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# Dancing at the crossroads of body and mind: The therapeutic use of Irish set dancing as storytelling for the elderly

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Dancing at the crossroads of body and mind:  
The therapeutic use of Irish set dancing as storytelling for the elderly

Caitlin Kelly

Submitted in partial completion of the  
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### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the Irish dancers in my life:

Margaret and Ellen Pike, for igniting the spark 25 years ago,

Sheila Ryan Davoren and Camp Rince Ceol, for all the rage and “reel” fun,

Claire and Jonathan McMorrow, for the TCRG training opportunity of a lifetime,

Sean Reagan and Colleen Quigley-Carey, for encouraging me to grow as a teacher,

the Inishfree School of Irish Dancing, for showing me that Irish dance can be DMT,

and all the friends that have become a part of my Irish dance family along the way.

I am grateful for those who have supported me on every step of this journey, especially:

my mom – the embodiment of patience, persistence, and the healing power of set dancing,

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Special shout outs to Blue Steel (my 17-year-old car), St. John the Baptist School (for letting me

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Instagram accounts featuring cute dogs and sassy goats (self-care), mango margaritas (more self-

care), extra-large iced teas, and having Tuesday nights off so I could remain (relatively) sane.

There is wisdom in knowing what we don’t yet know. Here’s to the next adventure!

### Abstract

Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a strengths-based therapeutic intervention that focuses on the mind-body connection and its role in behavior, expression, cognition, and communication. Dance has served a purpose beyond entertainment for thousands of years – even, and especially, before recorded history. Cultures worldwide developed dances to celebrate, to mourn, to worship, and to work. The folk dances of ancient societies, now enjoyed and performed primarily for their cultural and aesthetic value, showed evidence of an inherent understanding of the tenets of dance/movement therapy. Originally representing and working within the rhythmic context of nature, figures such as chains and circles continue to appear in present-day folk dance traditions such as Irish set dance, suggesting community, the sun, and the circle of life (Lawson, 1953) and relating the history of their people through movement. Once performed “at the crossroads” of the Irish countryside in social gatherings called céilithe (pronounced “KAY-leees”, plural of the Irish Gaelic “céilí”), these circular set dances brought people together to meet and to remember (Allen, 2003). Today, an older generation of dancers has brought about a rebirth of traditional Irish set dancing as a vehicle for healing and self-discovery through storytelling. Community connections are restored through set dance as a form of reminiscence therapy, providing a new sense of meaning, purpose, and a life well lived (Snyder, 2005), as well as providing an antidote to isolation and fostering a sense of feeling “understood”. The experience of being “listened to” from a movement perspective – or in dance/movement therapy, wholly “seen” – reinforces self-identification, empowerment, and conscious aging.

**Key words:** Irish dance, dance/movement therapy, reminiscence therapy, storytelling

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### **Dancing at the Crossroads of Body and Mind**

Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a strengths-based therapeutic intervention that focuses on the mind-body connection and its role in behavior, expression, cognition, and communication. This branch of the creative arts therapies was developed in the midst of the modern, expressive dance movement of the mid-twentieth century. DMT's founding pioneers, many who were modern dancers themselves, imprinted their dance training onto future generations of dance/movement therapists. Modern dancers sought to expand their movement vocabulary by breaking through the "restricted" technical repertoire of classical dance. While previously a dancer's role was supported and defined by choreography, costumes, and other accouterments of the stage, the modern dancer endeavored to portray a more personal, emotional journey through which her movements spoke for her. Stressing a looser, more open style and welcoming improvisation, modern dance matched the DMT pioneers' mission: working to help others find their authentic voice through therapeutic movement (Levy, 2005).

The purposeful folk dances of ancient societies, now enjoyed and performed primarily for their cultural and aesthetic value, showed evidence of an inherent understanding of the tenets of dance/movement therapy. Originally representing and working within the rhythmic context of nature – inspired by the rising and setting of sun or the seasonal harvest – humankind's foray into controlling the land through agriculture is reflected in the communal movements and rituals of early dance. Though there are many aspects of the natural world from which humans have been able to extract power (fire, seeds, tools), there are many others (the weather, some diseases) that remain largely out of our control. In response to the mysterious and often cyclical natural processes that remained, early humans attempted to control the uncontrollable through rituals such as rain dances. The patterns a group of dancers create, whether with their feet or their

whole body moving, are reflective of the society from which they emerged. Simple shapes featuring circles and lines are common in early folk dance; these became increasingly complex as they developed over time and in response to external influences and internal cultural shifts (Lawson, 1953). As these dances were passed down through the generations, they related the history of their people through movement.

Circles have been featured in group folk dances the world over for thousands of years. In Ireland, the ancient Celts attempted to organize their world by marking the time, constructing circular stone formations that were built to be lit by the sun only at the summer solstice (Lawson, 1953). Sun-worshipping dances were important to the Celtic peoples, who reflected this circular natural rhythm in their eternally looped and connected artwork. Dance/movement therapy pioneer Marian Chace extolled the healing power of group work in a circular arrangement (Levy, 2005), which promotes equality, provides an opportunity for all participants to “be seen”, and offers a medium for open communication within a contained space. In a circle, there is a “co-creation of worlds”: the individual transforms herself, her worldview, and the world around her, while she, in turn, is transformed by her world (Fischman, 2016, p. 36). All at once, the individual is able to see her current experiences reflected in the movement of others, promoting socialization and adaptation to the “give and take” of working with different partners who may experience the same dance from a different perspective (Capello, 2016).

The use of circular formations as a source of healing throughout human history shows that the therapeutic nature of expressive movement need not be abstract to read as authentic. One such example of a highly structured form of movement that may nonetheless fit the modern dance-based mission of DMT is Irish dance. Though it may not be as outwardly emotional as other forms, Irish dance requires intense internal control that can only be mastered in finding

connections between brain and body. Intricate steps and figures challenge the memory, creating balanced patterns both bilaterally and spatially. Though individual footwork is flexible, the unifying rhythm of the dancers and their accompanying music creates group cohesion. Providing clients with a structured sequence of figures and familiar music like that of Irish set dancing, rather than focusing on the free association common in a DMT session, may help them to feel less vulnerable expressing themselves through movement (Armstrong, 2008). The social nature of set dancing, a form of group Irish dance that features grounded footwork and a repetitive figure structure, naturally lends itself to the development of identity and strong community ties, decreasing isolation and fostering a sense of feeling “understood”. Originally performed “at the crossroads” in gatherings called céilithe, these circle dances brought people together to meet and to remember (Allen, 2003). Today, an older generation of dancers has brought about a rebirth of traditional Irish set dancing as a vehicle for self-discovery and storytelling.

