

The Experience of Sacred Circle Dance in a Wheelchair: A Somatic Phenomenological
Case Study: “She’s Barbara. She’s Not ‘Just’ a Woman in a Wheelchair.”

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Abstract

This paper is based on in-depth conversations I held over a period of six months with a long-time friend who is able to move in space only with aid of a motorized wheelchair and who has been participating for the past eighteen months in an on-going, weekly Sacred Circle Dance group. Sacred Circle Dance is a gentle practice with simple, repetitive steps and ancient roots in music and dance from around the world and aims to integrate mind, body, and spirit . Because this dance practice is especially reliant on community, I also held conversations with the other participants in the group and I recorded my own reactions. Because participation in dance in a wheelchair challenges our culture’s deeply held assumptions that only able-bodied people can or should dance, my study focuses on these questions: 1) What was the experience of someone who could dance only in their wheelchair as they participated in this communal dance practice? 2) How did the others in the circle experience the presence of a dancer who had to use a wheelchair in order to move and could not hold hands as the others did? 3) What was my experience as leader? How did I respond to the changes created by the inclusion of a dancer in a wheelchair? Because “disabilities are naturally occurring brackets” that make us rethink what is “normal,” this study becomes a study in the power and necessity of bracketing.

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Introduction to the Project

Barbara is a seventy-five year old psychotherapist who must use a motorized wheelchair to move around. It is highly likely that at this time in her life Barbara would never have thought to join a weekly dance group, had it not been for the confluence of interests (rooted in aging and spirituality) which led us both to a group on Wise Aging newly forming at a local synagogue to which neither of us belonged. Each week the leaders included a short meditation and out of this practice came my offering of a Sacred Circle Dance, which led to a weekly dance group which has been meeting for the past eighteen months.

Since I am the dance teacher of this group, I must admit to having a greater stake in this project than the usual “observing participant.” And, I must make clear from the outset, that it was Barbara’s presence in our group, moving her torso and arms as best she can, with increasing expression, passion and joy, that was the catalyst for this study of our collective experience of Sacred Circle Dance.

Because this practice is especially reliant on community, I not only held many conversations with B, but also talked with the other dancers in this on-going group (by mutual agreement, Barbara was not present when we met, though she asked to be told of the overall response); at Barbara’s suggestion, I also interviewed people who had danced with her only once and had not expected to be dancing with someone in a wheelchair. I also recorded my own reactions.

Because participation in dance in a wheelchair challenges our culture’s deeply held assumptions that only able-bodied people can, should, or would want to dance, this study focuses on these questions:

- 1) What was the experience of someone who could dance only in their wheelchair as they participated in this communal practice?
- 2) How did others in the circle experience the presence of a dancer who had to use a wheelchair in order to move and could not hold hands as the others did?
- 3) How did I, as leader of this group, respond to the changes created by the inclusion of a dancer in a wheelchair?

Sacred Circle Dance

Sacred Circle Dance is a world-wide movement originating in the early 1970s in a small communal settlement near the village of Findhorn, Scotland from where the dance migrated as people entered and left the community. Findhorn, as it is known, has since developed into the Findhorn Foundation, a world center for the study of ecology, spirituality, psychology and other healing practices, including sacred dance as the practice is called there. (It goes by different names in different places; in Great Britain it came to be called Circle Dance.)

Sacred Circle Dances are simple, gentle dances, embodying and integrating mind, body, and spirit. They have ancient roots in music and dance from cultures around the world. The importance of the music cannot be overestimated; its power to move us deeply is central to the effectiveness of our practice. The “sacred” in this form of dance is not associated with any theology or religion, but describes an intention, an inclination of our hearts, a desire to dance mindfully, to create a meditative, liminal space, set apart from the hurly-burly of the world. Rooted in our connections to the earth, these dances, both traditional and modern choreographies, evoke a spiritual dimension leading to harmony, balance, joy and healing. No partner or previous dance experience is needed. The philosophy of this practice, aimed to bring dance to a wide variety of people is, “There are no mistakes, only variations.”

