

Reconciling the Body and the Spirit: A Dance/Movement Therapy Perspective on the Life of  
Jesus

Hosanna Tolman

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**Abstract**

This thesis investigates the elements of breath, action, touch, consent, and empathy in dance/movement therapy through the lens of Jesus' incarnation and life for the purpose of reconnecting the bodily experience to the spirit for Christian dance/movement therapists or those who work with people of faith. For dance/movement therapists who share a Christian faith with their clients, looking to the incarnation of Jesus is helpful and encouraging, as it so closely parallels the therapeutic work they do with the healing work that Jesus did. The relationship between spirit and body and how it can be connected through the Christian faith for a dance/movement therapist is discussed. The integration of spirit and body that Jesus models offers dance/movement therapists an example of how this practice can be applied to their work.

*Keywords:* dance/movement therapy, Christianity, Jesus, breath, touch, consent, empathy, spirit, faith

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**Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to those who long for the synthesis of body and spirit.

To those who feel incomplete or unseen in modern Christian theology, and  
who strive for living out Christ-like lives fully embodied.

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“Because our faith is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus, any form of spirituality we claim must also be incarnational, which by definition includes the wholeness of the person.”

Flora Slosson Wuellner

### **Personal Background - Dance, an Expression of Spirit in the Body**

The history of my family is mixed European, and as a cis-gendered female born into a non-denominational Christian family, I come from a lineage of spiritual leaders. My maternal grandparents were missionaries to rural Alaska. My mother is a spiritual leader and pastoral counselor in the Christian church. This spiritual conviction held by my parents led them to reflect their adoration to God in the name they chose for me. Their vision was to express the embodiment of praise and joy in my life and named me Hosanna Lynne. “Hosanna” means “God save us” and is high praise to God, similar to that of “hallelujah.” “Lynne” means the pool of water at the base of a waterfall. For me, this image of praise and joy collecting into a pool of water represents how dance and movement are connected to my spirituality. Like the pool collecting water at the base of the waterfall, dance is the way that I collect and express the joy and praise of my spirituality.

I began ballet lessons at age five, thrusting me into the discipline of dance. Dance became my life. I danced all the time, everywhere. I danced in private, for socialization, and eventually, for my career. In dance, I discovered a form of language that delved deeper than words ever could. Movement vocabulary gave language to my soul. As my vocabulary expanded, so did my desire to experiment with my expression. During adolescence, I struggled to relate to my peers, and I was often misunderstood. As soon as my parents were out running errands or my brothers

were out with their friends, I would dance my heart out. I felt free and liberated. In my heart, I longed for these precious moments where I could physically express what I felt internally, free from outside judgment or expectation. Dancing became my anti-depressant, and it was only in these moments that I was able to breathe freely. What I discovered in those private moments taught me that movement, however expressed, is healing and emancipating.

Finding a balance between what I felt in my body and what I believed in my faith became tumultuous. The internal struggle created a war between my body and my spiritual education because of the different Christian belief systems around me. My biological family taught me to “listen to my gut” - this is what my body also taught me during our times of solitude - and this spiritual sensation quickly became attuned to an internal impression in my body. Yet, at the same time, doctrine taught me that my body was sinful, and to not listen to the “flesh but to listen to the spirit.” It taught me as a woman that my physical body was to be preserved, to be kept pure, to hold in and restrain any movement or emotion that was deemed inappropriate. My desire has become to fully understand the purpose of my body and its relationship to my spirituality and practice.

## **Jesus - Connecting Body and Spirit**

### *A Summary of Jesus' Life*

Jesus is at the center of all denominations of Christian faith. What makes Jesus so profound to the Christian faith is his physical life and his resurrected body. He brought God, who is Spirit, into an earthly body. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Bible emphasizes that God displayed the importance of our human bodies, the experiences they hold, and their connection to the spirit.

According to the Bible, Jesus was born in ancient Israel to a young Jewish virgin named Mary. Mary's fiancé Joseph initially rejected her because of her virgin conception, until an angel appeared to him in a dream and convinced him to stay with her by explaining that the child she carried was the child of God (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 1:18-25). Many people, from shepherds to kings, came to see him and offer gifts. As a young child, Jesus and his parents fled to Egypt to escape King Herod, who had ordered that every male child under the age of two be killed. He lived in Egypt with his parents until it was safe to return to Israel (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 2:13-18).