Beyond their affinity for lively music and dance, the Irish are said to have the “gift of the gab” – the ability to weave dramatic and enthralling tales out of even the most ordinary of situations (O’Suilleabhain, 1973). Their flair for storytelling is apparent from the moment they say hello: in Irish Gaelic slang, the English phrase “How are you?” translates literally to “What’s the story?” Community connections are restored through storytelling as a form of reminiscence therapy, providing a new sense of meaning, purpose, and a life well lived (Snyder, 2005). The experience of being “listened to” from a movement perspective – or in dance/movement therapy, wholly “seen” – reinforces self-identification, empowerment, and conscious aging. The potential for positive growth does not decline with age; it ends only in death. Using Irish set dance as a therapeutic form of storytelling can set off a domino effect, providing the source of hope needed to cope with adversity and unlock creative potential.



### **Irish Dance: History and Cultural Identity**

On the global stage, “Irish dancing” generally refers to step dancing, a stiff-postured yet lively form of Irish dance that was popularized in the 1990s by touring companies such as Riverdance and Lord of the Dance (Moloney, Morrison, & Quigley, 2009). While today Irish step dance is seen as athletic and flashy – with young dancers bounding across the floor sporting large curly wigs and elaborately bedazzled costumes – this particular evolution had more to do with stage presence than with tradition. Solo step dancing is the product of generations of travelling “dance masters,” whose regional styles eventually narrowed and were later codified in the 1930s by the Irish Dance Commission, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (CLRG) (Phelan, 2014). As the popularity of Irish dance grew, CLRG was set up under the umbrella of the Gaelic League, an organization dedicated to preserving and cataloguing Irish art and sport, to govern the loose network of schools, teachers, and competitions being held throughout Ireland and in Irish immigrant communities around the world (Hall, 2008).

Unlike other folk dance forms, Irish step dance features two different styles of shoes and four distinct types of music. Balletic “soft shoe” dances are performed to reels (4/4 time, speed 113), light jigs (6/8 time, speed 115), and slip jigs (9/8 time, speed 113 – a time signature nearly unique to Irish dance), while wearing the women’s black lace-up “ghillie” style leather shoes or men’s flexible leather jazz-type shoes with fiberglass heel tips (Phelan, 2014). Rhythmic “hard shoe” dances are performed to double jigs (6/8 time, speed 73 or 88), hornpipes (2/4 or 4/4 time, speed 113 or 140), and occasionally reels in a performance setting (Moloney, et al., 2009). Hard shoes, like the men’s soft shoe, feature a jazz shoe-like silhouette, but with thicker fiberglass tips on both the heel and toe. Musical accompaniment employs traditional Irish instruments such as fiddle, bodhrán (drum), and accordion alongside more modern instruments such as the keyboard.

Tunes played are often also traditional (or traditionally-inspired), with names referencing Irish mythology, famous battles, or historical figures (Brennan, 2001).

The “restricted pose” displayed in Irish dance, featuring stiff arms, a straight spine, and an absence of movement in the upper half of the body, can appear strange to those used to more full-bodied types of dance such as ballet, modern, jazz, and hip-hop (Hall, 2008). While this framework may appear constrained at first, there is much control and discipline involved in making this rigid posture look natural, especially when connected with the more active lower half of the body. The modern carriage of the Irish dancer was not always this way, as evidenced by the more relaxed styles of sean-nós and set dancing, but it later developed this feature due to the development of competitions (féiseanna, pronounced “FESH-ah-na”, plural of the Irish Gaelic “féis”) and a consolidation of solo step dancing styles (Hall, 2008).

Beyond step dance, there are several other styles of Irish dance that have fluctuated in popularity over the years: sean-nós, céilí, and set dancing (Moloney, et al., 2009). Sean-nós, or “old style” dance, is also performed solo, though its technique takes up less space, its footwork remains closer to the floor, and its steps are often improvised on-the-spot to match its musical accompaniment. Sean-nós dancers wear hard-soled shoes, have a looser style in both their arms and feet, and place their rhythm emphasis primarily in the heel, rather than the toe (Hall, 2008). Set and céilí dancing require groups of four or more, and are popularly performed at social gatherings. Céilí dancing is tighter and more technical, employing the posture of step dancing, whereas set dancing is less formal and features sean-nós-style shuffled footwork (Murphy, 1995).

The earliest written references to Irish dance appear in the journals of British tourists from the 1600s (O’Keeffe & O’Brien, 1944). Before that time, there are hints of evidence that

festivals and music traditions flourished throughout the island, but no mention of dance.

Drawing from the timeline of folk dances in continental Europe and the theory that where there is music, there must also be dance, it is likely that Irish dance existed in some form further back than records suggest (Whelan, 2000). Even the swirled knotwork designs carved into the thousand-year-old Druid temples scattered around Ireland suggest movement, with an emphasis on balance and symmetry seen similarly in mirrored repetition and circular structure of Irish social and step dancing (Lawson, 1953).

For a nation so far removed from the European continent, Ireland can reliably trace their linguistic and art traditions back to several foreign cultural groups (Whelan, 2000). The eighth century brought the Vikings, and along with them, round dances that appear similar to the Irish “Bonfire Dance”, during which participants advance, retire, and leap over a central “fire” (Phelan, 2014). French cotillions and quadrilles, at the height of their popularity, were brought over by British landowners and military personnel stationed in Ireland in the late eighteenth century. Though these court dances directly influenced the overall structure of Irish set and céilí dancing, the musical accompaniment and footwork were adjusted as they spread across the country, adopting a particular Irish flavor (Murphy, 1995).