Barbara

Barbara has not always been unable to walk. As a child she had difficulties running (she says it was always a “torture” to her), but until well after the birth of her two children, in her early thirties, despite some indications that something was “off” in her body, she was able to participate in modern dance, downhill skiing and swimming, all of which gave her enormous pleasure.

Barbara’s multiple sclerosis (MS) was first diagnosed by a psychoanalyst who was also a neurologist. She had decided to go into analysis after she had completed her Master’s in Social Work, because she believed her increasing physical discomforts were psychosomatic, and that if she cleared her psyche, these would also abate. When I first met her, about two decades ago, she was still able to walk (with great difficulty) and could still drive a car.

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Gradually, her remitting MS became secondary progressive; to get around now, she must be lifted into and out of a sturdy motorized wheelchair which was custom-made to fit her body. This is an important detail because the chair's good fit enables her to move with great fluidity, which helps enormously in her ability to fully immerse herself in the dance.

B. What I noticed is that the quality of my own wheelchair makes a difference in my experience of the dance. It makes a HUGE difference. I think about people who can't afford a good chair like mine, made to fit me. My experience is very different internally if I don't have my own good chair.

Barbara is clearly very aware of the resources it takes for her to have the privilege of such a good vehicle which makes it possible for her to enjoy the dance. If she were totally without it, she may not have continued to dance in our circle. To get around, Barbara makes use of this chair exclusively and she can travel long distances on her own (sometimes more quickly than I can walk) if the weather is not too inclement. She is fearless and determined, using the chair even in heavy traffic (we live in a big city), even at night. In one of our interviews she shared the fact that for her, worst of all, is not being able to drive; she hates the dependency and utter loss of freedom.

Barbara is a fiercely independent woman who is always well groomed and well dressed, with lovely jewelry and colorful scarves. She is warm, friendly, thoughtful, sensitive, curious, deeply intelligent, highly resilient, and much beloved by many, as our focus group revealed. The sub-title of this paper ("She's Barbara. She's Not 'Just' a Woman in a Wheelchair) was spoken by one of the participants (and echoed by several others) in response to my query, "What was it like for you to dance with someone in a wheelchair?" This was an "aha" moment for me; I not only felt appropriately chided for setting the question so abstractly, but I became acutely aware that the experience of dancing with others, especially in Sacred Circle Dance, is strongly interactional and person dependent. Traditionally, the circle is closed by everyone's holding hands, except for a few dances that are done in a line or open circle. Some modern choreographies are done individually, but we still all follow the same steps. When Barbara dances with us, the circle is always open.

Where and How We Dance

We dance every Tuesday morning in a large room in the lower level of the synagogue where this journey began. We dance for two hours with a break for sharing food and socializing, which over time, has become increasingly longer and more important, as participants get to know each other more deeply. Actually, I socialize least of all because I have to take care of the music and think about what dances we just did and which ones we will do next. In spite of my careful preparations, I most often have to change dances in response to the dancers' energy in any given session. But we also schedule pot luck lunches every few weeks, where I can participate in the conversation more fully.

Where We Held Our Conversations

After dancing, most weeks, Barbara and I eat at the Japanese restaurant a few blocks away and usually we meet at the door. By now the owners know us, and if they see us coming, they help us open the heavy doors and hold them so Barbara can get the wheelchair in. We are always greeted warmly and they quickly prepare what has become "our" table by removing two of the chairs so there is room for her wheelchair. They apologize if this table is taken when we get there. My interviews with Barbara have mostly taken place over lunch here, directly after dance so our conversations would be as experience-near as possible. It is difficult for Barbara to write and talking is a far better means of recording her experience.

