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Nature-Based Dance/Movement Therapy

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Sarah Lawrence College

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Science Degree in
Dance/Movement Therapy at Sarah Lawrence College
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Abstract

This paper examines how a therapist's embodied experience of the natural world can provide a foundation for utilizing a nature-based dance/movement therapy with medically fragile children in long term care. Beginning with a reflection on her childhood experiences in nature, the author then discusses the literature on the impact of nature on human development and the implications of loss of contact with nature. The final section presents examples of how the integration of natural elements and embodied experience was used to provide dance/movement therapy to medically fragile children at Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center in Yonkers, NY.

Keywords: nature-based dance/movement therapy, nature-based therapy, chronically ill children, palliative care, pediatric care, nature deficit disorder

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Frolic

Twirling and whirling in a big golden meadow
Spinning until the sky, clouds, and treetops become a blurred kaleidoscope of color.
Freedom from time
Butterfly
Open joy
Love, be loved
Wind, Earth, Mud
No time to wait

A childhood approach to nature

You can tell how old a tree is by counting the number of rings produced within its trunk. Wider rings represent warmer years and thinner rings show the harsher, colder years of development. Examine the bark type and characteristics of the leaves to determine the species of the tree. Some trees bear fruit, others nuts, and the cross-purpose of reproduction and nourishment for birds and squirrels are both necessary. Trees grow to be all shapes and sizes, a few even carry with them myth and legends as they stand tall in the landscape of their origin. Trees demand stability, as their roots grow deep into the soil gripping into the earth for balance. Yet, they must sway and bend with the wind to prevent their massive frames from snapping from even the gentlest of winds.

Most of my childhood was immersed in the woods of Connecticut surrounded by massive trees, fields of wild flowers, and rocks. So many rocks, my mother would always joke that on God's day off he would throw rocks at Connecticut. The rocks reflect Connecticut's history, as you can see hundreds of rock walls scattered in the woods left over from a time when farmers divided their land with piles of rocks to show where their property started and ended. As a child, I had no concept of ownership laws. I followed the lion king rule of anything that the sun touched was a part of my kingdom. Most days you could find me hopping over my neighbor's rock wall, looking for adventure, a form of society that my brothers and I would call our own. If we got hungry we would eat from the raspberry bushes, and if we got thirsty we just ran back home, because even as a

young girl I knew the dangers of drinking dirty water. The “we” refers to my brothers, friends, and pets that shared my adventures, with me as a child.

Depending on who accompanied me that day would determine the destination in the woods. It was divided into different sections, the open field of golden hay, raspberry bushes, and the land of birch trees; which held many names over the years. We couldn't help but carve into the trees, as the smell that would emit would be comparable to the irresistible root beer barrel candies I would sneak from my father's jacket. As a kid I would take to carving the trees, much like a parlor trick, to seek the reaction of my peers as they too discover the magic of my woods. I was convinced mystical creatures must have planted these trees long ago.

My imagination was always running wild in the woods. I discovered this world as if it was a forgotten time capsule filled with treasure and wonderment. Past the birch trees was a place that only allowed room for beams of light to squeeze through the canopy of the trees. I think my affinity for the spotlight came from playing in and out of this light, feeling the warmth against my skin, as it would contrast with the coolness of the shade. I would twirl in the rich topsoil that was soft, familiar, and gave a bounce with each step I took. The top layer of soil was warmed by the beams of light from above, but with each spin I would burrow until my bare toes pressed into cold wet earth.

I would leap from rock to rock, holding an arabesque between each one as I found my way to the old oak tree covered in vines. These vines were my jungle gym, they created all shapes and structures for me to climb. The best attraction in this area of the

woods was a thick twisted root that looped out of the ground and assisted me to climb up to the vines that hung down from the oak. We used the higher vines anchored to the branches above as a swing, while the tangled root structure below was a trampoline to propel ourselves out further and higher into the open space of the forest. That swinging sensation is still very much etched in my muscle memory. So is the feeling of the wind combing through my hair and brushing against my skin or of how my stomach would jump into my chest as I leaped; these feelings have always made me giggle.

