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Exploring the Self Through Others in 5Rhythms

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Stillness: I opened my eyes, to see for the first time medium and large sized paper lanterns in groups of three suspended, swaying gently above my head. The floor was cold and rigid on my body as I lay relaxed observing the fragile decorations that dimly lit the space. As slow soft music quietly filled the room, my breath was the loudest sound I could hear next to the shuffling of other bodies, and the creaking of the floor below their weight. My body was so exhausted and yet my mind so relaxed, despite the extent I had pushed myself to. There were moments where I had thought to be self-conscious of the sweat breaking through my skin, but it felt too soothing, too much of a natural response, I trusted that this was what my body needed to be doing. The room grew quieter and quieter as I allowed myself to sink in to the floor, sharing this room and stillness with the other people who occupied it.

(from Fieldnotes, Francesca Rouse)

5Rhythms is a meditation practice that allows participants to “creatively express emotions and anxieties, ... initiating us back into the wisdom of our bodies” through dance and movement (5Rhythms Website 2016). It was created by Gabrielle Roth in New York in the late 1970s, and is heavily influenced by other forms of ecstatic dance, indigenous traditions, shamanism, and Eastern philosophy (Juhan 2003). The five rhythms, which form the backbone of the practice, are always done in the same order. It starts with Flowing, then Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and finally, Stillness. Each rhythm has been identified by Roth as corresponding to different parts of our psyche, life cycle, emotions and the elements (5Rhythms Website 2016). It is through setting ourselves into the motion of the rhythms that the body becomes free, the mind becomes still and the spirit awakens (Roth and Loudon 1989).

The starting question for our fieldwork research and subsequent analysis was the question; why could one not just dance alone at home and achieve the same psychological benefits? What is it about this practice and the shared experience amongst strangers that facilitates healing? We have taken an auto-ethnographic approach which foregrounds our own emotional and physical experiences in the field. As such, we are our own primary sources for the material presented in this text. We attended a dance class which had a strong therapeutic element and so the idea of standing off to one side and merely observing would not have been appropriate even if we had wanted to. Due to the emphasis on physical engagement and the intense personal experiences we were having whilst dancing we would describe our approach as “observant participation”, rather than participant observation (Wacquant 2003). Through this we found that other dancers became a focal point that helped to keep our minds in the present and away from ‘meta-thoughts’. Based upon our research and experience with 5Rhythms meditation this essay puts forward the argument that as social beings, because of the need to witness and be witnessed, self-knowledge and self-healing are better achieved through the presence of others. Those who come to 5Rhythms use movement and dance to achieve exactly that.

Intimacy and the Need for Others

In the final rhythm, Stillness, you connect with the floor and the room, you wind down your body and breath while maintaining a focus on the shared journey you have undertaken with all of those in the space. It may seem like people dance on their own in this practice but in fact the session leader¹ encourages dance partner-

1. In an interview with one of the authors, she rejected the label ‘teacher’, saying she would describe herself more as “the holder of the space”. We’re inclined to agree with that distinction as there is little to no dance instruction. She is more of DJ and spends most of the two hours in front of her computer at the front of the room, behind a table with a black cloth draped over it.

ships at different points throughout the session. It can be difficult to manage an awareness of oneself, of partners and of the rest of the room all at once, and there are examples of the success and failure of this venture within our discussion. But we argue that for 5Rhythms and the self-healing it promises, it cannot be a solitary affair. Engaging with other dancers is a necessity.

When dancing alone, it is easy to lose concentration and slip into the distraction of self-consciousness and passing thoughts. However, dancing with a partner requires a level of awareness that connects you totally with your body. Accepting and submitting to this is an intimate act and in the context of 5Rhythms we would distinguish between two types of intimacy: intimacy with the self and intimacy with others. Both types involve being comfortable with what is happening in the moment. Intimacy with the self happens when one is able to “let your body dance you” (‘Rainbow Rhythms’ teacher in a *Peep Show* spoof of 5Rhythms, 2004), to give in to the dance itself without caring about the aesthetics of your movement, or who might be watching. “Getting out of your head” as our session leader once put it. Intimacy with others, from our experience, occurs when dancers are able to tune into their partner and intuitively respond to their movements. This is more in line with the common preconception about intimacy, often perceived as involving other people. The idea that intimacy is not about capacity within individuals but rather is something that “exists in the ongoing interchange with others” (Weingarten 2004: 3). Intimacy is the product of “individual constructions”, which are in turn shaped by “prevailing discourses” (ibid). This social constructionist perspective helps to explain the limitations people felt on their ability to connect with or feel intimacy with certain partners.

