

## For Anna Halprin on her 95<sup>th</sup> – July 13, 2015

*"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*

A few years ago, I accompanied Emilie Conrad to witness her interview with Anna Halprin for a video series she was making about dancers who were pioneers in the somatic field. (You can see the series here: <https://vimeo.com/22344331>) At the beginning of the interview, Emilie declared her admiration for Anna, and spoke of her as the contemporary version of Isadora Duncan, the mother of modern dance. Like Isadora, Anna was a rebel and had been far ahead of her time. 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 - which started even before we met - I realized Emilie was right. The connecting link for me 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 almost preordained, as I look back now at all the forces that ultimately 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 weekly workouts was when our teacher would bring in disco music on Fridays to accompany our "katas" (a specific sequence of punches and kicks that were like the musical scales of karate). The disco music made the movement playful and the room come alive; I wanted more of that magic!

The instructor of the improvisation class was a graduate student, Barbara Bruce, who continued to dance despite her diagnosis with MS. After the confines of karate, having the freedom to move and embody a full range of physical and imaginative possibilities with no pre-planned outcome was a 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, Barbara talked about a dancer in California named Anna Halprin. I had never heard her name before, but Barbara was convinced her MS had gone into remission due to taking a workshop with Anna. And 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; 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 heard Anna was creating large-scale events with non-dancers, like Citydance in San Francisco, so that summer I went to take my first workshop with her. During the weekend, we explored individually and in relationship with others basic movements, such as walking, running and standing. Since there was no complicated movement to master, or the pressure of performance, personal feeling and meaning could more easily surface. And 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. I had found my teacher!

Anna's passion about the power of dance and its place in culture for all people inspired me to take a year-long sabbatical and study with her in California. That initial study turned into a four-year apprenticeship of living in her studio, assisting her in a variety of workshops, and teaching in the training program. My specialization in the training program 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 dance techniques is the open-ended nature of the sequence and its intention. You follow the

prescribed pathway in your own tempo, focusing on the rhythmic movement of your breath and its expression while paying attention to the moment-by-moment sensate feedback. This attention to the physical body opens the door to feelings, images and associations, which then influence both the dynamics of the movement and its spontaneous creative variations. There is implicit permission to leave the path whenever you want and follow whatever movement is arising; and to stay with the path, even to linger in stillness, whenever you like. This holistic 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. Working with the body as an expression of nature made me realize how confined I had been by my cultural notions of dance. Even with all the innovations and creativity I had been exploring, I still was adhering to a stylized vocabulary of performance-oriented movement.

The ultimate 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 when I give myself the freedom to spontaneously express outwards through voice and movement what I sense, feel and imagine 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, and spirited improvisation of nature and less on the formal, controlled, and materialistic choreography of culture.

Her inspiration continues to live on in my work as I continue to advocate for more freedom of expression, individually and in the body politic, while also exploring the inner landscape of the body through Embodied Mindfulness and our relationship to the planet through Embodying Nature. I am grateful for our ongoing personal and creative relationship that has endured over these 30 years, and am happy to acknowledge her on her 95th birthday as teacher, mentor, collaborator, and friend.

Here is a video of us together at Sea Ranch in 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJqFCe8IFYM>