

Dancers of Incarnation From Embodied Prayer to Embodied Inquiry

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Article abstract

In poetic, sensuous and visceral language this article explores how one liturgical dance artist, whose work as a dancer and educator was centered in dance and theology for decades was informed by an incarnational theology to break open a field of embodied inquiry now situated outside the field of theological studies. The article is in itself a dance consisting of five movements which trace the journey of a liturgical dance artist from theology to doxology, embodied prayer and embodied inquiry to dancing in nature as a cathedral. Here in creating and performing site-specific work in the natural world, all of living and being is an embodied expression of spirit. Attention is given to the Biblical foundation of bodily expression and wisdom, moving to the fields of arts-based research rooted in phenomenology and curriculum theory to open up an embodied and poetic scholarship. Here writing is artistic and scholarly, personal and universal, evoking a physicality through the senses where connections between the holy and ordinary are honoured. Dance, movement and the body are rooted in incarnational and poetic expression and represent a philosophy through the flesh where physicality and spirituality are deeply intertwined.

Dancers of Incarnation

From Embodied Prayer to Embodied Inquiry

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Movement 1: The journey of a liturgical dance artist

My entrance into connecting dance as a place of knowing, inquiry and discovery came through decades of experience as a liturgical dance artist. Many are perplexed when those words are in the same sentence: liturgical and dance. But to one who came to Christian faith as an adult and had a true conversion experience and was a mover; dancing my faith was inevitable. How else could one contain the visceral joy running through the veins where love was both palpable and overflowing? Didn't everyone experience the Creator through their veins and skin, along with mind, heart and soul? How could I express such love if not through the cells, muscles, tissues and gestures of my body? Of course this was the late seventies, and there was more room for creative expression in some ways, but clearly I was a little out there.

After embarking on studying every form of sacred dance, liturgical dance, modern dance and going off to seminary for years to acquire a

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Masters in Theology to exegete the scriptures connecting dance and faith, I was on my way to launch «embodied prayer» as a path to connect the interior life and the divine through dance. I danced at baptisms and weddings, in litanies and benedictions, invocations and intercessions, and interpreted scripture and psalms through dance. I exegeted texts, understood the historical and cultural contexts, read them in Hebrew and Greek, and then moved them through my body. I was a dancing exegete. A spiritual seeker who danced. I danced theology. Theology danced me. I was passionate and inspired and came to know the Biblical text as perceived through the lens of an artist.

The Biblical scriptures were one big art book and love letter from God. There were poems and prose, narrative and essay, words imbued with colour, tone, texture, dance, music and exaltation. Here were luxurious sentences where sacred text was expressed through the materiality of the senses. How could others not see that the beauty and poignancy of the Psalms were given through the art form of poetry? Jesus came as a master storyteller, an art form where performance and word are at the center. Jesus didn't come and say that he was the eschatological hermeneutic of our phenomenological beings. He said, «I am the bread of life» I am the «living water». He communicated as an artist, yet theologians and philosophers reduced him to a discourse which was colonized; language devoid of imagery, poetry and sensuality. Where was the body and soul in these discourses of theology? Soul and body are inextricably connected and nowhere is this more evident in the Hebrews' articulation of the Scriptures; a language rooted in breath and viscera.

My years being immersed in graduate theological studies became the foundation to see the importance of exegesis, hermeneutics, poetry, narrative and the performative at the heart of both declaration and expression. Here was an alive scholarship formed on relationality and the connections between the divine, human and more-than-human world. The Psalms were singing with the breath of God and announced natural creation and humanity's diverse expression in wonder and lament, praise and prayer, confession and celebration. The materiality and spirituality of the sacred was not met in formulaic or linear thinking and writing, but in writing which fed my artist. Humankind met the divine through the rise of story and movement where meaning was revealed through the lens of the poetic. Here was insight and sight enfolded in mystery, nuance and even the comedic.

1. Movement II: Theology to Doxology

Theology was transformed to doxology in the Biblical scriptures where gestures and movement were a consistent form of expression of faith. David danced with boldness before God and Jeremiah clung to the ground with his belly, while Daniel fell prostrate in deep reverence. Miriam danced when the Red Sea was parted. This was no small miracle, as she led the women with tambourine and dance to celebrate what God had done (Exodus 15: 20). I took lessons from joy being expressed in the body utterances of emotional and spiritual sentences through the limbs and torso. Room was given to the full expression of the body and soul from reverence to anger, humility to jubilation, supplication to rejoicing. Dance became so associated with joy and in some passages it actually is a metaphor for joy, opposite to mourning as said by the author of Ecclesiastes, there is « a time to mourn and a time to dance » (Ecclesiastes 3: 46). Dance was so integral to Hebrew culture and faith that there are many words for dance in the Bible including rotating, leaping, circling, whirling, or dancing in a playful manner. David did not just « dance » as translated in the biblical book of Samuel, but the Hebrew verbs literally said he rotated with all his might, whirled, skipped, and leaped (2 Samuel 6: 14-16,21). This is not a dance with light airy moves, but an outright cry of YES to God in vigorous movements. Full-hearted prayer. Full-hearted worship. Here was a physical articulation of spontaneous praise I could relate to, echoing the Psalmists words, « You turned my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, That my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent » (Psalm 30: 11-12, NIV). The full gamut of expression was found through the movements of people of faith. Longing was both visceral and vulnerable as David cries out, « All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you » (Psalm 38: 9, NIV). The Hebrews expressed a spirituality through physicality. Dancing out of the depths swelled from the heart's knowing and as a modern dancer, I found a spiritual kinship in the ability to articulate through the innermost workings of my body.

I experienced a Biblical text salted with the connections between the poetic, personal and the universal. In retrospect, I see how immersion in Hebrew and Christian scriptures formed the foundation to see the interrelationship between the personal and universal. This full-bodied articulation of spirituality is the faith I fell in love with. Jesus takes this further as he had a life on earth incarnated with bodily expression. His life was an embodied prayer; eating with disciples, washing feet, embracing children,

taking his body into solitude. The Word became flesh, not a text. Jesus time on earth came through a body in the acts of kneeling, praying, healing the sick, or pounding nails. He was born into a culture where the body was honoured as an expression of the heart. There was a vulnerability laid bare in the incarnation. A place of surrender and emptying — an honouring that all of life is a place of articulation with the divine. I found refuge here and through dance could express even lament and grief to and with a God who took shape in human form. In my own limits as a seeker who had gone through much loss, I could dance grief; one third of the Psalms were Psalms of Lament. The prayer of lament became associated with contracting the belly, rolling and crouching. I could relate to this as one who was trained in Martha Graham technique in modern dance. The Psalmist says, « We are brought down to the dust: our bodies cling to the ground » (Psalm 44: 25). The depths of their sorrow became expressed through the centre of their bodies. In the place of brokenness, exquisite beauty could be cracked into the pain. Textures of vulnerability were my new understanding of faith, wrapped in and through the body. And here I danced my own dances of lament as I went through losses of loved ones.

2. Movement III: Dance as Embodied Prayer

So I danced, choreographed, improvised and performed my newfound faith in cities and towns, cathedrals and churches, conferences and conventions, in and out of doors. The door of body and soul united in movement swung open. I eventually taught classes on Dance and Embodied Prayer in seminaries and theological graduate schools. I wrote a book, *Embodied Prayer* in 1995 that was translated into Korean and a British and Canadian version came out almost ten years later (Snowber 1995; 2004). I pioneered what was an organic response to the vitality of being loved by the Creator. A process where one can listen deeply to the Creator and the body and be infused with a full-hearted, whole body love; receiving and giving.

I found mentorship and inspiration in the many ways dance and faith were being articulated and explored across North America and Europe. I studied with everyone I could who integrated Christianity, spirituality and dance, including the Sacred Dance Guild, Sacred Dance Group of Boulder, Carla DeSola and Fr. Bob VerEeche who started the Boston Liturgical Dance Ensemble. I took courage from the pioneers in liturgical dance and their writings (see DeSola 1977; Gagne, Kane, & VerEeche 1984). I finally came across the work of Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter who

developed the practice of Interplay where I eventually made my home and have had a rich twenty-five year connection with this community. Here I was given wings to tell my bodystories through all of my being and have a community that acknowledged the connections between physicality and spirituality. Interplay is a practice and a social movement developed by Winton-Henry and Porter which focuses on play, ease, connection, human sustainability and honours the connection of mind, body, spirit and the wisdom of the body. Drawing on many forms including, silence and song, movement and stories, voice and improvisation; here was a portal for me to be formed and transformed and integrate a physical expression of faith (Winton-Henry and Porter 1993; 1997; 2004).

Wherever I danced, it emerged out of my relationship to God or as I like to now call, the Beloved, where all my cells were vibrating. Dance was akin to lovemaking with Creator. The women mystics became my mentors, and here I still take inspiration. St. Theresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Carmelite mystic speaks of our bodies as the leaves of God and she says, «How does the soul make love to God? The heart has divine instincts — it just needs to be turned loose in the sky» (in Ladinsky, Trans., 2002, 271 and 275). I was let loose in sky and earth and I was on a path embedded in wonder. My body was porous to the energy beyond and within me. I align myself now with the writings of Celtic theologian, John O'Donohue (2004, 24), as he says,

Human skin is porous; the world flows through you. Your senses are large pores that let the world in. By being attuned to the wisdom of your senses, you will never become an exile in your own life, an outsider lost in an external spiritual place that your will and intellect, have constructed.

My senses were my guide. Common sense evolved into deep listening and responding through the senses to Spirit with all my being. The body is a portal to deeply honour the knowledge and wisdom of the body. Cognition and intuition became partners and lovers. Imagination transformed from the visceral and my inspiration was fueled by the breathtaking beauty of the flesh of the world through incarnation and creation.

3. Movement IV: From Embodied Prayer to Embodied Inquiry

There were palpable challenges over the years in what it meant to be an artist, theologian, feminist, and advocate for connecting body and soul in theological and Church circles. I became weary of advocating for an

embodied way of articulating Christian faith, coupled with being a woman leader, feminist, mother, and dedicated to my artist, dancer and scholar. Just as there was a distrust of the embodied, bodily, and physicality, there was a distrust of scholarship that did not fall in linear, post-Cartesian sensibilities. The word of God, formed in syllabic sentences of artful ways was hijacked by rationality. What happened to the art? Why would one study hermeneutics and exegesis, and the ancient languages of Hebrew and Greek, but not know the languages of storytelling and poetry, dance and dramatic arts? So here became a place of disconnection and incongruence. As much as I dedicated many years to integrating the arts and Christian faith in the eighties and nineties and much was being done in this area both in practice and scholarship, I hungered for more. I hungered for a discourse that truly honoured the textures of the divine that I knew through my heart and skin. I hungered to be a strong woman leader, a feminist without having to always advocate to be a passionate scholar who was a woman.

I eventually was catapulted out of these domains, and into scholarship and eventually teaching in a secular university. Moving to a secular university opened up forms of scholarship which honoured the connection to the personal and universal, and I had the support as a woman and feminist, mother and seeker to pursue my vocational desire in full force. In my pursuit of my doctorate I was exposed to the field of phenomenology and curriculum theory which informed my understanding of the body and connection to lived experience.

I was utterly ecstatic when I came upon the field of Curriculum Theory twenty-five years ago and realized there was a way of articulating the curriculum as «lived» rather than just «content» (Pinar & Reynolds 1992; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman 1994; Pinar 1994). Influenced from the field of phenomenology, there was an emphasis on integrating the felt and lived body, rather than just body as text. Phenomenology focused on looking at how humans immediately experienced a connection and intimacy with the world and attended to its gestures and textures rather than just describing the world (Merleau-Ponty 1962; 1964; 1968; Husserl 1970). Here was a field which honoured the lived experience of the body as central to knowing, being and learning and yet had compatibility with the theological tradition I had been inspired in. Early curriculum theorists had a huge influence through incorporating the lived experience in their scholarship and opened up the way for me as a dancer to continue to theorize an embodied way of inquiry (van Manen 1990; Grumet 1988; Aoki

1993; Greene 1995). The field of arts-based research grew out of the field of curriculum theory and opened up the arts to be a place of inquiry, methodology, and has burgeoned world-wide over the last decade. Arts-based research utilizes artistic methods which interact between artistic work and its reflection. Arts-based researchers use performing, visual, and/or literary artistic practices in the systematic generation of new knowledge through aesthetic discoveries (Barone & Eisner 1997; Knowles & Cole 2008; Leavy 2008; 2017). There are now thankfully, other areas of scholarship connecting somatics, dance and spirituality. The recent *Journal of Dance, Movement and Spiritualities* as well as the edited book, *Dance, Somatics and Spiritualities. Contemporary Sacred Narratives* (Williamson, Batson, Whatley, & Weber 2014) are ongoing testaments to the connections being made by many dancers, movers and scholars.

As a dancer and one who moves in the world kinesthetically, the foundation had been made to theorize the ways for embodied ways of inquiry. There was a generative space for developing and experimenting with performative ways of writing which were compatible with not only articulating about the body as a way of inquiry, but writing from the body. This is an important distinction since many fields, even in the arts connecting dance and scholarship were required to articulate language in more conventional forms to be recognized. And this was certainly my experience in the field of theological studies.

