

# Dance, Stillness and Paradox

**Jennifer De Leon**

Auckland University of Technology

## Introduction

This paper is about stillness – a singular stillness, occurring within movement yet also framing, holding all movement. Using a phenomenological hermeneutic theoretical framework and drawing on Master of Health Science research *Dance and Stillness* (De Leon, 2005), the works of poet T.S. Eliot, phenomenological and philosophical writings of Heidegger, Milner, Smythe, de Chardin and others, notions of equipoise and hysteresis, as well as an underlying Christocentric philosophy, the potential therapeutic value of this stillness is discussed.

The post-graduate research (2003-2005) involved creating a dance work, *Stillpoint*, which embodied this stillness. Dancers and watchers were questioned about their experience. Information was sought about the essence of the danced, watched and felt stillness-in-the-dance, and what constituted the lived experience of it.

My goal was to gain understanding of the therapeutic and transformative potential of this particular stillness and how it may inform therapeutic engagement. My research looked from a psychotherapeutic perspective at what happens in 'a moment of time (for)... that moment of time gives the meaning' (Eliot, 1936, p. 163).

Leading questions were:

- How can dance and dance-movement therapy contribute to well-being and personal growth?
- How can dance and dance-movement therapy be employed as tools for health and healing?
- What place does the lived experience of stillness have in the practice of dance and dance movement psychotherapy?

Analysis of the research with participants in the *Stillpoint* project revealed important psychotherapeutic themes such as relationships with chaos, with each other, and with design and time; and the meaning of authenticity, symbolism, awareness, focus, and release.

### **The first dance**

When we are born, one of the first things we do is breathe. Our tiny body gasps and shudders, twitches, reaches, stretches, curls and unfolds, gulping great in-breaths of life-giving air. Breath is thus the first dance, and this 'dance' continues as the fundamental kinetic impulse for the rest of our lives. The breath sustains our bodies, thus breath + body = movement. There is no client, dancer, watcher – or any person – who comes to therapy independently of breath, body or movement. Preceding and containing whatever issue for which a client has come to therapy, are breath, body and movement. Every person presents with distinct characteristics of breathing, body and movement. Paradoxically then, what then does it mean to be still in the midst of movement?

Living in a state of paradox seems to be the way life is: we feel urged—pulled or goaded – one way and then another. We want to do this and end up doing that. We wish for this and the other is what happens. Within this tension often lies a place of distress; sometimes a profoundly deep distress that manifests itself as disease, chronic depression, or even death. I propose that in dance the paradox and its attendant tension can be held in a kind of 'dance of paradox.' It can be likened to currents that *seem* oppositional – as the current and its undertow (a current under the surface of the water, which is not apparent on the surface). This paper proposes that not only are these currents profoundly symbiotic, they cannot exist without each other. That is to say, not solved, resolved, or cured – but held – held at the 'still point of a turning world' (Eliot, 1936, p. 177).

A central premise is that all movement is contained within stillness and further, that stillness is at the same time also the core, the central axis of all movement. Both my research and my present practice indicate that the dancer who understands and allows the experience of stillness to inform her or his dance is accordingly closer to achieving the stillness 'at the eye of the paradox' – the still point. Research participants and present clients report that this moment in time seems time-less, a moment in which realisations occur and in which lies potential for transformation.

My objective in discussing currents and undercurrents, paradox, flow and undertow is not to blend, merge or subsume but to recognise and celebrate the opposition/harmony; the discreteness/connectedness - with the desire that readers, practitioners, colleagues may be willing to investigate, 'partake in the communion in which we no longer remain the same' (De Leon 2005, p. 58).

## The stillpoint

The poetry of T. S. Eliot for me epitomises the stillness with which this study is concerned. I suggest it is a stillness known through 'the grace of sense' and when thus felt it is 'lifted and moving':

At the still-point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance....  
The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded  
By a grace of sense, a white light lifted and moving  
*Burnt Norton*, (Eliot, 1935, p. 177)

What is expressed here? Eliot's poetry speaks of the suspended, timeless moment or state that is neither this nor that: a moment that is neither a coming towards nor a departing from. I interpret Eliot as giving words to the experience of a particular suspended stillness at the peak of the up-breath, the *ah!* The moment is aware, conscious, and mindful – yet it is *given*; un-orchestrated, un-manipulated, surrendered. My research revealed that the still point at the core of the dance was experienced as tangible and real; that the felt experience of it contributes to well-being and personal growth and that when brought to consciousness and employed in dance and dance-movement therapy it brought about experience that was transformative and life-changing. Epstein (1996, p. 101) names it 'equipoise.' Stephen Donaldson, in his epic trilogy *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977, 1978) returns again and again to the theme of living 'at the eye of paradox'. I think of it also as 'hysteresis.'

