

# Discovering the Language of the Ecological Body

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## SYNOPSIS

This article seeks to explore the voice of the ecological body, through which we can engage with the language of the cosmos. The human being is a living system, composed of numerous dynamic systems which constitute a collective that we call 'body'. To listen with, and speak from, the core of the complex system that constitutes 'body' is to discover a kinetic language that has its own depth, dimension and perspective. This embodied, relational language brings us into alignment with the improvised, interdependent dances that are always going on as part of the wider choreography of the ecology. Dance Therapy, with its tradition of aligning with earth-honouring principles, is just one way that we can learn to attune to other ways of being in the world, and to rediscover those wild parts of ourselves that know instinctively how to speak with the earth. In this writing, this process is illustrated by Kim's story, as she discovers a deep attunement with the earth through the fleshy substance of the body, and in so doing opens to an empathic resonance with the other-than-human. Kim meets with the spontaneous, aesthetic and symbolic creativity of human potential, and allows a new story to unfold through the raw material of embodied experience. Kim explores ways to straddle the personal, cultural and ecological contradictions inherent in her desire to live ethically and peacefully with the earth and her inadvertent complicity in the hubris of the human species.

Come join the dance! Step into the realm of human experience where language manifests in subtle nuances of the body, a drawing of breath, a shift of the shoulder, a foot sinking mindfully into the ground. At any given moment each of us is in movement, with a gentle tilt of the head, or an almost imperceptible lift of the knee, and that movement is relational, within the dynamic matrix of the ecology. As a cat might arch her back, tilt her head attentively and prick up her ears, or as the sunflower tilts her face slowly in the direction of the sun when morning shifts to afternoon, so we move. This article seeks to explore the language of the ecological body in which dance manifests as a universal language through

which we (humans) can foster healthier relationships with our ecology. This non-verbal language can offer a powerful modality in the process of reconciling and healing our relationship with the earth as individuals and as a collective. To listen with and to speak from the core of the complex system that constitutes 'body' requires an embodied awareness, within which lies the secret of our forgotten tongue (Hall, 2012). Through the body we can engage with the language of the cosmos. This entails a visceral listening to the story of the wind brushing against our skin, the vibrations of the earth and the changing habits of our creature kith and kin, all of which brings us closer to the story that is unfolding within

the wider earth community. Our embodied awareness is 'fundamental to survival' (Fogel, 2009: 2) and manifests on a physical, sensory, emotional and spiritual level. As this somatic intelligence meets with the spontaneous, aesthetic and symbolic creativity of the human potential, the raw material of embodied experience can transform the narrative of our process of becoming creatures of the cosmos. A new story can begin to unfold.

We are in and of our bodies and our bodies are in and of the earth, as we also find ourselves 'to be in, and of, Nature from the very beginning of ourselves' (Naess, 1995: 226). The creative force that brought life into being hovers in our every breath. The voice arising from that creative catalyst offers us a relational language that breathes the poetry of existence. Through that poetry we can begin to fathom and participate in the intricate improvisational choreography of the earth. In the same way that words conjure stories, that sound transforms into music and that art manifests in structural forms, so movement evolves into the extemporized dance of non-verbal, non-rational dimensions of our experience, bringing us into alignment with the complexity of a predominantly non-verbal world.

Some humans have no words. Some humans have lots of words, but employ them to assert the dominant cultural values that perpetuate the vertical hierarchy of needs that places human progress and productivity above all *others*. Our dominant Western culture can be exclusive and intolerant of other ways of being in the world, and many of the marginalized folk whom I have met over time have reminded me just how hard it is to 'dethrone' the cultural norms that 'have interrupted our process of listening' (Hayes, 2013: 108) to the animate earth. Consider, for example, my encounters with people labelled 'severely autistic', whose school reports typically suggest an inability to engage in meaningful social interaction, yet who seem to have an innate capacity to listen to the other-than-human. I have often been intrigued that a child described as beyond help in a formal learning environment might become a force of nature, seemingly fully conversant with the language of the elements; a free spirit, fully attuned to the environment. In a classroom setting she might be found sitting alone, avoiding eye contact or becoming distressed, banging her head with her hands and screaming. Yet, in the school garden I might find her covered in soil as she rolls in the earth at the base of her favourite bush, before delicately tracing the winding patterns of the roots entering the earth. At other times, she might be dancing with the breeze, leaping and turning with the autumn leaves falling

from a tree, facing into the wind and allowing it to brush her skin and blow through the matted brown curls in her hair. Such children remind me of how we straddle two worlds in the difficult task of reconciling those parts of ourselves that become distressed by the oppression of the dominant cultural values of progress and productivity, and those wild parts of ourselves that know instinctively how to speak with the earth.