While her courage and determination made it possible for her to join our dance group, it was also the receptivity, openness, and capacity for empathy evidenced by the non-disabled members of the group that made it possible for her to become a beloved member whose presence is highly valued. The empathy coming from the others in the group was enhanced by Barbara's reciprocal acts of empathy, her recognition that her presence impacted the group. She shows this by the way she carefully matching her movements to the other dancers, and if her movements don't seem to fit, she chooses not to dance at all. On and off the dance floor, Barbara is a strong, quiet presence and no one has ever questioned her dancing in our circle. In a focus group we held to discuss this project, several members said that her presence has redefined what it means to "dance." This echoes the words of disability rights activist, Simi Linton, who in her memoir, *My Body Politic* (2006), writes

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Disabled dancers don't simply serve as a reminder from the margins that "we're here too." Our bodies in motion insist that the terms *dance* and *dancer* be redefined. Our bodies. . .challenge every assumption about the shame and displeasure that supposedly shadow disabled people's lives. (p.153)

Conversations with Barbara

By the time of this first conversation, the group had been dancing together for more than a year, and as I noted previously, Barbara was present from the beginning. She has been very enthusiastic about this project and was ready to share her thoughts and feelings. We started by looking at the abstract I had submitted for the 2017 meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences (SPHS), in which I had referenced the example often used in a phenomenological world view, that disabilities are naturally occurring brackets that make us rethink what is "normal." (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962 in Rehorick and Benz, 2008)

B. I already have a reaction and it is maybe very idiosyncratic. Whenever I see the word "disability" I get angry because it always feels like they are trying to make it what it's not. I am crippled, that's a fact of life. That I accept. And I don't like it when people try to make it softer than it is. Handicapped, disabled. All of these things make it, like, "Are you trying to tell me it's not true?"

With these words, Barbara mirrors the pioneering work of Nancy Mairs, one of the most outspoken disability rights activists, whose essay, "On Being a Cripple" brought women's voices and feminist perspectives into this movement. With painful honesty, mitigated by humor, Mairs wrote from her own experience, revealing not only the difficulties she experienced in her life "as a cripple," but also the strengths she gained, such as a gentleness she never had before. Barbara herself is a staunch activist and has often had to fight with hospitals and insurance companies for her own rights to get the treatments she needed. Although Barbara was quick to call herself a "cripple," and would never pretend to be "nondisabled," my experience of her is that she accepts her disability, but does not identify strongly as a member of the "culture of disability" (Brown, 2002).

In our conversation that first day, Barbara was also quick to assert her preference for remaining in the line of the circle, rather than moving into the middle, where I sometimes

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suggested she place herself when she indicated that she would not be joining the dance; this is a practice common to most circles, especially if anyone feels they want to experience the powerful energy of the dancers moving toward them. Most often, because of Barbara's chair, we dance in an open circle with Barbara at the end while I am leading the line. As we dance, Barbara adjusts the movements of her chair to the rhythm of the music and to the movement of the other dancers.

B. Occasionally it works for me [to be in the center], but not most of the time, If I can't join I would rather stand outside and watch. Because when I stand outside and watch *I actually get a sense of my body moving that way. A sense of my own body, how it used to feel moving that way. Whereas when I am in the center I don't see it or feel it internally.*

E. But sometimes you do feel the energy coming toward you when you are in the center?

B. The sensation that my memory brings back is more fulfilling, and *I get a lot of pleasure remembering how my body used to work and when I watch I can remember it. I get a sense of my body, my own body, now it used to move that way. When I am in the center I don't feel it internally. I like to be in the group except when it is clear that I can't do it and at those times I actually like watching it. . . .What I want to explain is what the feeling is like, what it feels to move like that.*

E. Yes, it's like a muscle memory.

B. Right, right....So that is going to be different from someone who was born with a disability and who is dancing, as opposed to me who developed it later. . . .The other thing I wanted to tell you while it is on my mind, is *I very much try to mimic the movements as best I can and as a result it engages the muscles very minimally, but it is actually physically therapeutic, which my physical therapist noticed.* So that's another important thing. I can't actually feel that I am engaging, all I know is I am mentally thinking "move my leg," and apparently it is engaging a little.

A few months later Barbara returned to the importance of her body remembering what it was like to dance.

B. It's a great feeling to have that memory. It's not all the time. Sometimes it's hard for me to keep up. But if it's a simple dance and the dancing is smooth, I can definitely remember what it felt like before.... But it's not happening right now. *I used to feel my muscles responding--not at all today and that has to do with degeneration. There was a medication I was taking and*

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they kept asking me if it was working and I didn't know. It is supposed to help the connection from the brain to the muscle and it's very expensive. So I stopped for a month. And I think that is why I feel it less.

