

# An Expressive Body: The Beauty of Dancing in Elder Life

L. Martina Young, Ph.D.

©2024

## Prelude

May 1958. I was three. Seamlessly my mother navigated the Los Angeles rush hour every morning wending her way to my nursery school before work. Saying “good-bye” was never pleasant as I watched her get into the car and drive off. One day a dance teacher visited my little world: Joan Chodorow. Her married name then was ‘Smallwood’—Joan Smallwood. Once, maybe twice a week she came and gave us little ones a marvelous dancing experience following nap time.

From then on I looked forward to going to nursery school knowing I’d be dancing!—moving to ideas, music—being in contact with the hidden parts of myself. Joan’s prompts and soft lyrical voice laid a red carpet for my inner life to find harmony with the exterior world’s coarser lines and angles. We were all enchanted. I’ve been enchanted ever since. I danced my way into a magical place, an in-dwelling place. It was a *reverie*,—wholly being with my authentic self and discovering a language that allowed me to move through the world without words.

Since, I have enjoyed not only a rich and fulfilling career as a dance artist and choreographer, but I have also had the privilege of teaching for a spectrum of diverse populations—Head Start and K-12, persons with special needs, university students and older adults—always thrilled to translate the exquisite beauty of dancing.

Teaching and dancing with older adults inspire this essay, in particular, witnessing the generative beauty of expressive dancing in our elder years. As my childhood reveries confirm, the *transformative* experience ushered in by the beauty of expressive dancing has particular impact on our overall wellbeing. Australian dancer Eileen Kramer, age 107 at the time of this writing imparts: “I’m no longer my ordinary self, . . . I’m transformed into something wonderful.”

As teacher of *The Flow*®—my Expressive Dance Movement Chair Class initially developed for persons living with Parkinson’s Disease—this essay investigates the *feeling* of beauty. In a recent text message, a 78-year old student of *The Flow*® writes:

*“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.”*

While much research documents the benefits of movement as exercise for older populations—be it walking, Tai Chi, Yoga, Pilates, bicycling, or rowing—little attention has been brought to the more nuanced impact of aesthetic dance movement performed by older persons. We are aware of how music boosts cognitive function for persons living with Alzheimer’s Disease, for example. What we know less about are the effects on our wellbeing as a result of moving beautifully. Aligning our expressive gestures with gorgeous music not only calms the nervous system like Tai Chi, but it also raises our spirits by engaging cognitive *and* imaginative skills by opening a portal to a language of our souls. Our inner lives *b r e a t h e* in the light of day *through* our bodies. “If it does not lift the psyche [soul],” asserts poetics theorist Gaston Bachelard, “it will not transform it.” As we dance our souls levitate, renewing ways of being alive!

Critical thoughts guiding my writing are:

- the subjective (emotional, psychological)
- ethical aesthetics (beauty’s generative nature and its effect on wellbeing)
- Post-experiential resonances (what Irish poet Seamus Heaney calls the “afterlife”)

These ideas regarding beauty have been less attended to according to philosopher George Santayana. I will explore them in Parts I, II & III of this essay.

## Part I

### Subjective Experience

When a mover—student, participant—says, “I emerge as another,” I take note. Something extraordinary has happened. I am reminded not only of my own reveries—limbs gently circling over limbs, neck arching skyward or humbly bowing earthward—but that I am also witness to someone else’s transformation. What a marvel and delight to observe others bodying forth aspects of themselves that under any other circumstance rarely see the light of day. Why? Well, one reason is that one’s ego personality typically gets in the way. But oh, the glow!—the contagion!—to be enveloped in beauty’s transformative event! Author Toni Morrison captures this experience 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*. The dancing initiates a psychological shift, and in the spatio-temporal reality of the moment one retrieves another mode of being. One’s self portrait expands, is re-integrated, and brings a fuller deeper sense of being. Suddenly one *is* the antelope,—a re-collection of one’s antelope self. In other words, it is a reclamation of one’s primal being,—aspects that have been dis-remembered, unattended to, and long buried.

The beauty of expressive dancing in elder life is its ability to psychologically open one up and gather the disparate parts of one’s self. It gives depth to the content of our lives and, by extension, our ways of living in and with the world. “This beauty,” Bachelard writes, “is within us.” Moreover, “[beauty] revives us”; it is generative. 8th century poet Hesiod perceives this generative aspect in the Greek goddess of Beauty and Love: “As Aphrodite walks, flowers bloom under her feet.” Such generativity embodies ethical value. Beauty, naturally, bestows a worldly grace.

