

The Power of the Pause

“I can think when I’m quiet. I can see when I’m still” (from Quiet, by author of children’s books, Tommie DePaula, d. 2020). Our human world slows to a pace,—we are all a bit more still, a bit more quiet. Yet we rise. For this we can be thankful. Two days ago, my car, idly parked curbside, was totaled by a hit & run driver, no note, no responsibility. I had just driven home after 6 weeks of caregiving for my 92-year-old mother in Palm Desert, CA. Within my first week of sheltering, a resident artist here at the Riverside Artist Lofts alerted me through my closed door, “I hate to be the bearer of bad news Martina... .” Inspired by a recent email invitation, not two days later, sent to non-LA resident artists to contribute a piece of dance memoir for an online archive, I wrote the following. Though not exactly a dance memory, I took the opportunity as a memory-making act to simply write,—marking these months of pandemic pandemonium with my own kind of creative response. Thus these thoughts erupt in a dance of words, shaped by the pause—grateful for the pause—to discover what unthought thought lurks between the lines, and to share an utterance that swirls between reason and imagination.

In a recent email I sent to my dance, Pilates, and Somatics students, I articulated what every other artist-teacher has had to reckon with: “Our work, group and private, will necessarily have to be suspended for now.” Additionally, I wrote that I would commit to “sending select phrases from my book-in-progress as a way to continue communicating what matters to me greatly: engaging and integrating the collaborative intelligences that help me convey and bring balance to our experiences of being a body being here.” I ended the brief missive with a call to “follow the scent of something fragrant amidst the miasma” and a photograph of the daffodils I had left on the night table for my mother.

In the quiet of sheltering at home, I pondered my reference to the sense of smell. *The nose is an organ of memory*, I remembered, and with that thought came this: *in times of crisis we come to our senses*. Such a simple thought. Ironically, the coronavirus compromises our sense of smell. Nevertheless, we muzzle on. “When in doubt, follow your nose,” bolsters Gandalf in Peter Jackson’s *Fellowship of the Ring*. The line is spoken in reference to Gandalf’s memory of the way through Khazad-dûm.

And so, it seemed a timely idea to explore just how our senses are bridge not only for how each of us know and express ourselves in the world, but also how our relationships, both harmonious and discordant, are framed by our sense of life, of being alive!—from the time we wake to how we lay ourselves down to sleep.

In the film, *Agora*, Hypatia, the 4th century BCE Egyptian astronomer, urges her students to comprehend the nature of gravity,—the primary force causing all earthly bodies to fall in a vertical descent. Dancers are quite familiar with this experience. “[Your feet],” Hypatia asserts, “stand at the center of the cosmos, [holding and pulling] all things together.” Her declaration is instructive. We are all sensing the pull of gravity, the grave sweep of this pandemic time. Yet, at the same time, the weight of our wailing world, its enfolding and its collapse, has rendered us feeling unmoored and untethered, from our heads down to our toes. The ancient Greeks called this heavy experience *katabasis*; it is the descent, a 'going down' by the pull of

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what is most grave. The gravitas of our current life condition threatens like an oceanic undertow. For many, it feels like a kind of drowning. In fact, last month I dreamed I watched a tidal wave growing ever higher before me, —a wall of inescapable frothing icy green-blue water. My breath pattern woke me; I was gasping. To be sure, all the world is gasping through unknown and uncharted territory, feeling as if sinking down and away from a familiar air of sun and sky.

I wish to put this forward, however, to every tribal member: it is precisely in moments of *gravitas* that we find ourselves—literally find ourselves—and pull together. When we do, we discover a *levitas* so that we may all rise. This is our collective grace. Consider, if you will, how French philosopher Simone Weil understands the relationship of gravity to grace: “Grace is the law of descending movement. To lower oneself is to rise in the domain of moral gravity. Moral gravity makes us fall toward the heights.” Falling toward our heights, —an exquisite perception indeed.

Dancers have an unusual relationship to gravity; they’re familiar with falling, with going down. They’re also familiar with how to rise from the fall, using gravity’s ground level. With their lifelong practices, dancers respond to shifting and uncertain ground. Of course, now is a time of radical uncertainty. Still, we err toward hope, toward rising above the curve by grounding ourselves from exactly where we are. Consider this thought from one of my indigenous Australian dance colleagues: “When a Milpirri (rain storm) cloud forms, people know that a big storm is being made. That storm is full of thunder and lightning. But it also drops rain which creates new growth.”

Dancers remind us how to transfigure gravity’s domain: with a care for particulars. We can learn to abide in the quiet places the way a dancer enters the studio, like entering a temple, attentive to the whisper, respectful of the pause. As a choreographer, I have learned to cultivate the quiet, lean into the pause, and listen. This body is nourished in quietude, in stillness; it’s how I see the movement.

And what of this 6-feet distancing? Certainly, I comply when I venture beyond my closed front door. At the moment, in this quietude, my mind settles on the number 6. I think: *six degrees of separation; six feet under; deep six’d*. So what does the number six have to tell us? What beauties might the number possess, might it yield for us? I remember. “Sixo,” a character in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, is the sixth generation in his lineage. He laughs aloud as he is being lit up with fire. He knows that his woman, “Thirty-Mile Woman,” is pregnant with his seed. “Seven-O! Seven-O!” he shouts through the flames. Family? Lineage? Legacy? I like it.

According to Angelology, 6 is “the first perfect number, perfectly balanced and harmonious, made up of two sets of 3,—the number of creativity and of the spirit.” This is heartening. Vedic astrology tells us that the 6th House represents health and physiology: hygiene, job and service, daily routines, and responsibilities. Ah, it’s making sense. And in Western astrology we learn that the 6th House is ruled by the Greek god *Hermes* (Rom. ‘Mercury’),—the wing-footed god capable of crossing the boundaries between a myriad of worlds. Finally, the Creation took six days, and so according to *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 6 corresponds to the

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cessation of movement. Well, there you have it. The number 6 seems most apt for our mercurial times, — for the mutual benefit of all.

What seems most important at this time is that we re-learn to integrate the use of all of our senses, — feeling our way through by listening, deeply, and by taking in and taking note of all that presents itself, calmly, mindfully, day in and day out. We can honor this time by renewing the grace and the grit of what once was considered common sense. Nothing heroic, but simply, sensibly, facing the matter at hand and discovering something meaningful, sustainable. Or not. Poet Robert Frost reminds us in *Directive*: “Here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”

Thus we are re-minded to settle in from where we stand, —to observe our sense of humanity in its challenged state,— separately together. We are put on notice to bring a heightened attention to *how* we live, day in and day out, with ourselves, and with one another. Ultimately, down here at ground level, we’ve been brought face-to-face with ourselves, —no mask, no distance, no distraction. The coronavirus has reminded us that we not only have an effect on each other, but also how one single human being can affect everyone else. So this is a time for us to remember just how connected and delicate we are, and also how resilient. Like daffodils in a tidal wave.

After Words:

Remember (y)our feet and the gravity that keeps us here, grounded, in place. We are always and already in place. Honor the pause. And because our bodies are a series of joints,—levers, we are made to lift one another, body and soul.

2020. L Martina Young, PhD