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## Patterns In Wild Places: Approaching Dance/Movement Therapy Through The Lens Of Ecopsychology

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PATTERNS IN WILD PLACES: APPROACHING DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY  
THROUGH THE LENS OF ECOPSYCHOLOGY

Briana Imani Blakey

May 2020

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Dance/Movement Therapy  
Sarah Lawrence College

**ABSTRACT**

Nature's connection to the improvement of human well-being is longstanding and has become of growing interest in various health related fields. While certain therapeutic practices have begun to explore a nature-based approach, there is a lack of information and inquiry into the relationship between nature and the field of dance/movement therapy. This thesis investigates the connection between nature and well-being through the lens of ecopsychology, which can be used to understand people and their bond with nature. This thesis posits that there is a parallel relationship between particular elements of nature and the practice of dance/movement therapy, and that this relationship supports the integration of nature into dance/movement therapy's pre-existing frameworks. The discussion offers a conceptualization of the body that integrates nature, offering a new approach to the practice of dance/movement therapy.

*Keywords:* dance/movement therapy, nature, ecopsychology, therapeutic space, well-being

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all of the indigenous cultures and communities across the world who have known and honored their connection to nature since the earliest of days.

I would also like to acknowledge all the people who might one day inherit this planet, I hope that in deepening our connection to nature we may all be healed.

"If we seek the real source of the dance, if we go to nature, we find that the dance of the future is the dance of the past, the dance of eternity, and has been and always will be the same... The movement of waves, of winds, of the earth is ever the same lasting harmony." - Isadora Duncan

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### **Author's Reflection**

Almost every memorable part of my life has taken place in nature; a vast system of lakes, trees, and organisms are deeply embedded in my history. Spending days pacing the rocky shores of Lake Superior and racing into its frigid waters, where my feet carefully traced the lakebed, checking for drop offs, and my breath shortened to brace against the cold water, always ready for the unexpected. I learned to play a game of balance and recovery, hopping quickly across sharp rocks, squatting low and stepping slowly with arms outstretched across stones precariously stacked on the shore. In winter, when forests I walked all summer were shrouded in snow and no longer recognizable, I wandered through the same trails, my wonder restored by how every time I visited the forest it was different, like me, always changing. Most fondly, I remember how I used to sneak out to the park down my block to peel my shoes off and in the dead of night I would dance and run through the grass until my feet were stained green. In the open space I could run fast, pound my feet hard into the ground and feel it move beneath the power of my own body. The wind could blow across my skin and I could breathe in deep, letting it fill my lungs. I would weave between the tree's low hanging branches, my body twisting and shrinking to slide through the empty spaces. These became the rituals I practiced to honor every heartbreak, every success, every loss. These places and the practices explored in them have become an integral part of the landscape through which I have come to know myself most fully. They are places people came to long before I did and will continue to long after I am gone, and in that I find both humility and pride.

## **Patterns in Wild Places: Approaching Dance/Movement Therapy Through the Lens of Ecopsychology**

To begin an inquiry into the impact nature could have on dance/movement therapy, there is first the question of what it means to be in the natural world? Ecopsychology seeks to better understand this question. As a subfield of psychology, it employs principles from both ecology and psychology, using their collective theories to study the relationship between individuals and the rest of the natural world, with a particular investment in a more environmentally conscious and sustainable relationship between the two. In recent years, it has become a field that has informed the development of many other fields and has been used by environmentalists and psychologists alike. While it has many implementations and has been infused into several fields, its basic principles are founded on the idea that while humans are impacted and shifting in response to a modern world of new technologies and inventions, at its core, human structure and behavior is deeply informed by counterparts in nature (Roszak, 1995). The interests of ecopsychology are a useful place to begin in the pursuit to understand the interplay between human behavior and nature. On human's connection to nature, Shepard states that people's connection to nature and their impulse to connect to it is not gone but is simply waiting for an authentic mode of expression (as cited in Roszak, et. al., 1995). Perhaps that authentic expression can be found in movement. By using nature as the environment where dance/movement therapy is practiced, new avenues to deepen and integrate the mind, body, spirit connection are created by connecting to something tied to, but also much greater than, the self.

Therapeutic rituals of dance in nature have existed for millennia, such as the *Yébiçhai* Ceremony of Navajo tradition; a nine-night ceremony of healing, through sacred dances, prayers,

and sand paintings (Francis, 1996). Through reconnecting the body to the nature around it, *Yébîchai* seeks to restore balance to the individual and ameliorate ailments believed to be caused by a lack of balance and harmony between the self and the natural world (Francis, 1996). In this practice, the dance is done in nature and the dance becomes a way to connect the person to their environment. In this practice and many other indigenous therapeutic movement practices around the world, both nature and dance play an integral part in the healing process. Dance/movement therapy is a modern iteration of dance being implemented for therapeutic purposes. As it is currently practiced, its potential connections to nature have yet to be deeply explored. Considering the rich relationship dance and nature have held across time and space, it is worth further inquiring about how integrating dance and movement into natural environments can shift the experiences of dance/movement therapy.