## Part II

### Aestheticization of Ethics: Gestures of a Moral Imagination

*"I never knew how expressive every part of me can be! Every part of me dances, every finger and down to my toes. I feel rejuvenated, energized, but also very peaceful."*

~ handwritten note from an 80-year old *The Flow*® student

Beauty's generativity engenders joy and peace simultaneously; it is beauty's enchantment. *To Walk in Beauty*, as the Navaho poem encourages, is to embrace the world's natural beauty alongside one's own sense of dignity: large, limitless, ever expansive, yet deeply intimate, . . .

*"The mountains, I become part of it . . ./ The evergreen, I become part of it. / The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering waters, / I become part of it. / The dew drops, the pollen, / I become part of it."*

#### *Navaho Beautyway Chant*

Human nature is concomitant with the world's nature; walking, dancing,—we grow, expand,—no less than the ways of our verdant planet. (Consider the Buddhist ethic, *dependent co-arising*). "How one walks," poet Amiri Baraka once remarked, "is as profound as a system of thought." Indeed, our everyday gestures—in solitude as well as our social practices—speak to a unified moral imagination. *How we walk, how we talk, how we are this body, how we use our physiognomies!*—all reflect a life expressive of an ethics of beauty.

Expressing beauty cannot help but alter all our ways of being: fluid *and* whole; grounded *and* elevated; humble *and* lofty. Attentive *relationality*, we bring ourselves to *how* life shows up,—especially to the innermost content of the moment at hand. It is a porous state of being: open, and generous. It is what Bachelard terms an 'aestheticization of ethics': *in relationship to the world that at once refines and grounds our composure, beckoning us to meet life forthrightly, head on, with a virtue of beauty*

one moment at a time. A responsive life renders a gestured life,—a life in the round. Infused with beauty's countenance, our bodies move with a generosity of spirit.

*"Our bodies are a series of joints,—levers; thus we are made to lift one another,—body and soul" (Young).*

In human hands, beauty's generativity finds ethical expression. A recent *Silo* episode on Apple+TV offers a perfect example of beauty's relational and ethical power:

*"When you talk about [things that matter to you], something ignites in you. And I don't see that in a lot of people. And whatever that feeling is,—when you feel it I feel it too. And it's not just here. It's afterwards" (Silo, Episode 6, "Relic" Apple+TV).*

*When you feel it I feel it too.* Here is a clear expression of beauty's power,—one human being ignited by and bridged to another. Furthermore, the feeling transcends the initial timeframe of its occurrence: "[I]t's not just here. It's afterwards." I will address the experience of 'afterwards' later in this essay. The transference of beauty's qualities is well known; we experience it in art, music, poetry, and of course, dance. We *feel* it because beauty is *within us*; beauty shines through us. And it is good.

The Greek word, *kalon*, is a compound concept for 'beauty' and 'goodness' and its meaning has a wide reach. Explicit throughout cultural imaginations, beauty carries moral or ethical resonances, bridging our human affairs and affecting our sense of belonging. Still, beauty's apprehension, admits 19th century essayist Walter Pater, requires a certain temperament. For my part, apprehending beauty requires cultivating our *porousness*, our openness,—the *condition* for that temperament.

An aesthetic temperament embodies responsiveness,—a generosity of articulate expression *through* our gestures by leaning into the *feeling*. When I glance over the elders in *The Flow®* class I am moved to tears by their complete immersion in the poetry of their movements. "Beautiful!" I exclaim. We are all transformed in the alchemy of the moment, dancing with the presence of beauty. And it is good.

I am reminded of the last line in Rainer Maria Rilke's sonnet, *The Archaic Torso of Apollo*: "You must change your life." The sentiment is echoed in *Silo*. We are beckoned to err toward the beauties of the world, meaning, *a change has gotta come*, from within and from without. Socrates's "*Know thyself*" suddenly comes to mind. Expressive dancing surely is one way.

In Plato's *The Phaedrus*, a dialogue not unlike *The Symposium* where several minds chime in about the attributes of love, Socrates utters a prayerful plea: "O Pan, and all ye other Gods, [give] me beauty in the inward man, and may the outward and inward man be at one." Here Socrates discloses his own desire: to live with beauty, and that wisdom is the most beautiful of all. *Know thyself*. Know beauty's goodness; they are one and the same, inside and out. Thought and action fulfilled for the greater good is an integrated, ethical state of being,—for self and the world.