After decades of demanding “home rule” for Ireland from the British government, the struggle for Irish independence came to a head in 1916 during the Easter Rising in Dublin. Following this revolt, Ireland entered into war with colonial Britain, finally concluding in a truce in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922 (Phelan, 2014). Though the “Irish Free State” was granted its independence, it remained within the British Empire, leading a group of Irish nationalists to demand a more complete liberation from Britain. Thus, a brief civil war took place: the six counties of Northern Ireland opted to remain within the United Kingdom, while the remaining

twenty-six counties became the Republic of Ireland (Whelan, 2000). This arrangement persists to the present day.

Leading up to the Anglo-Irish and civil wars, a spirit of nationalism began to blossom during the Gaelic Revival (Hall, 2008). Eager to promote Ireland as worthy of independence, the Gaelic League was formed in 1893 to gather the icons of Irish culture – language, sport, music, literature, art, and dance – that were in danger of being lost as a result of the famine and restrictions under British control (Whelan, 2000). Where Irish cultural markers were previously enjoyed casually or at social functions, this movement sought to officially catalogue traditional forms of art and expression. Following Ireland’s successful bid for independence, an increased interest in Irish dance both at home and abroad sparked the formation of a separate Irish Dance Commission, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, in the late 1920s (Phelan, 2014). Members of the Gaelic League had a narrow vision of what they considered to be authentically Irish, handpicking which aspects of culture and tradition to retain or promote and dismissing the rest – leaving many of the country set dances out of their official canon (Flanagan, 2009).

Under British control, restrictions on Irish language and cultural expression made it more difficult for the native Irish to express themselves, sometimes quite literally, in their own words. Dance was employed as a lesson in manners, to reflecting the “proper” carriage of the European upper classes (Hall, 2008). As nationalist sentiment grew, the cultural influence of dance shifted. While Irish céilí and set dances superficially resembled the posture and patterns of both the French quadrilles and British country-dances, the emphasis on style soon turned from assimilation to differentiation (Whelan, 2000). In *Dance in Ireland: Steps, Stages, and Stories* (2014), Phelan notes that the “imitation of the colonizer can be subversive. As the colonized copies the colonizer’s demeanor, morals, and etiquette, it can be malicious and condescending...

this becomes even more evident when the colonized retain something of their culture” (p. 33). By imprinting Irish style onto British dances, both in name and in execution, “the colonized [could] re-voice their colonizers culture in dissident ways” (Phelan, 2014, p. 42).

### **Dance Masters and the Gaelic League**

The rigid posture of the Irish dancer – one of the more distinctive attributes of the form – is a product of two major cultural forces: the moral force of Catholic Church and a burgeoning nationalist spirit exhibited by travelling “dance masters” (Whelan, 2000). The Catholic Church, a bastion of faith, community, and “decency” in Irish society, played a peripheral, yet integral, role in the development of the straight posture in Irish dance (Brennan, 2001). Like the Irish language and its cultural art forms, Catholicism was largely repressed under British rule, quickly regaining its status and influence as the Irish people began the process of reconstructing their national identity. “The verticality of the body and the control with which it is held” represented not only mastery of the body, but also of “a set of social, cultural, and historical values associated with civility, morality, and status” (Hall, 2008, p. 20). Though it cannot be nailed down to one specific origin, the uniqueness of Irish dance posture and body movement is often colloquially explained in relation to censorship by the British for cultural reasons and, later, the Catholic Church for “moral” ones. The clergy played a large role in pressing the newly-formed Irish legislature to pass the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935, which forbade social dancing without an approved license, causing significant damage to the conservation and development of Irish dance (Whelan, 2000).

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Irish dance masters journeyed throughout the countryside, teaching Irish dance to both native Irish people and the British landed gentry

(Whelan, 2000). Each dance master had his own distinct style, in both footwork and posture, mirroring the regionalism already evident in Ireland – a nation that continues to identify itself primarily by county. Dance masters guarded their territories fiercely as they travelled from town to town, naming their steps after themselves or the towns they had “claimed” as they moved along (Phelan, 2014). The dance master system paralleled the political life of Ireland: laying claim to the land through music and dance was a critical step in cementing nationalist pride – and claiming ownership of Ireland.

As the Gaelic Revival gained traction, dance masters sought to relate a stronger and more elegant example of the Irish nation through their proud posture. Dance masters began to select the features that best reflected Irish nationalist ideals, and these notions affected both how and why the Irish danced. Upright posture in Irish dancing reflected morality and “good bearing”, which the Irish nationalists hoped would promote their new vision of the Irish nation as it strived to gain independence (Hall, 2008). “As republican ideals were cemented in the nationalist cultural movement (the Gaelic League), the aristocratic posture was appropriated by Irish dancers as an expression of Irishness” (Hall, 2008, p. 23). Through a proliferation of competitive Irish dance following the Gaelic Revival, as well as an inspiration from classical dance forms such as ballet, style preferences were further whittled down, becoming less regional and more technical (Moloney, et al., 2009).

The Gaelic League oversaw the massive effort to nationalize Irish dance. Through An Coimisiún, the Gaelic League “aimed to devise a purely ‘Irish’ dance repertoire, to establish exclusively ‘Irish’ events (féiseanna and céilíthe) and to create completely ‘Irish’ dance costumes” (Phelan, 2014, p. 5). Dance masters became dance “teachers”, who sought to “promote and preserve Irish dance as an inherent part of the Irish culture” under the Gaelic

League (Phelan, 2014, p. 4). The newly-appointed Irish dance teachers were expected to follow Gaelic League guidelines, which conflicted with the multifaceted and largely improvisational training philosophy of the dance masters. The rules for choreography and style became stricter and more streamlined, leaving little room for movement ideas to be repatterned into original material (Phelan, 2014). Instead, Irish dancing became codified in an attempt to create a common movement language and present a unified style of performance and expression (Hall, 2008).