Should you decide to read further you will meet with Kim, an amalgam from my mind's eye, conjured from those encounters between the dancing body and the cosmos that I have witnessed on my earthly travels. Kim also serves to animate the 'evolutionary dynamic that is moving the western psyche to reconnect our overspecialized ego to its natural psychic roots' (Bernstein, 2005: 9). Kim discovers dance as a medium that can reconnect her with her psychic roots in a process that requires her to move beyond the inflated Western ego and the rational dimension of her experience into a place of empathic listening that renders her open to the great unknown.

Kim discovers a kinetic language of its own depth, dimension and perspective, through which she finds a way of 'realising (her) connection to the cosmos' (Chodorow, 1999: 250). The dance that is embedded in the flesh of each one of us offers the possibility of transcending the cultural constructs of the Cartesian body-mind split and the illusory divisions between self and other, humans and universe, to which our culture is so loyally attached. In mainstream Western culture, dance has become a tamed, specialized and objectified animal, executed by exotic, highly trained creatures, who maintain a very particular and elite physical status, and where particular kinds of bodies are objectified and rarified. This objectification of the body is part of a culturally prevalent phenomenon, characterized by an 'underlying pervasive disembodiment' (Soth, 2006: 46) symptomatic of our estrangement from our earth-based heritage. Time was when dance offered a powerful modality to call the sun to rise and the rain to fall, to honour the stages of becoming in the process of life and death, to express gratitude for all that sustains us, and to cherish the sacred. Chodorow (1999) observes that when 'we humans have withdrawn from a direct experience of our relationship to the universe, there too has the power of dance diminished' (1999: 250).

Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP) has emerged from this age-old tradition, locating the human experience within the physicality of the earth and recognizing dance

as the expression of unconscious knowing, offering an inherent potential for healing. In 1958, Mary Starks Whitehouse, a pioneer in Dance Therapy, championing Authentic Movement, writes about 'The Tao of the Body', beginning:

Movement is the great law of life. Everything moves. The heavens move, the earth turns, the great tides mount the beaches of the world. The clouds march slowly across the sky, driven by a wind that stirs the trees into a dance of branches. Water, rising in the mountain springs, runs down the slopes to join the current of the river. Fire, begun in the brush, leaps roaring over the ground, and the earth, so slowly, so always there, grumbles and groans and shifts in the sleep of centuries. (Whitehouse, in Pallaro, 1999: 41)

Mary Starks Whitehouse didn't identify herself as an ecopsychologist, nor would she have been conversant with Arne Naess' term 'ecological self' (Naess, 1995: 225) when she wrote this. Yet her writing locates the human experience, and in particular dance therapy, in a relational alignment with all life. Dance Therapy has a tradition of aligning with earth-honouring principles (see, for example, Chodorow, 1999; Hartley, 2001; Frizell, 2009; Hayes, 2013; Reeve, 2011; Whitehouse, 1999 – to name but a few), not to mention all those unpublished oral-tradition practitioners who work in this way. Central to dance therapy is a focus on somatic awareness, through which we can begin to identify with the non-human sentient world as we learn the art of 'listening with all the cells of our body' (Hayes, 2013).

The capacity to listen to the 'animate earth of the body' (Hayes, 2013: 95) puts us in touch with the substance of our life force. The individual human body is an organism comprising numerous dynamic systems which constitute the collective that we call 'body', which itself is a living system, operating in relation to all systems that make up Earth. Movement Psychotherapist and dance artist Sandra Reeve developed the notion of the 'ecological body', which she situates 'in movement itself and as a system dancing within systems' (Reeve, 2011: 48). The perpetual motion of the ecological body is experienced in relation to the kinetic energy of an ever-changing wider system. Therefore, '(e)mbodiment is not a fixed state, but a process' (Totton, 2011: 78) and the language of dance nestles within this dynamic matrix, in which we are 'carnally embedded – along with all of the animals and the plants and even the drifting cloud in a psyche that is not ours, but is rather the Earth's' (Abram, in Damery, 2013: 109).

If our individual psyche is part of the wider psyche of the earth, then dance, as an embodied language, can

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put us in touch with a 'different kind of knowing' (Hayes, 2013: 128). This is an embodied knowing, which connects simultaneously to different levels of awareness, open to the subtle and eclectic nature of our experience in which body is psyche (Abram, in Damery, 2013).

