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# **Dance as a moving spirituality: A case study of Movement Medicine**

Eline Kieft, dance guide and anthropologist

## **Abstract**

This article describes dance as a moving spirituality through the case study of a specific practice called Movement Medicine. It addresses how a danced spirituality differs from other forms of spirituality, such as meditation and contemplation, and attempts to explore some of the aspects that make dance a unique medium for an embodied, lived and creative spirituality. 'Feel good feelings', as well as emerging from difficult emotions encountered on the dance floor, generate a sense of meaning which is translated to taking sustainable, socially just action. Through dance, different states of consciousness can be experienced through which 'other' knowledge is accessed and subsequently embodied. In these states, people can also meet and relate to spirit beings, and simultaneously express that relationship through the moving body. Finally, three qualities of dance are discussed, which contribute to concrete, lasting changes in existing life structures.

## **Keywords**

embodied spirituality

dance

feelings

altered states

other ways of knowing

direct, immediate and reciprocal experience and expression of spirits

change and action

My dance became a prayer, a dance with god and my heart expanded so wide. I was swept [...] upon a river of love for god and for this life. It became a sacred dance for me [...]. To dance is to know, for our body holds all the secrets and when we move [...] we allow those secrets to emerge and come to consciousness. Our deep knowing is formed on the breath and freed as we move and breathe, listen and become present to

that which desires expression through us. A hand that glides like a bird and spreads wings to fly. A foot that holds the earth and feels her pulse in the beat of blood. A head that bends to an emotion that arises spontaneously and lets flow the well of tears. A heart that lifts and falls with the wave of music and feels its Soul. To dance is a prayer, not just for god but for our self; for our awakening to our Self and all that we can be; the innermost core of self. [...] To dance is to be and to become. (Katheryn May 2008 School of Movement Medicine newsletter)

Based on my recent Ph.D. research at the University of Roehampton, London, as well as 29 years of love for dance and studying a wide variety of styles,<sup>1</sup> I discuss in this article the medium of dance as a moving spirituality through the case study of a specific practice called 'Movement Medicine'. How is a danced spirituality different from other forms of spirituality? Does dance have advantages compared to other spiritual practices? If yes, what are they, and why is that the case? I argue that dance offers a different kind of spirituality to more static forms, such as meditation and contemplation, and attempt to explore some of the aspects that make dance a unique medium for an embodied, lived spirituality.

### TS: INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1: An example of a Movement Medicine dance space.

Movement Medicine is a contemporary freestyle dance practice for lay practitioners, presented as a way to interact deeply with the self, others and the natural and spirit world, aiding self-discovery and the search for a deepening of meaning, connection and tools to live life skilfully (Darling Khan & Darling Khan, 2009; Kieft, 2013). As it is inspired by ecstatic dance (most notably Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms™ practice), shamanism, voice work and Bert Hellinger's Family Constellations, it is considered a spiritual practice. During each workshop, a ceremonial space is created which allows the dancers to focus on and connect with specific areas of life, including spirit and the divine. This energetic field, called 'the mesa',<sup>2</sup> is co-created intentionally between the teacher(s), participants and the physical and energetic features of the space, such as an altar and the music. Each of these components contributes in their own way to creating the possibility of meaningful and transformative experiences. Within this field or ritualized space, a 'liminal space' may at times emerge for individuals and/or for the group (Turner, 2007 [1969]). People have experiences of which the intensity can vary from ordinary to overwhelmingly strong, once-in-a-lifetime moments. Although the dance floor is not a sacred place in the sense of wider

historic, religious or social meaning or worship, it can indeed become a space where the luminous and sacred may appear.

**TS: INSERT FIGURE 2a–e**

Figures 2a–e: Movement Medicine altars.

My research investigated the contributions of Movement Medicine to well-being, personal growth and spirituality as experienced and expressed by participants. I used a combination of hermeneutic and ethnographic methodologies, gathering data through ongoing participant observation from 2006–11, 25 qualitative interviews and analysis of 190 articles in the School of Movement Medicine’s newsletter.<sup>3</sup> It would be safe to say that most Movement Medicine participants have a commitment to self-actualization and to living a meaningful life. Many have a strong foundation in other spiritual practices such as Buddhism, Sufism or shamanism. They mention feelings of alienation from mainstream culture and a desire to ‘belong’. They also express a sense of ‘missing’ something, and in Movement Medicine they find an experience of community which is often underlined by using words such as ‘tribe’ and ‘family’. This is very similar to the descriptions of participants in the Human Potential Movement and other New Age subcultures of the early twenty-first century (Buckland, 2002; R. Cohen & Rai, 2000; Greenwood, 2000; Jakobsen, 1999; Lowe, 1986; Pearson, Roberts, & Samuel, 1998; Prince & Riches, 2000; Sutcliffe, 2003; Sylvan, 2005; Wallis, 2003; York, 1995). Although the value of the role of religion or spirituality in postmodern times can be questioned – as it often seems to be pieced together according to ‘particular consumer requirements’ and abandoned if it does not serve those needs (Heelas, 1994: 102) – much of this discussion depends on the definition of religion and its role in culture. If we see religion or spirituality as a set of answers to existential questions (Bell (1977),<sup>4</sup> then the assumed breakdown of religions, or ‘de-traditionalization’ as Heelas (1994: 103) called it, is not that important, because the search for answers and the creation of the sacred is timeless (Bell, 1977: 429; Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: 160). That this search currently takes highly individual forms does not necessarily mean that it is less valid. After all, the great religions were once experiences of individuals that solidified through the effort of trying to repeat divine encounters.