The Gaelic League went so far as to institute a ban on teaching, learning, and performing any dance forms other than “traditional” Irish dance (Phelan, 2014). While it attempted to establish authenticity after generations of repression, the League’s policies simultaneously went about destroying dances deemed to be “not Irish enough”. As set dancing so closely resembled the “foreign” French quadrilles and British country dances popular at the time, the Gaelic League outlawed it, threatening that its participants would be cut off from all other aspects of the cultural community. As the governing body of Irish dance under the Gaelic League, An Coimisiún began selecting those dances which would be included in its official catalogue, *Ár Rincí Fóirne* (“our team dances”, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014). In an effort to display strength, poise, and modesty, a stiff, straight posture was preferred that could reflect the new Irish identity (Hall, 2008). Under the influence of the dance masters, céilí and set dances evolved to feature strong movement and rapid footwork set to lively Irish music that stood in stark contrast to the reserved setting of the British and continental courts (O’Keeffe & O’Brien, 1944). The looser style of sean-nós was no longer in vogue, and set dances were pushed aside in favor of the style of step and the “official” book of céilí dances. As such, *Ár Rincí Fóirne* was promoted as the national guidebook of Irish dance; and An Coimisiún, its storyteller.

### **Set Dancing: Meaning in Movement**

Ironically, in the effort to preserve “authentic” Irish traditions, the Gaelic League nearly wiped out the pockets of traditional set dancing that remained. While solo step and céilí dancing were codified and promoted as being truly Irish, the so-called “foreign” set dances survived only by way of the stories passed down of social “dancing at the crossroads” (Murphy, 1995).

Younger generations picked up interest in the “lost” country dances of their parents and grandparents as late as the 1980s, and from there set about collecting what they could from those set dancers who remained, gathering under the umbrella of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, which was primarily an organization for Irish musicians (Murphy, 1995). Set dancing was brought back to life by the collective memory of past participants, and is now gaining popularity amongst an older group of dancers – many of whom have found it to be beneficial in helping them with memory recall, physical and emotional health, and general well being (Allen, 2003).

Though the footwork typical of set dancing is simpler than that of step dancing, it is similar in rhythm and timing. Movement stays close to the floor, shuffle-like, and partners often use a waltz-like hold to travel around the set (Murphy, 1995). These repetitive movements allow the figures and patterns created by the group as a whole to tell the story of the dance. The circular format of the set evokes community, encourages socialization, and requires the focused effort of all involved to work – each moving piece plays an integral role in the completion of the dance. Figures that involve dancing in pairs give dancers the opportunity to lead and to follow, and the structured group movement serves as an interactive memory exercise. Once basic units of movement are learned, dancers are able to learn a variety of sets. Common set dance formations and figures include the closed circle, the chain, and more frequently in the “official” céilí book, long sets of lines facing each other (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014).



One of the oldest known group dance structures, the closed circle, appears in dance traditions the world over. The ancient circle dance served several functional purposes, namely for worship and work. In worship, dancers joined hands together and gradually moved from left to right. Celtic tribes, specifically, were known to move clockwise for joyful events and counter-clockwise on occasions of mourning (Lawson, 1953). The early circle symbolized equality: everyone was seen, and differentiation between the sexes appeared to be nonexistent (Lawson, 1953). Later, men and women formed two separate circles, turning and passing around each other to symbolize courtship (Lawson, p. 1953). Circle dances also served as lessons or representations of work tasks, such as harvesting and weaving, and trade guilds employed these dances to teach their apprentices (Lawson, 1953). Most or all working class people had no access to literacy or written materials, and thus relied on oral traditions or structured dances to pass on their knowledge to the next generation.

A variation that developed from the closed circle is the chain figure. Openings in the circle, through which other dancers pass in, out, and around, represents the admission of good spirits and the release of bad omens (Lawson, 1953). The chain figure follows a path, weaving the dancer through the set to meet new partners along the way (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014). Each encounter moves the figure forward, as dancers receive, present, and pass on their contribution to the dance. By opening up the circle, its energy travels beyond the group assembled, spreading health, luck, and fertility over the people and their land (Lawson, 1953). The spirit of the dance, once contained within the closed circle, spreads exponentially from its central point, through arched arms that symbolize entrance into a new life (Lawson, 1953).

Longways, or processional dances, are often danced in double file, evoking seasonal, wartime, or cleansing rituals (Lawson, 1953). Irish long dances such as the Bridge of Athlone

and progressive dances such as the Siege of Ennis share many traits with other European line dances, which feature advancing together, crossing over, dancing down a row, and “casting off” (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014). The advance and retreat of opposing lines represent a challenging tribe or communal path, while the space between forms the road that separates them (Lawson, 1953). Telescoping chains and figures of eight, as in their circular counterparts, allow participants to travel down the set to meet new partners and opened the dance to the larger community. Cast off marches recall migration or readiness for battle, and the arches that follow represent a joyful reunion after a time apart (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014).

If the figures and patterns of a dance correspond to the arc of a story’s journey, its footwork and rhythm stand in for words. Large gestures display energy, excitement, and vitality (Lawson, 1953). Shuffles near the floor reflect the grounded nature of a dance, displaying its “earthy” character. Nearly all Irish set and céilí dances are cyclical, featuring repetitive movement figures and returning dancers or couples to their starting position. Many progressive céilí dances feature forward motion, passing under arched arms to meet a new line of dancers (Murphy, 1995). The floor patterns created by sets and figures are inherently proportional, paced equally, and mirrored by surrounding couples in the set in a three-dimensional visualization of Celtic knotwork designs (Lawson, 1953). Stamped feet and clapping hands promote group rhythmic action, keeping the beat and connecting the set of dancers together in a shared movement experience. A marked stillness in the upper body balances out the quickness of the footwork, while it simultaneously reveals a story of cultural suppression under colonial British rule (Lawson, 1953).

### **Storytelling in the Irish Tradition**

For hundreds – perhaps thousands – of years, storytelling has held a special place in the heart of Irish culture. Oral storytelling served many purposes: entertainment, education, cultural transmission, identity formation, and even as a tool of rebellion. Hundreds of years ago, literacy in Ireland was limited to the upper classes and clergy, and for Celtic tribes thousands of years before that, written knowledge was banned by Julius Caesar himself (Lawson, 1953). Without access to written language, the farmers and peasantry were left with no option but to create memorable stories to carry their fairy tales and folk wisdom across the miles and through the generations. Repression of the Irish language by English colonizers often sent these storytellers underground, along with those involved in the creation and promotion of traditional music, dance, and sport. Historians lament the loss of the colorful embellishments of Irish tales as they were translated from Irish Gaelic to the English language: “the poetic fancy, choice diction, and variety of theme” has been diminished, “indicative of the profound effect of the change of language on the national character and psychology” of the Irish people (O’Sullivan, 1961, p. 47).

