

An Expressive Body: The Beauty of Dancing in Our Elder Lives

L. Martina Young, Ph.D.

Introduction

May 1958. I was not yet three. Seamlessly my mother navigated the Los Angeles rush hour every morning winding her way to my nursery school before work. Saying “good-bye” was never pleasant as I watched her get back into the car and drive off. Then one day a dance teacher visited our little world community: Joan Chodorow. Her married name then was ‘Smallwood’—Joan Smallwood. Once, maybe twice a week she came to give us little ones a marvelous dancing experience following our nap time.

From then on I looked forward to going to nursery school knowing I’d be dancing!—moving to music that brought out some other aspect of my *being*! Joan’s gentle prompts and soft lyrical voice laid a red carpet for my inner life to dance into the coarser lines and angles of the exterior world. She created a magical environment and we were all enchanted,—at least I was and have been ever since. This integrative experience had the affect of being home—*reverie*—being at home in my authentic self, languaging.

It was clear to Joan and my parents that I was a born dancer. Since, I have enjoyed not only a rich and fulfilling career as a concert dancer and multi-venue choreographer, but I have also enjoyed the privilege of teaching and creating an environment for translating the exquisite beauty of dancing at every age throughout one’s lifespan: from K-12, children and adults with special needs, to university students and older adults. It is to this latter population that I address this essay,—the resonant and generative beauty of dancing expressively in our older years.

While much research has documented the benefits of movement and exercise for older populations—be it walking, Yoga, Pilates, rowing, or bicycling—little attention has been given to the more nuanced impact of aesthetic expressive dance movement performed by older persons. We know how music boosts cognitive function for persons living with Alzheimer’s disease, for example. What we know less about are the affects on our total wellbeing, inside and out. Aligning our gestures with beautiful music not only calms the nervous system as meditative Yoga does, but it also and ever more importantly elevates our spirits by engaging our whole beings in an embodied language of our souls. In those moments our inner lives breathe in the light of day.

“If it does not lift the psyche [soul] it will not transform it” ~ Gaston Bachelard

As teacher of *The Flow*©—my Chair Expressive Dance Movement class developed initially for persons living with Parkinson’s Disease—I wish to articulate the transcendent richnesses I’ve witnessed and on which I continue to contemplate.

“I cannot tell you enough how beautiful I feel when taking your classes. I emerge as another, sprouting with beauty, allowing myself to absorb every note, every chord, every sound. That which you emote I take in with all-knowing of my beauty, now I am gorgeous. It’s that Tuesday hour that makes me so and beyond. Thank you for filling my heart with it all.”

~ a texted message from a student, 79 years of age

Critical points with which I am interested have to do with *experiences* of beauty and their overarching effects on wellbeing,*—as distinct from theoretical definitions:

- the subjective (emotional, psychological)
- the ethical (relative to the generative well-being of the individual and society)
- post-experiential resonances,—what poet Seamus Heaney calls the “afterlife”

These considerations, what philosopher George Santayana suggest have been less regarded in discussions about ‘beauty’ I will explore in Parts I, II & III of this essay.

Part I

The Subjective Experience

When a mover—student, participant—states, “I emerge as another,” I take note. Something extraordinary has happened. I am reminded not only of my own childhood and professional reveries—limbs gently circling over limbs, neck arching skyward or bowing toward the earth, shoulders in counterpoint to waltzing feet—but I have also witnessed another’s reverie,—one who has been elevated into a transformational state. It is a marvel to see an individual enter and bring forth an aspect of their being that under other circumstances rarely peeks out into the exterior world. Why not? One’s ego personality gets in the way. The exhilaration, the contagion of joy, the expression of beauty is always transformational. Author Toni Morrison captures it this way in her Pulitzer Award-winning novel, *Beloved*:

“And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced
the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams. [They] shifted shapes
and became something other.”

The ‘something other’ is precisely *what happens*. In this instance, the dance initiates a psychological shift, and in the spatio-temporal reality of the danced moment retrieves another aspect of one’s self, expanding and re-integrating one’s self portrait. Suddenly one *is* the antelope,—the contagion of a recollection of one’s antelope self. I would add that it is also a reclamation of one’s primal animal self,—a dynamic aspect of one’s being that has been left unattended, dis-remembered, flattened, and buried.

The dance opens one up, psychologically, and by doing so gathers the disparate parts of one’s self. Recognition and re-integration of possible ways of being brings breadth to content of our lived life and, by extension, to the whole of one’s community. “This beauty is within us,” writes Bachelard, “revives us, [and] puts the dynamism of one’s life’s beauties within us.” On the generative aspect of beauty Hesiod writes:

“As Aphrodite walks flowers spring up under her feet”(*Theogony*).