## Equipoise

Epstein links his equipoise with Freud's notion of sublimation, where inborn, instinctual cravings and impulses are 'sublimated...transformed into wisdom...' (1996, p. 79). He informs us that meditative equipoise is achieved when the attention is turned towards conscious stillness:

Firmly grounded in awareness of breath and body ... learning to surrender to the ebb and flow of breath, a stilling into one's body... stilling the mind ... then approaching some sense of open space ... surrendering to the flow.  
(ibid, pp. 145-146)

In intentionally directing the attention inwards, as the dancer does when he or she prepares to dance – to the core of stillness; stillness within the whirl, within the tumult, within the choreography itself – there in the moment of its recognition the perceiver (dancer, client) is ready to surrender to the flow. It seems that it is in this recognition the perceiver (dancer, client) is, to some greater or lesser extent, releasing, surrendering, allowing the 'yes.'

## Hysteresis

This stillness is the moment of neither this nor that: neither a coming towards nor a departing from – a hiatus of suspended stillness – hysteresis.<sup>1</sup> The hysteresis moment is one of exchange/interchange between the movement that goes up then down, in then out, wide then narrow, tightened then released, curved then straightened. This is the moment of the time/no-time when consciousness is occupied with neither coming nor going, neither haste nor urgency or imposition, but simply being. It is a movement-in-time example of phenomenologist Heidegger's *dasein* (1927). The *dasein* concept refers to the nature of being: being-in-the-world, being in, being there – something concrete, literal, actual and daily. Since the salient point about *dasein* is that it can wonder about itself as existing (Steiner, 1989, Smythe, 1998), then the *dasein* moment/state provokes questions as 'What am I?' 'Why am I?' 'What does my existence mean?' These are questions that arise continually in my practice, and that I suggest are the stuff of life itself.



From *Stillpoint*

Photo: Eva Karlsson

Further, this hysteresis in the dance, this hysteresis of *dasein*, is not manipulated or engineered through disconnection with the 'before' or the 'after'. It does not require deliberate choreographed stillness. It is a condition without announcement of, or grand preparation for – it simply happens – it is simply part of the dance. It is as if Heraclitus' notion of all things changing, yet nothing ever becoming disconnected (in Koch, 1994), is *danced*. Neither is the stillness dormant or fixed, for change occurs even *in* the time of stillness. And furthermore, this stillness/hysteresis/*dasein*/still point exists within a cosmic holding together of constant change. As soon as we observe, recognise, become aware of this moment – it has passed. But in that moment, of felt, embodied consciousness, we are wholly present, wholly attentive, wholly here.<sup>2</sup>

## **The symbolic**

Within this stillness is an opportunity for experience of the symbolic. In the dance our bodies and the shapes and sequences made by them are symbolic. Working with my clients in the domain of the symbolic does not require the movement to be spectacular or beautiful – the dance itself carries the symbol. The symbolic expression is an entry to a kind of ebullient overflow, expressive of the orgasmic joy of creative experiencing (Milner, 1987). Milner further suggests says Raab (2004), that mystical and creative states hold the potential for elements of joy, union, ecstasy, absorption, loss of self-consciousness and loss of sense of time, and that both states undo the over-fixed separation between self and other caused by the tyranny of the conscious mind. Where the over-fixed separation is undone and the tyranny of the conscious mind is released is a place of timeless suspension, an equipoise that occurs between movements. Milner (1987) holds that creative and symbolic experiencing has many phases: agonising, depressive, dead, empty, thrilling, high, emptied – and still. It allows a person to experience stillness in which the state of paradox – affirming I and not-I, self and no-self may be contained. Raab (2004) declares this psychologically beneficial. As attested to by my clients, fellow dancers, and me, the symbolic experience contributes powerfully to well-being and personal growth and is a tool in the journey towards health and healing. The power of the symbolic dance is to tell a story that cannot be said in words.

Thomas Merton (1958, p. 48) says that the symbolic within the created work contains in itself that which makes us aware of the inner meaning of life, a deeper reality. He says a true symbol points to the stillness at the heart of all being. I do not think that all created works are authentic emanations from the stillness at the heart of all being. But I do suggest that in conditions of humility, receptivity; of resonance with the tenet that the essence of our existence is the passion to create (Moreno, 1959); that the symbolic language of dance can arise from nowhere *other* than the stillness deep in the dancer's being. I believe it possible that the dance, being symbolic, may hold at its core the stillness at the heart of all being.

## **Symbol, stillness and healing**

Nothing that knowledge can grasp or desire can want is God - but that where the pursuit is subsumed and knowledge and desire are still, there is darkness, and there, God shines.