When Jesus was twelve years old, he and his parents went to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. After the celebration, Mary and Joseph went home without realizing Jesus was not with them. Jesus remained in the synagogue for three days where he taught and learned from the teachers there until his parents returned for him (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 2:41-51). He stayed with Joseph and Mary until the age of 30, when he began his public ministry, which continued for three and a half years until his crucifixion and resurrection. Throughout his ministry he connected with the outcasts, the sick, and those who society rejected. He healed all those who came to him as seen in Matthew 12:15, "And great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all" (*New International Version*, 2011).

At the age of 33, Jesus was arrested by local Jewish authorities, and brought to King Herod for sentencing. Herod, finding no fault in Jesus to warrant execution, asked the people if they would rather he release Jesus or Barabbas (a known murderer). The people asked for Herod to release Barabbas and called for Jesus to be crucified (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 23:1-25). After Jesus was crucified, his physical body was buried in the Jewish tradition: wrapped in linen clothes and placed in a tomb. Three days later some of the women who

followed Jesus came to his tomb to complete the ritual burial and anoint his body with spices, but they found the tomb empty. Jesus appeared among his disciples and followers for forty days before he was “taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (*New International Version*, 2011, Acts 1:9).

The full account of the life of Jesus can be read in the New Testament in the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - each providing a different perspective on the ministry of Jesus. Each perspective differs slightly - displaying the individuality of humanity - but they all exhibit Jesus’ purpose and life, and his embodiment of Spirit.

An examination of the life of Jesus reveals four themes relevant to the body and movement. These include Jesus as the Image of God, the connection of Spirit and breath, an emphasis on action & the use of touch, and the primacy of love and empathy.

### ***Christ as the Image of God***

According to the Bible, Jesus is the exact reflection of who God is, the *exact* representation of God’s being, in a human body. Hebrews 1:3 states, “The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God’s glory and the *exact* representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (*New International Version*, 2011). It is like a relationship between a caregiver and a child. When a parent gives birth to a child, that child has their own body and their own experiences. However, a child's personality, traits, and demeanor are often a reflection of their parents. Hebrews 1:3 highlights this relationship between the seen (Jesus) and the unseen (God), the body and the spirit. Witness Lee, a Chinese preacher, teacher, and writer further elaborates on this verse. “Christ is the effulgence [radiance] of God’s glory and the express image of God’s substance. The effulgence of God’s glory is like the shining, or the brightness, of the light of the

sun. Christ is the shining, the brightness, of the Father's glory. The effulgence cannot be separated from the glory just as the shining of the sun cannot be separated from the rays of the sun, since the shining and the rays are one" (Lee, 1985, p. 2).

Lee explains that not only is Jesus the visual representation of God, like the sun's rays reaching far ends of the solar system, but that they are inseparable. You can feel the sun's warmth on your skin, as well as see it shine on the leaves and blades of grass. The warmth of the sun's rays, and the light it makes are two elements of a single existence, just as spirit and body are two elements of Jesus.

Colossians 2:9 explains the complete, fully embodied experience of Jesus, "For in [Jesus] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (*New King James Version*, 1982). The Godhead here is referring to the idea of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. The father being God, the invisible divinity, the Son being Jesus, and the Spirit being the connection between the two. The spirit bridges between the spiritual (God) and the physical (Jesus). It is this connection that all bodies have; all of humanity exists in spirit and body as well.

The life of Jesus provides an example of spirit and body co-residing together in perfect harmony, being without conflict. In Hebrews 10:14, Jesus' harmony is stated, "It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people" (*The Message*, 2018). Prior to Jesus' birth, sacrifices were made to God to preserve the purity of the people, to cleanse, and to make whole. The main purpose of Jesus' crucifixion was to connect people directly to the Spirit, eliminating the need for a sacrifice to initiate this connection: to perfect that which was imperfect. The connection between body and spirit that Jesus created is what transforms the individual from imperfection to perfection, as stated in Hebrews 10.

***Spirit = Breath***

The word Spirit is used 378 times in the Old Testament (Hebrew - רוּחַ - ruah) , and 385 times in the New Testament (Greek - πνεῦμα - pneuma) (blueletterbible.org). The translation to English for both of these words is “breath” or “wind” (blueletterbible.org). This divine breath (or Holy Spirit) that is used throughout the Bible is life-giving and nurturing: it existed before Earth was created (*The Message*, 2018, Genesis 1:2), it is what gave humans their life (*The Message*, 2018, Genesis 2:7), and it connects humans to God after Jesus’ resurrection (*The Message*, 2018, Revelation 22:17).