In order to illustrate the importance of intimacy described above we will introduce the reader to an auto-ethnographic vignette of a successful dance partnership:

Lyrical: “I was exhausted. I could feel exactly where my lungs reached their full capacity, and my heart beat in my chest, over and over again. I had, for what felt like hours, pummeled the floor with my feet and heard the sound reverberate around the room duplicating the throb of the beat. I could feel my body push back. The music began to change, this was so welcome as every movement and every sense of mine relaxed. I could rest back and allow my body to sway and move as it wanted to. If I had been shy before, you would not have known it in this moment. I felt my arms stretch across the space and lead me into a sweeping turn, my long hair feathering the air. I fell down into a deep lunge, a momentary pause, before my motion matched that of the figure dancing beside me. He was one of the most energetic and eye-catching dancers in the room. I had wanted to dance as freely as he seemed to, and had found myself doubting that he and I would ever share a dance together. And yet I found myself moving, turning and breathing with him, and at moments our dance and our bodies were indistinguishable from one another. Our movements were as one, I was entirely absorbed and focused on his body, my focal point had expanded from myself, into him, his body was just as fundamental to this dance as my own. As he placed his feet on the floor, far apart, flat and harsh, into a deep bend close to the floor, my arms swept down and up, the momentum bringing me onto the tips of my toes. My small body elongated, juxtaposed next the strength of his deep measured movements. As I spun in soft quick turns, my eyes finding him, I became the axis upon which he turned. His dance and mine dependent on each other, to stay stable, finding bursts of new energy and inspiration.

This was something that I could not have experienced alone, and would not wish to. His support amidst my nervousness and vulnerability, came together to create an emotionally transcendent experience with 5Rhythms. As two individuals we came together to create something momentary and entirely unique.

(from Fieldnotes, Francesca Rouse)

The social necessarily involves more than the individual and we, as humans, are social beings. Successful social interaction in turn requires empathy, which is key to self-awareness (Finlay 2006: 6), something that 5Rhythms exploits. As Durkheim (1995) and many others have shown us, self-other differentiation is key to a sense of self. The ‘lyrical’ dance experience described above is of a dancer’s intimacy with herself, in a given moment. An intimacy that was deep enough to encompass another person and create a shared intimacy which

then fed back into her sense of self, leaving her feeling elated. Both partners communicated their openness to this encounter by mirroring each other and remaining engaged in the moment. “To achieve empathy we iteratively engage in different strategies such as bodily mirroring, imaginative self-transposal and reenacting the other’s experience” (Finlay 2006: 6). As infants and toddlers do, we in fact learn how to be and remain human by mirroring the people around us.

What Happens When the Thoughts Won’t Go Away

This next section describes what can happen when the dancer is unable to arrest meta-thoughts. Weingarten’s argument, that intimacy arises out of social dynamics and our encounters with others (1991) is useful, mainly when considering intimacy with others because it is based on a social constructionist model. As in the ‘lyrical’ dance above, we would suggest that intimacy with the self needs to be achieved before one can be intimate with others.

Chaos: “I went straight into the disabled loo to change as soon as I arrived, without going into the room to check-in first as I had done the previous two weeks. Robert was ahead of me as I entered the hall, carrying my boots, coat and large bag. He is probably in his late forties, balding. His kind face, salt and pepper beard and round-necked jumper make him look like a biology teacher. As we queued to pay and sign in he asked how I was and listened with a concerned expression as I said I was anxious about today and had been since last week. He told me about how when he’d first started, there were moments in the middle of the dance when he would feel lonely even though there were people all around him. He reminds me that the pressures and anxieties we feel during 5Rhythms are self-imposed.