Past the world of tangled vines, was a cliff ledge that overlooked a rolling sea of trees, valley of boulders, and endless clay-laced streams. A lone birch met me at the edge, a marker for where the perfect grips were for rappelling down the mica-infused rock ledge. I shifted down the cliff one grip at a time toward the stable surface of an alcove that sat in the middle of the rock face. I placed my supplies of graham crackers, gold fish, and freshly pulled daisies out of my backpack onto the picnic blanket, which I had carried throughout my adventure. I would sit for the first time all day, weaving a chain of daisies, allowing my mind to notice for the first time the lullaby that surrounded me, as the birds sang above and the animals below darted in and out of the landscape. Here I would sit nuzzling into my rocky cradle.

During one of these times playing in the woods, I found a tree with a hollow cave carved into its base. I become fascinated with this tree and the idea that a tree of its size could stand so strong. One day after my great-grandmother's passing; I walked past this tree and thought it would be best to name after my great-grandmother because she was

one of the strongest women that I knew. It became known as the Grandma Tessie tree. I was very proud of my tree and thought my brother should know about my discovery. It ended with him asking if it was possible to fit in the cave and with much curiosity and a triple dog dare, I ended getting stuck inside the tree. It was dark, and I couldn't see my own finger let alone what else might be sharing the space with me. As my brother left for help, his words "watch out for the snakes" trailed behind him. With that I squeezed out of the tree and went back into the sunlight and ran back home.

In the woods, we built bunkers and trenches as we loaded up paintball guns to shoot at each other. An activity that both frightened and exhilarated me, as I learned how to run through the trees without being seen, or would find myself in a massacre of bright colors splattered all over my clothes. Often I would patiently wait in a bunker. A four-foot deep hole dug in the earth covered with discarded tires, I never knew who shared the space with me because of the darkness that entrapped me as I waited for the combat to silence. When all was said and done, we would case our surroundings and stand staring at what had been turned into a life-sized Jackson Pollock; however, this artwork would only last until the next rainfall.

No matter the weather, I found a way to move outside. Rain was my favorite to dance in. I would wait all year for it, whether sun showers or thunderstorms, I needed to frolic. I have a memory of running out the door with just my pink rain boots and dress on, ignoring my mother as she yelled out after me. Something about catching a cold, getting electrocuted, or worse get her kitchen floor all dirty. It went in one ear and out the other

as I leaped off the porch and into the wall of water. I jeté in the direction of the wind, allowing nature to pull me. In the process of my dance, I found puddles to kick up with a brisé and series of pirouettes to capture the splashing water. My dress and hair began to feel the weight of the raindrops that had gotten trapped in every fiber and strand I carried with me. I ran around my yard, slipping against the wet grass, laughing, and screaming, slowly feeling the sensation of exhaustion as my body let me know it was ready to end this duet. I stood with my eyes closed swaying and waltzing, trying to feel each individual droplet bounce off my skin. Steadily, my body became still and able to take in the present with a large breath. I walked back into the house taking with me water, mud, and grass across my mother's clean kitchen floor.

When I was 13-years-old, I watched as my kingdom was taken from me. I sat by the stone wall as they stripped the trees of their branches and eventually brought the naked trees down. With every tree that fell, it sent out a ripple of sound and vibration unlike anything that I had experienced before. For a while, the only things that stood were the stumps of a hundred fallen trees whose roots still gripped the ground. It just took one morning and a truck or two to remove the last of the woods. Nothing was spared, not even the lush topsoil that I had once twirled in, it was scraped and sold. My beautiful landscape was now formless and void.

Nature was my first mentor for movement and temperament, it exposed me to many different elements of myself that I would have not had the chance to experience had it not been a major part of my childhood. It taught me how to be flexible and

grounded in how I adapted to working with others, from watching the dynamic of the wind and the trees. It allowed me to find a balance in myself playing on the rocks, and how to be present to all the different exposures to stimuli in the forest. Growing up in nature led me to discover that movement is all around us, and it gave me a sense of knowing that dance doesn't need to be on a stage or in a studio. Dance is happening everywhere, we just need to open our eyes and let it in.

As I grew older nature was left further behind me; I was now learning how to perfect my technique in the studio, and learning how to adapt to a school environment where you have to be a specific type of intellect to be successful in the generation of “no child left behind.”

An academic approach to nature

Homo sapiens is the recognizable form of human that we know of today. This species has been on this earth for roughly 100,000 years. During this time we as humans have been using nature for shelter, worship, culture, influences in music, dance, and art, as well as medicinal purposes for as long as we have existence on this earth. However, as we have evolved as a species, we seem to have removed ourselves from the natural world, which by definition is the world that goes beyond the man-made infrastructures. The natural world as I see it is the wooded area that borders highways, lines backyards, provides park space, and natural trails. Landscapes of lakes, waterfalls, rivers, river

valleys, sandy shores, rocky coastlines and lush forests where at any point you can look down to see a full array of animal tracks. This again is my idea of the natural world as I know it, the areas that I explored and worked in my home state of Connecticut. As a part of New England, this state experiences all the different seasons, which included snowy winters, spring sun showers, full bloom of flowers in the humid days of summer, and crisp fall air as the leaves turn.

The natural world can also be looked at as green space in an urban environment, which includes parks, roof tops and community gardens, or any other area that includes grass and trees, or any space set aside for recreation or aesthetic purposes (EPA, 2015).

The natural world seems to have become separated into two different worlds, the world of busy city and the suburban landscape. Both of these spaces often, to quote Joni Mitchell, “Pave paradise and put up a parking lot” (1970, track 10), meaning that the green space that we once immersed ourselves in has begun to be lost as we develop our need for “things,” such as cars, houses, and technology. By the year 2050, about 70 percent of the world population will be in an urban setting, which statistically would fuel man’s separation from nature as it becomes obsolete in man’s need for space. The inaccessibility of playgrounds, parks and open space are directly linked to high crime rates and depression. The absence of nature has been labeled as nature-deficit disorder, a disorder that affects the use of the senses, attention difficulties, and a rise of both physical and emotional illness (Louv, 2005).

The idea of reconnecting to nature is by no means a new idea and can be traced back to the Romantic Movement, which originated in Europe in the late 18th century and was characterized as a reaction to the industrial revolution and the scientific rationalization of nature (Casey, 2008). Those in the field of ecopsychology believe that modernity and industrialism have a desensitizing effect on the body and a catastrophic effect on the mind (Jordan, 2015).

At this point in man's development, the use of nature for mental health is dire. In looking at using nature for the benefit of mental health, we have to look at the positive effects of nature on a person as well as different therapies that involve nature as the foundation.

To look at man's connection with nature we can look toward the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984), which is the theory that we are genetically programmed to seek a relationship with nature. This theory suggests that our identity and personal fulfillment depends on our relationship with nature as well as the connection that this world has on our relationship with our emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual development (Louv, 2005). The biophilia hypothesis supports the idea that our connection with nature is not totally biological but is linked to psychology and identity (Wilson, 1984), meaning that not having the ability to have the connection with nature will affect a person's psychosocial well being.

Walking in nature, being surrounded by wildlife, and partaking in activities such as hiking, bird watching, and fishing allows us to restore our attention and capacity to

retain information. A study conducted by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989; Kaplan, 1995) calls the green world a “restorative environment,” and discusses “how contact with both the wildness and nearby natural environments allows us to feel restored.” [Jordan, 2015 p10.] This supports the need for children to have an outlet to restore focus and concentration for task completion in their daily life.

Mud and Sawdust

I can remember my little brother in the driveway getting hosed down and scolded by our mother as I came home from dance class. He was covered head to toe in mud from playing in the construction of the cul-de-sac beyond the stone wall. I had not returned to my former wonderland because it no longer felt like mine. By this time they had erected the bare bones of four large houses, each getting a stamp-sized yard and hedges to decorate the dead landscape. However, with witnessing this moment between my mother and brother, I had such a need to play again. So I packed a change of clothes by the side of the house to get rid of any evidence of my mission. I walked again over to the wall and onward toward a flooded pit of red rusty clay soil that would soon be the center of this suburban neighborhood. I stepped closer toward the outer ring of the mud bath; I was barefoot and could feel the mud between my toes and the powerful suction from the wet clay. I stepped further toward the center, my feet turning in and out trying to stay upright as I slipped down the barely existent slant. I laughed as my feet slid out from underneath

me and landed with a splat. The mud covered my whole being, I didn't get up, I didn't brush the earth off me, I went in deeper. I rolled, made mud angels, and danced. What I was really doing was saying thank you to this piece of land that had nurtured me so. I walked home over the stone wall for the final time.

It wasn't until college that I rediscovered my love for dancing outside. It happened when my professor, Orion Duckstein, took us outside to improvise in the large space of the quad at the beautiful Adelphi University, which is an arboretum. There are many different types of flowers and trees to interact with; some of the trees would rain pink petals as the wind swept through their leaves. One special tree we called Rafiki, which was a weeping sergeant hemlock. This tree had branches that swirled around to create a large bird's nest like shape. This secret hideout had a platform of woven branches that formed a circle, so that you could sit up into the tree without being seen by anyone walking by on the ground level. In a way, this tree created a unique space for my peers and I to hang out and just live. We once got eight people into that tree and a guitar. We laughed with each other, jammed, and discovered lasting friendships.

However on this day, I found myself on a stump of a tree that had only just existed the day before, it still had a layer of sawdust around it. I walked over and bent down and pressed my palm against the wood. I gave the weight of my body to my right

hand, my feet extended out to the side in the sawdust. I looked down and took notice of the many thin rings on display on the stump. I shifted my weight to one foot as the other I quickly kicked out and spiraled myself up to standing. In doing so I invited a cyclone of dust into a twirl duet, I had to close my eyes. Hitting my senses to this intimate connection with the earth. I took in the smell of the sawdust, the sound of the birds, and the sensation of the sunbeams illuminating me from behind. I felt powerful, strong, and beautiful. Most important, I felt like the best possible version of myself.

Re-Embodiment of Nature

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1989) believed that the earth is sentient, a living entity, stating that we are not upon the world but the earth is within us (Jordan, 2015). According to Jordan, Jung had a difficult time trying to describe this connection with language because of its subtlety. Such difficulty in describing a felt sensation, is reflected in the idea that Diane Ackerman (1990) describes in her work, *A Natural History of the Senses*. She writes that there is a physiological link between smell and language and explains how this connection between these two areas of the brain is weak. It is almost impossible to use language to describe a scent, even a familiar scent, such as that of friend, lover, child, or perhaps the bedroom of your childhood home. Such memories cannot be described with language, because the experience of the scent goes deeper, it becomes a feeling, an emotion. We just know and can remember these smells after years

of being away from them. The connection between nature and man is comparable with this idea. For example, 15 years after experiencing my childhood in nature I am still capable of remembering elicited sensations of these memories. The act of feeling this experience on a physical level when I have been removed from the event is through embodiment.

The Dance/Movement Therapist trains to understand clients on a kinesthetic level. During a session, the therapist seeks out an embodied awareness of the patient's physical and emotional state. Embodiment is the process of taking in information on a physical level, allowing the information that we receive to be processed on a whole body level. According to Koch, "human meaning grows from our organic sensory motor, and emotional transactions with the world" (Koch, 2011, p.60). Embodiment is something that we all uniquely experience but often don't have the words to describe.

Embodiment has been an essential tool as a Dance/Movement Therapist with a medically fragile population. My clinical internship is at Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center in Yonkers, New York. The center is home to 137 of New York State's most medically complex children, who have multiple physical, neurological conditions, and disabilities. These children come from anywhere in New York State and from all different socioeconomic backgrounds. The children reside at Seton Pediatric because of their fragile medical needs that may require ventilator dependence, rehabilitation, or skilled nursing. The Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center provides their residents (ages ranging from newborn to 21), with services such as palliative care, which is designed to provide

children with relief from pain and stress of a serious illness. It provides services for children and families when a cure is no longer possible. At the Center, some children have a range of disorders of consciousness, characterized by different levels of persistent vegetative state, minimally conscious, delirium, and coma. This means it can be difficult to determine the child's awareness of themselves and others in their environment.

As a Dance/Movement Therapist, I train to understand clients on a kinesthetic level. During a session, I work on developing an embodied awareness of a resident's physical and emotional state. The Embodiment process allows the information that I receive from the residents to be processed on a whole body level. This process can also be done with embodying an experiences and working with that feeling that is elicited. For example, my embodiment of my experience in the woods as a child is my biggest inspiration for how I conduct therapy with the children at Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center. I embodied this experience for the children so that I can create a modified intervention that is based off my bodies' repertoire of experiences with playing in nature. I'm hoping to create an experience of kinesthetic empathy on both sides of the therapy. Firing up residents Mirror Neurons, which is when a person watches an action being performed by another person, and the neurons of the individual watching is as active in the brain as if they themselves were doing the action (Koch, 2011). With the level of function and mobility of the residents at Elizabeth Seton, connecting with them like this is crucial for their development of and building connection with others. The Center's mission is to create an environment that tries to foster as much of the child's norms as

possible. In keeping with this idea of normal childhood experiences is the function of what I am doing with embodying nature and bringing it into my one on one, or group work at the Center. I'm hoping to bring the experiences of nature to the children without them having to worry about the exposure to allergens or transportation out of bed, which can be painful and traumatic experiences for some of the children.

A look at Nature-based interventions at Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center

I have been looking at developing movement for a multi-culture musical and dance experience group that does not come from folk dances, but rather the different environmental elements that also might elicit movement, and provide the children with the ability to go on an adventure without leaving the Center.

An example of this process involves looking at music from island countries like Jamaica, then leading the group with imagery of the weather, climate, landscape, terrain, and animals of the country. Many of the nurses who came from this area give their own input of what it was like at home as well as others who have traveled to the country. As the dance movement therapist, I provide scarves of different color that can be found in nature, for example: yellow for the sun, tan for the sand, white for clouds, and a long blue canopy scarf for the water. The resident then gets to experiment with different scarf colors, exploring the different ways that they can move with them. For the residents who

are not as physically mobile, I facilitate the exploration, moving the scarves over them to emulate the sensation of the flow of water.

A scarf was given to one resident in a group session, a 20-year-old non-verbal male named, Jay, who uses a wheelchair for mobility. Although he is capable of self-propelling and will push his wheel chair away when no longer engaged in the group, during this session he remained while I integrated guided imagery with the scarf intervention. Using images that encapsulated the beach while providing the tactile stimulation of the scarves, Jay's facial expression completely changed. His usually unexpressive face brightened with a large smile. His body began to rock back and forth. Suddenly, Jay started to clap his hand with vocalization that seemed to express excitement and make sounds that resembled laughter. This was most stimulated I had ever seen him, and the first time I had heard him vocalize. Jay's use of language is limited. However, with the use of the scarves along with the guided imagery I was able to give him a more in-depth experience.

Throughout the group, the music therapist has also provided music about the earth and different elements found in a natural setting. With the use of lyric substitutions we were able to develop an intervention that involved the more verbal residents participating in this session. This intervention had me pulling out different colored scarves as I asked the residents and staff members what colors in nature the scarves reminded them of and how could they move with those elements or objects. The music therapist was able to individualize the song to include both the object and the movement directed by the

resident, reflecting the benefit of altruism. This also helped promote psychosocial factors from the scarves such as bringing up family members clothing that resembled the movement and color of the scarf.

Other nature-based interventions included the song of falling leaves, where, with assistance of the group therapists, we laid out a large red scarf and moved it up and down like a parachute. During the song, I threw out brightly colored artificial leaves on the scarf to promote the experience of falling leaves and to provide the light movement of them floating up in the air and floating down onto the red scarf. The intention was to provide a calming cool down for the group as the session was concluded. I had to use artificial leaves to reduce the risk of exposing the children to unsanitary objects.

Artificial leaves can be sanitized before and after use.

This was be a direct use of a nature based intervention to provide a unique way for the children to experience the world outside of Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center. However, the use of a nature-based intervention does not need to be done by directly correlating elements or material from natural world. The residents can be exposed to the beneficial use of nature just by working with a therapist, who himself or herself has experienced the cathartic effects of nature before entering a session with a resident.

As an intern at Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, I have been given the opportunity to work in groups and with individuals providing Dance/Movement Therapy sessions. Throughout my time at this internship I have worked with a young boy named Frank, who is four years old. This child's diagnoses include cranial paralysis, which does

not allow him to close his eyes or change facial affect. Frank has been at this center for most, if not all, his life. He is non-verbal and uses minimal sign language to communicate his needs. Frank was my first resident that I had worked with at the Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center. Most of my time with him has been aimed at building a therapeutic relationship. During my initial assessments with Frank, or the others' on my case load, I look to find movement patterns or their way of navigating through space. I also look to discover and witness the ways that he communicates and connects with others in his environment. During the beginning of our session together, I would remove Frank from his chair and allow him to move in the space without directives. I began to notice that his natural free flow spiral movement pattern was exhausting as evidenced by perspiration and increased breath rate. I discovered that during movements of recovery he would look out the window, which appeared to reorganize and ground him. During the first couple of sessions, I had a difficult time finding moments of connection with Frank. I looked to build a space that would allow him to explore his environment and that would contain him, so that he could focus on others in his environment. I conducted sessions in his room in his play pen. I would step inside his playpen so I could better connect and attune to his movement. During one session, I sat with him inside the playpen as he spiraled around me and a few books. I noticed that one of the books had a button that played music. Following my own curiosity, I pressed the button and discovered that Frank stopped his movement and directed his attention to where I sat. When the music stopped, he took my hand and placed it on the button. This happened a few times before I took his

hand, placed it on the button and assisted him in pressing the button. He flung back against the playpen as his eyes got bigger and requested more music by signing. Based on the micro-movement of his eyes, Frank seemed to be showing excitement. He also indicated satisfaction by showing reciprocity through actions that were not perseverate and developed sequentially as we played back and forth. This particular session ended with Frank coming into my lap and placing his head against my chest and taking my hand and putting it on his head. I rocked him back and forth in my arms until he initiated that he was done, by getting up and returning to looking out the window. My sessions with Frank developed so that they no longer needed to be in the playpen.

I continued to develop more moments of play with Frank, in particular playing a combination of hide and go seek and tag in his room. We both navigated around the space, hiding behind mats and scarves as we explored the environment together. During these moments of play, I was brought back to the woods where I played paintball with my brothers. I darted behind a corner as I waited for Frank to find me. I noticed that this was the longest that I had seen him in a direct movement pattern and connecting with another person. I was embodying my own childhood memories during the session with this child. Throughout my time at Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, I was able to embody experiences such as these with the children. I was finding life and joy with each individual that I worked with. I witnessed such fullness of movement and play with each resident through Dance/ Movement Therapy and my deep connection with nature. As I continue my work as a Dance/Movement Therapist, I will strive never to lose my own

sense of wonder, adventure, and sunshine, because these very experiences allow me to be the person that I am today. My sense of nature allows me to walk into an environment of palliative care and seeing life at its most raw, create a space for joy and curiosity through movement and my own ability to reconnect to my childhood in the woods. I have learned how to frolic and discover adventure in the least likely of places thanks to my own childhood in nature.

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