Meet Kim. Kim's early life experience was steeped in the dominant mainstream culture, and as an adult she had begun to explore her earth story in a quest to find alternative ways of knowing the world. She had become skilled in tracking movement (Bacon, 2012), which allowed her to find a verbal language that speaks *from* an experience, rather than *about* an experience. Kim tells how, arriving at a coastal wilderness, she wanders alone across the beach. Preoccupied in thoughts of her own existence, she balances on boulders, peering inquisitively through the giant, rounded stepping-stones. In spaces between the boulders, the smooth curves of smaller rocks lie on still smaller stones, which harbour glistening pebbles and spiralling shells, layer upon layer. Kim catches her balance as her walking boots dialogue with the kaleidoscope of stone. Transferring her weight from one rock to the next, she senses her desire to tread with care, to pursue her journey with the least disturbance to this rocky universe. Kim finds her spine curving forwards and sideways, as she lifts her arms from the elbows, attuning to the motion of the undulating waves far out in the ocean. At each step she rights her balance, feet twisting to fit the rocks, knees yielding to the movement, her proprioceptive sense on high alert. She begins to play with stopping and starting, balance and lightness. She becomes aware of the stretch of silence beneath the urgent roar of the rushing waves. The sea comes closer, splashing on to the rocks and clattering through shivering stones as it recedes, tugging at the succulent seaweed caught in small, jagged

crevasses. Drops of water landing on her boots cause her to edge instinctively back towards the beach. Kim opens to an awakening of her kinaesthetic sense, as her attention shifts from her intrapersonal preoccupation to an inter-subjective, relational attention, which reaches beyond her immediate species. 'Other' becomes 'intrinsic to (her) own vitality' (Macy, 1991: 239). Kim becomes open to the sentient expression of the non-human, and she negotiates the terrain in conversation with rocks and sea, allowing 'other beings to knock on the doors of (her) awareness, to visit on their own terms and in their own language...' (Conn and Conn, 2009: 114) in a widening and deepening of her intimacy with Earth. Kim's heightened sense of belonging and connection came into focus, as she discovered a sense of place through her body. Rather than creating a dance, Kim was 'participating in a dynamic, moving universe' (Olsen, 2014: 3). In so doing, Kim entered a conversation which manifested as a poem that is both embodied and relational, and arises from a liminal space of playing between one life form and another.

David Abram (2010), a cultural ecologist and environmental philosopher, explores levels of perceptual awareness and ways in which the sensing body can attune itself to another presence and another form of consciousness. Abram (in Damery, 2013) notes how

...our sensing body easily and spontaneously slides into conversation with other facets of the surrounding terrain. Every aspect of the world seems potentially animate and alive, all things have the capacity to engage us, and to speak. Most things, however, do not speak in words. They speak in loopy cascades of song, or pulses of rhythm. They speak in gestures, and the sounds that they utter when the wind blows through them, or by the movement of shadows across their surface. To the animistic sensibility of our indigenous, oral ancestors, everything speaks. (p. 112)

This 'conversation' of which Abram writes is a creative dance within the relational field of the ecosystem (Totton, 2011). As Kim's reality shifts, the emotional and sensory space between the 'I' and her experiential horizon becomes differently configured. She experiences an opening out (Key and Kerr, 2012) to a wider cosmic reality. The embodied dance is a first-person, subjective experience which can be powerful in its fragility, creative in its unpredictable shape-shifting and illuminating in its wayward wandering. The dance can serve as a reciprocal offering to the earth, which can shift us into a space of empathy with the other-than-human, opening a dialogue through our kinaesthetic sense. This sensitivity and attunement to other ways of being offers us an inter-

subjective, embodied language that connects us to our ecology.

The choreography of this kinetic language has a rhythmic, spatial, temporal and aesthetic coherence as we begin to hone our instinctive capacity to listen and respond. We are conceived into a dance that is relational, interdependent, inter-subjective and creative. The 'self' is being constructed from the moment that each of us begins to emerge as a foetus, spouting arms and legs, wriggling and kicking inside our mother's womb to the accompaniment of our mother's gurgling guts and throbbing heart (Frizell, 2008). Our initial attunement to our immediate environment is through the body (Stern, 1985) and our first language is that of the senses. In indigenous communities, the birth of a child might be a time for rituals which honour the bonding between that newborn child and the earth, in which the baby is seen 'inextricably connected not only to her family, but to all living things and to the earth itself' (Barrows, 1995: 107). Then, the possibility of recognizing deep formative relationships with significant others that impact on and shape our lives embraces an ecological dimension.