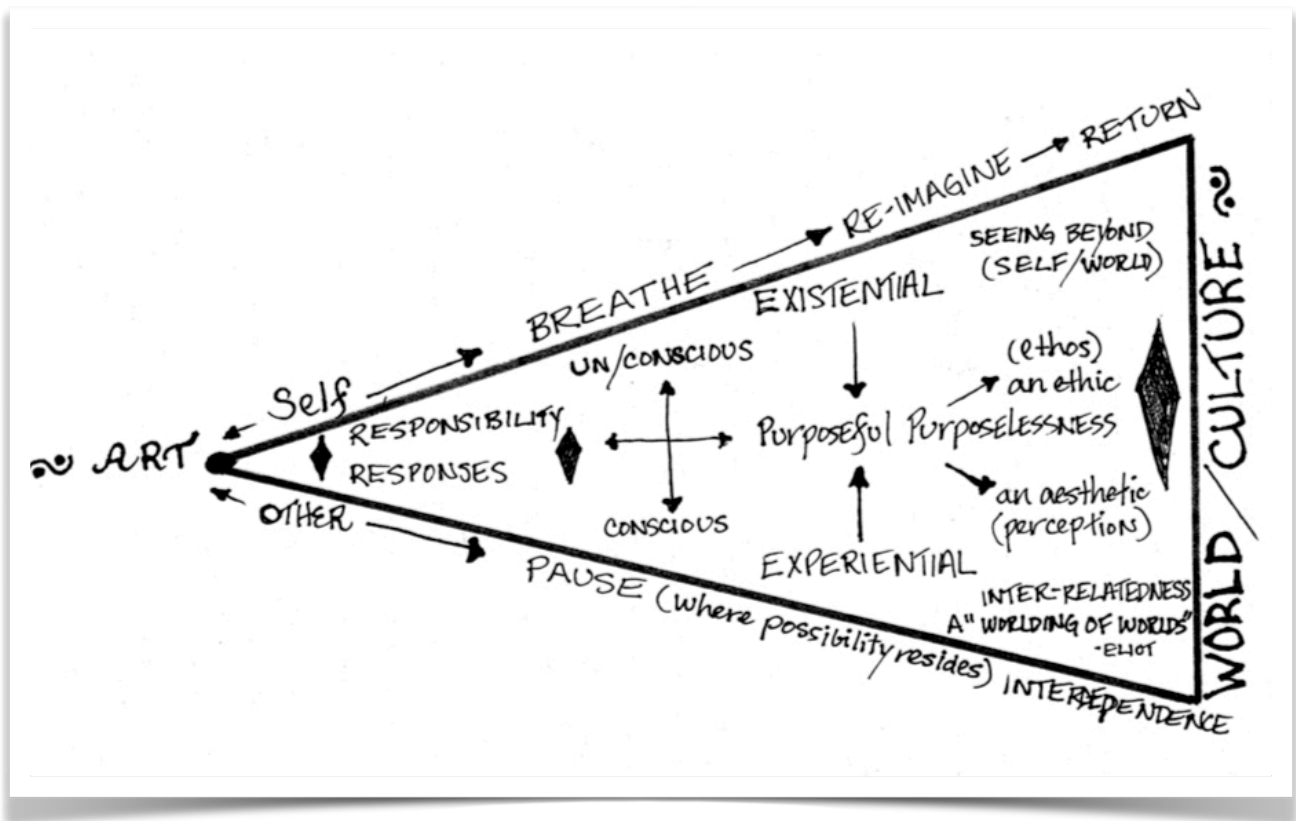
The marriage of beauty and ethics is understood not only in Western thought. In a conversation between Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and James Baldwin, Achebe, of the Igbo culture, stresses an essential aesthetic precept:

"Our art is based on morality. Perhaps this sounds old-fashioned to you, but it is not to us. The earth goddess among the Igbo people is the goddess of morality. [So] you see in our aesthetic you cannot run away from morality."

While Achebe speaks to art and art-making, it is art's underlying value, that is, its *aesthetic value* that Achebe equates beauty with ethics. The Igbo sense of beauty cannot be separated from a moral imagination. Beauty uplifts the people. Aesthetic experience is given highest import because it contributes to the overall wellbeing of the whole community.

And so it was with a 2009 presentation I gave at the Nevada Arts Council's *Oasis Arts Conference* in Reno, Nevada. Foregrounding a discussion on *somatic knowing*—intelligences informed by what I call our body's 'technology' such as feeling, intuition, imagination, and the perceptive use of our senses—I created this diagram to illustrate

how I view the inseparable relationship of the individual artist to the world-at-large. Art —dancing our way forward—is always relational; it is a duet of ethical proportions. Even at the level of performance, everyone is considered an essential part of the event; no one is passive,—viewer and performer alike are present for the greater good. And it is to this ethos that I, my teaching, and my practice are rooted, bringing me to my final thought: beauty's afterlife.