The Irish storytelling tradition is not limited to prose. Many tales survived as folk songs, matching words and melody in both lively tunes and sorrowful ballads. “‘Folk’ denotes music that has a long history within a specific community”, recognizing a rich cultural history of shared rituals and values” (Hast & Scott, 2004, p. 16). Ballads link “past action to a timeless present”, forming an invisible thread that weaves through the centuries, connecting to present-day (Shields, 1993, p. 5). The narrative songs native to Ireland, also called “lays”, reveal their rural origin, displaying a marked difference from the music traditions of the industrialized landscape of mainland Europe in the eighteenth century (Shields, 1993). As these ballads and lays were subject to generations of oral transmission, the songs’ composers are often forgotten as the song

evolves, becoming the property of the community-at-large, rather than one individual artist (Hast & Scott, 1993). Though their distinct Irish flavor remains, Irish storytelling, reflected through music and dance, has changed due to cultural influences from within and outside Ireland. The accommodation of new audiences and contexts of time and place become absorbed into the Irish story, conveying valued memories and creating an interface between past and present” by drawing on a “collective sense of history to revitalize and personalize experiences shared over time” (Hast & Scott, 1993, p. 42). What remains in modern day is a dynamic example of living art that both reflects the present and recalls the past.

Ireland was, and remains, a land that defined itself locally, by clan and later by county. Each story or song holds within itself a history of origin that adapted and grew as it was carried on. Though it may have passed through cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries through oral transmission, the story held on to its essence while reflecting its audience (O’Suilleabhain, 1973). The regionalism inherent in Irish culture is reflected in the way names are pronounced, stories are told, and céilíthe are danced. To this day, there is no one set vocabulary to define the movement patterns and steps of Irish step dance; this can cause some confusion, but also exhibits the necessary flexibility Irish culture needed to survive both oppressive British colonialism and the diaspora of its people. Irish dance reflects these pathways, showing slight differences in style from region to region. As it is largely still possible to trace Irish ancestry geographically by surname, it too is possible to trace a step, céilí, or set to a specific region or teacher.

Irish set and céilí dances, along with their accompanying tunes, often carry the name of their geographical origin, honor Irish artists or historical figures, or memorialize a specific battle or celebration. Several céilí dances, such as the Antrim Reel, the Glencar Reel, and the Bridge of Athlone, are named after the town or county from which they originated. “The Irish often

attached place names to the native dances – it reflected their territorial attitude” (Hall, 2008, p. 19). The Bridge of Athlone remains true to its namesake: in this dance, two long lines of dancers form either side of the “bridge” and later, an “arch”, for couples to take turns dancing through (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014). The Harvest Time Jig, St. Patrick’s Day, the Sweets of May, and the Bonfire Dance recall specific seasons or important feast days, reaching as far back as pre-Christian Celtic sun worship, as reflected in their circular structure (Murphy, 1995). An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha’s latest céilí guidebook, *Ár Rince Céilí* (2014), notes that the Bonfire Dance was “traditionally... danced around the bonfire, at a Summer Festival on St. John’s Eve” (p. 32). A subset of céilí dances, called “progressive” dances, are reminiscent of battle, “with warlike pathways [that] moved towards and away from each other in long lines” (Phelan, 2014, p. 64). In name – the Walls of Limerick, the Siege of Carrick, the Siege of Ennis – and in performance, dancers “Advance & Retire”, give “Right & Left Hands Across”, and “Pass Through” opposing lines to meet a new set of dancers (An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, 2014), “communicating Ireland’s desire for freedom from British rule” and simulating the meeting and advancing of soldiers in battle (Phelan, 2014, p. 64).

### **Reminiscence Therapy**

Stories are alive, whether they carry the experience of the storyteller or celebrate the legacy of those who are not present – either temporarily or permanently. Cultural traditions, strongly rooted in the past, remind us of previous ways of living in and seeing the world. Those cultural touchstones that are able to “spur the imagination” and evolve to fit a wider generational or geographical audience connect the past to the present, cementing their legacy through greater accessibility (Koch, 1998, p. 1183). Worlds can be created, changed, and informed through the

dissemination of stories. The potential for empathy increases when a personal touch is added to a specific experience. Yesterday's folktale is today's digital meme – the same photo can be understood in an endless number of ways, and quickly spread to others across the globe.

In addition to their social, cultural, and historical value, stories hold within them potential for healing. Reminiscence therapy, a strengths-based modality, uses concepts already familiar to clients through lived or imagined experiences. Building upon previously established or newly discovered personal resources, reminiscence therapy serves as a more accessible route to self-understanding. Clients are empowered to illuminate potential paths for change as they create or relate their own stories, instead of focusing on pathology or getting lost in psychological terminology (Bergner, 2007). Faced with an overwhelming array of symptoms, experiences, relationships, and emotional markers, stories help the client to discern patterns, organize concepts into a timeline, and construct a cognitive, relatable whole from which to derive meaning (Bergner, 2007). Story-based therapeutic interventions can reduce confusion and defensiveness, destigmatize diagnoses (Bergner, 2007), and serve as a powerful channel for communication between therapist and client (Koch, 1998).

Reminiscence therapy, like dance/movement therapy, seeks to help the client to embrace themselves as an integrated whole, but through the lens of time rather than physicality and space. Looking back on individual life experiences and the contextual effect of cultural traditions on present functioning, clients can discover the essential structure which underlies the trajectory of their life (Snyder, 2005). Multidimensional facets of past experience – historical, geographical, intellectual, emotional, and physical – come together in a cohesive story and contribute to a clearer understanding of an individual's unique traits in relation to present and future challenges (O'Leary & Barry, 1998). Reminiscence therapy offers clients the opportunity to continue a

journey, complete an unfinished story, acknowledge and integrate unresolved issues or feelings, and develop present awareness of past problems from the past that may still be affecting an individual's well being. Increased cognitive and emotional flexibility, independence, self-discovery, and an exploration of boundaries within the container of therapeutic storytelling portray "a willingness to adapt and incorporate new information and experiences", an essential task for continued growth (O'Leary & Barry, 1998, p. 163).