Also, if we look at one of the (albeit disputed) etymologies of the word ‘religion’ – *re-ligare* – this may refer to connecting or reconnecting with the sacred (Andrén, Jennbert, & Raudvere, 2006; Barnhart, 1988). These reconnections can be brought about by many different activities at any given moment, and are not dependent on specific religious specialists or contexts (compare Maslow, 1994: 29). Other than church settings such as New Age workshops create

contemporary situations in which people may experience these connections anew in different ways. For some, this can bridge the gap between the search for answers and established religions that possibly do not address the questions in a language that is understood by postmodern individuals. Again, even if the original motivation is inevitably embedded in the consumerist, capitalist ethos, the search for settings that enable extraordinary experiences is testimony to the fact that the questions have not lost their relevance. Although many activities contribute to spiritual experiences, including sports, doing the dishes, playing or listening to music and making love (see for example Czikszentmihalyi, 1975), there are places, activities and circumstances where such experiences can be more easily evoked or accessed, and in this article I will explore dance as one of them.

### **Case study: Movement Medicine as ceremonial dance space**

Movement Medicine consists of individual, free, primarily solo movement improvisation. In general, there are no set steps, routines, choreographies or formations. At first sight, everyone seems to move in a different way. As there are no prescriptions regarding the dance style (its appearance, movements, tempo, volume or aesthetics), individual limits are defined by flexibility, fitness, energy levels, moods, emotions and process. Some people have a larger movement vocabulary available and move through the space confidently, whereas others may be dancing an inward, delicate and stationary dance, with possibly less variation in movement expression. This may even vary from moment to moment for each individual, as a person's process can change abruptly from quiet and internal to big and extrovert, and consequently influence their movements. The dancers' movements also convey emotional qualities such as 'sad' or 'playful', 'inspired', 'bored' or 'angry', and often leave an impression of archetypes or stories that can be imagined in the dance. The dance includes sounds and other explicit expressions that would possibly be considered offensive or objectionable in different contexts. Movement descriptions by participants often refer to both nature and stereotypical 'tribal culture', which raises interesting questions about the identification of (mostly) urban people with nature and the contemporary 'spiritual' notions around it (see for example Greenwood, 2005; Hanegraaff, 1998; Pearson et al., 1998), and also about the idealization of tribal societies (Aldred, 2000; Black, 2002; Weaver, 2004). No comments are made regarding 'good' or 'bad' dancers.

**TS: INSERT FIGURE 3a–3e**

Figure 3a–3e: Movement Medicine dancers.

There is a strong supposed link in Movement Medicine between movement and life; life is considered to be the ‘creative, dynamic interplay between stability and change, limits and growth, awareness of what is and movement towards what can be’ (Darling Khan & Darling Khan, 2009: xvii). This indicates movement between different parts of the individual psyche, but also a movement from the present towards the future. Bridging paradoxes within the individual is thought to increase their self-awareness, which is considered necessary for finding collective solutions to global crises (compare van Egmond, 2010). Movement is underlined as the basic ‘medicine’ (a concept frequently used in shamanic traditions) to remedy disconnection, to release blocks that may cause inhibition and fear, and for energy and soul retrieval. ‘Soul loss’ is a shamanic term for moments when part of the soul can become separated from the person ‘in order to survive the experience’ (Ingerman, 1991: 11). This can lead to illness (Eliade, 1972 [1951]: 300-1, 327), and these parts therefore need to be retrieved to secure or regain full health.

A wide variety of exercises address themes such as the polarities represented by yin and yang; the elements earth, fire, water and air; and an awareness of different dimensions of relationships with oneself, others, community and nature, the spirit world, the divine, the tree of life and the symbolism of the phoenix. The work is furthermore organized in nine different ‘gateways’ grouped together in three groups of three ‘journeys’. Each of these journeys contains three specific ‘stations’ as a focus of attention, as well as a spatial orientation that gives a sense of direction. The first ‘journey’ – represented by a vertical line – connects the body, heart and mind. The second ‘journey’ is seen as an axis through time, running horizontally through the body, visualizing the past behind, the present in the centre of the body and the future in front (Darling Khan & Darling Khan, 2009: 79). The third ‘journey’ addresses personal fulfilment, interconnection and a potential realization of oneness with all of existence, and is represented by a ‘lateral and ultimately circular or spherical axis’ (2009: 79).

The different aspects of Movement Medicine, which reflect several spiritual traditions, are represented in a ‘mandala’ (see figure 4). This is the symbolic, condensed representation of the aims, intentions and ceremonial space of Movement Medicine. It is not only used as business logo, but actively gives shape to the energetic field of the practice, and functions as a ‘map’ for accessing gateways to the soul (Darling Khan & Darling Khan, 2009: xix –xxii).<sup>5</sup>

## TS: INSERT FIGURE 4

Figure 4: Movement Medicine mandala.<sup>6</sup>

This ‘map’ is translated to various workshops, ranging from two to ten days, which focus on specific themes: responsibility and personal authority; voice expression; working with emotions; sexuality; rituals; and changing perceptions of self and the world, and connections to spirit and ancestors. In general, they contribute to embodiment, healing, empowerment and transformation (Kieft, 2013). A Movement Medicine space can be described as an ‘altar’ for being and becoming, as an honouring and celebration of life in all shapes and flavours.

### **Experiencing spirituality through motion**

In many cultures and spiritual traditions, dancing is practiced as a means of coming closer to spirit, to encounter the divine, and as an expression of that relationship that already exists. This includes some mystical branches of Islam and Christianity (Hume, 2007: 68), for example, as well as non-delineated forms of ‘sacred dance’.