The focus on lived experience gave a foundation for dancers, choreographers and movers to integrate the connections between living, being, moving, dancing and writing. Central to many forms of arts-based research, whether it is poetic inquiry, narrative inquiry, performative inquiry, or embodied forms of inquiry is the connection to the personal and universal. I took renown curriculum scholar, William Pinar's word to heart and body — « Autobiography is an architecture of self, a self we create and embody as we read, write, speak and listen. The self becomes flesh in the world » (1994, 220). Here curriculum was reconceptualized curriculum as lived, and this field gave me the wings to let my soul fly, hips move, sternum rise to sky and belly contract to earth (Snowber 2016). Body intelligence could once again, as in a Hebrew sensibility be grounded in the senses; dance could take flight as a place of inquiry and discovery. I have been fortunate to continue to find ways to see the body, dance and movement as a place of excavating wisdom and knowing within these forms of arts-based research and have a lively practice of writing, performing, and teaching. I was able to theorize a way to inte-

grate the body as a place of inquiry and dance as deeply connected to the bodysoul and yet keep all the parts of myself intact. (See Cancienne & Snowber 2003; Snowber 2005; 2007; 2010; 2013; 2014; 2016a; 2016b, 2017). Here I did not have to leave parts of my self, but could honour my artist, dancer, mother, scholar, leader and my prophetic voice. My multiple identities could co-habit together where my dancer, scholar, theologian, mother, poet could explore the relationship between the ordinary and holy, sacred and profane and I could live out a holy irreverence. The integration of arts-based forms of poetic inquiry also allowed me to do further integration of the poetic as a place of discovery and articulation in my writing academic work (Leggo 2005; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima 2009). Here my sinews, bones and flesh were formed in a language resonant with bone reality, breaking open the page and blood was transformed to ink (Snowber & Wiebe 2009). Eventually, the dances that I spent years doing in churches in connection to worship, praise, prayer or lament left the church and went into the wider world and combined the poetic, visceral and corporeal in expression of what it meant to be human in this world.

Creation and incarnation went hand in hand, foot in foot. I am reminded of the words by Judy Connato when she says, “Creation and incarnation go hand in hand, Incarnation dependent upon a created material world, the created material world fulfilled in Incarnation (2010, 50). I was continually recreated in the making of dance and movement, words breathing from the body, and I continued to offer these forms in a variety of contexts. The classroom, conference, site-specific work in the natural world became my theatres and cathedrals in which to dance. The borders between sacred and secular broke down. God and Goddess literally jumped out of the box and were found everywhere.

4. Movement V: The dance of nature as cathedral

My soles of my feet became the place where my soul listened to the beat of my heart, the Beloved and the beat of creation. Transcendence and immanence danced as I started creating dance in the natural world. My cathedral became the creation where I walked daily, most often along Burrard inlet — a shoreline which hugged the Salish Sea outside Vancouver, B.C. Walking was not enough and over the years I responded to creation through dance and poetry. The landscape of heron and eagle, marsh and cedar, seagull and wind ripped through my body and the relationship

between the inner landscape and outer landscape was transformed into art. Here was the entrance to participate with creation in a dialogical relationship where the natural world was a place to listen to the hum of creator and creation to bring forth doxology. I eventually created site-specific performances of dance and poetry, which incorporated people walking in silence over a few hours. Creation was my sanctuary — living and green, vibrant and vibrating through body and earth. Slowing down was the invitation into a rhythm to deep listening. The transformation occurred from being a human doing to a human being in the echoes of birdsong. I am a guest in these places of creation, and yet there is a larger participation and reciprocity with the landscape. I am mindful of John O'Donohue's words (2004, 24), «When we walk on the earth with reverence, beauty will decide to trust us. The rushed heart and the arrogant mind lack the gentleness and patience to enter that embrace. Beauty is mysterious, a slow presence who waits for the ready, expectant heart». The dance between the inner landscape and outer landscape became a place of home, longing, belonging and possibility (Snowber 2014b, 119).

Even though I seldom dance in a church or faith context integrating movement in liturgy, the practices I held dear as a liturgical dance artist imbue all my performance; whether I am dancing in creation, or in a performance, gallery, theatre or conference. I have always attested to the reality that the spirit and energy of life run through me as I dance. This is the co-creation of the dancer, whether I articulate it as God, the Beloved, the *eros* of life, or life force, I feel the vibrating energy come through my body. My task is to be open, let my busy mind release and allow for the more-than-human force of Love to radiate through my being. This takes different forms; it could be the humour of life running through me, or my response to the magnolia and maple trees in the University of British Columbia (UBC) Botanical Garden where I was the Artist in Residence. Over the last few years I have been creating seasonal performances of poetry and dance in the Asian Garden within the UBC Botanical Garden. Here I listen and respond to the worlds of botanica, a linguistics of creation, and share these performances with the public. In the Fall and Summer Incarnata performance, I danced to the following poem in the midst of a beautiful Katsura tree.

5. Ode to the Katsura

tears and trees are prayers
 you cascade with grace
 surrender and fall with ease
 in a bow of sculptural elegance
 weeping katsura or Morioka weeping
 is unusual, a rare jewel
 let the water within us
 among our rough bark of skin
 release as the sweet
 smell of senescing leaves

As I walk, move and be with the garden, words and movements arise, which speak to me of the many lessons the earth offers.

I have had one principle, which has guided me over the last three decades. My body and soul needs to be open to God, as the leaves on a tree, and I have often seen this as both a vertical and horizontal relationship. If I am going to share anything with an audience or congregation, this must be at the forefront of my practice. Then the horizontal flows freely to the audience. This performer-audience relationship is my receptivity to much more than my skills, art, choreography, improvisation, form, but is an alive energy rippling through my kinesthetic awareness and transforms into dance. The divine impulse dancing with the human impulse. My dance is a prayer. My prayer is a dance.

Conclusion

Love knows no boundaries. Dance knows no boundaries. For the body does not end with our fingers or toes, pelvis or hips. Nor does love. Love takes many forms as does dance. My journey from being a liturgical dance artist to being immersed in an embodied theology has shifted form to dancing in a variety of contexts and seeing all of life as an embodied inquiry. Here is a place to live, listen and respond with all our beings and honour body, soul, heart and skin. Let everything in the fabric of our beautiful and paradoxical lives bleed through our bodyspirits. Limitations and grace. Lament and joy. We are in this human journey, one grown out of humus with the magic of more-than-human having a dialogue with us. May the dialogue always be one of asking and receiving, listening and loving and include all of who we are. Blood and bone, prayers and praise, sinking into the mystery of all our cells. I am still a dancing exegete. Here is the call to dance and a sacred space for embodied inquiry.

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Résumé

Dans un langage poétique, sensuel et viscéral, cet article explore la façon dont une danseuse liturgique, dont le travail en tant que danseuse et éducatrice s'est centré pendant des décennies autour de la danse et de la théologie, a été incitée, grâce à une théologie d'incarnation, à ouvrir un champ de « recherche incarnée » (*embodied inquiry*) qui se situe maintenant en dehors des études théologiques. L'article est en lui-même une danse constituée de cinq mouvements retraçant le trajet d'une danseuse liturgique de la théologie à la doxologie, à la prière incarnée, à la recherche incarnée et à une danse dont la nature serait la cathédrale. En créant et en jouant des œuvres pour des sites spécifiques du monde naturel, tout le vivant devient une expression incarnée de l'esprit. Une attention est accordée au fondement biblique de

l'expression corporelle et de la sagesse, avant de se tourner vers des champs de recherche artistique prenant appui sur la phénoménologie et la *curriculum theory* pour ouvrir un cursus scolaire poétique et incarné. L'écriture est ici artistique et académique, personnelle et universelle, évoquant un aspect physique à travers les sens où les connexions entre le sacré et le mondain sont reconnues. La danse, le mouvement et le corps sont enracinés dans une expression « incarnationnelle » et poétique, et ils représentent une philosophie dans la chair, où le physique et le spirituel sont étroitement liés.

Abstract

In poetic, sensuous and visceral language this article explores how one liturgical dance artist, whose work as a dancer and educator was centered in dance and theology for decades was informed by an incarnational theology to break open a field of embodied inquiry now situated outside the field of theological studies. The article is in itself a dance consisting of five movements which trace the journey of a liturgical dance artist from theology to doxology, embodied prayer and embodied inquiry to dancing in nature as a cathedral. Here in creating and performing site-specific work in the natural world, all of living and being is an embodied expression of spirit. Attention is given to the Biblical foundation of bodily expression and wisdom, moving to the fields of arts-based research rooted in phenomenology and curriculum theory to open up an embodied and poetic scholarship. Here writing is artistic and scholarly, personal and universal, evoking a physicality through the senses where connections between the holy and ordinary are honoured. Dance, movement and the body are rooted in incarnational and poetic expression and represent a philosophy through the flesh where physicality and spirituality are deeply intertwined.