Though it has been shown to be effective as an individual intervention, the group therapeutic environment provides a psychosocial dimension to reminiscence therapy, as participants absorb, reflect, accept, and find commonalities among the stories and information shared (O'Leary & Barry, 1998). Group therapy serves not only as an avenue for healing, but also as an antidote to isolation. Through the shared experience of listening, observing, and self-disclosure, an individual can find solace in the feeling that one is never truly alone in facing a challenge. Individual group members resonate with others' experiences by meeting, affirming, and picking up cues to foster understanding on a more personal level. An eagerness for empathetic connection "evolves from suffering emptiness, loneliness, and devaluation" (Fischman, 2016, p. 41), all feelings which can be overcome by finding one's place in a community or group setting. Activating memories through reminiscence therapy can provide a sense of comfort, familiarity, and belonging, but can also be fertile ground for an individual's frustrated needs to be reactivated. The group format offers a "second chance" to explore a past challenge in a safe, empathetic space. An individual's story is her own, but in sharing, it expands beyond the personal, potentially assisting in the healing journey of others.

Equally important to identification with others is differentiation, and development of frustration tolerance necessary to move through a diverse world, made miniature in a group

therapy setting. An essential goal of dance/movement therapy is to “expand movement repertoire so that it will lead to a wide variety of experiences and resources that allow us to accept, respect, and understand different human feelings and ways of living in the world” (Fischman, 2016, p. 44). This kinesthetic empathy, a felt understanding of others, allows the group to grow together. Similarly, reminiscence therapy recognizes stories as “socially co-constructed,” wherein individuals build their identities within and around the “symbols or meanings on offer within their culture” (McLeod, 1996, p. 175). The global practice of storytelling is inherently social and, like movement, serves an essential part of everyday life: to educate, establish cultural identity and membership, communicate and express emotions on a verbal or body level, and interact with the environment, both personal and natural (Capy, 1973).

### **Challenges and Goals for the Elderly Population**

The elderly population faces challenges that span the cognitive, physical, and psychological realms. As an integrative therapeutic modality, dance/movement therapy is uniquely suited to tackle these issues, going beyond the physical (dance as exercise) and emotional (traditional talk therapy) to provide additional social and cognitive benefits invaluable to healthy aging (Sandel & Hollander, 1995). With the addition of the comfort, recognition, and identity development provided by reminiscence therapy, and the use of Irish set dancing as a nostalgic, narrative form of movement, older individuals can find healing from a therapeutic source that meets them where they are in a joyful, accessible, and nonthreatening way.

Cognitive challenges such as spatial and temporal disorientation, communication difficulties, and memory impairments due to neurological disorders such as dementia, Parkinson’s disease, and Alzheimer’s may cause frustration as well as diminished expressive and



functional capacity (Shanahan, Ni Bhriain, Morris, Volpe, & Clifford, 2016). Often, when the elderly “have lost their power of speech, they can still make themselves understood through movement, however limited” (Silvester, 2014, p. 18). In this way, movement stimulates mental functioning and promotes body/mind integration by “encouraging affirmative and meaningful gestures” (Levy, 2005, p. 230). As a therapeutic intervention, set dancing “emphasizes consistency and predictability in time, place, leadership, and activity” (Sandel & Hollander, 1995, p. 136). As an opportunity for physical contact, the use of touch in set dancing has a marked organizing effect, stimulating cognitive restructuring through reminiscence (Sandel & Hollander, 1995). By focusing on the body in motion, attention is pulled away from the disabled mind, helping the cognitively impaired individual to find “contact with the ground and a connection with the world through gravity” (Silvester, 2014, p. 20).

Exercise is essential to the achievement of optimal health across the life span, but physical challenges “need not prevent participation in DMT... [where] the focus is on the psychosocial values of the group, rather than on the activity” itself (Sandel & Hollander, 1995, p. 134). Every participant has something to offer, whether she is on her feet or simply keeping the beat. Diminished sensory function, loss of muscle mass and bone density, increased fall risk, arthritis, pain, and other physical limitations common to the elderly population contribute to a loss of ambulatory independence, which can have a negative effect on the individual’s overall sense of self-worth. Potential positive outcomes of a dance/movement therapy group for the elderly include “increased mobility, improved circulation and breathing, relaxation, and release of tension” (Sandel & Hollander, 1995, p. 133). DMT employs a psychosomatic approach, focusing not only on the physical benefits of movement, but also on its parallel effects on social and psychological well being (Levy, 2005). The improved muscle tone, posture, flexibility, joint

mobility, movement range, coordination, spatial orientation, kinesthetic awareness, and body control gained through movement activities such as Irish set dance further serve to increase self-esteem, openness to learning, vitality, awareness of self and others, and personal movement repertoire (Levy, 2005).

Enhanced emotional health is another benefit of improved physical and cognitive function: feeling better results from the combination of active movement and “heightened mental activity engaging imagination and emotions” (Kshtriya, Barnstaple, Rabinovitch, & DeSouza, 2015, p. 89). Psychological development is a life-long endeavor, and old age is a dynamic time of sustained emotional growth (O’Leary & Barry, 1998). The psychological needs of the elderly population are as varied as any other age range, but this group is at greater risk of the negative effects of isolation, identity loss, and life stressors such as grief. The social nature of set dancing serves as a buffer to loneliness by offering an opportunity to develop new relationships, skills, and support systems (Allen, 2003). Irish set dancing provides a safe venue for the creation of new memories, “promoting ongoing expansion and enrichment of experience” in the present, while also containing and honoring an individual’s past (Silvester, 2014, p. 22). Stories and rhythms are shared with fellow group members, who can offer validation and reflection of experiential material in a “consistent, orienting environment” (Sandel & Hollander, 1995, p. 135).

