

*"All the movements of the earth follow the lines of wave motion. Both sound and light travel in waves. The motion of water, winds, trees, and plants progresses in waves. The flight of a bird and the movement of all animals follow lines like undulating waves. If then one seeks a point of physical beginning for the movement of the human body, there is a clue in the undulation of the wave." – Isadora Duncan*

In 2010, Emilie Conrad made a video series about dancers who were pioneers in the somatic field. I joined her in the Bay Area for three non-stop days of conversations, performances, and interviews with Anna Halprin and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. At the outset of her interview with Anna (you can view it [here](#)), Emilie spoke admiringly of her as a contemporary version of Isadora Duncan, the mother of modern dance. I was surprised in my 25-year relationship with Anna I had never made that connection before, but when I looked back at my history with her I realized Emilie was right. The connecting link was freedom of movement and the quest for a more humane, nature-based dance art.

When Isadora took off her shoes and her corset to dance on stage in the early 1900s, she outraged many people by breaking a sacred rule in dance at the time: you contain the body and conceal its earthiness. When Anna's dancers took their clothes off on stage and moved out into the audience in the 1960s, she continued the legacy of breaking taboos, especially by revealing the body as it is, and blurring the boundary between the viewer and the viewed. Transforming the art of dance first with these avant-garde performances, and then with audience participation events, Anna spearheaded a contemporary movement to broaden what dance could be; and still later on in her career, to return dance to its indigenous roots as a participatory ritual with intention and meaning.

My relationship with Anna seems preordained now in looking back at all the forces that directed me to her home studio on the side of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California. In 1977, I was an English major at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when I walked in to my first dance improvisation class. Movement classes were unfamiliar to me; my only other experience with formalized movement was karate, which I had begun the year before as a way to stay in shape after a cross-country bike trip. The highlight of the karate classes for me was Fridays when our teacher would bring in disco music to accompany our "katas" (the specific sequence of punches and kicks). The disco music made the movement playful and the room come alive; I wanted more of that magic so when friends told me about a dance improvisation elective, I was game. The instructor of the improvisation class was a graduate student, Barbara Bruce, who continued to dance despite her diagnosis with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). After the confines of karate, having the freedom to move and embody a full range of physical and imaginative possibilities without a pre-planned outcome was pure delight. The class allowed my body and mind to speak simultaneously; and like the creative writing classes that saved me from the banality of high school, I was able to be myself and have my own voice. Coming to dance through

improvisation, instead of through traditional technique classes with everyone doing the same movement at the same time, set a lifelong theme: *Dance is for personal expression, creative exploration and human liberation, with each person the choreographer of their own lives.*

One day in class, Barbara talked about how her MS had gone into remission after taking a workshop with a dancer in California named Anna Halprin. I had never heard of her before, but that was when the mythos of Anna began! After taking Barbara's class for two semesters, I was sufficiently inspired to drop being an English major and start the path of becoming a dancer and creative arts specialist. 4 years later working as an NEA funded Artist-in-Residence, I was bringing creative dance and drama to schools throughout the state. In the meantime, Anna kept appearing on the radar - I learned she was a graduate of UW-Madison; a girlfriend was on the mailing list for her school, Tamalpa Institute; and I came to know one of her primary collaborators from the 60's, A.A. Leath, who also lived in Madison and regularly attended my performances in the schools. By 1985, my vision in residencies had grown to the point of orchestrating Laban-inspired movement choirs and community-based festivals so large groups of children and adults could dance together. I knew Anna had created large-scale events with non-dancers (like Citydance in San Francisco), so that summer I went to my first workshop with her. During the weekend, we explored basic movements, such as walking, running and standing, individually and in relationship with others, as collective springboards into personal variations. Just like my early experiences in Barbara's improvisation class, we moved equally from the body and the imagination, with awareness of our environment and other people. There were no complicated sequences to master or the pressure of performance so the *art of human movement* could emerge organically and effortlessly in this evolving ecosystem with varying body types, ages, and levels of experience. And by paring down movement to its essential elements of space, time, force and flow so everyone could participate, there was an essential democratization and a return of DANCE to people.

Anna's passion about the power of dance and its place in culture for everyone inspired me to take a year-long sabbatical and study with her in California. That initial study in 1986 turned into a three-year apprenticeship of living in her studio, assisting her in various workshops, and teaching in the training program. My specialization was teaching Anna's Movement Ritual 1, a fluid Yoga-like form done lying down on the floor that features the basic movements of the spine – flexion, extension, and rotation – in different combinations. What makes this particular form different than other structured movement techniques is the open-ended nature of the sequence and its intention. While following the set spatial pathway, focusing on the rhythm of the breath and its expression, and paying attention to the sensory feedback arising, a door is opened into personal feelings, images and associations. This attention to

sensation and feeling drives both the dynamics of the movement and its resulting spontaneous variations. You have implicit permission to leave the path whenever you want and follow whatever movement is arising (or even linger in stillness); and to stay with the path as much as you like. This integrative approach to dance combining form and freedom (technique and improvisation) in a naturalistic way was groundbreaking when Anna introduced it in the 1970s - and in some respects, still is.

In retrospect, the primary gift I received from Anna was *nature* - my own and that of the world. I learned how my body can be expressive, articulate and even transcendent when I allow my bones and breath to collaborate with gravity and momentum, and give myself the freedom to spontaneously express outwards through voice and movement what is alive inside. By turning my attention to the vocabulary of ordinary movement, I was able to discover dance anew - one based more on the unruly, dynamic, ever-changing and spirited improvisation of the natural world. And of course, to be in partnership with the larger body of the natural world – to become water, sky, rock and sand not in an abstract, imagistic way, but in a direct, sensate and sensual way of receiving and being received. Her inspiration continues to live on in my own work of [Embodied Mindfulness](#) (exploring our inner landscape somatically and creatively) and [Embodying Nature](#) (exploring the outer landscape somatically and creatively) as I continue our shared mission of advocating for more bodily freedom and movement creativity - individually and in the body politic.

I am grateful for our ongoing personal and creative relationship that has endured over these many years, and am happy to acknowledge her as teacher, mentor, collaborator, and friend on her 95th birthday.