(Eckhart, 1994, p.185)

The words 'grasp' and 'desire' I here construe as movement, thus I interpret Eckhart's words as describing movement, stilled, and in these moments I become aware of a potency that I can only name – God. But here is a paradoxical state of affairs, for to glimpse the 'stillness at the heart of all being' and perceive/receive the shining of God (also known as healing and wholeness), I dance. I dance the grasping, desire, darkness, stillness – all may be expressed in the dance. So, to dance or be still: is it one, or the other, or both? My research findings suggest that the stillness is throughout and in the spaces between... the dance and the stillness become indivisible.

In my dance therapy practice I work with the principle and goal that in the midst of turbulence, in the ebb and flow of the dance, the dancer becomes still, conscious, self, other and context-aware. Still in a way which is 'neither arrest nor movement, neither fixity, neither from nor towards, neither ascent nor decline but still, at the still point' (Eliot, 1936, p.177). In more mystic vein philosophers Teilhard de Chardin and Matthew Fox describe a similar stillness: 'Awakening from the dream; the world, this palpable world... we stand still, for this is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it' (de Chardin, 1968, p. 112), and Fox (1988, p. 60) uses the biblical reference (John 4: 6-29) to describe 'the suspended moment at the well, at the source of being, of images, of creativity ... That power from which the dance ... comes, is silence, and stillness'.

Here are experiences of stillness that surely may wake in us an energy of creativity and a sense of the holy. It is an experience into and towards which I invite my clients. My intention is that they will experience the awakening of creativity and something of the divine.

### **Literature from the world of dance**

In the area of dance writing, the work of dance therapists and body workers provides insight into the subject of stillness within movement. Amy Kaplan, a process oriented psychotherapist, dance movement therapist, and writer of *The Hidden Dance* (1986) speaks of the unfolding nature of authentic movement, 'You wait in the stillness, and watch the creative spirit of nature unfold' (p. 73). Other dance therapists reinforce this idea of 'waiting and watching'. Joan Chodorow (1991, p. 196), dance therapist and Jungian psychologist comments: 'Movement is followed by a period of natural stillness and continuing inner attentiveness ... sometimes the transformative experience simply cannot be expressed in words.' Ruth Noble (1998), UK dance therapist says, 'Our embodiment in the material world and our struggle to manifest this creatively ... is within body and mind, movement and stillness'.

Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), physicist, dancer, philosopher, perhaps the first movement psychotherapist and one of the 'gospel' writers of dance, captures in Laban Movement Fundamentals terminology, the essence of dance and stillness – the moment *caught* – the moment that permits the next to be seen:

Movement is man's magic mirror, reflecting and creating the inner life in and by visible trace-forms, in turn also reflecting and creating the visible trace-forms in and by the inner life. The simplest visible element of this startling and paradoxical operation is the plate between the axial-stable and the surface-mobile bodily movements, or, in other words, the struggle between the binding power of a knot and the loosening power of an untwisting line with an intermediary lemniscate.

(Laban, 1966, p. 54)

And then, perhaps most eloquent of all, are the timeless lines of Eliot that, whilst not the work of a dance therapist, reflect nonetheless so aptly the

transformative moment. '... except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance' (Eliot, 1936).

### **A task (for dance therapists, for the human race)**

In the midst of living, we are dying and the client seeking psychotherapy is essentially, afraid (Jung, 1965). I here pool all problems, issues and manifestations presented by clients, into the one core issue, fear – fear of living, fear of dying. Is not one of the questions of *dasein*, if not *the* ultimate question of life, (this knowing that we are dying), therefore, *how shall we live?* Indubitably then, I suggest this must also be *one*, if not *the ultimate* task of dance therapy to create an environment wherein the fear of living and of dying, may be brought into the open, where it may be met and the life lived again. James Hillman (1975) comments that the significance a soul makes possible, derives from its special relation with death. If psychotherapy is to do with the healing of the soul, then it must be a psychotherapy that has a relationship with death. What is required then is a therapy that dares work with clients who are afraid, dares confront the terror, dares admit the paradoxes and the unanswerable.

Is the dance, with its movement and its stillness and a dance therapy employing these concepts adequate for such a task? I believe there is no one methodology of psychotherapy that meets the need for every unique individual, but my research showed that the stillness studied and described here contributes profoundly to this task. Working with research participants and clients of my dance therapy practice I realise that the stillness within and undergirding the dance epitomises a greater stillness that undergirds both psychotherapy and life's transformative experiences. Participant and client feedback<sup>3</sup> suggests it is the stillness, the moment *caught* in the midst of the turning world, in the midst of turmoil and busyness that allows the space and the pause to make the psychotherapy work at all.