Dancing can be still, quiet, receptive and reflective, as well as exuberant and celebratory. It includes all aspects of the body-heart-mind unity or continuum, each of which finely influence and affect each other. Movement in one area of this continuum immediately affects other areas. It is precisely because the human being can draw from all its interior levels of information that the body-heart-mind-continuum is an instrument of and for direct experience. When I look at my own practice, I realize keeping my back rigid and straight creates a very different feeling/sensation/experience to moving my spine freely, turning, flexing and bending my torso around in all directions. Focusing my eyes on a still point in one direction or having them closed in meditation is different to moving my gaze around 360°. Limbs that are encouraged to move create a different experience to when they are required to be still, in a posture that is kept for any length of time. If I am able to express the experiences that arise in my moving body in a light tip-toeing foot dance or in a flexing of my fingers or stretching of my jaw, this again is very different to distantly

observing the emotions that arise in the mind. The body-heart-mind continuum can be trained to attune and listen to other subtle pieces of information in a way that is wholly inclusive of the totality of the human being. Through movement, this inclusivity is strengthened and reinforced. The dancing body has the ability to become an antenna for the direct experience of spirit and the sacred, which is not defined or fixed by sacred stories, interpreters and 'gatekeepers' of the mysteries. Bradford Keeney explains it as follows:

Shamans first move the locus of mind to the heart and whole body rather than to the inside of the computational cerebral brain. This whole-body knowing is, in turn, a vehicle for stepping into relational mind, allowing for 'the other' to be felt in more intimate and expressive ways. As we are absorbed into the greater relationships around us, whether with another person or a redwood forest, we enter the domain of sacred mind. This broader mind touches, awakens, and deepens our connection with one another and brings us inside the mind of nature, an ecology that holds diverse ways of knowing and being. (Keeney, 2005: 39)

This broader or 'sacred mind' which exists outside us, as well as in other layers of our being that we might not always have direct access to, is directly accessible through movement (compare Keeney, 2007: 112). We could therefore speak of a body-heart-mind-*spirit* continuum through which we are acutely aware of our interrelationship with other beings, because the continuum does not stop at the boundaries of our skin. This fourth, 'spiritual' level 'beyond words' is also described by Anna and Daria Halprin (1995 and 2003, respectively), and is linked to simultaneously imbuing the physical, emotional and mental levels, which have to work together in order to cultivate spiritual awareness (D. Halprin, 2003: 105; Worth & Poynor, 2004: 59-60). The body can be seen as channel or avenue through which 'higher levels of consciousness' (D. Halprin, 2003: 105) or our 'spirit/soul' (Hume, 2007: 139) work.

In general, art has the capacity to uplift and bring people in touch with other dimensions (see for example Shusterman, 2008). Dance is somewhat different, because the artwork is actually created and experienced within and through the body. Dancing is a 'double act' of moving and feeling oneself moving at the same time: 'Awareness of experiencing what one is expressing is the kind of somatic transformation emphasized by disciplines like yoga or breathing meditation. It is an ultimate intimacy, a doing while being with oneself' (Sklar, 2000: 72). It is this intimacy that allows us to bring that which we embody in ourselves 'into our relationships with others and into the world' (D. Halprin, 2003: 79). Because dance is fluid and multidimensional, occupying one's

front, side, back, inside, outside, high and low, dancers cannot but recognize themselves as multidimensional agents moving through the space. Again, when I dance, I am literally moving through and actively engaging with the great mystery. If I move my hand this way or that, the whole world and my relationship to it seems to shift. I am aware of the spaces between the molecules and directly experience my connection to the web of life. It is as if all the pores of my skin become attuned to the life force and creation pulsating outside of me. On the dance floor, in Jung's (1971: 40) terms, consciousness meets its archetypal foundation. Each dancer's individual style and movement vocabulary is a metaphor for the 'blueprint' of their unique expression of self and their being in the world. Through our dancing bodies, we can partake in a dialogue between different forces inside ourselves and in the wider community, and we can dance our souls back into the body. Becoming body-literate increases our capacity to be in relationship with seen and unseen, known and unknown dimensions of the world around us. This relationship between practitioner and the mystery defines spirituality for me, and dancing is a possibility for directly experiencing and expressing this two-way relationship, traffic or communication.

### **Emotionally moving: A touching, heartfelt spirituality**

Through the body and dance, people can experience and express the whole range of human emotions.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, dance is a place of celebration of the life force. This includes feelings of joy, pleasure, love, hope and compassion, play, humour and an appreciation of beauty. Movement Medicine participants speak of the delight that embodiment brings; a full experience of the senses, as it enables one to appreciate the aliveness that is surging through the body (Hans 26 April 2008 interview). David describes how, through dance, he has a deeper recognition of beauty in the world and people, even on grey, rainy Monday mornings when the heating is not working and the house looks like a 'plumber's yard'. He also experiences an increased enjoyment of the 'savour and texture of food', rather than overeating to fill a metaphysical emptiness inside (David December 2007 newsletter). Although 'joy' may seem effortless, for some people it actually takes as much (or even more) courage and effort to choose an attitude of happiness, pleasure and gratitude as it does to let go of difficult emotions. It often requires an active choice, which needs to be renewed and renewed, instead of unconsciously and habitually emphasizing struggle, suffering and hardship.

However, contrary to what may be the general assumption of dancing, the dance is certainly not always an easy place. On the other hand of the spectrum, participants also frequently experience 'raw' and difficult emotions. Feelings such as shame, stress, guilt, fear, rage, a feeling

that life is uninhabitable and yet one is 'stuck' in it are uncomfortable places to visit in oneself or to admit oneself to feeling (see also Leseho & Maxwell, 2010). Most Movement Medicine dancers feel at some point that they are 'going over the edge of the comfort zone', 'falling apart' or 'deconstructing'. Some describe this as 'a dark night of the soul' – a concept which is recognized in most healing trajectories, mystical journeys and also in Jung's 'individuation' (Jung, 1971 [1959]: 275-89; 1981 [1921]: 448-450). This may refer to physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual experiences, and is often accompanied by feelings of being in the unknown, and/or being uncomfortably uncertain:

I have experienced the dance as frightening, dark, inhibiting, dangerous, physically and energetically unsafe, intrusive, destructive, stressful, distancing, unloving, boring, pointless, vain, silly, nasty. And every time I have been so glad I kept dancing through that and got to the other side. Those are the times I treasure most – they are the leaps of faith into a new way being in the world, which nurture me as I grow. (Lunar 15 November 2008 interview)

