963c, p. 204), that is: home.

The French poet Mallarmé (1945) said that in order to experience ecstasy one must relinquish the compulsion to know how. Similarly, the theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart (2011) has said that to know God one must relinquish all of one’s preconceived notions of God, and Wolfe (2012) has said that in order to know the secrets of the desert one must relinquish one’s questions. T. S. Eliot’s (1940/1963) line “In my end is my beginning” (p. 204) may mean that when we relinquish everything, we truly begin.

I train and discipline my body; I focus my thoughts; I do the rosary in my soul and I can still feel a lost wandering. When I relinquish the desire to dominate, order and control my being, when I relinquish to the flow, I feel I come home.



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