As we align ourselves and identify with the wider matrix of the ecology through our kinaesthetic awareness, we become acutely aware of the interdependent nature of our experience and the dysfunctional nature of the human-earth relationship. As we attend to our breathing, we realize that we inhale the poison that we have pumped into the air. When we are mindful of the food we consume, we become aware of the abhorrent treatment of animals in the food system. As we develop a love for the land we inhabit, we are dismayed and insulted by the destruction of wild habitats in the name of progress. Many indigenous communities find themselves displaced and, bereft as their landscapes, are destroyed in the name of economic progress. The ensuing state of solastalgia (Albrecht et al., 2007) is the deep sadness arising from this loss of the landscape that has shaped us. What we do to the earth is hard now to ignore, as climate change begins to impact on our immediate lives in the Western world. As someone who often travels between South Devon and London, I'm reminded of the significant and potentially devastating consequences of climate change as I stand in the queue waiting for the rail replacement bus service. In the time of writing this piece, the train line connecting the South West to the body of Britain has been washed into the sea by ferocious and unprecedented storms. It is thankfully now repaired. But what next?

As Kim contemplates the contradictions and

complexities of the human relationship with the earth, a dance of despair emerges in her body. She stands barefoot on the open land and consciously connects to the gravity that pulls her weight towards the earth. She surrenders to the intelligence of the body, rooting herself in the physicality of her existence. The dance of despair steps her slowly forwards, with arms outstretched either side, and mouth opening wide as if to scream, but there is no sound, just a deafening silence, reaching far into the distance. Kim closes her eyes and her left arm feels its way into the darkness. Her right foot slides along the ground and a haunting moan erupts. Despair bursts out of almost imperceptible wanderings of the body; a flick of her wrist, a small shift of the angle of her head, an impulse in the elbow and a small twist of the spine that pulls her in a spiral down to the ground, to rock and sway from side to side on all fours. Gravity pulls her further down and she rolls on her back. Opening her eyes, Kim lies on the uneven earth, to stare aimlessly and unseeing at the passing clouds. There she stays, for what seems like an eternity. A soft breeze brushes across her cheek and she smells the musty soil beneath her. An ant crawls on to her hand. She turns her head inquisitively, just as a butterfly alights by her head, silent and weightless. This is the earth that she knows and trusts. A tear rolls down her face and drops into the soil. Kim feels the loss that sharpens her focus on what it is that she has taken for granted that has changed irreparably.

Grief is but a gate, and our tears a kind of key opening a place of wonder that's been locked away. Suddenly we notice the sustaining resonance between the drumming heart within our chest and the pulse rising from under the ground. (Abram, 2010: 308–9)

There is deep distress in relation to what is happening to the earth, and this grief, if realized and felt, can be a source of our empowerment (Macy, 1995). Kim is discovering a deep attunement with the earth through the fleshy substance of the body, and in so doing is opening to an empathic resonance with the other-than-human.

Kim brings a dream to therapy. She is in a public garden, with tidy lawns and managed, tree-lined paths. She wanders, obediently following the path, noticing a distant, muffled sound which is unfamiliar and too unclear to discern. Kim senses that the sound comes from the surrounding trees, and to get closer to them she needs to stray from the path. She allows her body to follow the sound, which becomes louder as she nears a particular tree. She stands beneath the overhanging branches and experiences the soft vibrating song of the tree in a

dynamic, flowing rhythm. She presses her ear to the trunk and senses the tree calling her over. People on the path glance disapprovingly at the woman who has strayed from the designated route. However, Kim is oblivious to the disapproving looks and becomes totally absorbed in the rattling song of the tree, listening and entering into a dialogue. Kim wakes with a start, unable to remember what the dialogue with the tree was about, but with a sense of the sacred and a deep unease.

Kim decided to explore her dream with the body, beginning with the feeling of unease that she was left with when she awoke. Closing her eyes and sensing her feet on the wooden floor, she waits for an impulse to arrive. She stands straight and symmetrical, arms placed either side of her body. The warmth of the sun through the window catches the skin on her right arm. A creeping sense of futility rises in her, and for a few moments she stands feeling lost. Her right arm nudges the warmth of the sunlight and her head begins to move gently side to side, as her jaw traces an invisible curve through the air, like the grin of a Cheshire cat. For a moment she loses touch with her body. Kim locates the position of her forehead, turned slightly upwards to her right. She stands; feet planted firmly on the floor, eyes closed, listening to her breathing. Her right arm bends and moves slowly upwards towards her face until her finger-tips land tentatively on her cheeks. She gasps at the intensity of the connection. Her finger-tips rest a while, savouring the conscious connection that lets her know she's here. Her fingers continue moving upwards, sliding lightly across the fine hair that covers her face, past her cheek bones, across her temples to her forehead. Her head straightens, and her hand begins to drag down, across her cheeks, under her chin, until her palm flattens to her chest. Slowly, her head tilts towards her right ear as she listens to an impulse which leads her to unfurl her right arm towards the sunlight, like a tropical fern. She follows a wave of movement flowing from the right shoulder blade, through her shoulder, into her elbow, to ripple through into her hand. Like a pendulum about to change direction, Kim is suspended at the edge of the world, before swinging her right arm leftwards across her body. Kim's right arm becomes light, colourful and fluid, moving like a dandelion seed in the wind, and her body follows the movement. In the darkness, her left side follows passively, curled, lifeless into her torso. As it catches Kim's attention, the lightness of her dancing shifts to the lifeless hand, and the tree of her dream appears, but is withered and dry, starved of nourishment. Kim's right arm stretches desperately