This breath was vital to the embodiment of Jesus. When Jesus was conceived, Mary was filled with the “Holy Spirit” or Divine Breath. “While Joseph was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God’s angel spoke in the dream: ‘Joseph, son of David, don’t hesitate to get married. Mary’s pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God’s Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus—‘God saves’—because he will save his people from their sins.’ This would bring the prophet’s embryonic revelation to full term” (*The Message*, 2018, Matthew 1:20-23). The connection of spirit (breath) and body that was made between God and Mary was solidified physically with the conception of Jesus. This was also a profound moment of the divine meeting the physical. God takes the form of a human with the conception of Jesus.

This connection of spirit (breath) and body was tangible to others before Jesus was even born. The divine life in Mary’s body exuded to others around her. In Luke 1:39-45, Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant six months ahead of Mary. When Elizabeth heard Mary coming - Mary wasn’t even in view yet - her baby, John the Baptist, “leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (*New International Version*, 2011). This

word “spirit” in Luke 1 is the same Greek word mentioned previously, *pneuma*, meaning breath. Spirit (breath) creates a connection between bodies even when proximity isn’t close. It exemplifies the strength of breath and its connectivity to life and between living beings. The presence of Jesus, through the Spirit (breath), affected the body of Elizabeth and baby John in the womb. The spirit connection (breath) caused a reaction in Elizabeth and John physically.

This same divine breath was experienced again by Jesus just after he was baptized in Matthew 3:16 in the image of a dove (*The Message*, 2018). This verse describes what Jesus saw after his baptism as “God’s Spirit, it looked like a dove, descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice” (*The Message*, 2018, Matthew 3:16). At this moment, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were present on earth. Jesus was in His physical body, the Father spoke audibly for all present to hear, and the Spirit manifested as a dove (Varrett 2020).

In Luke 4, Jesus utilized his breath to give his body strength. Jesus fasted and resisted the devil’s temptation in the wilderness for 40 days (*New International Version*, 2011). Once he left the wilderness Jesus began his ministry and continued to rely on the Holy Spirit (breath) to strengthen, heal, and set free those who were oppressed (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 4:18).

### ***Action, Touch, & Consent***

Another vital element of Jesus’ existence was his physical interactions with those he was in relationship with, specifically with the healing miracles he performed in the New Testament. These physical interactions usually involved some sort of call to action such as “go”, “come”, “stand”, “walk.” Jesus’ calls to action would often initiate a change in physical movement or

existence to those he healed. Occasionally, touch between Jesus and others was also incorporated and these interactions often led to physical, mental, and emotional healing.

In Luke 7:14, Jesus told the young widow's dead son to "arise" (*The Message*, 2018). This was a call to action, or a shift from one state to another. Jesus' request called for the body of the dead son to shift from ultimate stillness - death - back to the constant activity and movement of life. In Luke 5:24-25 Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (*New International Version*, 2011). The previously paralyzed man immediately stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.

In Luke 13:10-13, Jesus encountered a woman who had been afflicted with arthritis for eighteen years. The verses describe that she was "so twisted and bent over with arthritis that she couldn't even look up." Her physical posture transitioned when Jesus summoned her to him. He called her over, a call to action, and despite her pain and physical condition, she did. Jesus says to her, "You're free." To finish this healing miracle, he helped her stand straight by laying his hands on her and "suddenly she was standing straight and tall, giving glory to God" (*The Message*, 2018).

People from all over came to Jesus and "begged Him to touch them" (*New King James Version*, 1982, Mark 8:22), claiming "if only I may touch his clothes, I shall be made well" (*New King James Version*, 1982, Mark 5:28). In the book of Luke, a man with leprosy approached Jesus and said to him, "if you are willing, you can make me clean." He gave Jesus specific consent to heal and to touch his body. Jesus, despite the cultural taboo against touching a person with leprosy, consented to this request, "[He] put out his hand, and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said." (*New International Version*, 2011, Luke 5:13). Then and there the man's skin

was smooth and the leprosy was gone. Not only was touch displayed in this healing miracle, but consent was exchanged between Jesus and the leper.

Jesus displays consent numerous times during his ministry in the New Testament. For example, he healed Simon's mother-in-law from a horrible fever by offering her a hand and helping her stand in Luke 4:38. Jesus' offer of his hand could easily have been rejected by Simon's mother-in-law, but she chose to accept his offer. This is an example of Jesus using a physical signal (the outstretched hand) and then waiting for a mutual understanding of consent (the person reaching back and taking his hand) before he touched someone. Consent is used over and over again in the New Testament: Jesus healing the blind man (*New International Version*, 2011, Matthew 9:29; Mark 8:22), Jesus blessing and healing children (Matthew 19:13; Mark 10:13; