

DANCE AS TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Notes of the Presentation to the North American Assn for Baha'i Studies, Orange County, California, August 2015

Presenter: OWEN ALLEN

If you are wondering why the seating is in this strange formation, I am asking you **just to try it on**. Not as a reason but as an experience. Not just an experience as being at an event but **as that you are standing within the presentation**, within dance as transformative practice. To stand within, is to fully cloak yourself in the feelings and concepts of the presentation, as an experience of transformative practice; that you are being the presentation. So, **here**, as you are sitting, in this place, **you are Dance as Transformation**. And that is the opening of your transformation, in this place and forever. You are now, no longer as you were, you are, now, transformed.

Question a few audience:

LISTEN!!! To your body!

What part of the body has your attention wandered to?

Can you describe how that part feels like, right now?

What are you feeling?

Describe the body.

What does it feel like, right now.

What words can you use for that?

LISTEN!!! To your body.!

Every way that it is right now, is how your body is right now.

Acknowledge it.

Accept it.

We are BEING is the start of transformation

From Baha'u'llah:

"O SON OF WORLDLINESS!

Pleasant is the realm of BEING, wert thou to attain thereto;

Glorious is the domain of ETERNITY, shouldst thou pass beyond the world of mortality;

Sweet is the HOLY ECSTASY, if thou drinkest of the mystic chalice from the hands of the celestial Youth.

Shouldst thou attain this station, thou wouldst be freed from destruction and death, from toil and sin." ¹

From Martin Heidegger ² BEING is Da-sein: "Having to Be Open"

Being Open is to stand out:

- stand back from our own occurrence in the world
- stand in an openness, a clearing of Being

Being Open is to create as possibility:

- how we occur to ourselves;
- how others occur to ourselves;
- how the world occurs to ourselves

This is the transformative possibility, that something occurs to have disappeared and something new occurs to appear.

From Martin Heidegger ¹

For something to disappear it must first be unconcealed.

In the midst of Beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is clearing, a lighting. .. this clearing is in a greater degree than are beings. This open centre is not surrounded by what Is; rather the lighting centre itself encircles all that Is, like the Nothing which we scarcely know.

This clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those Beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing, Beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees.

Every decision bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing...

Truth happens as the primal conflict between clearing and concealing.

Truth happens in the work being of the work. Setting up a world .. the work is the fighting of the battle in which the unconcealedness of beings as a whole, or truth, is won.

(Truth) does not mean that something is correctly portrayed, but rather that which is as a whole, attains to unconcealedness.

Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness.

Art is the becoming and happening of truth.

Truth, as the clearing and concealing of what is, happens in being composed."

How does the world appear?

To appear is to be an image of something.

Our world and everything within including ourselves appears as an image.

Where is the experience of world?

I experience you "out there".

I experience myself "here"

Somehow my experience is both here and out there: out here. Werner Erhard⁵

Development of how the world occurs and identity

As the baby moves to the tactile, vestibular and proprioceptive nervous responses with which we are born, a pre-verbal, structural language is formed.⁶ This language is the language of the relationship of our physical structure and the structure of the world. Sometime around and after seven months of age, the baby gets the idea that other people around them are separate from them. At this stage, babies are crawling about and running into things and grabbing everything they can. There's a great opportunity for the baby's development of 'knowing' about the body and the world. In this world without words we experience the world as it is, without extended meaning. We experience that we cannot proceed against an object that is unyielding and which, when proceeded against, responds as pain. Other experiences can be altogether different: pleasurable, intriguing. Water without its linguistic symbol is yielding, cool, slippery, (I wonder if you can think of how to describe water, experientially).

Our emotional language is already structured into our brain as part of our evolutionary animal, for survival relies upon domination and demand or avoiding domination or neglect. Together our emotional responses and our structural language can be called an immediate language. Our immediate language is talking with you right now. LISTEN !!!

Our immediate language speaks one truth and one truth only. It tells us how we are being right now! It does not add any meaning to that. It is not telling you whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, just how you are being and responding internally, right now. However, listen, so that you can give yourself the time to compare your immediate language with a second review of the world.

