

Nature and Contemplative Dance

By Alton Wasson

I grew up in Mississippi in the country, playing in woods, ponds, creeks, and pastures the childhood games of road building, cowboys and Indians, riding horses, hunting, fishing, going to summer camp. Parallel to this embodied life in the wild, I also lived in the world of church and religion. This world was very powerful for me, but it cast prohibitions against the pleasures of the body, including dancing. When I began to dance later in life, I was able to recover the playful, exploratory, nature-loving side of my childhood. The witnessing and moving that I now practice and teach in Contemplative Dance has enabled me to experience myself more fully as body and as part of nature.

Our bodies are the closest contact we have with nature. Our bodies are nature. They obey the laws of nature. How we relate to our bodies reveals how we relate to nature. Being in nature gives us access to ourselves as bodies. In Authentic Movement, we cultivate acceptance of and curiosity about the body. The remarkable experiences that the body provides through movement lead us to respect the body and to wonder at its nature. In exploring the inner reaches of the body and psyche through movement, we are opening ourselves to the inherent qualities and operations of nature itself. By deliberately placing ourselves in nature in the mode of witness or mover, we open ourselves to a dialogue between inner and outer, between self and environment.

The natural world responds differently to our presence than people do. A tree or a lake doesn't get intimidated or grumpy—it doesn't even pay attention. The indifference of nature can be profoundly soothing and tonic, reminding us of a larger reality that has nothing to do with our sorrows. Our troubles may feel overwhelming to us in other circumstances, yet feel small in contrast to a serene, impassive landscape. I think of nature as the container that holds us all and holds all aspects of us. It is vast, impersonal, and yet supportive. Nature is the ground of our lives. Being in nature reflects the ultimate awareness. Nature itself is accepting of things just as they are, present to whatever is.

In the presence of nature, I can resonate with its qualities and be in touch with those qualities within myself. As I look at a tree or embrace it or perhaps move as it, I may feel its columnar stability, its shelter, its abundance, its rootedness. By recognizing those qualities in the tree, I find them in myself as well.

One day, a bobcat walked across our backyard. I was moved by the way he walked, the integrated quality of his strength. He didn't seem to be worried or afraid of anything. These observations told me something about myself—about my needs, fears, and worries—and gave me a vision of how to be with them. This is a form of projection: the psychological process whereby I see in the world around me what I want to see or don't want to see in myself; I experience the external world in light of my internal world. Understanding that this mechanism is at work and how it works is crucial to the practice of witnessing; it provides us with information about ourselves at the same time as we recognize the limitations of projection. Even in nature, we project our expectations and perceptual habits onto the environment and its inhabitants. By recognizing and acknowledging those projections we learn more about our own nature.

Yet we can't reduce everything to projection lest we miss seeing the way things are in themselves. Visitation is a term the depth psychologist James Hillman uses to describe the encounter with another creature in a dream (which I extend to include waking encounters). He speaks of honoring such elements of nature and suggests that we refrain from going too quickly to the archetypal, symbolic level. Rather, we can investigate the specific qualities, habits, and characteristics of the animal in the dream. In a similar way, practicing active imagination in nature requires being present to, observing, witnessing, and getting to know the true nature of whatever we are drawn to or whatever shows itself to our awareness, not just our images or projections.

The practices involving nature have taken shape through my collaboration with Mary Ramsay and Daphne Lowell as part of Contemplative Dance workshops and trainings. They are both simple and constantly evolving. The foundational practice is simply to go outside regardless of weather, to take time to observe what we are drawn to in a setting or to notice what happens or what comes to us. We often go out for only 10 or 15 minutes, and yet amazing things happen. To witness-consciousness, subtle events reveal themselves: a plant growing, a stone's weight, the drip of dew. People often return with new insights, profoundly moved, or deeply appreciative. The time outdoors is set up as an invocation to awareness and to active imagination, yet it is nature itself that "offers itself to your

imagination / calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—over and over announcing your place / in the family of things.” (from Mary Oliver’s poem “Wild Geese”)

In the same way that we take turns witnessing and being witnessed in the studio, I offer the exercise of witnessing something in nature and inviting something in nature to witness us. In this context, witnessing can mean to observe, for example, a plant and then to move as it moves, to respond to it in movement dialogue, or to simply be with it in stillness. Then I could imagine the plant witnessing me. How does that change my sense of the plant, of myself or our relationship? One person witnessed the night and then imagined the night witnessing her; this turning of the tables changed the darkness into a benign, embracing presence rather than a threatening one. Here is some writing that followed from someone witnessing and being witnessed by the sun:

SUN WITNESS

I see you with my eyes closed
Through my eye skin
Orange and red.
When I open them you are too
bright to look at.
I see you on every object
Making shape and color
Everywhere I look
You make us happen
You live in us.