### **Understanding the Self Through Nature**

Definitions of nature are wide ranging and are written about on a variety of different scales, from nature indoors, to parks, to wild open spaces. With consideration to access, it is crucial that nature in this context includes as many iterations and elements as possible. In its ideal form nature is a wildish fresh-air outdoor space, biologically diverse, and away from the built space of cities and suburbs. However, for the purpose of this thesis nature can comprise many elements of nature or few, including solely the image of it.

### **Biophilia**

In the pursuit to understand the relationship between people and nature, many ecopsychologists and biologists identified an instinct driven connection between people and nature, dubbed the ‘biophilia hypothesis’. Biophilia translates to “love of life (or love of living things)” (Gunderson, 2014, p. 2) and was a term first coined by Erich Fromm, a psychologist,



sociologist and philosopher. Fromm used the term in his work often to talk about a certain psychological orientation or state of mind that he felt was crucial to the building of empathy and the possibility of freedom and independence for all humans (Fromm, 2014). It has now become synonymous with the biophilia hypothesis proposed by socio-biologist Edward O. Wilson. His biophilia hypothesis suggests that humans instinctively and subconsciously seek to connect with other living organisms. He suggests that “to the degree we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves” (Wilson, 1984, pg. 2). Wilson attributes his hypothesis as resulting from evolutionary processes; for a majority of humans’ evolutionary history, the human brain has been programmed to evaluate and process natural environments. So, even now, as modern and constructed spaces are increasingly prevalent (Wilson, 1984), the human brain still seeks and more readily understands organic patterns. The pace at which constructed non-nature environments are arising and changing is so rapid that our evolutionary development cannot keep up, and will often return to natural patterns that have been deeply ingrained into human biology and psychology (Saunders 1999).

Evidence of biophilic behavior can be quickly observed in many facets of western culture, from the domestication of house pets to the endless stream of prose, poetry, and painting dedicated to nature (Melson, 2006). Biophilia has been most concretely observed in aesthetic preferences. One of the first and most referenced studies associated with biophilia was done by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) who conducted a study to evaluate the public’s preference in regards to their visual environment, so that ‘environmental professionals’ and architects could better accommodate the aesthetic values of the masses. In their research they found that generally people prefer natural environments to built environments, and within built environments people prefer those with natural elements such as trees, water, and plants (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

The innate draw people have toward nature may also be tied to phenomena beyond the biology of evolution. Within ecopsychology there is an exploration of transpersonal experiences. Transpersonal psychology can be used to better understand the relationship between people and natural environments. It is a subfield of psychology that takes psychological concepts and theories and integrates them with spiritual practices and theological concepts (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). With an interest in examining experiences that transcend the self and investigating that which is greater than the self. Transpersonal psychology is fundamentally constructed around *nonduality*, the belief that singular parts comprise a greater whole (Davis, 2003). Although not explicitly stated, the concept of nondualism is reflected in the phenomena of biophilia, through the observed impulse people have to connect to that which is beyond the individual experience. With an awareness of this paralleled relationship Kamitsis and Frances' (2003) study sought to demonstrate the connection between the peoples' spiritual practices and their experiences of engaging with nature, arguing that both experiences orient a person in a relation to a larger system and both hold potential to positively impact well-being (Kamitsis & Frances, 2003).

### **Biophobia**

Despite this deep desire to connect to the natural world, many people are becoming increasingly distant from it – a phenomenon that has been of paramount focus in the recent study of human and nature relationships. The distancing from nature that has been observed by many was coined, in opposition to biophilia, as biophobia: the innate and subconscious fear and urge to distance or separate the human self from nature. This desire to separate from nature has been understood by some as a reflection of a deeper fear of the self, because the self is too a part of nature (Williams, 1996). This separation from nature has also been likened to dissociation, which

is a defense mechanism where a person disconnects from their own thoughts, feelings and memories, often in response to trauma or unwanted stimuli (Hilgard, 1992). Hilgard suggests that this dissociation from nature has resulted in humans being perceived as other than, and different, than all other living creatures. Additionally, biophobia has been studied as a disruption on a more spiritual level. Metzner suggests that Euro-American culture perceives “the spirit” as the mind and the self and nature as organic organisms and environments (Metzner, 1993). From his perspective, this split is the product of a misconception that the spiritual and the natural are mutually exclusive, when in reality they are interconnected. In cleaving the mind from nature, a dissonance has resulted in both the development of individuals and communities (Metzner, 1993).

The pervasiveness of this separation has made the origin of the separation between self and nature a critical topic within ecopsychology. There are a multitude of compounding factors that have contributed to the pervasive separation of people from nature, particularly in Euro-American culture. Many historians attribute the increasingly biophobic patterns in Euro-American culture to a longstanding conceptualization of nature that has been influenced by modernization and capitalism. Modernization was constructed heavily on the idea of anthropocentrism, that positioned humans as paramount and most valuable on earth (Gillespie, 2008). Anthropocentrism allows for a justifiable dominion over nature that has also allowed it to pervade Euro-American culture because it fits into many Euro-American values and narratives like capitalism and “the American dream” that have been built up and held in power over centuries (Gillespie, 2008).

### **The Ecological-Self**

A person's orientation toward nature and the development of an orientation that considers

nature is understood in ecopsychology as the “ecological-self”. A greater exposure to nature is attributed with building a concept of the self that is broad and encompasses one’s environment and larger systems of being (Kamitsis & Francis, 2003), and therefore, is perhaps more fully integrated. The ecological-self, like transpersonal psychology, is bound to concepts of nondualism. Often the concept of connecting to one’s spirituality and exploring systems beyond the individual can feel daunting and intangible. Exploring nondualism through an ecological identity provides a tangible point of connection via the very real grounding element of a natural environment (Næss& Jickling, 2000).

Næss argues that an understanding of one’s ecological-self orients a person's perception of their experiences to be more deeply rooted in realism (cited in Bragg, 1996). It also allows us to build a deeper understanding of both the self and the larger communities in which we live; resultantly healing our relations with both the smallest communities, such as ourselves, and the largest, such as nature and the universe. The ecological-self is not fixed or inherent, but rather something built and strengthened over time. The experiences that reinforce a person’s ecological-self are impactful but ephemeral so, in order to make enduring shifts there must be regular exploration and interaction with one’s natural environment (Bragg, 1996).

Enduring shifts in a person’s psyche can often be achieved through the experience of awe. Feelings of awe are an elemental part of many people’s natural experience and can be inspired by various sources, from the grand scale of a seemingly endless ocean or the strength of a small ant carrying a crumb back to its colony. Awe, as conceptualized by Keltner and Haidt (2003), requires a perceived vastness and a need to accommodate for a new experience in one’s mental structure. In accommodating and altering one’s own internal schemata, long term impacts on a person’s psyche can be made (Williams, 2017). Integrating awe-inspiring experiences into a

persons' pre-existing schemata is mostly often done through the incorporation of some spiritual or transpersonal awareness and belief (Schneider, 2017).

### **Nature's Impact on Well-Being**

These different explorations into the relationship between nature and people support the idea that a person's experiences in nature can deeply shape their own identity. Along with understanding human's relationship with nature, ecopsychology has begun to delve into the many ways that a person's health and well-being is impacted by different elements of nature, positing that human wellness is crucially connected to and enhanced by nature. Health is understood by the World Health Organization (WHO) as being more than the absence of disease or infirmity and includes one's well-being (as cited in "Well-Being Concepts", 2018). Well-being, as implemented in this paper, includes positive physical and emotional function, and feelings of fulfillment and satisfaction with one's life ("Well-Being Concepts", 2018).

In an era where technologies and modernization are rapidly growing, and environmental degradation is on the rise, ecopsychology is deeply concerned with understanding the influence exposure to nature, or lack thereof, has on both nature and human health. It is commonly accepted by many scientists and healthcare professionals that a lack of exposure to nature has been shown to impact things such as mood, focus, and the ability to recover from both physical and mental fatigue (Clay, 2001). The decreased exposure to nature being felt across the U.S. became the primary focus of Louv's work. After he spent 10 years traveling the U.S. and speaking with children and families about their relationship with nature, he identified a symptom of reduced exposure which he coined Nature-Deficit Disorder (NDD) (Louv, 2003). NDD is the idea that in recent decades people -children in particular- spend less time in nature, which has negatively impacted their overall wellness, as seen by increased rates in things like depression,

obesity, ADHD and myopia. For Louv, these problems can be fixed by integrating more outdoor activities into children's lives (Louv, 2003). It is important to note that while this concept has been influential in developing nature experiences for children around the U.S. and has become a fairly common term used in the fields of environmentalism and ecopsychology, it is not a formally recognized disorder.

Despite its recognition across multiple platforms, many people have found the labeling of such phenomenon and behaviors as disordered at all to be problematic and reductive. Dickinson (2013) calls for a more critical look at NDD, suggesting that the way Louv presents peoples' disconnect with nature lacks a necessary cultural examination and sensitivity. It is apparent in reading Louv's work that his investment in people engaging with nature is deeply rooted in his own experiences growing up playing outside. Dickinson (2013) suggests that his writings require a deeper consideration for, and a more objective look at, the context of modern living in order to understand the relationship with humans and nature that doesn't romanticize past eras. She also states that his solution calls for a passive engagement with nature which, Dickinson argues, is not enough to repair the disconnect Louv has observed. She suggests instead that it is important for people to have active, expressive and emotional engagement with the environment in order to develop a fuller relationship with nature and in turn the self (Dickinson, 2013).

### **Nature Within the Medical Model**

Many of the first studies examining nature's impact on health were conducted in hospitals and were invested in how nature can affect one's health through visual engagement. One of the first, and most influential, studies was conducted by Robert Ulrich. Between 1972 and 1981 Ulrich conducted experiments where he observed patients recovering from stomach wounds. Patients were placed either in hospital rooms with beds facing a window or beds facing a brick

wall. His study found significantly faster rates of recovery and improved mood in people who were able to rest in a room with a view (Ulrich, 1984). This led to his development of supportive designs, which are a set of guidelines geared toward developers of health-care facilities (Ulrich, 1991). Ulrich's supportive designs seek to support well-being by suggesting "a) sense of control over physical-social surroundings, b) access to social support, and c) access to positive distractions" (as cited by Andrade & Devlin, 2015, p.1). The journey of recovery is fraught with stress from the ailment itself and all the things that may come with managing it. Ulrich believed this stress was one of the greatest obstacles to improving well-being, and his theory for supportive design intended to create spaces that minimize that stress, increasing rate and efficacy of recovery (Ulrich, 1991).

Kahn, Severson, and Rockert (2009) hypothesized that the benefits of nature went beyond the visual experience, and in their 2009 study explored whether viewing digital nature images versus physically experiencing nature was more beneficial to a persons' general wellness. Their research indicated that viewing digital imagery of nature was shown to improve certain elements of health such as stress and injury recovery in relation to the control group which did not observe any nature images during their recovery. However, actually being in nature, via a hospital garden, was shown to be significantly more effective in improving these aspects of health than the digital images (Kahn, Severson, & Ruckert, 2009). This supports the idea that the benefits of nature extend beyond the visual and are maximized when the experience is a more holistic experience of the natural world.

Another widely recognized beneficial element of nature is sunlight. Sensible exposure to the sun is encouraged, as it is recognized to increase alertness and support the body's synthesis of vitamin D which supports the production of adaptive immune responses and mood boosting

serotonin neurotransmitters (Colarellim, O'Brien & Boyajian, 2016). A study conducted in Italy investigated the impact of sunlight on mood, in those with mood disorder. The research recorded the discharge dates of people experiencing unipolar and bipolar depression in the hospital and found that those exposed to direct natural sunlight in the morning had faster discharge rates which, they assert, suggests that sunlight has the capacity to stabilize and improve mood (Bendetti, Colombo, Barbini, Campori, & Smeraldi, 2001). Sunlight's impact on immune response has made it an asset in the process of recovery and is more regularly being factored into hospital architecture and design, with more focus being put into window design and positioning of windows to maximize daylight and view (Aripin, 2007).

### **Nature Outside the Medical Model**

The work being done to explore the quantifiable and physiological benefits nature can have on human health is only a part of understanding nature's influence on health and well-being. There are many more nuanced ways that the interplay between nature and movement can affect a person. Ecopsychology recognizes that so much of the experience of nature is ephemeral and difficult to quantify, but still ever present and crucial to understanding a wide range of the opportunities nature can provide to humanity.

### ***Preparation for the Storm: How Nature Builds Resilience***

Resilience is like a trampoline beneath one's feet. As opposed to concrete, if a person were to fall, they would be able to bounce back up again. It is the trait that allows one to adjust and adapt to change and adversity, which is bound to arise throughout one's life (Kunicki, 2017). Adversity in its many forms contributes to the exacerbation of pre-existing stressors; it can lead to relapses, first breaks, and lower quality of life. Ego strength is a concept introduced by Freud that is often associated with being a primary building block for resilience. According to Freud's



structural model of the psyche, ego strength refers to how the ego manages the demands of the id, the superego, and reality (King & Schiller, 1960). The more someone is able to maintain their sense of self while managing internal and external challenges, the stronger their ego is. In psychoanalytic theory, the way that one deals with these stressors and manages the ego is via defense mechanisms (Boag, 2014). While the mechanisms have been conceptualized by various theorists in different ways over the years, they have all worked to identify and categorize ways of coping with the mind and environment.

Nature is constructed in such a way that engaging with, and experiencing both its beauties and, more notably, its challenges, helps to soften the blow of hardship and “gentle the shock” of the unexpected shifts that occur in one’s life (Williams, 2017, p. 171). This description of nature imbues it with a very active and decisive quality, as though nature has a will, and aims to ensure its inhabitants growth in order for them to maximize survival and persistence.