Earthquakes are often psychologically very disturbing for people because they undermine the very basis of our being in the world, that the earth is stable, unyielding. Our sense of 'reality' begins in the engagement of our immediate language with the world. The source of suffering is in the deep belief of our immediate language, that our world is stable and known, that it is exactly and only the way our structural language experiences it. This belief is strengthened or modified by the strictures of parental authority and cultural norms in their support for the emotional response. Our suffering becomes layered in the dismissal of the body and emotions as an interference that must be controlled. The disembodied state can, paradoxically, lead to a sense of a body out of control or that the emotions are out of control. As the rituals of our bodies contain and conceal its possibilities especially in this modern age of sitting for long hours and working with our intellect, perhaps we build identities of control that extend to all social entities: the community, the nation, our urban and natural ecology. Ultimately, when things fail, we don't understand what has gone wrong, because we have been out of contact or control of our bodies, and **being disembodied**.

Erik Erikson's Theory of Child Development⁵ suggested that identity development occurs as the resolution of a series of crisis. (See Appendix 1 Chart) Verbal language develops in the child with the cultural constructs that inform that language. Between 3 and 4, as the child develops some competency in

language, this is also the earliest stage of life that most of us remember as adults. Perhaps because, prior to this, we had no good way of labeling our experience for future reference. We can look at our own life as far back as this, for significant stories of disappointments. How did you respond to the disappointment? How did you really respond to the event? What failure did you consider, of your efforts at the time? And now, the crucial question: What choice did you make that would ensure that you did not fail in that way again? The series of choices you made, not to fail, are significant in the development of your identity, the person that you are today.

Identity under Transformation

Our identity is not immutable. Baha'u'llah reassures us that "the greater the effort exerted for the refinement of this sublime and noble mirror, the more faithfully will it be made to reflect the glory of the names and attributes of God, and reveal the wonders of His signs and knowledge."

Transformation requires a type of effort that is not force but that is perseverance and attention. It can be effective in your life as a function of the disappearance of your childhood and youthful disappointments. Your failure no longer occurs to you as a failure - not as a logical inference but as a disappearance of it being a failure. As the concealed is unconcealed, then the strategy that has become your identity, gives way to other possibilities.

A Strange Loop

Another fairly new look at how we might Be as human comes from the philosopher, Douglas Hodstader who describes that our huge imaginative intellect has emerged from the massive levels of feedback upon feedback of the growth of the brain as loops of nerve networks. Taking it a step further he surmises that we involve each other in another kind of feedback loop in which we host the identities of others in our close circle.

One implication of this idea is the possibility of a vast new intelligent organism coming into Being, a global human entity.

Embodied Cognition

Our immediate language is making decisions for us all the time. Our developmental milestones are largely influenced by emotional and physiological development, and our choices around the circumstances and events of life during the period of those milestones, are heavily influenced by the immediate interpretation of our environment. The interpretation of what is in front of us as a problem is based in the primal sensorial metaphors around sight, sound and touch and movement. These primal responses are modified somewhat by cultural influences. The influence of our bodies on our decisions is researched under the term, embodied cognition.^{8,9} Finally, and often when we have made our choice, we wrap some reason around it. It makes some sense, then to become aware of our immediate language in order to see what it is telling us, to ask what that is about, and to choose to accept its choice or not. If not, there is evidence that it is not wise to subdue the immediate language. There are two other possibilities: firstly, as in conflict, acknowledging the immediate language and

seeing to what extent it can be put aside or asked to take a back seat while choosing another course of action; and, secondly, in the possibility of reconciling and disappearing the immediate response.

Cognitive Dissonance

Being in 'two minds' around an issue, shows up as an unease in the body. It can often be as a clash of our values against some other pragmatic option. Many people have performed criminal acts on the basis that they were just being pragmatic or what was right. How could we lie to ourselves this way? Cognitive Dissonance researcher, Carol Tavris sums up the problem with thus, "How do you get an honest man to lose his ethical compass? You get him to take one step at a time, and self justification will do the rest. Dissonance is found in criminal acts, prejudicial behaviours, and relationship breakdowns. It is tied to the being right, listening through a filter of having already decided what it means, and being rewarded for incrementally larger acts against our held values. Tavris recommends dealing with dissonance openly, painfully, and as slowly as necessary. In other words, we can be patient with ourselves around any issue we are in two minds about. The dissonance will show up in the body. That is a sign to look at the issue carefully, directly, patiently. Ask, what values do I hold that are related to this problem. Your body will respond as a guide to this. And when you match up the elements of the issue.

If you avoid letting your mind find all sorts of escape exits, you will feel in your body the 'battle'. You might see that part of your body is in desire for the material acquisition. You might see that there is almost a physical drawing away of attention from our values, almost as if our values are something just out of sight, literally in a blindspot. Maybe you experience it in another way. It can be of great value to describe your experience, image, of the mind at work as a way that your body can release desire, stand back from self-justification.