upwards to the sky. When it can go no further, it traces an outwards circle in the space around her, coming down and across her centre to cradle her left hand, lifting it to her face to feel the warm breath on her left palm. Her hands travel slowly inwards to the centre to her chest and her finger tips meet one at a time; thumb to thumb, finger to finger, each finger finding the corresponding finger of the other hand with an acute sensation. Once all the fingers have arrived, she parts them very slightly and repeats the sequence. Kim then becomes still, becoming acutely aware of the 'spreading silence' (Abram, in Damery, 2013: 105) beyond words, to which she needs to listen.

Both mover and witness were struck by a tangible sense of the sacred in the silence at the end of the movement. The silence that surrounded us was palpable; it was rich and thick with a fathomless depth. It was perhaps that 'silence beyond the words' that Abram urges us to heed. He says:

So many other species... are being pushed to the brink of extinction by our lifestyles, and then being shoved over that cliff into oblivion. Their many-voiced eloquence is dissolving into the silence, or into the sometimes-clamorous monotony of a single species talking to itself. At such a moment it feels as though we have to drop underneath the clatter of our technologies and the bluster of our politics, in order to listen into the depths of the spreading silence. We need to listen into that silence beyond the words and begin to respond with our voices and with our actions, carefully, creatively. (Abram, in Damery, 2013: 105)

The silence took on a vibrant energy of its own and carried us in its current, before gently setting us down on the shore. Before speaking, Kim's hands remembered the coming together of the fingertips and so she began to find the words to speak from the silence, resisting the urge to jump into her rational Western ego, which sought to find sense and meaning at the cost of a more subtle kind of knowing.

At first Kim spoke random words, which entered the space as an improvised poem shaping both the physical experience of the movement and the story of the tree calling to her. Kim found that she had entered an experience of unfamiliar otherness, as the dream and the dance came together through the silence, which she then became able to articulate. Kim was able to attend to her 'kinaesthetic awareness in order to access the ongoing stream of animate sensation and imaginative association' (Chodorow, 1999: 242) which offered her the prima materia that enabled her to locate herself within

the contradictions of her experience. She was developing the capacity to listen with an embodied presence and to be moved by the dance as an expression of multiple realities; she was able to heed the story of her dream and to bring it into the dance, in which the body became a 'sacred vessel' (Hayes, 2013: 71) honouring her intimate connection with earth. Kim was able to explore her quest to somehow straddle the personal, cultural and ecological contradictions inherent in her desire to live ethically and peacefully with the earth and her investment in the hubris of the human species. She became acutely sensitive to the voices of the earth and increasingly open to them, allowing herself to be present to whatever calls her.

So as we allow our weight to sink into the earth with feet planted firmly on the ground, we can meet ourselves in a place of authenticity. 'I' becomes a dynamic system that operates relationally in spatial, temporal, sensory, emotional, spiritual and environmental contexts, which themselves are also in continuous flux. It is from this context that we can allow the dance to emerge, through which we can find a language to call the world into relationship (Abram, in Damery, 2013). We can become skilled in listening to the encoded messages that offer a connection to those thoughts that await our discovery. The dance, as a live, relational expression of our existence, is immediate, subjective and transient, entering into the seamless flow of an existential current. The dance comes and goes, lingering as an invisible trace that is absorbed into the unwritten history of the material world. The dance can serve as the 'bearer of the soul' (Hayes, 2013: 127) which offers us the language of our primitive sensations (Chodorow, 1999: 242) for which there might be no words, but which carry our forgotten connections with the earth as a living system. The dance can lead us into a sustainable narrative of reciprocity with the earth, as we quiet the babbling intellect and listen through our senses. 🌀



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