Here it seems important to note, that with health care in jeopardy, and medication so costly even for a relatively well-off person, Barbara is willing to go off a medication just to see if she really needs it.

B. But even if I don't feel the firing, I love the music, I love watching, I like the people. It's also a spiritual experience.

E. I hope you give yourself credit, you work with it and around it.

B. I do. I do a lot of denying and yet I never deny going to the doctor. I never *don't* go to the doctor. And another thing I noticed. For years I used to cry every day, every single day, a friend told me it's good, it cleans out the system. But I just realized that in the last five years I haven't been doing that at all. I noticed with some friends, now they all have aches and pains, so I am not alone in physical discomfort, now I am part of the group. They are not joking, they are in pain. They have caught up with me.

With a sense of surprise and wonder, the act of self-reflection in our interview project leads Barbara to really take in that her friends have aged and become less "nondisabled," which makes her feel less alone, less different from them. Thus, participating in Sacred Circle Dance led Barbara to see aspects of her life in new ways that have positive resonances.

Responses from the Weekly Group

After I had gathered (oral and written) responses from our weekly dance group, Barbara was, of course, curious to know what people had said about her. We were both surprised at how overwhelmingly positive the responses were, even after I had made it clear that I was not looking for any particular response, "Just say what the experience was like for you." While Barbara was happy to hear how much people valued her, she wanted answers to a few questions that seem to have worried her: Had anyone said anything about the circle's never being closed when she dances with us because she cannot hold hands and at the same time steer her wheelchair? The answer was no, no one had mentioned it. I shared with her that when I myself brought this question up with the group, the answer was that Barbara's presence overrode any other

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considerations (which also reflects my own feelings). Barbara was relieved to hear this, but also wanted to know if anyone had objected to her being there. I could honestly and without hesitation respond, “No, far from it” as these representative samples show.

J. She gives new meaning to the word “dance.” She gives new meaning to the word “determination” . . . There are times when I feel almost embarrassed that I feel so much joy in movement when Barbara cannot move as much. Her presence does remind me of my vulnerability—anyone can get a disease, an injury, and be limited and have to deal with it.

R. I can't imagine dancing without her. She is such a beautiful spirit and so courageous in dealing with her physical limitations that she opens my heart every time I see her in our circle. I've been delighted to see that, within the limitations of the chair, she keeps getting more and more creative in her ways of doing the various dances spirited scarf waving, dancing inside and outside the circle and following us even in the dances where we don't hold hands and move freely on the floor. In fact, I think she has really been a gift to us all, encouraging us to figure out how better and better we can integrate our dear friend in the joy of the dancing, but above all, teaching us about dealing with challenges we face. In fact, the only thing that troubles me was the wording of the question. She's not “someone in a wheelchair,” she's our dear friend Barbara. And kudos to you Evi, for having the sweet heart and creative spirit to initiate this wonderful venture. I ran into H and we agreed that Barbara was a central member of our group.

S. When I joined the group last year, Barbara was already there and a part of it. I thought it was wonderful that she could dance with her chair, and she's always been as much a member of the group as anyone else. When I stand back objectively, I'm in awe at Barbara's courage, determination, and grace. But, while she is limited in mobility and dependent on help at home, she doesn't seem "limited" to me. Barbara's spirit is full of light and energy. I love to dance at the end of the line, to be her "connector" to the group. Her response to the music and the movement makes the experience deeper for me. I feel a bond with Barbara, more than with some of the others in the group. Who knows why we connect with some people more than others (I know, there are theories). Barbara's mind is so alive, she's politically engaged, she radiates a firm determination to live fully. I love dancing with Barbara, I love continuing to get to know her as we move together as we are able.

K. O my god. Yes, she is a phenomenal person. She is willing to expose her disability. Most people hide it. . . .She's inspiring to me. She's not letting her disability hinder her whatever she may feel in terms of self-consciousness, however hard it might be for her to get ready for dance. .

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. .she never brings that to the group. She just brings her presence. And I am sure that she contributes to the positive experience that I and the rest of us have. I feel that anybody who comes with a disability --I have a [hidden] disability--that's part of the beauty of the circle. We all have some disabilities. Some can't get the steps right. . . .One other thing I would say, because she can't hold hands with us, I sometimes long to be able to touch her, to be physically connected to her. . . . That is something I am aware of. And I try to. Not because she expects it, but I make a conscious effort to look at her for the purpose of establishing touch. . . . But energetically she allows herself to be part of the group. It is very generous of you to invite her to do these things. It is not usual for someone with a disability to come to us. . . . It gives a new definition of dance. . . within what she can do, she is dancing. And she obviously loves it or she wouldn't come. And I have to say, Evi, your leadership helps as well, the way you accept all of us. She is never treated any differently. She is also giving us something very important, hope. . . .Many of us struggle with our limitations. Many of us feel we should rise above our limitations. And Barbara, she accepts with graciousness instead of denying it or hiding it.

M. One of my reactions is gratitude that I have mobility. I don't feel shame about that, because I can and she can't. I now feel more gratitude for my ability to walk down the street. When I was growing up and someone was handicapped you were not supposed to look at them.

H. I think Barbara helps us be our authentic selves, to accept our own disabilities. I told Evi I have two left feet, can't tell right from left. I have never told anyone that before. But here I just accept it.

A Preliminary Synthesis

From the responses of the on-going group, it is clear that dancing with Barbara helps people understand and appreciate their own condition of being temporarily "nondisabled," and in this group, brings forth a strong sense of empathy. Theorists from different academic traditions illuminate this phenomenon. Most useful to this discussion of dance, because she focuses on "kinaesthetic empathy," is the work of Finnish phenomenologist and dancer, Jaana Parvianinen (2003), who, building on theories of phenomenologist Edith Stein --a student and collaborator of Husserl-- sees empathy as an

act of knowing. . . a re-living or placing of ourselves 'inside' another's experience. We may grasp another's living, moving body as another center of orientation of the world through our own

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kinaesthetic sense and body topography. Kinaesthetic empathy seems to have a partial capacity to make sense of others' experiential movements and reciprocally our own bodily movements.

The need for empathy has played a major role in the field of intercultural communication. Milton Bennet defines empathy as

a shift in perspective away from our own to an acknowledgment of the other person's different experience often accompanied by a willingness to participate in the other person's experience, at least to the extent of behaving in ways appropriate to that experience." (1993/1998, 2003).

In phenomenological language, this is a call for "imaginative variation." Bennet importantly distinguishes empathy from sympathy, which he sees as a less useful stance. While sympathy allows one imaginatively to enter the world of the other, one still remains "oneself." Empathy, on the other hand, requires "bracketing" one's own beliefs and "stocks of knowledge," so one can enter the other with fresh eyes. But, before one can venture forth into unknown territory, one must first know what one is carrying. Parvianinen, again citing Stein, asserts that "empathy is not only about access to other minds. . . it is also a means to greater self-knowledge." Essential for Stein is the state she names "reiterated empathy," a process by which one's acts of empathy return to the self, so that one temporarily becomes an "other" to oneself, which in turn, becomes the condition for a deeper understanding of the other and ultimately, one recognizes the other in oneself. (Calcagno, 2014).

Although they do not use the language of phenomenology, many of the respondents in our group describe such a reciprocal process. Those who had danced with Barbara over time became increasingly more aware of the vulnerability of their own bodies and felt gratitude and appreciation of their abilities to move freely on their feet. Seeing Barbara as a role model, they also grew to accept their own disabilities more fully. Some felt that in this process they had become more authentic. In an auto-ethnography where I attempted to document the transformative power of Sacred Circle Dance I wrote that I am my most authentic self when I dance in the circle. (Beck, 2015, 2016). Nearly all the respondents commented with surprise and wonder at Barbara's determination, courage, grace, openness, as well as the creativity in how she danced, her good humor and willingness to be open. A few expressed appreciation of the great effort they imagined it took for Barbara to come and dance with us, another act of "imaginative variation."