As a method of reminiscence and dance/movement therapy, set dancing helps an individual’s experiences to be highlighted and expressed, promoting identity formation and self-definition within a group context (O’Leary & Barry, 1998). Self-worth and efficacy are restored as participants recognize that their lives are entwined with historical and geographical markers, and that growth is not limited to their youth (O’Leary & Barry, 1998). Dancers are attuned to

each other and their present journey as a group, enhancing collective well being through the gathering and sharing of internal strengths and resources. “Aches and pains recede... losses can be reconfigured, and experience can be reshaped by the powerful effect of the human body” in motion (Silvester, 2014, p. 20). Irish set dance reveals a path for participants to form connections with other group members, within their own mind/body network, and in a greater environmental context.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy Interventions**

The unique perspective endowed by a long life can serve to interpret the past, play out patterns into the future, and interconnect both back to the present (Snyder, 2005). This is reflected in Irish set dancing, in which figures and patterns weave dancers around and through a social circle: coming together, pairing up, following a path, drawing apart, turning to experience a new perspective, and connecting with others in a chained series of handshake-like clasps. “Designs such as diamonds, squares, roses, waves, gates, arches and crosses are formed by the varied dance movements”, continuously engaging and challenging the body and mind (Allen, 2003, p. 113). Relationships are formed, broken, and revisited. Each dancer has a chance to be seen in the center of the circle, and further, a chance to see the same movements mirrored in others as each couple takes their turn. The shape of the environment – like the opening, closing, and weaving shapes that evolve from a circular set – is ever changing; the only constant is the rhythm of the music, marking the time.

Adding dance to the therapeutic mix provides an element of physical and emotional development that can, in turn, affect health, vitality, and brain plasticity (Snyder, 2005). In a review of research conducted on the connection between dance interventions and brain function,

cardiovascular activity has been shown to “enhance cognitive plasticity and executive and motor functions”, producing positive effects on a variety of neurological variables (Kshtriya, et al., 2015, p. 82). Described as “inherently multimodal” (Kshtriya, et al., 2015, p. 82), dance goes beyond physical exercise by additionally promoting “learning, attention, memory, emotion, rhythmic motor coordination, balance, gait, visuospatial ability, acoustic stimulation, imagination, improvisation, and social interaction” (Kshtriya, et al., 2015, p. 82). Further, studies show that there is greater improvement of client well being in group or partnered dances than in performing alone, as this communal setting provides an opportunity for social interaction usually absent from typical forms of physical exercise (Kshtriya, et al., 2015). Considering its focus on the mind-body connection, dance/movement therapy fits perfectly into this framework.

The cognitive, emotional, and physical benefits of dance-based interventions are not limited to beginners. Though learning new skills can be a powerful exercise in frustration tolerance, identity integration, and creative development, measurable gains in sensorimotor performance, balance, posture, and reaction time can be gathered from continued practice of a familiar physical skill (Kshtriya, et al., 2015). A client who is well-versed in a movement vocabulary like Irish set dancing can employ their “muscle memory” – a previously mastered movement and the mirror neurons associated with it – that is reinforced by the patterning and repetition of figures in a set dance (Kshtriya, et al., 2015). Memory is encoded in both body and mind by watching a number of other couples perform the maneuver, then physically completing the task in view of the group. From a dance/movement therapy perspective, this is an exercise in delayed mirroring, or “echoing” (Fraenkel, 1983), through which participants’ movement synchrony is delayed, yet still matches in other qualities such as rhythm and form. This repetition of figures inherent to set dancing improves sensorimotor, kinesthetic, and emotional

understanding, as well as recognition, attunement, and empathy in participants through increased mirror neuron activity (Kshtriya, et al., 2015).

Through a dance/movement therapy lens, Irish set dancing serves as an external structural movement framework for an internal creative healing process. Set dancing employs simple rhythmic footwork, repetitive movement sequences, and familiar couple holds in a recognizable group format. Variations in individual or couple positioning, sequential order, or patterning are integrated into movement, cognitive, and emotional processes as new ways of seeing, perspective, and understanding of self and others. Exploring and experiencing new spaces in a changing environment directly reflects aspects of personal resilience and social flexibility. As a community-oriented form of dance, sets welcome participants “where they are”, promoting acceptance, social learning, and an opportunity to present or develop the individual’s sense of self. A typical dance/movement therapy session similarly does not require any previous technical dance training to provide a benefit: DMT is a process- and personal resource-oriented modality, promoting integrative learning and growth through the acquisition of an expanded movement vocabulary (Wengrower, 2016). In both DMT and set dancing, the session is structured like a story: familiar, yet leaving room for individual flourishes as the participant reveals personal details and recovers unconscious movement knowledge within the comfort of a structured space.

Group rhythmic action and repetitive movement further help to strengthen the therapeutic framework present in set dancing, helping participants to access emotional and experiential material in an accessible way. Rhythm is a “unifying, integrating, and powerful force that can release tension, serve to ‘center’ the individual or group... [and] evoke emotional memory release” (Capello, 2016, p. 92). As personal rhythm patterns are “picked up” and shared with the

group, a sense of collective cohesiveness is fostered, individuals are invigorated into active movement, and a satisfying means of closure is provided (Capello, 2016). Movement encourages movement: once the body begins to move, the cognitive and emotional will follow. The formation of body/mind connections is reflected on a larger scale in learning variations on previously-known partnered and group action sequences. Building upon body mastery by interweaving new patterns within familiar movement structures encourages cognitive and emotional flexibility. Repetition reveals unconscious processes and resources, provides a method of reality testing through active and observed movement, and promotes feeling grounded through the balanced and circuitual nature of set dancing. Together, the dancers take a journey, tell a story, and always return to where they began.