### ***Returning to Childhood: Fostering Play and Creativity Through Nature***

Conversations regarding the benefits of being in nature often begin with an examination of childhood experiences. For instance, Louv’s work unabashedly harkens back to his own childhood memories as the driving force behind his research into the impact of nature related deficits. This is because nature is often the place people first begin to play, and to understand kinship between the self and other living things (Williams, 2014). Play is considered an integral part of the childhood experience, crucial to healthy and happy development. When asked about what constitutes play, children identify fun, choice, pleasure and freedom as integral elements of the play experience (Herrington & Brussoni, 2015). The free and choice driven qualities of play mean that it can look like a lot of different things depending on the person. Herrington and Brussoni (2015) explore how nature might act as the ideal environment for the diverse

expressions of play. They investigated the different approaches children took to playing in different environments and found that nature-based play spaces resulted in more movement and more different kinds of movement than indoor play spaces. Their study also found that, the less structured the nature-based space was, the more varied the movement and exploration of space. Based on their studies, they suggest the more varied the environment is, the more play there can be (Herrington & Brussoni, 2015).

This study is also an inquiry into what inspires creativity. On a playground where all of the play apparatuses already have a role and context, the ways of interacting with the environment are already predetermined: a child slides down a slide and swings across monkey bars. However, in a space full of boulders and twigs, where the play apparatus are laden with less context and therefore offer more choice, the child has to create their own way of interacting with the environment (Crease, 1993). Play is less often associated with the experience of adulthood, but its benefits are important and can improve a person's wellbeing regardless of age. Returning to nature-based spaces that many grew up playing in may be a more accessible entry point into exploring play for both children and adults.

### ***An Escape: Stepping Away to Step In***

Where Louv's literature calls for a return to an older time where people were "more connected" to nature, Florence Williams explores how people are currently benefiting from nature amidst their new relationship with natural environments (Williams, 2017). In her book 'Nature Fix' she explores what about nature really makes people feel happier and healthier. The most common pattern she observed was that for many people, nature provided a shift in venue and acted as a form of escape from the "everyday" world, even if it was just walking through a neighborhood park. She suggests that being in nature and actively engaging in nature and one's

environment, contributes in reducing distractions and allows for a shift in focus (Williams, 2017).

Escapism is a common practice deeply ingrained into U.S. culture and has been capitalized on by many organizations, with the popularization of nature-oriented retreats that promise a space away from the hustle and bustle of the day to day and a chance to recalibrate. Freud and later psychologists acknowledge occasional escape as crucial to managing the turbulence of reality (Longeway, 1990). Næss' concept of deep ecology suggests that escape, when done through nature, is an opportunity to connect more deeply to reality (Næss & Jickling, 2000), as it invites inquiry and acknowledgment of the connections people have with the natural world around them.

### ***Patterns in Wild Places***

Nature is shown to be organizing and restorative because it engages the human brain and body in a process of biomimicry. Biomimicry or biomimetics is the process of imitating patterns, systems, or models found in other living organisms, often to enhance one's own species, and it is closely tied to processes such as evolution and survival of the fittest (Huelat, 2008). Biomimetics is a field most frequently applied to the invention of new technologies that return to ancient organic solutions to solve modern day issues. Biomimetics inspired the development of the world's fastest bullet train in Japan. The chief engineer, a bird watcher, was inspired to shape the front of the train like that of a Kingfisher bird's beak. Increasing its aerodynamics in the same way Kingfishers have evolved to do for ages (Wadia & McAdams, 2010). Although its foundational concepts have yet to be formally explored in the field of psychology, biomimetics is already taking place in the study of fractals and their implementation in therapeutic and health related fields.

Fractals are one of the prominent factors that biomimetics draws from to inform the generation of new inventions. Fractals are structures composed of repeated shapes or patterns that generate a larger whole, such as leaves of a fern or branches of a tree (Stevens, 1994). This organic geometric phenomenon has been observed and applied across a broad range of technologies from architecture to computer graphics (Huelat, 2008). In human psychology, fractals have been shown to reduce stress levels. Wise (2002) studied the impact of fractals on stress responses. Studies show that the organic design of these patterns are calming to our autonomic nervous system, and interpreted by our brains as both organizing and stimulating. Wise suggests that part of this is because our brains recognize these shapes because of their organic nature and are evolutionarily predisposed to prefer them. This, in turn, contributes to their organizing effect on the human psyche as well as the reduced stress response (Wise, 2002).

### **Therapeutic Space**

Therapeutic spaces are an important part of all forms of therapeutic work. Therapeutic spaces are the physical and conceptual spaces and boundaries that contain the experiences of an individual or group. These spaces also help the individual feel secure enough to construct containers and boundaries in themselves. Winnicott (1953) asserts that a ‘holding environment’ emulates the way a caregiver lovingly and supportively holds a baby. For Winnicott, this holding environment is created both by the therapist’s presence and choices as well as by the literal space that is holding the session (Winnicott, 1953). In the same article, Winnicott also presents the idea of ‘transitional spaces’, which he defines as spaces that allow the therapist and client to connect subjective and objective experiences. Winnicott suggests that creative arts therapies allow for aesthetic, imaginal, and metaphoric content to enter into the transitional space and be explored and interpreted for the person's improved development (Malchiodi, 2013). Within the therapeutic

space is also the goal of containment, derived from Carl Jung's idea that, much like in alchemy where a container is needed to safely store chemicals, in therapy a container is needed to safely store thoughts, feelings and experiences of both therapist and client (Finlay, 2015). Containment happens on multiple levels: the therapist acts as a container, the space acts as a container, with the goal that eventually the participant is able to be the container for their own experiences (Finlay, 2015).

Nature is currently being implemented as a therapeutic space in various nature-oriented therapies, where the therapeutic space is an active container that is integrated directly into the therapeutic interventions (Berger, 2006). Berger (2008) developed a method called building-a-home-in-nature. This method is meant to allow the client to create their own therapeutic environment, providing opportunity for exploration of imagination and fantasy through creation, while still maintaining a connection to reality through the very real and tangible qualities of nature (Berger, 2008).

In recent years, *Shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, has also become a popular informal therapeutic intervention in the US. Originally from Japan, it is a practice that invites people to engage in a submergence of the senses, namely smell. In Japan it has become an increasingly important aspect of preventive health care (Williams, 2017). The practice is often facilitated by a trained guide who leads individuals through the forest, with the goal of immersing all of one's senses into the experience. This practice is believed to reduce stress and prevent the likelihood of things like high blood pressure, anxiety, and weak immune health. There is a particular focus on forests with trees that produce phytoncides (wood essential oils), which are known to increase immune function and provide a feeling of rejuvenation (Li, 2010). This practice is an example of

how a nature-oriented therapeutic space can actively engage with the body on various sensory levels.

### **What is Dance/Movement Therapy?**

Dance/movement therapy is a form of body-based psychotherapy that uses movement as the primary medium to improve mental, physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being (American Dance Therapy Association, n.d.). Dance/movement therapy seeks to help people develop a present awareness of their felt experiences through connecting to their bodies. This field uses various interventions including movement, imagery, rhythm, and props, in order to expand one's emotional expression and help integrate the experiences of the mind and the body. Dance/movement therapy developed in the early 1940's as dancers and psychologists became concerned with the implications of a separation between body and mind that they observed occurring in Euro-American society (Levy, 1988), similar to the observed separation between people and the rest of nature observed by biologists and ecologists.

At their core, these two types of separation are the product of the same shift in thought. The separation from nature and from the body are both a reflection of value systems that have developed, which champion the mind as the most valuable part of the self. Because of their similar origin of separation, finding ways to connect to nature and explore one's relationship with nature can reciprocally help in establishing deeper integration and understanding of one's embodied experiences.

### **Circles**

Circles provide physical, conceptual and spiritual organization to the practice of dance/movement therapy in a nature-base environment. In dance/movement therapy, the therapeutic space is most often created through the use of circles. Circles have been a part of

group movement practices across cultures for centuries and are often found to be effective because they allow everyone to see one another and create a sense of unity. Marian Chace, a founder of dance/movement therapy, used circles as a part of creating the therapeutic space. She felt that a circular space allowed individuals to test their own comfort level and also provided a structure and grounding that she identified as necessary to the starting and closing of the group session (Levy, 1988). This structure provided by circles acts as a form of spatial containment for the experiences of the group.

For as long as the relationship between nature and movement has existed, circles have been an instrumental way to commune and connect with others. Across species, circles are implemented as shapes of protection and symbols of connection. Elephants form them to protect a mother giving birth, skunks use them when defending against attackers. It is a way of organizing and connecting that humans have practiced and observed in nature for millennia. Looked at from an ecopsychological perspective, circles are similar to fractals. They reflect larger circular patterns occurring both physically in nature and also systematically in nature, like the life cycle of a plant. Perhaps, like fractals, circles are something recognized by the human body on an evolutionary level, acting as a familiar pattern that helps to calm the nervous system and organize the body and mind.

Circles' pre-existing relationship with nature and their capacity for containment make them particularly well suited for use in natural spaces that may not have the same boundaries as an enclosed space. While the openness of nature offers particular therapeutic opportunities, holding a more contained environment is also important at times. Circles offer structure when needed but can also be expanded or broken to explore the benefits of a natural environment that is more expansive and less contained. In these instances, when a physical circle is not used,

circles can still work to support the therapeutic process on a conceptual level. This can be done through the implementation of biomimetics, by taking an approach to nature and its various cycles with the intention of exploring, learning, and then applying its relevant aspects to a person's life, with the intention of making positive changes to well-being. The development of resilience, for instance, can be approached biomimetically by exploring the cycle of the seasons.

This may be done through observing, with all the senses, what is happening in the space and attuning to different elements of that space. If it was fall one might observe creatures growing larger as they prepare for hibernation or leaves falling lightly off the trees that are preparing for dormancy. Embodying these observations can help someone understand what they may represent, perhaps preparation or rest, and how those themes may appear in their own life. Using imagery one can also explore seasons of nature they are not presently experiencing. Through the changing of seasons, the earth has learned how to grow and flourish in the spring and summer after long periods of dormancy, rest, and death during the fall and winter. Applying the concept of seasons to the human body, a dance/movement therapist can facilitate the discovery of new energy, mobility, or growth in people experiencing periods of immobility and stagnation.

While these cyclical patterns can be thought of as circles, they are also symbols of rhythm and pattern. In dance/movement therapy, patterns within the body such as breathing, or the rhythm of one's heartbeat are repetitive, a quality that helps to support organization of thoughts and feelings, grounding, and stress reduction. Like fractals, these patterns are organic and known by our bodies on a subconscious level. When a person is disconnected from the natural rhythms of their own bodies or their nervous system has become dysregulated, patterns in nature can act as a model to help understand one's movement patterns and preferences. The dance/movement



therapist can focus on these patterns in the body and work towards connecting to a person's internal rhythms. For example, one might reconnect the rhythm of their own breathing by focusing, either visually or, ideally, through physical touch, on the repetitive pattern of waves hitting the shore. Shared rhythm in dance/movement therapy helps to foster feelings of connection and unity, and the same can occur in relationship to nature's rhythms. Creating the potential for a person to find support and unity both with others and with the space around them.

Cycles are also able to form spiritual connections between nature and the body.

Dance/movement therapy sessions often include some sort of repeated structure or form. This may look like beginning every session with a movement warm-up or a repeated mantra at the end of a session. These repeatable actions act as therapeutic rituals that can help to support someone and can also be used to effect change over time. Nature has an extensive history with ritual, such as that of the *Yébîchai* Ceremony, which can offer abundant material for the development of rituals. *Yébîchai* generate ritual through repeated implementation of certain natural elements such as pine or sand. The repeated use of these items gives them a meaning and power within the ritual. In dance/movement therapy the cycle of repeating certain actions each session connects the session and the people in the session to something greater than themselves. Ritual in this context is both a therapeutic endeavor as well as a spiritual endeavor. Rituals conducted around the world also frequently require a respect and awe for the process and experiences held within the ritual (Penner, 2016), awe being a feeling often elicited from the various aspects of nature. Nature's ability to foster awe can support therapeutic rituals in creating long term positive changes to a person's life.

### **Creating the Therapeutic Space**

Dance/movement therapy can benefit from the active and dynamic qualities of nature,

similar to the way other nature-based therapies do. The impact that nature has on creativity can be a great asset to dance/movement therapy practices. A person's life is often full of situations that they cannot control, which may lead one to feel overwhelmed or powerless in their environment. A goal for many therapists is to help people cope with their circumstances and to help someone develop an awareness of how they can make healthy and positive shifts in their life.

The biodiversity of a nature-based environment when both plentiful and diverse might include elements such as grass, twigs, flowers, trees, rocks, or dirt, as well as variability in terrain and levels. Employing the basic concepts of Berger's method of building-a-home-in-nature, a person is able to use these various elements of nature to physically create the therapeutic space around them. Because the elements of a natural environment are not saturated with meaning or purpose, the way that a room of a hospital might be, a person is both challenged to create their natural environment and assign it meaning.

Dance/movement therapy is uniquely positioned to facilitate the creative process of construction because it is a form that values and uses creative process' to explore emotional content. One way that meaning-making can be done is through the exploration of metaphor; by building-a-home-in-nature through literally shifting or creating one's own space, a person can begin to wonder about the emotional content that arises from having an impact on their environment. How does it feel to change/have control over the environment? What tools (physical, emotional, cognitive) did the person use in creating their environment? By interrogating the metaphors within the creative process, a person can begin to identify how that metaphor may translate beyond the boundaries of the session and into their everyday lives.

As a body-based therapy, the act of simply physically shifting one's environment is a part

of the therapeutic process. Dance/movement therapy subscribes to the belief that experiences of the body impact the experiences of the mind, and reciprocally the experiences of the mind impact the body. This fundamental concept is another example of cyclical patterns appearing both in nature and the body. So, in embodying the actions of manipulating and generating the space around them, a person may also gain the capacity to make desirable changes in other parts of their life. Nature-based therapeutic spaces lend themselves to developing a sense of control over one's physical-social surroundings which, with consideration for foundational concepts of Ulrich's supportive designs, helps to reduce stress and helps to validate a person's self-efficacy, both goals of a dance movement therapist.

This particular creation of the therapeutic space is, like most things in dance movement therapy, a practice in impermanence as well. The experience of creating a space or "home" provides a sense of control but also requires an eventual relinquishing of that control, which is equally as important to sustainably coping with one's environment. The practice of impermanence comes from the reality that the therapeutic space is alive, and is therefore growing and shifting all the time. A circle of leaves made during one session may blow away by the next, or be eaten by a nearby creature. Learning to tolerate and perhaps even appreciate impermanence can be done by developing an awareness of the spaces' aliveness and constant changing as an extension or reflection of our own lived experience.

In the act of embracing this impermanence, another opportunity arises to construct various spaces across many sessions. Dance/movement therapy can use the aliveness and diversity of the space to facilitate the exploration of building various kinds of environments that elicit a range of movement and emotional experiences. Building an environment from rocks of varying sizes might allow the exploration of strength or stability, both qualities that rocks have and qualities

that may be required in building with them. This exploration encourages the development of a wide ranging movement vocabulary, which supports the expansion of one's emotional and expressive vocabulary as well.

### **Nature as a Prop**

In dance/movement therapy, props act as a way to encourage and explore specific movement qualities, and can also act as transitional objects that allow a person to explore felt experiences through a more indirect source, which can be more accessible and help to mediate intense emotions (Levy, 1988). Earlier I reflected on what it was like to dance in the park near my house. In that space, the environment acted much like a prop. This memory offers an example of how an environment with dirt or grass might lend itself to the experience of movement that explores strong and powerful movements, as seen in the strong and heavy weight exerted that shifted the earth beneath my feet. Exploring strength and power may be beneficial in helping to build feelings such as groundedness, anger, confidence, or physical and emotional stability. In the lake, also referenced in my reflection, a different element of nature is introduced - water - which can take many forms. Still water may be beneficial to the exploration of feelings of freedom, floating, lightness, or calm. whereas rough water may elicit feelings of instability or loss of control. Conceptualizing elements of nature as props allows them to act as transitional objects. Which in dance/movement therapy are items that allow feelings to be experienced through an external medium. If elements of nature are also understood as being connected to the nature of the body then these elements of nature become transitional objects that are more deeply integrated into a person's experience.

### **Bringing Nature Indoors**

While the ideal may be to practice dance/movement therapy in nature-based spaces, that is

not always the reality. For those working indoors with no potentiality to be outdoors, there are still many ways the above ideas can be infused into dance/movement therapy. Imagery has played a formative role in dance/movement therapy, and offers a chance to explore boundless worlds and ideas. Blanche Evan, an early dance/movement therapist, employed imagery as a key part of her practice, as she felt it helped clients explore their natural rhythms and the content of their subconscious (Levy, 1988). Many of the concepts explored above may be modified by experiencing them through imagery.

If nature cannot be accessed through going outdoors, then there is also the potential to bring nature indoors and explore the various sensory experiences of nature. By applying the ideas of nature as prop. Bringing leaves, branches, flowers, water tables, sand, or dirt into a session opens up the potential to explore a wide range of expression. For instance, bringing sprigs of pine to a session, the therapist can facilitate an exploration by asking people to use their senses to explore what the pine smells like or what it feels like against the skin of their palm, the bottom of their foot, or their knee. A sprig of pine is light and somewhat fragile in its constitution, quick to tear or crumble, and, with an awareness of the qualities of the material, this pine might elicit experiences of light touch and themes of tenderness or care. This can help to build feelings of connection and support, and also ideas of how one can be gentle or kind to themselves. Even though being indoors limits the sensory immersion experience, the stimulation of senses such as smell and sound can be done through things like essential oils and soundscapes. This can help support the use of nature imagery or props by simulating a more immersive experience.

### **Conclusion**

Bringing dance/movement therapy to nature, especially as it is predominantly practiced indoors, offers a change in environment and shift in perspective that can aid in the stimulation and activation of the body and mind. As a constantly changing therapeutic space, nature could be overwhelming or distracting but, because of the ancient and evolutionary way the human body is conditioned to respond and connect to nature, it can instead help to create a simultaneously stimulating and grounding experience. Exploring the diversity of the wildness around us through bodily and sensory experiences fosters creativity, organization, self-awareness, and expression.

Working in a space that, like people, is alive and moving allows for a deep relationship to be built with the world around one's self, a relationship that can help people better understand themselves and their relationship to the larger systems and communities they are tied to. Perhaps in developing a deeper awareness of the reciprocal relationship between the natural world and the natural body, the definition of what constitutes the body can expand, allowing the body to become more than flesh and bone in order to achieve a deeper sense of embodiment.

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