Responses from the Ad-Hoc Group

Most of those who had danced with Barbara only once were first surprised to see her, but were able to integrate her into this new experience of the dance. Not surprisingly, their responses were less enthusiastic, because for them, the experience of dancing with Barbara was more like “dancing with someone in a wheelchair.”

J. When I first saw the woman in the wheelchair I was not expecting it and I was worried how she would fit, but once we started to dance, I forgot all about it and it was fine.

Ei. I was initially surprised to see someone in motorized wheelchair and wondered how a wheelchair and dance would work and how accommodation would be made, especially since she couldn't really navigate the wheelchair and hold hands during the dances. During the first few dances, I was distracted by the newness of the experience and mechanical sounds of the wheelchair. I thought the motor noise would be a constant distraction, but I was wrong. It's not like I was unaware of the sound, but at some point the sound of the wheelchair became part of the fabric of the circle. And it reminded me of something my daughter [who herself has a developmental disability] says, “We're all the same because we're all different.”

O. When I saw a person in a wheelchair I was not surprised because dance is such a bodily expression of a soul. . . I tried to include her in the circle but she showed that she was fine where she was, at the disconnected end of it. I felt no discomfort and felt her presence in the dance, she was a natural part of the dance. I vividly see her image operating the wheelchair to follow the circle.

I had not said anything about someone in a wheelchair coming to dance with us. To have done so felt as if I were warning the group and calling negative attention to Barbara, as if they had to prepare themselves for her presence. At this moment, typifications of “disabled” were clearly at work in my mind. In a culture that has such negative views of “cripples,” (to use Barbara's own word), I was hesitant to call attention to her disability and did not believe it would be heard simply as a matter of fact. Perhaps that was not fair either to Barbara or those dancers who were surprised by her presence. I will have to rethink my strategy should I invite all three groups to dance together again next year. The irony is, we were able to bring so many dancers together only because Barbara was able to reserve the party room in her building for us and I did send out that information. But maybe these details also factored into people's responses.

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I feel it is important to document one unusually poetic and deeply felt response (from someone in the ad hoc group) to the experience of dancing with Barbara, which stands apart from all the others, in that S. observes Barbara more closely with inner and outer vision; what she sees seems to me to approach “the transcendent in the imminent.”

S. My sense of dancing with Barbara was that she was adding other dimensions of circles and rhythms.

1- she was dancing in the larger circle with all of us

2 -she was rotating a lot

3 - the wheels were dancing - turning vertically to add that dimension to our circular energies, and rotating, moving as they turned

4- she was a little syncopated - having to plan her rhythm to meet where she wanted to end up at the end of a cycle of steps. This felt like the movement of the planets in the solar system -- not in perfect sync, but still in relation and part of a larger rhythm. . . .Thinking about her again I am missing the many wheels of her turnings. It was wonderful to dance with her.

Not surprisingly, these words came from a mature woman who herself has a deep and long-standing spiritual practice; her work in the world is care for an aging population, mostly women, who are in the last phases of their lives.

Thematic Overview of Barbara’s Experience

It was very important to Barbara that she access the body memory of having danced on her feet, an activity that once gave her great pleasure. After she had read a draft of this paper, she asked me to be sure to highlight the fact that her body memory of having danced before she was “crippled” makes her experience of the dance different from someone who had been disabled from birth. She also wanted to be sure that I understood the body feelings she was trying to convey, and equally important, that dancing with us has resulted in some positive physical changes in her muscles. She was clearly delighted to be in a community of women she likes and trusts, a community that was created through our Sacred Circle Dance. (Our circle is open to everyone and is not advertised as a women’s group, but it has been only women who have shown up. This is not unusual in Western culture, where women far outnumber men in most dance activities and also outlive men. Our group is composed of mostly retired women between the ages of 60 and 88, from different cultural and faith traditions.)

It was also not an accident that the strong degree of empathy our dance circle evidenced toward Barbara (and toward each other) has, since its inception, been a circle of women. (Bolen, 1999). In her now classic, ground breaking study (*In a Different Voice*, 1993) Carol Gilligan demonstrated that empathy for the lived experiences of others, though present in all humans, has a qualitatively different feel and is stronger in women, though it is not gender specific, but only gender related. This means that empathy can be amplified and developed if the will is there.