## Part III

### The Afterlife

Throughout my teaching and performance years, certain experiences have prompted me to consider what Irish poet Seamus Heaney calls the “afterlife” of aesthetic experiences: its lasting resonance. This ‘afterlife’ exists beyond the doing, after the poem has been read, after the dance has been performed. The aesthetic moment continues to live in our minds,—indeed, *in our bodies*.

Likewise, expressive dancing engages us in ways that surpass mere exercise. Its broad-band reach envelopes our souls and spirits in an ecstatic play with the life’s gorgeous realms. Expressive dancing yields to the poetry in our limbs and gently transmutes the histories held in our backs, in our arms,—it heightens our *minding* of how we live day to day. Expressive dancing is the *pause* from daily mechanical doings to which we subject our bodies and rather brings us into contact with what is possible: *poetic being*,—relational, associative. We soar on the sound of the whistling hawk; our thoughts arc and bend like a rainbow; and we find repose like a lotus on a pond. Our bone-wise language transports us and helps us to recover meaning in worldly matters if only momentarily. In the process, *ah, well!*—we become more of ourselves. Restored, we awaken to our sense of belonging in and to this world by other means.

Following an expressive movement workshop I offered some years ago, I received an impassioned correspondence from a student stating how, for days and weeks afterwards she found herself weeping. “The work we did in The Swan Practice,” the letter began, “helped me find my own way of dancing. I have danced all my life but I have never felt connected to the movement. Your workshop made me feel like it was the real me dancing, from someplace deep inside.” This letter continues to delight me and keep me in wonderment.



Walking home recently from my university, I ran into a colleague and former movement student. It was spring. We found ourselves under the bloom of a Sweet Acacia tree when all of a sudden my colleague burst into poetic gestures, and with outstretched arms began to dance!—becoming an extension of the tree itself! It was a marvel! I couldn't help but unleash my satchel and join in the dance. Before one could count to ten other passer-byes joined in; we were all dancing and laughing.

These are just a few of the ways in which the afterlife of aesthetic experiences lives in us. In an instant we are overcome with a feeling, and with a presence of mind our bodies respond: we *become* the music; we *are* the poem. With gladness or with melancholy, lived moments are remembered, and are lived again. And it is beautiful. The spontaneity of the Acacia Tree dance is, perhaps, the rarest of moments. We were transformed into something other. It is the way of all aesthetic experiences. And when we can share in the dance—*ah! well,*—we are lifted, body and soul. And it is good.

### Coda

An expressive body is a responsive body,—keenly attuned to the senses: the touch and the feel of things; textures; sounds; the flight of pigeons; life in motion and repose; how a tilt of the head—ours or someone else's—evokes a flood of emotion. An expressive body is a sensitive body: one who, with a care for particulars, retrieves an insight while threading twine through the eye of a needle; one who knows how much of an angle the wrist must bend when pouring tea from the teapot, discerning *by feel* the weight of its dwindling contents and how gradually the pitch changes as the teacup fills up,—*glissando*. It's all in the wrist.

An expressive body is always relational. From an inner life where a constellation of relations abide and language conspires with the interconnection between all things, an expressive body, especially a dancing body, speaks to the mete and measure of an aesthetic life. And it is beautiful. And it is good.

## References

- Bachelard, Gaston. *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*. Trans. Edith. R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988.
- Baldwin, James. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Mississippi: U P of Mississippi, 1989.
- Baraka, Amiri. Wikipedia. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amiri\\_Baraka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amiri_Baraka)>. 2024.
- Hesiod. *Theogony*. Trans. M. L. West. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Kramer, Eileen. Wikipedia. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eileen\\_Kramer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eileen_Kramer)> 2024.
- May, Rollo. *My Quest for Beauty*. San Francisco: Saybrook, 1985.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- Navaho: Walking in Beauty*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. New York: Warbler Press, 2023.
- Plato. *Essential Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. New York: B & N Classics, 2005.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. <https://poets.org/poem/archaic-torso-apollo>. Online. Poets.org, 2024.
- Santayana, George. *The Sense of Beauty*. New York: Dover Publications, 1955.
- Silo*. AppleTV+. Season1, Ep. 6, "The Relic." <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silo\\_\(series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silo_(series))>. 2024
- Young, L. M. "Where Grace May Pass: A Poetics of the Body." Pacifica Graduate Institute. Santa Barbara, California: <https://www.pacifica.edu>, 2007.

Copyright © 2024 by the Author, L. Martina Young

Photography by L. Martina Young

No portion of this writing can be re-printed without the written permission of the Author.