The Disappearance of Suffering

The beginning of the disappearance of suffering is being present to the world and our body, as an acknowledgement of 'as it is', and being in conversation with others about 'as it is'.

As it is' whether internal or external, is an experience of body and emotion, not a description in language.

Although description is sought for conversation, listening of body with body can provide greater access and power in the conversation.

The disappearance of suffering continues by being 'I don't know', as wonderment and enquiry of a body and a world that is changeable even unpredictable yet knowable as we are adaptable.

'I don't know' exists as a conversation in language, an expression in art, an exploration in science.

The disappearance of suffering is completed in the acceptance that however it is, all is well, as an access to being complete, workable, and effective.

Performance

Transformation can be effective as a function of disappearing anything that is in the way of your performance. The disappearing itself shows up as the lighting, the clearing, and the opening, for a new way of Being, that is a new way of experiencing the world out here, a new way the world occurs or appears, and, instantaneously, a new action or behavior in the world.

Zaffron And Logan describe three laws to transformative performance:

1. How people perform correlates to how situations occur to them;
2. How a situation occurs arises in language; and
3. Future based language transforms how situations occur to people

In these three laws we can see that, firstly there is a particular way that anything and everything occurs to us. It may not need transforming. Your choice.

If you are connecting it with the language of disappointment, then it is just possible it could do with a transformation.

So, we might have to look at how we are talking about it, maybe in a small hidden voice. Maybe given to a kind of spin on our life that presents as if we live life like a lecture. While all the time we have an uneasy feeling that we are not really living up to the promotion.

Give full voice to that small hidden voice. It might not sound like you want to be sounding like, but it is authentically how you are being.

Write it down. Get it clear. Out in the openness, around it you will see the clearing form that Heidegger spoke of. Here out in the openness, you can see that another language is possible. In the clearing you can construct other future based language ie how you can be, how you, now, are. Here some imagination is required, and not a little confidence to be in imagination, to be in image, to 'see' as a form, you as, and with, the transformed future.

Be as the transformed you, in a transformed future, is transformation.

Access to transformation, therefore, can be gained through experiencing an opening for the extension of imagination and imagery. A great deal of our existing imagery comes from our body and starting with what we are in our body, gives us an opportunity to see, imagine, explore, move, in a new way. At that point we are not a transformed thing. However, in being as looking for being transformed, the exploration in body and especially in dance, can create access.

As a correlation to Zaffron and Logan's observations, imagery has 3 aspects:

1. Our experience as images as how the world, ourselves and others occur to us
2. How those images occur to us, often in language and story through emotion; and

3. Deconstructing the emotion from the image from the language, allow a great deal of diverse restructuring, from which new possibilities can show up. Here then is an access to transformation, a re-occurring, and a new declaration of your world.

Once you can bring your life and your world into clear images, then you have all that you need for dance.

Dance, the Art, The work.

Dance is a conversation of the body in the world, in the body and with the body.

A Dancer is a way of being as dance. Everyone who turns up is a dancer. You are dancers.

A conversation is the being in play as a to and fro of responses without expectations, and form emerges.

Form, the work, emerges by the dancer's responses as a collapse of possibility into reality.

Contemporary dance as individual practice provides access to the variations of the body 'as it is', being in self-conversation through body as an authentic response, creating access to protected corners of the mind, training the mind to its effortlessness in adapting to changing conditions through creativity. Here, dance is what anyone, in any condition, brings to the floor.

Contemporary dance as a group practice is engaging in authentic expression 'as I am' in body and mind; deep listening; adaptation and synchronizing of motion in creative collaboration; and making choices that reflect workability in community.

Contemporary dance in collaborative story and design provides access for dancers and audience to the authentic expression of a disconnected life as an acknowledgement in the access of the possibility of connection.

Contemporary dance as performance provides access for the audience to their own immediate responses to story and aesthetics, disturbing our protections with visceral responses. The audience' transformation, and the potential of contemporary dance to be transformative in community, begins in the authentic conversation of their own visceral responses. Contemporary dance suggests that, as in the vastness of body in motion, reality is more vast, less known, more possible.

The teachings of the Baha'i Faith have authentic expression in the interpretation of the individual within the acknowledgement of the individual's life. Contemporary dance lends to the individual making clear enquiry of their

attitude to teachings-as-subject through the aspiration of reflecting their belief in creative motion.