A Negative Voice

And yet, it was a woman who responded negatively to Barbara when she bumped the person in front of her who was dancing at the end of the line. This occurred when we gathered in a very large circle for World Sacred Circle Dance Day, and many dancers who had never before been in a circle with Barbara were invited. The space we were dancing in was proportionately smaller for the number of people and Barbara had less room to maneuver her chair. Nonetheless I had not anticipated the difficulty that arose with one dancer, nor did I witness this incident, since I was dancing on the other side of the circle. Only Barbara and one other dancer reported it in their responses. Others must also have witnessed this, but no one else mentioned it.

B. There was one person, when we were dancing, she slowed up, so I hit her, not hard, nothing was very fast, right? But she acted as if it were awful. But for the next dance she asked someone else to be at the end. She didn't mind sacrificing them!

Here I detected some anger in Barbara's voice that was also evident on the tape; in telling this story Barbara was very animated and her voice louder than usual. I remember thinking as I listened to her that she probably felt bad that this had happened and frustrated about having to dance in a wheelchair.

Ei. One more thing which I hesitated including before because it's not exactly about my reaction to the motorized wheelchair...it's more about my reaction to others in the circle. I was glad when some of the group new to the wheelchair made quiet, but active efforts to be inclusive. And equally annoyed when one member of the group was a little gruff, negative and almost rude about not being able to deal with the new situation. She left early and on her way out made rumblings under her breath about how she was really there for the food. What can I say? I wasn't really surprised, but it was a little jarring. I'm a little embarrassed to say that I was glad she left and took her negativity with her.

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As it turns out, the woman who became agitated is someone who has been dancing with one of my other groups for many years, but stands out because she frequently comes to the dance with anger or despair which seem to lessen or even dissolve as we dance. Given a person's willingness or desire to let go, the circle can absorb and metabolize negative energy; it is a powerful, safe container even under disruptive circumstances .

Dance in My Lifeworld

Nearly twenty years experience of Sacred Circle Dance leads me to concur with Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, when she asserts in *The Phenomenology of Dance* (1966/2015),

movement is our mother tongue. . . .all humans have the communal capacity . . .to move together in a common harmonious dynamic. . . In its simplest form, this harmonious dynamic is realized in a circle. . . . Moving in concert in a circle. . . involves not simply an awareness of the movement of others but a sensitive attunement to their qualitative dynamics. (1966/2015, p. xxiii).

I don't know if what Sheets-Johnstone describes is what drew me to Sacred Circle Dance, but I do know that from the moment I joined in my very first Sacred Circle Dance, I felt I had "come home," a feeling which echoes how others have described their experiences of this form of dance. (Watts, 2006; Beck, 2011, 2015; Shannon 2015)

I was born in Vienna, at a time when grown-ups still danced in the afternoons at cafés, though with the rise of Hitler, that didn't last long for Jews. My mother loved to dance and was a wonderful dancer, but my father, who had a gorgeous untrained tenor voice, had absolutely no sense of rhythm, so my mother was always frustrated about his dance deficit. Sometimes, when I dance, I think I am channeling my mother, dancing for her. We fought a great deal in her lifetime, but in the most fulfilling dream I ever had, long after she had died, I am waltzing with her, and we are completely in sync.

When we first came to this country, I was a young child; as a refuge from Hitler, I joined a Zionist youth movement that inspired hope and offered a socialist vision of equality, but mostly, we sang and danced the nights away, shoulder to shoulder in a circle, gloriously and with great passion. The dancing was magical and I am sure the sense of community, purpose, and being held by the group, saved me from the depression that marked my home while my

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parents sat around the radio, anxiously waiting for news of family we had had to leave behind. Many did not survive.