Learning a new language of movement is a discovery process, both of the dance style itself and its potential effect on an individual's wellbeing. Irish dance, much like the oral storytelling tradition of Ireland, was passed on in person long before it was written down. Upon hearing a story or learning a dance, another's journey becomes integrated into one's own experience, affecting and reflecting a new concept of self-in-the-world. Participants have an opportunity to try out new viewpoints through varied placements in a set, experiment with weight and support by dancing with a partner or group, increase fluency in a new movement language through mastery of footwork and figures, and manage interpersonal distance and overall sense of safety within the container of the set itself (Wengrower, 2016). Attunement and awareness of potential for growth is sparked by the empowering realization of one's visible and tangible effect on others, seen immediately in the echoed figures of the set dance. Each mover has a role to play, helping the participant to define the self within a larger community and

visualize the effect of their movements on others. A chain figure with a missing “link” is incomplete, throwing off the balance and continuity of remaining movers.

The structured order of set dancing encourages the development of ritual and a method of interactive problem solving. By entering a seemingly complex set and dissecting it into its component parts, participants develop confidence in finding a path and solving the 3D puzzle at hand. Where does everyone fit? Is the dance balanced, giving everyone a chance to lead the figure? The order and boundary of the set creates a safe space within which to dance freely and establish relationships, while simultaneously developing awareness of its moving parts and the participants involved. The recognizable framework of a set dance relieves anxiety, especially for those who have trouble identifying themselves as capable of creative movement or those who may be overwhelmed by free improvisation. In a DMT session, there is no “wrong answer,” and within a structured dance, the expectations are clearly mapped out – easing tension and providing an opportunity for participants to discover their own needs and places within the group (Wengrower, 2016). As originality is not necessarily the goal of Irish set dancing, the group is able to practice impulse control, experiment with the patterning or repatterning of their movement behavior, and learn how to work with their body in both an emotional and spatial sense. The specific movements and rhythms of the set dance can serve as a baseline from which to self-evaluate and measure progress. Witnessing and actively engaging in the movement series produces a sense of common understanding through a shared movement experience.

### **Irish Arts as Healing**

The healing properties of the Irish arts can be harnessed by reminiscence and the creative arts therapies, especially for the benefit of older generations. Incorporating movement and music into reminiscence therapy celebrates positive development through creative expression in an adaptable and accessible way (Snyder, 2005). Beyond words, reminiscence therapy can utilize folk dances and familiar music to uncover memories and promote mood enhancement (Silvester, 2014). The nostalgic pull of traditional tunes can reawaken the potential for lifelong learning and foster a sense of community for the elderly population (Allen, 2003). Irish music connects to dance and storytelling in the “larger cultural context of céilí (‘visiting’) and craic (‘conversation’), in which values of hospitality, generosity, reciprocity, humor, and social intimacy take precedence” over individual talent (Hast & Scott, 2004, p. 18). The group therapy session is reminiscent of a traditional Irish music seisiun (session): an inclusive atmosphere that features a circular format and promotes open communication, shared leadership, and group decision-making (Edwards, 2009). Music is an effective tool for memory recall, promoting self-reflection, identity confirmation, and reexamination of past experiences (Armstrong, 2008). Traditional tunes may not only spark the recall of past memories, but also serve as a springboard to the creation of new experiences.

Where music sparks an emotional reaction, dance can further awaken the “kinesthetic recall of body memories” (Chaiklin, 2016, p. 6). Dance/movement therapy pioneers acknowledged the powerful moment of acceptance and understanding when an individual experiences another person reflecting back their story through movement. Allen’s 2003 study, *Irish Céilí Dance and Elderly Dancers*, explores this phenomenon from the perspective of three set dancers who have found camaraderie and cultural embodiment through Irish dance. For these



dancers, the sets and céilí dances form an essential part of who they are as individuals, and provide additional benefits that include celebration of cultural heritage, socialization, fun, health, and humor (Allen, 2003). The spirit of Irish tradition and expression is personified in these dancers, whose behavior patterns are influenced by the cultural world of set dancing. Even simply watching a dance performed from the sidelines can promote connection, as onlookers are often drawn to tapping out the essential “rhythm and pulse” of the tune to match the steps of the dancers (Armstrong, 2008). Seeing a folk tradition such as Irish set dancing replicated in a group setting promotes a feeling of having contributed in some way to preserving and passing on valued cultural traditions, and the dance becomes a three-dimensional story come to life.

The creative nature of these living arts serve as a channel through which participants’ life stories can be interpreted in a group setting under the umbrella of a shared rhythmic or movement context (Silvester, 2014). Revisiting familiar music and movement can serve to reveal long term memory, foster resilience, and help the client to construct her own sense of personhood (Silvester, 2014). For those with memory impairments such as dementia, finding internal resources in this way can be crucial to well being. A 2013 (Volpe, Signorini, Marchetto, Lynch, & Morris) study explored the usefulness of Irish set dancing in helping clients to manage the debilitating symptoms of Parkinson’s disease. When compared with “standard physiotherapy”, set dancing showed “superior results” in terms of balance, gait, and motor skills (Volpe, et al., 2013, p. 2). Through its inherent rhythmic cues, the stability offered by a partner’s assistance, and “relatively simple” movements, set dancing proved to be an effective and enjoyable way for clients to “slow physical decline... and facilitate greater [community] engagement” (Volpe, et al., 2013, p. 1). For those without significant cognitive challenges or memory loss, the identity strengthening perks of set dancing can serve as a foundation for

empowering clients to live in the present, create new memories, and continue to find growth potential throughout the life span (Sandel & Hollander, 1995).

Irish set dancing, once a rebellious cultural act, is now a communal space within which to celebrate, to mourn, and to endure. It is now safe to be Irish and to dance Irish. For those who are not of Irish heritage, it is an opportunity to feel welcomed and understood by others whose bodies, voices, and identities were once considered less than human. Irish dance tells both a specific and global story of struggle and survival – offering a venue through which participants of all backgrounds can find balance, grounding, and community support. In dance/movement therapy, clients are encouraged to reveal themselves on a body level, which can be anxiety-producing for those who may not feel comfortable with expressive movement. Sometimes a measure of structure is necessary – it is within an established movement framework like Irish dance that we may thrive in often unpredictable surroundings, applying lessons learned from the shared group relationship to the outside world. As in the ancient circle dances, the energy from this central point can be released and carried beyond, promoting an exponential capacity for healing at the crossroads of body and mind.

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