

Spirituality at School  
Musings on movement, somatic inquiry, and spirituality at Moving on Center  
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Finally, Spirituality is out of the closet.

But can it be “out” at school?

There are all sorts of considerations. If we rely on our hope to receive government funding do we have to ask – what about separation of church and state? And if we are a private organization and chose to minimize such questions we may be left with - - how do we best leave room for acknowledging differences amongst participants. At Moving On Center we asked -- How can we educate holistically without imposing dogma, or imposing models, forms, rituals, beliefs? Can we educate about the living, conscious body – the soma -- while invoking spirit, in this small private training about engaging the living body, the soma, in art, education and health.

At Moving On Center – The School of Participatory Arts and Somatic Research relationships to the movement of ruach/spirit as breath and wind has found its place. It does so idiosyncratically –changing form each year.

Once we as co-directors –Carol Swann, Jon Weaver, and Martha Eddy rather quietly acknowledged our acceptance of spirit moving as a part of who we are as individuals we did not seek to establish these experiences into our somatic curriculum. First of all they were quite different for each of us. Secondly our intention at the school centers on the participatory and evolutionary, if you will. So instead we just observe, sometimes indirectly, and wait for what emerges. And we improvise.

“What is our common ground?” How do we celebrate, create and support together with open acknowledgement of spirit (replete with the subtlety that was honed into us during the years of “the spirit lives in the closet” – the seventies and eighties?)

With small openings, forms and processes emerged. The experience of our first class, the class of 1995-96 (as told from my individual perspective) evolved something like this:

Openings:

Aside from a small question in the application “What is your experience with body-mind-spirit intensive trainings” no reference is made to spiritual practice in our promotional literature.

People arrive to learn about the body, how to enter their bodies through somatic dialogues, and find and activate personal and cultural wisdom. They seek to learn how

to share this wisdom through performance, movement education, and in therapeutic settings.

We introduce ourselves and stories of deep experiences are shared -- passion for the outdoors, vision quests, and coincidences that brought us together are danced and discussed. Compelled by a drawing of an open hand (our graphics), written words filled with hopes and vision, words of people, money, and even a lack of money are part of what brought us together.

So the year begins and anatomy is taught, somatic practice begins, hands are laid on, and dancing emerges from our hearts, legs, fluids, consciousness. We also sing a lot – spirituals, songs from around the world, and utterances from within. These songs reveal our reach, both inward and outward. Our assignments provide structure for these revelations. A few activities provide further wind, blowing on the doors just a bit more:

Assignment One is to go off into nature and meditate – contrasting the experience of contemplation in stillness with contemplation in movement. Each person records their experience as they like – through dance, poetry, essays, and statements. Conversations about these experiences emerge intermittently.

Students report back that these contemplative moments at the beginning of the year “set the tone” for culminating projects they pursued at the end of the year.

Early on, authentic movement is introduced – the process of moving from within with a witness becomes a tradition at Moving On Center, a baseline for all participatory exchanges.

A class is taught on the activation of the endocrine system through vocalization. My laryngitis means that no demonstrating is done. Guiding words are written and read. Each person finds his/her own voice. Great shifts in mind-body are explored. The art of creative yoga (a Body-Mind Centering approach to the combination of developmental movement, glandular movement and physical postures) is introduced. Many echo the experience that glandular activation using tools from BodyMind Centering can also be experienced as chakral energy, a map for a somatic and/or spiritual journey.

A detailed curriculum for further study in somatic movement therapy is handed out that says that a class in Therapeutic Movement and Spiritual Dialogue is available by request of the whole group. No response to this occurs.

Titos Sompos teaches African dance, leading dances with songs and always talking about full integration of all parts of our lives. His eyes illuminate these possibilities.

Students choreograph and present – they call on the “witness” inclusive of telling and hearing stories of spiritual heritage (e.g., reading from the Bible and talking about grandma and warm cake) while being encircled by the audience or seen by classmates. Moments of mutual blessings happen – being washed, being purged.

The first semester ends with a day of closure activities. Each person is asked to speak of what s/he wants from the group. Being carried, flipped, held, and touched are common requests. One student asks us to do a contemplative dance structure – Barbara Dille is the influence. One faculty member asks us to sit zazen quietly as a whole group. Silence permeates the day of singing and sighing.

A long break, five weeks, many stories.

Visiting teacher, Sara Shelton Mann, asks students to spend a day in ritual. No classes just go do these things at home. Returning students work with them in the classroom. Even more dancing results of course, alone and together.

We continue to touch; more and more skillful touch. Observing, supporting, improvising with others somas, with greater sensitivity.

Students discover the gems of the San Francisco Bay area – meetings with monks, teachers, healers, practitioners of all kinds are weaving into the somatic educational experience. The exchange of information and resources is thick.

The core of the schools' somatic work is driven home – acknowledgement, acceptance; acknowledgement, acceptance. Allowing, observing, being with. Opening up to options, checking in with bodily experience to confirm.

Healing is happening, illnesses are fought off, shifted, brought into clearer dialogue. Pain comes and goes. Understanding and tolerance increases.

We live a long ritual at the beach with Jamie McHugh of Tamalpa. He shares more of the Halprin Method and beyond, modeling his deep integration of many forms. We are outside, mostly in the rain, at Point Reyes National Seashore for 2.5 days. Those who couldn't get away on this retreat are missed.

And more and more. The end is vague, perhaps because it is a beginning. ... Performances rich with stories of the body's revelations, song, music, more healing are simply part of how we are together now. Even visitors are steeped in soma fullness – audiences experience the circulation of the heart – they become part of the pathway of the aorta, some join in and are the blood – blue and red. Others take in a musical about east west contrasts in health perspectives starring the spleen. Each of these engagements invoke more than the body, the mind, the spirit. It is a wholesome shake-up. Full of laughter too.

This is the beginning of our work in 1996.

Since then students lead structures even more. For instance, while living at EarthDance for SOMAction Movement Therapy Training two students decide to sit Zazen in the round studio at 6AM. A structure is developed that includes all. Enter quietly at anytime. Settle in and stay til 8AM. This structure is passed down – to classes in New York City; to people around the world.

As spiritual practices are formed by the student body the body of knowledge becomes more whole.

And soul searching has also evolved into spirited envisioning of each person's path – students and faculty together supporting the birth of a friend's next stage of life fulfillment. Spirit and soul awaken through this community interaction.

And email exchange is one type of nursemaid between this birth and engaging again, newly, “back at home.” Spirit, ethers, internet.

One of the last scenes this year was in the tower of Riverside Church in New York City, overlooking the Hudson River – up on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor of the grand church's spire. The turreted studio was alive with SOMAction - adults, joined by children, touching, and being touched across race, class, and culture. The spirit was present in every sense – to touch, to taste, to smell, to see, to feel, to balance, to self-sense, to intuit, to hear.

The spirit was present in every sense, and in each soma.

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