I was a rebellious teen-ager, what in those days, was called a “bohemian.” We wore leather jackets, smoked, drank wine and spent hours folk dancing. When I became a professor, I gave up dancing for the usual academic pursuits: teaching, research, writing, and serving on committees. Decades later, when I was changing careers and in the throes of completing a second Ph.D. (in clinical psychology), I found the dance again at a Poetry Therapy conference, when a Sacred Circle Dance Workshop was offered. I was immediately hooked. This form of dance took me back viscerally, somatically, as it was similar to the folk dancing of my youth, but, having a spiritual intention was also very different. I had never gotten sustenance from organized religion, but much to my surprise, in Sacred Circle Dance, I began to experience the wonder, awe, and mystery of life. When I dance, I am not only my most authentic self, I also feel a deep sense of unity with all creation, and I am humbled. These words are inadequate to express the transformational power of the dance, which has to be experienced somatically.

This is the history I bring to this project. No one could be more surprised than I that I am dedicating myself to teaching dance at this time in my life. But sharing what I am passionate about has always been central to my life as a teacher, and I am continuing to do this, but with a different content.

While I am teaching the steps to a dance, I am usually aware of where Barbara is in the circle and how she is moving. But once I put on the music and we start to dance, I often forget she is there, and as in any other circle, I simply give myself over to the dance. The role of the leader is to hold the energy for everyone, especially for those who may lose the rhythm or make their own variations of the steps, so I try not to watch the other dancers, as it can distract me and throw me off. But if the circle begins to close, and Barbara is no longer at the end of an open circle, then I start to pay attention to how close I can get to her, and I match the size of my steps to the length of her movements. Again, as others have said, I would rather make this adjustment, than not have Barbara dance with us. Just last week Barbara arrived late and we had already started to dance. While she was waiting outside the circle, I had the strongest wish for her to join the circle, and before the dance was over, she was with us, dancing.

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Sacred Circle Dance is not part of the “dancing with disabilities” movement “ which is purposefully inclusive of people with disabilities. (See *New Mobility* 2010 and *Physically Integrated Dance* 2017). I did not plan to invite someone with a disability into our group, and simply said yes when Barbara asked if she could join us in her chair and I have never for one second regretted that decision. At the time I did not know I had it in me to be so flexible, to let go of my tightly held idea, that for the energy of the dance to circulate freely, there should be no gaps, that the dancers should all be connected by holding hands. But, it turns out, as the dance participants reported, in our group, the energy jumps across the gap made by Barbara’s chair. And gradually, over time, as we have come to be more comfortable with each other, when we form our opening and closing ritual circle, whoever is standing on either side of Barbara reaches out and holds her hands.

I was surprised (and pleased) at the positive comments the respondents made about my generosity for having Barbara in the circle. It takes a circle to make a circle, and I am certain that it is the members of this group who have made it so special, but I accept that my leadership sets the tone. Many factors no doubt feed into this. We dance in the mornings, so we are open to the new day. We dance in a place run by people who are delighted to have us there, so it is not a surprise that our group mirrors that welcoming. Our dance space is large, airy, and bright; we have a full kitchen at our disposal, making it easy to share food, always a good connector. But there is a synergy created when this group of women dances together, a powerful energy flows from each of us into the other, whether the energy of the dance is sadness, grief, or joy. One of our dancers beautifully articulated what I also experience in the dance.

S. We acknowledge a sacredness in ourselves and each other, and trust in the dance to nurture our wholeness. We don’t judge. We don’t exclude. When we set our intention at the beginning of the dance time, I always feel that the intentions go beyond ourselves, they are for ourselves, but also for the world.

Because this is the only synagogue I have ever danced in for Sacred Circle Dance, I sometimes wonder if being in a Jewish space affects my mood and enlivens my spirituality, even if the music we dance to is not, as we dance to music Christian, Native American and Buddhist chants. After all, I first danced in Jewish space where I felt safe, just after I escaped from near annihilation. While it would be foolish of me to overlook such a significant biographical detail,

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until I was writing this self-reflection, this possibility was hovering, but out of reach of my conscious awareness.

From this project I have learned that Sacred Circle Dance and the practice of transformational phenomenology are highly compatible. Immersion in both has led to my seeing the taken-for-granted world anew, with a sense of awe and wonder; both have changed and enhanced my life. I am grateful to Valerie Malhotra Benz for truly grasping the transformational power of the dance and for inviting me into the phenomenological way of being in the world.

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