Audience Performance:

The start : Where did it start. Select on clear image of yourself in the situation. You can do the following all in your mind but you can perform it as well. Make your face like that. Make you body feel like that. Exaggerate your body so that it shows on the outside.

The middle : What is happening now or happened when you were in your fortyiess. Make your face like that. Make you body feel like that. Exaggerate your body so that it shows on the outside.

The End: What is going to happen or what new has happened? Make your face like that. Make you body feel like that. Exaggerate your body so that it shows on the outside.

Okay, everything bigger bigger bigger. Or smaller, smaller, smaller. Not passive, actively smaller.

Okay, now here are some words that in the Baha'i context should evoke for you certain imagery. As Baha'is as a group the imagery will have some constraint. As individual Baha'is the specific imagery will be individual.

Youth
Souls
Women
Children
Education
Aspiration
Peace
Consultation
Teaching the faith.
Service and contribution

Okay, now, in you mind create an image that is being each of these things. The image will be you as an expression of your face and your body as a feeling moving thing.

If it doesn't have and image in memory for you, then you will have to imagine what that would look like and feel like. So just take a stab at imagining that.

Now, if you would like to dance out of this session, starting from here, make some of those faces and gestures and just repeat them as you walk from here around the room and out the door. And then just follow on as you see the person next to you get up. Thanks you. Music >

Appendix 1.

Erikson's stages of psychosocial development

Stages	Approximate Age	Important Event	Description
Trust vs. Mistrust	Birth to 12-18 months	Feeding	The infant must form a first loving, trusting relationship with the caregiver or develop a sense of mistrust.
Autonomy vs. shame/doubt	18 months to 3 years	Toilet training	The child's energies are directed toward the development of physical skills, including walking, grasping, controlling the sphincter. The child learns control but may develop shame and doubt if not handled well.
Initiative vs. Guilt	3 to 6 years	Independence	The child continues to become more assertive and to make more initiative but may be too forceful, which can lead to guilt feelings.
Industry vs. Inferiority	6 to 12 years	School	The child must deal with demands to learn new skills or risk a sense of inferiority, failure, and incompetence.
Identity vs. Role Confusion	Adolescence	Peer relationships	The teenager must achieve identity in occupation, gender roles, politics, and religion.
Intimacy vs. Isolation	Young adulthood	Love relationships	The young adult must develop intimate relationships or suffer feeling of isolation.
Generativity vs. Stagnation	Middle adulthood	Parenting/ Mentoring	Each adult must find some way to satisfy and support the next generation.
Ego integrity vs. Despair	Late adulthood	Reflecting on and acceptance of one's life	The culmination is a sense of acceptance of oneself and a sense of fulfillment.

References and Bibliography

1. Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, Part II, Persian, No 70.
- 2 Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time* (orig 1958), A translation by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York, 1996
3. Heidegger, Martin, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, (orig 1950), excerpt Albert Hofstadter trans, "Poetry. Language, Thought", NY, Harper and Row, 1971, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark Taylor, University of Chicago Press 1986
4. Francis Steen, A Cognitive Account of Aesthetics, in *The Artful Mind*, Ed Mark Turner, Oxford university Press, NY, 2006.
5. Erhard, Werner, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwQr_BJrHJ8 (at45-50 minutes)
6. Watson, Anne; Chase, Philip, *Relational Learning in Preverbal Infants*, Behavioural development Bulletin, Vol 1., Fall 2002.
7. Erickson ,Erik – Search the web under Child Development Stages.
9. Adam Alter, *Drunk Tank Pink*, Oneworld Pub, 2013
10. Thalma Lobel, *Sensation*, Scribe Pub, 2014
11. Douglas R. Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, Perseus Books, Philadelphia, 2007
12. Steve Zaffron, Dave Logan, *The Three Laws of Performance*, Jossey-Bass, San Fransisco, 2009
- 13 Eric Franklin, *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance*, Human Kinetics, USA 2014
- 14 Carol Tavris, Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were made (but not by me)*, Harcourt Books, 2007.
- 15 David J. Linden, *Touch: The Science of Hand, Heart and Mind*, Penguin Random House, UK 2015
16. Norman Doidge, 2015, *The Brain that Heals Itself*, Scribe.
17. Ines Pereira Rodrigues Tutor Philosophy University of Notre Dame Australia & Murdoch University, *To Live Creatively*, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/to-live-creatively/6495420> , 31/05/2015