### **The watcher**

This paper refers so far to the person who dances, but what about the one who does not dance, but watches the dancer? Is any of this therapeutic for that person? My research indicates that those *watching* dance become physically, kinetically and mentally aware. A cellular response, an innate sense of kinaesthetic empathy with moving bodies to directly receive the dancer's message occurs (Foster, 1986, Langer, 1953, Sachs, 1963, Grove, 2003). It is not without cognitive processing but it is not dependent on it. Choreography can be a voice for both dancers and audience. An audience may not learn the movements or the shape of the choreography – yet it 'speaks' for them. Wordless emotion can be expressed; and there is a sense that despite (or because of) wordlessness, dancer and audience both, share such expression.

While this empathic kinaesthesia can be verbalised, it has a potential that is beyond words to reach both dancer and audience. My research showed that this level of embodied resonance in the dance-stillness experience has the capacity to hold and express the *dasein* of both dancer *and watcher* and that

the stillness becomes a vessel, a therapeutic crucible in which healing may take place for *both*.

### **Further comment**

Working together with my clients watching, experiencing, waiting, processing, the question arises: *Is it possible that the quintessential essence of dance and stillness are one and the same?*

Writer Iris Murdoch poses a question of seemingly irreconcilable contradiction:

You have created me with the longing and the hunger – I must dance, or die. Is my art the ultimate distraction; the final cunning of the human soul which would rather do anything than face the gods? – or is my dance the most profound entrance into God's presence that I shall ever essay on this earth?

(Murdoch, 2005, p. 1)

Here is a tension of opposites that was borne out in my research as being familiar, to us, the research participants, and to my clients. The details were unique but the dilemma of opposites was shared. The findings showed that the stillness between (movements) was the time-space in which the current and undertow could be contained, reconciled, welcomed. Stillness and movement, as current and undertow are indivisible, the reflection of each other, for in the midst of movement there is stillness and the stillness contains all the movement.

### **Conclusion**

In terms of our original questions remarking the place of dance, dance-movement therapy and stillness in the journey of healing, participants in the research said that they had experienced a kind of 'eternal' healing stillness. Their experience of stillness in conjunct with movement that was at times fast and frantic gave permission and expression to both personal chaos and personal source or essence of stillness. One client (whom I shall refer to as 'M' for confidentiality purposes) said:

We cannot find our own stillness unless we're in chaos. It's out of our own madness, our freneticism, our searching, always searching, searching... unless we look within we can't find the stillness, and the healing. Your portrayal of chaos has the effect of leading me into my own stillness by way of comparison. It leads me to reflect on the healing nature of stillness and how that can be encouraged within the context of daily life.

Another client, whom I shall name 'S', explained the experience as follows:

You can describe it but not define it. When the breathing goes right - like the ebb and tide of the sea, there's certain stillness there, it definitely doesn't mean no movement because that is static and this is a dynamic something. It starts as moments, but you hope to be getting to stillness as a state.

Other participants commented that it was the sense of time (or suspended time), a timelessness they experienced in dancing and watching that they



identified as integral to their way of being. It was a 'space' that released them from the need to do and do, and simply – be. We understand our bodies and their movement in space and time; our bodies and their stillness in space and time is then the dance that contains the stillness and the stillness that contains the dance... not simply a metaphor for *Dasein*, being-in-the-world (Grenz, 1996) – these *are Dasein*.

The dance-stillness journey may be understood as an expression of the dialogue between the sacred, or God and all who are engaged in healing, creating, resting, growing; it is a pilgrimage, a prayer, a way of life. As a choreographer, psychotherapist, dance therapist and human being – my desire is that my work might inspire others to recognise the steps of their own dance, perchance feel a rhythm behind the words that stirs them to dance on, and a stillness that enables them to rest and recover for whatever follows.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are other discipline-specific uses of this term - for example in physics it is noted as a delayed response by an object to changes in the forces acting on it, especially magnetic forces.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to be confused with a stillness that is unmindful and that people plead as boredom or nothing to do. I contend that much psychological symptomatology named loss of self-respect, depression, suicidal is a stillness *misperceived* as fixed, antagonistic and meaningless.

<sup>3</sup> During the period of creating Stillpoint (Auckland, NZ, 2003-2005), the dance work that part comprised my Masters' thesis the work-in-progress was viewed. At these regular showings feedback was invited from both the participating dancers and from those who viewed the work. Gathering, analyzing and writing up the feedback data occurred through the 2-year period.

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### **Biographical statement**

Jennifer De Leon is a dance performer, choreographer and teacher and Director of Poyema Dance Company. She is also a psychotherapist (NZAP) and dance therapist, trained in UK, USA and NZ and founder of The Healing Dance Dance/Movement Psychotherapy, as well as a Laban Movement Fundamentals Certificated Practitioner (New York), a Master Practitioner in Neuro Linguistic Programming, and registered Dance Teacher (NZADT). Jenny is based in Auckland where she lives with her 2 children and is currently, alongside her dancing activities, embarking on her Doctorate. Please refer to <http://www.danz.org.nz/jennydeleon.php>