Afterwards I had a similar conversation with another man. I was out in the corridor waiting for Francesca and he came over to say hello. When I mentioned my inability to relax during the dance he told me 5Rhythms offered a non-judgmental space. I echoed Roberts’s words back to him about the judgement coming from within and he agreed saying yes, perhaps it’s “self-judgmental”.

During the dance that night there was a moment when I experienced something of the loneliness Robert had spoken about at the beginning of the evening. I became aware that most other people were moving like a swarm or a wave. Their movements seemed to be coordinated and the direction of movement was away from me and I was on the outside looking in. I made a note to myself to try and join the wave next week. I’m never quite sure what to make of these sort of thoughts during the practice. On the one hand I’m trying to do what I feel comfortable with and then there’s the urge to do what everyone else seems to be doing.

(from Fieldnotes, Adeola Eribake)

One of the best ways to overcome that urge to over-analyse could perhaps be to submit to an encounter with another dancer and fully focus on them. Doing this would be healing, in the sense that it allows the dancer to move away from self-consciousness to acceptance of themselves through a focus on their partner and their movements. In the ethnographic situation described above, the partner is the collective, all the other dancers moving together, in a wave. Surely less awkward than engaging one to one with another dancer and yet even that was resisted. We described two types of intimacy earlier, that with the self and that with others. This experience would indicate that intimacy with the self is a precondition for intimacy with others. It is fairly easy to spot the people who have been dancing for years because of their ease of movement. There is the shirtless older man in the white linen Thai fisherman-style trousers who glides and weaves his way around the room like a spring. Or the older woman with the ramrod straight posture and short, curly dark hair. She struts her way around the room in her tight-fitting black yoga attire. They both make full use of the entire room during the session. The man picks partners from time to time and other people also choose to dance with him but the woman in black is usually alone. There is something feline in her demeanor and apparent lone confidence.

Even when a partner dance is judged to be unsuccessful due to feelings of self-consciousness, the 5Rhythms experience is a journey. A journey where becoming comfortable with oneself in the room is the

first step. Our experience indicates that all dancers go through this journey even though different people join it at different points on the two scales of intimacy. That with the self and that with others. The session leader noted that most people in fact began their journeys towards intimacy with the self before coming to 5Rhythms for the first time. She was trying to make us feel better about our self-consciousness by pointing out that by joining the class for this project, we had come “from the cold” as it were. She told us that other participants often first came to 5Rhythms after exploring other types of movement meditation and/or shamanistic practices.

The need for brevity has necessitated a focus on self-consciousness here, but it was by no means the only emotion encountered in 5Rhythms. Thinking about hindrances to the two types of intimacy, other negative emotions we and our informants experienced included but were not limited to suspicion, self-loathing, irritation, anger, revenge, jealousy and grief. The ethnographic vignette of a ‘Lyrical’ dance earlier in this essay gives an example of a positive emotion, elation, that arose out of a dance partnership. Another positive emotion we experienced was that of occasional communion with the collective, with the group as whole

Conclusion

We started with the question of why dance partnerships occur in a practice that on the face of it appears to be overwhelmingly about exploring individuality. Our auto-ethnographic approach has led us to the conclusion that other dancers become a focal point to keep the mind away from meta-thoughts, and feelings of discomfort and other latent pressures we place on ourselves. The meditative aspect of the dance requires the other dancers to act as a distraction. Much like chanting in meditative rituals, dancing with another person stops your mind from wandering. The external physical presence holds you there more fully in the present, in a way that could not be achieved by dancing alone at home. We would suggest that experienced dancers who prefer dancing alone derive this benefit from the collective, rather than individual partners. We have shown how self-knowledge and self-healing can be better achieved through the presence of others, and that those who belong to 5Rhythms use dance to achieve that. If we understand the type of self-healing being sought here to be intimacy with the self, we found that intimacy with others helps achieve this. As social beings, we have a need to witness and be witnessed, to mirror others and to empathise with them. Somewhat paradoxically, others are necessary to our own individuality. 5Rhythms offers a space, both mentally and physically that allows people, as much as they are able to, to explore complex emotions through movement.

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