You witness me
Warm my skin.
You don’t see or feel
Yet you are present
Without you I couldn’t exist
Without you I disappear.

In workshops called “The Spirit of Place,” we explore the spirit of various places, how our projections influence our reactions to a place, and how we come to care for it. An exploration of nature goes on every week-end of the Year-Long Program and is further emphasized in the weekends with themes like “Inner and Outer Ecology,” “Moving in Nature,” “Nature and Writing,” and “Body and World,” each with a slightly different perspective on this connection.

“Patterns of Time,” a year-long course I co-taught with Daphne at Hampshire College, worked with various perspectives on time from Native American to Einstein, including rituals that observe cycles and seasons, rites of passage all around the world. Students

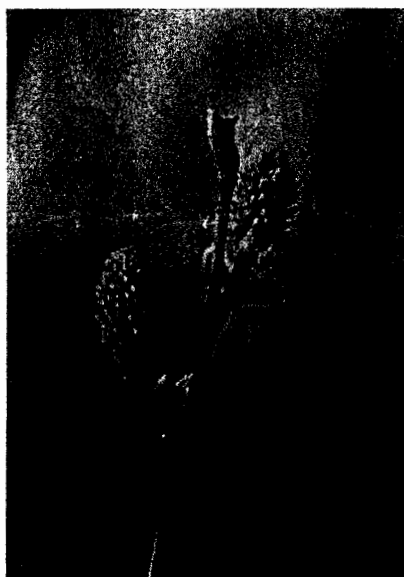
experienced the changes of season by going into a place in nature and responding with writing or other expressive art each week of the class. They became more aware of their own patterns of time by observing changes in nature and in themselves.

I also like to bring nature into the indoor environment, as imagined and remembered, to serve as a resource on which we can continue to draw. I may offer a guided meditation before a movement session: to remember a moment in nature that has taken your breath away, that has amazed you or surprised you. Another exercise involves imagining being in a place in nature that nourishes, then returning to the group; this oscillation enhances a natural contact/withdrawal rhythm.

I sometimes use an exercise in nature that I call “Camera and Photographer,” especially in workshops before we begin to practice partnering in Authentic Movement. The movers who are “the camera” first close their eyes and are led by “the photographer” partner to a place in nature that the photographer wants to show to the camera. The camera’s height, focal length, and exposure time are determined by the photographer through prearranged signals, since the exercise is in silence. Each person gets five “photos” before they switch roles. I have recently added three tactile turns as well. Participants often have moving experiences in terms of both what they behold and the experience of trust from being led through nature without having their eyes open. I recently did this with students in Washington Square Park (New York) on an exquisite day in early spring. Afterwards, they were ecstatic. One said that this made her feel better about the high college tuition, since through this exercise she had learned something that she now knew she could ask anyone to do with her for the rest of her life. Another said that he had never felt so trusting of another person in his life.

The kind of nature we explore in my workshops is often in backyards, campuses, gardens, parks—places shaped by a dialogue between human hands and nature. It is crucial that we acknowledge these kinds of places as being as rich with qualities and blessings as the wildest places. We need to understand how nature is part of every aspect of our lives and learn to integrate that reality into all our choices.

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The willingness to see ourselves as part of nature expands our sense of ecology to include the deep relationship between care of our bodies and care of nature. Our Western philosophy and theology have given us a legacy of human superiority and control over nature. Domination over nature is often blamed on the possibly misinterpreted creation story of Genesis, Chapter 1. In Genesis, Chapter 2, the story clearly points to stewardship and responsibility in relation to nature, rather than dominance. In *A God Within*, Rene Dubos says that the Genesis 2 story provides a theological foundation for a caring, compassionate relationship of stewardship. This is similar to what we are developing in the practice of Contemplative Dance / Authentic Movement: a witness perspective toward nature. In the same way we honor our inner material, we honor nature, dialogue with it, allow it to effect us, explore it in a deeply accepting way. We can learn to attune to nature's flow, to work with the laws and processes of nature.

I am drawn to the work in nature because both body and nature remain charged with mystery for me. For most of us, nature and body still dwell in the shadow of our consciousness, as if they were not fundamental to our existence. I continually find new energy in exploring them for myself and have spent much of my life offering ways for others to be in touch with them. I believe we need to reverse the figure and ground of our awareness so that we are not at the center. As Mark Strand wrote in "My Name":

*And though I barely existed, I felt for an instant
That the vast star-clustered sky was mine, and I heard
My name as if for the first time, heard it the way
One hears the wind or the rain, but faint and far off
As though it belonged not to me but to the silence
From which it had come and to which it would go. O*

Alton Wasson, MDiv, STM, founded Contemplative Dance Workshops and Trainings with Daphne Lowell and Mary Ramsay. He has a private counseling practice and consults with corporations and educational institutions on diversity and holistic education.

References

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