Jung (1993 [1953]: 338) compared this stage of the hero's journey to being swallowed up in the belly of the whale or dragon. However, participants keep dancing through fear, the unknown, anxiety, avoidance and resistance, and eventually come out 'on the other side'. Once there, they recognize that, after doing 'the hard work', life seemingly becomes easier, and therefore they are willing to 'invest' in that reward. 'Surviving' these challenges often eventually results in increased self-confidence through knowing from experience that one is able to handle more than one initially thought. This is comparable to a 'spiritual emergence' (Grof & Grof, 1986), and is indeed described as such by participants. The 'dark night' seems to crack open the outer layers, and bring the person somewhat closer to their soul, truth and to the mystery. People also experience god being 'right there in the middle of' difficult experiences (Elloa 15 January 2009 interview). This transformation or change of perspective can be perceived as 'being born again', and as 'another way of living life' (Paloma 24 November 2007 interview), and invites a state of non-duality where pain and love are experienced as one and the same substance. The release of trauma and emotions held in the body in this way literally opens up 'space' for spirit. Through the embodied experience of this cycle of descent, crisis and emergence, spirituality becomes a lived and living experience, rather than an abstract, external, metaphysical and transcendent concept. Also, the vulnerability often experienced in this process can create an awareness of mortality and the preciousness of life.

This physical and visceral experience creates empathy and compassion for others, and makes people aware of the necessity of peace and social justice.

Sometimes, accepting and dancing with certain emotions feels impossible. In that case, Movement Medicine participants are invited to transform themselves into a danced prayer for people in similar situations, and/or to send out blessings to people in specific circumstances. In this sense, emotions are taken beyond the direct private sphere, losing some of the individual's immediate identification with or immersion in them, while still making a significant contribution to the group field by responsibly 'holding', or rather 'moving', that particular emotion (23 June 2007 field notes).

Both the 'feel-good feelings' and the reward of emerging from a 'dark night of the soul' seem to stimulate happiness and well-being in general. Participants consciously make an effort to increase and spread this zest for life. This is translated in interest and active involvement in the well-being of others; a will to serve through supporting charities or doing voluntary work; a sense of 'stewardship' to look after the earth and preserve nature and life for current and future generations; and a wish to distribute things evenly so that more people can live a good life. These aspects are fundamental to most religions (see for example Moses, 2002 (1989)), and in turn these drives generate a sense of meaning, which is again an intrinsic motivation for 'doing good' (compare Damasio, 2004); it thus becomes a positive circle that reinforces itself.

### **Moving to different places in consciousness and accessing 'other' knowledge**

Most spiritual traditions include tools that enable practitioners to access different states of consciousness for the purposes of gathering information, healing or otherwise connecting with non-material dimensions of life. There are different types of trance states, varying from light to deep trance (Jakobsen, 1999: 10), and different ways these states are experienced. This is partly dependent on the techniques used, but also on the context in which they happen. As Brian Morris writes: '*what* will be experienced – its actual content – and *how* it will be experienced are largely functions of the intentions, expectations, and beliefs of the individual and the social and cultural context' (Morris, 2006: 37, italics in original). Whether these altered states are a prerequisite for spiritual experiences or whether they are a religious or spiritual experience in themselves is both dependent on how individuals perceive these states, and on the definitions of religious or spiritual experience (Kieft, 2013).

Dancing is one of the widely recognized tools to induce altered states of consciousness (Eliade, 1972 [1951]; Hume, 2007: 1). Movement Medicine participants describe qualities such as

being wholly present in the moment; an absence of thoughts; a sense of expansion or dissolving into the cosmos; distortion of time and space; experiences of non-duality; and a lost sense of self or ego. One participant, for example, compares the normal speed of thoughts to rain pattering steadily on a lake. In the dance, she experiences moments without thoughts, when ‘the chatterbox has actually stopped.’ Then the ‘lake’ becomes very still, and is only disturbed every now and then by a drop of condensation falling from a tree branch. This especially happens when she dances fast, with repetitive movements, and without thinking about how she is going to move next, so that self-conscious thoughts slow down. In this state, she feels vibrantly alive, joyful and tranquil at the same time, and in full possession of her mind, which operates differently, ‘without the internal dialogue’ (Anonymous 4 September 2008 interview). These trance-like states furthermore include personal encounters with the divine, and a deep sense of oneness and interconnection with and love for others and creation (compare Czikszentmihalyi, 1975; Eliade, 1972 [1951]; Hume, 2007; Maslow, 1994). For experienced dancers, the dance can be seen not just as a technique to reach an altered state of consciousness, but as an altered state of consciousness in itself. The awareness, the mind and the body have been trained to drop into simply being present in the body from the first movement on the dance floor, focusing with one’s entire being on opening, calling, connecting and remembering. This includes moving from one state to another; for example, from a perceived disconnection to an experience of connection within the self (for example, between body and mind), and/or between the self and the world around; from isolation to unity; from duality to oneness; from merged to distinct; from contracted to expanded; from internal to external; and from homogenous to diverse. Without preference for either end of a polarity, the dance can create an increased awareness of the complementary nature of seemingly opposite poles, and thus contributes to an increased spectrum of expression.

Moving in these altered states somehow enables people to access ‘other’ knowledge than that which is normally based in rational thinking processes, offering wisdom and insights through a different mode other than the exclusively rational mind, namely through the moving body which includes the intellect (compare de Quincey, 2002). This pertains to both knowledge that people attribute to their intuition or ‘inner compass’, which for some reason had become obscured or not yet accessed and knowledge that people perceive as existing outside of them in a larger field of consciousness. The information often has a visionary quality, such as insights into the nature of life and growth cycles, mortality, unity, and sometimes as receiving a specific calling. Not necessarily spiritual in itself, the way this information has come about and its nature, symbolism, clarity and intensity are often, although not exclusively, attributed to the ‘sacred’ or ‘liminal’ space created on the dance floor, and which is received through the moving body. These experiences also question

the nature and location of concepts such as mind, consciousness, intuition, soul and spirit, and also whether these are contained within the body or extend beyond the skin; it also asks how these wider, maybe even universal ‘fields’ or information sources, can be accessed (Damasio, 1999; de Quincey, 2005; Keeney, 2005; Radin, 1997; Roney-Dougal, 1991; Sheldrake, 1988).

Hume (2007) describes how accessing knowledge, gaining insight into ‘higher truths’ and seeking a union with the divine through dance and movement are recognized within the Sufi tradition of the whirling dervishes. The Sufi practice aims to attain a state ‘where the mind is emptied of all distracting thoughts and focused on one’s innermost centre, where one is closest to the Divine and can be filled with the presence of God’, or in other words ‘an emptying of the self so that “true reality” may enter’ (Hume, 2007: 67). This enables participants to have ‘a direct experience of the Reality or Truth, *al haqq*, or Allah’ (Hume, 2007: 67, *Italics in original*). What Hume calls ‘annihilation of self’ and ‘elimination of ego’ (2007: 67) is also referred to by Movement Medicine participants as loss of self (awareness) or self-consciousness closely related to an expansion into a bigger and wider ‘field’ or ‘force’, which can stretch out to and include the natural world, the spirit world or the universe (see also Sullivan, 2006). The loosening of the personality seems in this case both a prerequisite for and an effect of the altered state of consciousness, which, in turn, leads to the possibility of accessing other knowledge:

Feeling that deeply exquisite sense of being connected, with everybody and with myself. And I’m giving and receiving totally in a state of blissful sensitivity [...]. And in that space, in that time, I feel totally complete, and connected with a much bigger force or sense of being that for me those moments, they are amazing. That’s expanded. And it sometimes more internal than external. A sense of lack of self-consciousness, and more of a sense of consciousness. That borderline between where my edges go and I’m not looking at myself dancing. (Ruth 4 March 2009 interview)

However, there seems to be a degree of discomfort with trance in our culture. Even though trance experiences also have firm roots in western history (Ehrenreich, 2007), they have become ‘othered’ – often feared, marginalized and ridiculed, rather than recognized as an inherent part of the human possibilities. Therefore, aside from blissful altered state experiences, Movement Medicine participants also sometimes perceive the sense of loss of self that is associated with these altered states as dangerous or scary. Relinquishing control can be feared as an unknown experience from which a safe return seems unsure:

I've had a trance experience of being the entire ocean. At that time (and a few times since) I felt that I could release something – some part of me – into being that huge, and that it would be blissful and beautiful and I would gain great wisdom. But I don't feel ready to explore that far [...]. It may be that there would be no way back. I'm not expecting that to mean death or insanity (although either would be possible) but more such a change in perspective that I wouldn't recognize the person I am now. It may simply be that I lack the courage to be that big. (Lunar 15 November 2008 interview)

This compares to how for example the Khoesan peoples from Namibia consider trance dancing as an act of bravery to face a mini-death when 'temporarily relinquishing the power of the rational mind over the body, as well as undertaking possibly fearful metaphysical journeys to a powerful "other world"' (Sullivan, 2006: 236). In Movement Medicine, the body is emphasized as an 'anchor' that can generate positive, safe experiences with trance, and also creates a ground for 'bringing home' transcendental experiences.

Although trance is certainly not unusual (according to Maslow (1994: 29), most people have 'peak experiences' easily and often, also in very ordinary situations), this does not mean that such experiences always happen for every dancer, nor that ritual and dance are the only places where such experiences occur (compare Ehrenreich, 2007: 257-8). Nevertheless, the fact that most people seem to be able to access such experiences shows that the distinction between the extraordinary and the ordinary is more fluid than generally assumed.

### **Moving to, with and through spirit**

Besides spontaneous insights in a state in which the rational mind is 'out of the way' and knowledge can emerge, another way of accessing 'other' knowledge is through intentional interaction with 'spirit beings', which can manifest in different forms and contexts (Morris, 2006: 15).<sup>8</sup> Whether or not these have an 'ontological reality of their own' or are a 'kind of energy projection that is an aspect of the person and that could assume a semi-independent form and consciousness for a limited period of time' (Hume, 2007: 147, referring to Young, 1994: 183), 'spirit beings' are introduced and experienced in Movement Medicine as a real and tangible part of the practice. Relationship is sought on the basis of receiving 'help, power and knowledge' (Jakobsen, 1999: 9, see also p. 218). For example 'the spirit of the dance', 'spirits of the four elements' and the 'spirit of the land' may all be directly addressed. Participants are invited to make their own connection to spirits, personal allies and the divine, and to use their own language for it

(31 March 2009 field notes). Aside from possible staged encounters during specific exercises, participants may have their own, spontaneous encounters, which can be experienced in different ways such as visuals (shapes and/or colours), sounds and feelings. At one point during a workshop, participants were invited to dance with 'Benevolent Death':

A presence appeared that was Other, and unusual. I stopped directing the movements consciously, and my dance changed into something I've never danced before. It was touching and mysterious and powerful. There was an earthiness to my dance, an inevitability, a recognition of mortality and through that, I perceived the exquisite joy of being alive. I could taste mud, hear the wind in my hair and relish in the tingling warmth of my body. It was a warm feeling, not cold as I expected, and death, in that moment, became a companion and an ally. (Eline 21 June 2007 field notes)

Some participants speak of 'being taken over' by the dance or spirit, rather than 'directing' the dance: 'I'm not dancing, the dance is dancing through me' (Victor 25 September 2008 interview), or they describe 'being moved by the wind and by the space':<sup>9</sup>

[...] as if my atomic structure had very slightly loosened. Not a wind, more a breeze. It was as if a breeze blew through my body. As if my body had stopped being solid. And I was swaying very slightly and I felt as if I was totally held by the space. That I wasn't holding myself up is how I experienced that. (Anonymous 20 November 2008 interview)

The dance becomes a tool for relating to spirit, as well as for expressing that relationship. The body is literally brought forward and made available to spirit for its expression, and the dancer sometimes gets entirely out of the way. When the dancer is 'back', the spirit imprint and knowledge remain, literally 'inspiring' the dancer, who, through a web of such connections, becomes more consciously and strongly embedded in the natural and spirit world.

Ancestors, as a specific category of spirits, are also acknowledged in Movement Medicine. This includes the line of personal ancestors and the collective ancestry of our species back to the first life on earth. Although again this may occur spontaneously, certain exercises open a space for tapping into the 'knowing field' of the ancestral family system (compare D. B. Cohen, 2006: 226). Dancers can, for example, be asked to imagine their ancestors behind them, turn around to face them, and then be invited to step 'into' them (24 September 2007 field notes). Participants describe

physical experiences or recollections of ancestral memories that have been passed down through family history, in which they adopt a posture or movement style that is associated with their (known) relatives, and in which they may experience strong feelings attributed to their ancestors. Emma writes about an experience during a workshop specifically dedicated to working with ancestors:

The dance began to flow and take form. As a silent witness I followed these moves, I let them take over, allowed them out and into motion. These moves were mine but not completely of me. I recognised my fight in this dance but I had an awareness that it spanned further than my lifetime. (Emma February 2008 newsletter)

Through the movements that came, Emma felt the restrictions of 'society, religion and unhappy marriages' that were 'handed down from mother to daughter', and also gained an understanding of how this has impacted her own life. Kneeling, feeling defeated, trapped and oppressed, she realized how her ancestors had been unable to fight back. Realizing this, her movements changed into rage, and an awareness that she could 'change and break this pattern' through her dance, with a sense of 'power that growls in the dark, it is ancient and secret, ferocious and magnificent' (Emma February 2008 newsletter). After the workshop, she visited her mother, who confirmed these feelings in their maternal line. Emma felt that healing took place, both in the present and in the past, so that 'there could only be a new future path for the women to come' (Emma February 2008 newsletter).

Henk describes a danced experience through seven generations of his father's family line, with different 'atmospheres' and 'energies' in each generation. Doing this, he started to understand some of the fear and anxiety they had gone through, while also finding gratitude, strength and release for both his ancestors, himself and his daughter (Henk 5 July 2010 personal communication).

### **Moving life's structures through action: Becoming co-creators**

There is a wide agreement among dance researchers and dance therapists that dancing, and possibly even watching dance, can reshape practices, behaviours, world views, beliefs and ideas. It can revolutionize psychological perceptions, ways of being together in the world and one's outlook on life (Buckland, 2002: 181; Cohen Bull, 1997; D. Halprin, 2003; Hanna, 1988; Rill, 2006; Williams, 2004). Fiona Buckland (2002: 1), in her book on improvised social dancing in contemporary club culture, describes how dance holds the 'potential to transform and transcend.

How it links the everyday to the utopic. How it helps to remember the past and imagined possibilities for the future'. Another contemporary example is rave culture, which often creates a lasting sense of acceptance and inner peace that is carried from the dance floor back into the external social world (Rill, 2006).

In Movement Medicine, too, translating the experiences back into daily life structurally receives attention in workshops. Participants are asked to formulate small steps towards change and integration, for example, before leaving the venue, and in the weeks and months following the workshop. They are encouraged to visualize themselves acting according to the insights received. Participants describe a wide range of changes that they attribute to the dance experience. Some of these appear immediately, whereas others become apparent through facing familiar situations in which the participant has the ability to respond in a different way. The dance holds the possibility to affirm and strengthen pre-existing views and beliefs, and can even radically change outlooks on life. Internal changes affect concrete decision-making strategies, choices, actions and interpretations in external everyday situations.<sup>10</sup>

How can a 'simple' dance experience contribute so effectively to change, and motivate people to make such concrete, lasting adjustments to existing structures in their life (compare Stromsted, 2001)? My data indicate three qualities of dance that contribute to this. First of all, as we saw in the first paragraph on experiencing spirituality through movement, the medium of dance generates a directness and immediateness of experiences: these are literally arising in and brought home to the moving self as an integrated continuum. It is as if knowledge emerging in the moving body urges us to action in a stronger way than knowledge that originates in the mind alone. As Judith Lynne Hanna (1987: 103) wrote: 'the efficacy of dance lies in its cognitive-affective-sensori-motor power to effect change'. The experiences can be so strong that action seems inevitable. For example, once people experienced interconnection and oneness, they 'do not really have a choice but to act on it' (Sasa 4 September 2008 interview). The insights perceived on the dance floor can therefore be a strong catalyst for making concrete changes in daily life.

Secondly, through dance as a form of art and medium of creativity, dancers recognize themselves as active and creative actors and agents. Dancer and choreographer Mary Wigman (Wigman, 1966: 8-9) described how she 'could invent and create' in the dance and shape her visions. For her, both life and the dance mirrored the process of 'die and arise,' and the dance was a tool to face life even when it appeared unbearable; to remain true to oneself and to obey 'the law that called us into being' (ibid.). Through an awareness of mortality and the vulnerability of life recognized on the dance floor, participants are encouraged to make sustainable choices that are in harmony of and support both their personal journey and collective structures. As we have seen,

these changes can be fuelled by the desire to emphasize and share more joy in life to become actively involved in the well-being of others (compare Damasio, 2004: 284); or by despair, which can also be a key factor for empowerment and change (compare Macy & Young Brown, 1998). These actions might also be fuelled by a drive and endeavour to preserve life and survive (Naess, 2005 [1953]: 101).

Thirdly, dancing in a group can have a profound effect on the structure of society in two different ways. On the one hand, shared feelings of love and solidarity raised through collective ecstasy in dance are acknowledged for generating creativity, stability and group cohesion by reinforcing collective representations and recreating moral and spiritual life. Making a culture one's own by entering sacred reality (A. Halprin, 1995: 240) creates strong effects of belonging. When people feel they belong, they will want to make 'their' family, social and professional cultures operate in a satisfactory, sustainable way. This circumvents despair and criticism about something external that is seemingly outside of one's sphere of influence, but instead engages people actively in formulating and protecting that which they hold dear. Although the feeling of belonging is initially related to the Movement Medicine community, it is translated to participants' larger networks. On the other hand, collective ecstasy can be potentially destructive or dangerous for a culture's social and normative structures (Olaveson, 2001: 102, 107). These structures can be challenged through experiences on the dance floor, upturning an existing status quo for individual participants in areas of personal and family life, work and general ways of living life. Therefore, trance-like, liminal experiences can lead to conceptual innovations and creative insights regarding the development and direction of cultures and individual lives (see also Samuel, 1990). We can therefore also understand dancing as a moving spirituality in the sense of changing; in changing both the internal 'landscape' and perceptions of the practitioner and their external choices, and actions for a different lifestyle and political awareness and action.

## **Conclusions**

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this article, we can now address how a danced spirituality is different from other forms of spirituality, and subsequently what the specific contribution of dance is to spiritual experiences.

Firstly, danced spirituality is fundamentally different from other forms of spirituality because it is embodied nature-in-movement, as opposed to stationary and still spiritual practices in which either the body is not considered as significant for reaching and attaining communication with spirit, or where a specific posture is adopted and maintained for the duration of a prayer or

meditation. Contrary to this, dancing celebrates and embraces the structure of the living, breathing, sensual body. Through this physicality, spirit and the divine are recognized as immanent and therefore accessible, omnipresent and immediate. They are not to be sought 'out there' through elaborate, specified, timely rituals, but they are enveloping and permeating us at all times, and literally just a movement away.

Secondly, dancing offers another way of knowing other than exclusively through the rational mind. Because of their very nature, spiritual dimensions are not rationally knowable, but have to be perceived with other faculties, senses or modes of perception. The dance enables people to shift from cognitive facilities into experiential sensory mode, which opens some possibilities of seeing and perceiving with different eyes. The whole dancing being can attune to metaphysical experiences because there is no need to formulate those intangible phenomena into language. Dance can thus be seen as an instrument for wordless communication between different dimensions. It enables people to access other states of consciousness that reveal connections they are not normally so acutely aware of. Perhaps these connections already exist within us, dormant in our cells and bones, as well as in external fields of information. Through movement, these connections and this other knowing are drawn into dancers' conscious awareness, whereby connections and information can settle in physical, emotional and cognitive awareness.

Thirdly, all our experiences are intersubjective, and are shaped by the reciprocal relationship between the interior of the body and exterior of the outer world, which mutually influence and contain each other (see also Fleckenstein, 1999: 287; Shusterman, 2000: 159). The dialogue between the person, context and environment becomes very tangible on the dance floor, including personal, social, environmental and cosmological dimensions. This happens first through the breath; a physical exchange between the interior and exterior, which receives attention in many spiritual practices. This exchange is further underlined in dance through inward and outward movements. Through this relational nature, the dancer recognizes him/herself as part of a direct network of relationships, possibly in a more direct and concrete way than other forms of spirituality.

Finally, dance as a spiritual practice emphasizes the practitioner as an actor and a creator. Being in touch with life forces and vitality generates strength to manifest insights into action. On the dance floor, meaning and understanding emerge. Various possibilities of behaviour for everyday life can be explored, rehearsed and embodied, which is the first step for developing and realizing them (see also Buckland, 2002: 122-3; D. Halprin, 2003: 19). Becoming more 'in tune' with themselves, dancers may realize that they feel a new sense of direction, calling, job or vocation, which may lead to starting a new training or (self-employed) business; for example,

making a profession out of a hobby or passion. Through the active, creative nature of improvised dance, the dancer is already bringing insights in motion, deliberately positioning the body towards integration of spiritual experiences, whether they incorporate past, present or future.

In short, dancing spirituality integrates the totality of the human being in movement. As we have seen, dancing includes all aspects of the body-heart-mind-spirit continuum. This continuum includes, transcends and bridges movement between the self, humanity, the world and divinity (Shaw, 1994: 11). It is therefore the starting ground for further experiences, for healing and for connection with the world, including spiritual aspects. It can be misleading to categorize dance as simply physical, as it provides the key to and connection between these four levels of being and experiencing (D. Halprin, 2003). Because of the engagement with all these levels, dancing is an inclusive, holistic, full-bodied, full-hearted, full-minded encounter with spiritual dimensions. Other spiritual practices do address different parts of this continuum, but dance has the ability to cover, embrace and embody all of them. In other words, dance can transform life into a sacred art (Juhan, 2003). Naturally, this is the case for all spiritualities that are taken seriously by their practitioners. However, this article has explored some of the specific contributions of dance to spiritual awareness. Dance not only contributes to spirituality, but is a spiritual practice in itself. Through motion, it explores different areas of consciousness, moves with and through spirit, and contributes meaningfully to changes in internal and external structures. Similar phenomena to those often attributed to religion and spirituality, such as vocation, visions, inspiration, and individuation, can be accessed, which can lead an attitude of love, kindness and gratitude, as well as to meaningful actions that are in alignment with the individual's soul and with creation.

It is important to distinguish between the inherent qualities of movement, *Ding an sich*, including (but not limited to) dance, the characteristics of any dance floor as a contained, sometimes ceremonial, liminal space and Movement Medicine as one particular practice. As a new spirituality, this practice is a product of both postmodernism and the New Age, and yet participants describe a meaningful journey of dancing with the big questions and living the answers. Although this practice provides a framework that includes different gateways to transcendence – facilitated by specific processes and exercises – and also provides a way of interpreting certain experiences and events in a coherent structure, I believe that any form of dance can be used to reconnect with the self and with life in all its myriad forms, reconnect with gratitude, creativity and life force, and find meaning and significance (compare Penfield, 2001: 109; Worth & Poynor, 2004: 53). This includes dance in mainstream western settings such as club culture (Buckland, 2002), raves (Gore, 1997; Sullivan, 2006; Sylvan, 2005: 107), tango (Leseho & Maxwell, 2010), American country dancing (Flinn, 1995), belly dance (Kraus, 2010), and even striptease (Scott, 1996). Although the

settings as such may not be ‘sacred’, practitioners touch on spiritual dimensions through their dance practice. Dance is therefore a useful tool to recognize and move the spirit that is alive within us. When this happens, we come to know nature, ancestors, spirit and the divine as inseparable parts of ourselves. From that moment, previous dualities are lifted and the language of ‘reconnection’ is no longer necessary. Until then, dance is an ordinary way to reconnect with extraordinary phenomena – a moving spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> From 1987 until 1995 (with a break of 1.5 years) I undertook professional dance training, first at the National Ballet Academy in Amsterdam, and later at the High School for Music and Dance in Rotterdam, followed by a year at the Rotterdam Dance Academy. I trained in classical ballet, various styles of contemporary dance (Graham, Limon, European contract/release style), jazz, ethnic Eastern European and African dance, improvisation, choreography, Pilates, and in my free time I did ballroom and Latin American repertoire. After I enrolled at the Rotterdam Dance Academy, however, I realized that the rigorous training diminished my natural joy in dancing, and I chose not to further pursue a career as a professional dance performer. However, I have always been able to express myself strongly through dance, and a strong way of relating to the world around me, including invisible and intangible dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> 'Mesa' is a shamanic concept from various traditions from the Peruvian Andes (in which the Darling Khans have studied) and is also recognized by the Pueblo people of Arizona. In Spanish, it literally means 'table' or a 'natural flat surface' such as a field or hilltop. It may simply refer to a bundle of sacred objects, to the shaman's 'healing altar' or, in a more abstract way, to the ceremonial space, cosmology or 'map' within which the shaman works. In some situations, specific all-night ceremonies are called 'mesa' (see for example Glass-Coffin, 2010: 208; Mails, 1983; Walter & Neumann Fridman, 2004: 443). In Movement Medicine, the concept is used for the entire space, which includes ceremonial activities and cosmology. Some people express their respect for the space by bowing before entering and leaving the space (3 March 2009 field notes).

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations in the text are derived from my research data (specifically from interviews, the newsletter and field notes), and participants' requests regarding anonymity or the use of their own name or pseudonym have been respected. From now on, the online School of Movement Medicine's newsletter is simply referred to as 'newsletter'. It can be accessed at <http://schoolofmovementmedicine.com/news.php>.

<sup>4</sup> He summarized those 'core questions' as follows: 'how one meets death, the meaning of tragedy, the nature of obligation, the character of love' (Bell, 1977: 428).

<sup>5</sup> Although it can be argued that the diversity of tools and techniques creates a loose and incoherent structure, this is not the experience of the majority of participants. Rather, the diversity contributes to meeting the interests of a large variety of people who come to dance; everyone finds something valuable and 'fitting' to work with, and thus meet different areas of curiosity, depths, and levels of willingness and availability. In this way, the practice appeals to people's interests in numerous ways. Therefore, drawing from such a wide variety of sources does not seem to be an obstacle to the effectiveness of the practice. Movement Medicine symbolism conveys a coherent message of personal responsibility and interrelation with other dimensions of life (Kieft, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Included with permission (Darling Khan and Darling Khan 2010; Wilkinson 2010).

<sup>7</sup> The relationship between psyche, emotions, the body and movement is also recognized in – and fundamental to – body-oriented therapies such as body-mind centring (B. B. Cohen, 1993; Hartley, 1995: 106), Feldenkrais (D. Halprin, 2003), Gestalt therapy (Woldt & Toman, 2005), Dance Movement Psychotherapy (Meekums, 2002; Penfield, 2001) and Authentic Movement (Taylor, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> I follow Morris, who prefers the term 'spirit' over other alternatives; according to him, these only add to mystification. The term 'spirit' retains the connotation of the original Latin meaning 'of breath, life, wind, awe, mystery, and invisibility' (Morris, 2006: 15). The term predates anthropology and Descartes, and is even used by Plato and Augustine (ibid.).

<sup>9</sup> This has similarities with possession trance (Ehrenreich, 2007; Gore, 1995; Grau, 2008; Hanna, 1987; Hume, 2007: 69; Jankowsky, 2007; Samuel, 2008), even though that is not part of Movement Medicine's vocabulary.

<sup>10</sup> In my Ph.D. research, participants described the following changes (Kieft, 2013):

- In the body: physically (weight loss, posture, fitness); in body image; and in the relationship with the body;
- In the self: an increased sense of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-acceptance; increased access to supportive resources inside and outside; an increased sense of trust and feeling of being supported by life, which enhances the ability to cope with unforeseen and/or familiar events;
- In relationships: deeper, more authentic, intimate and meaningful relationships; an increased ease and 'fluidity' in social and professional relationships; clearer sense of boundaries and assertiveness (including learning to say yes and no); clearer communication (both about using the voice in a different way and communication skills); and an increased feeling of connection;
- In work: for example, following a new or old dream or vocation; or taking extra or less responsibility in an existing job;
- In lifestyle: taking up new hobbies and activities; integrating values such as gratitude, joy, 'slowing down' and social awareness; engaging in activities previously avoided because of, for example, fear; and embracing a spirituality that turns life into art.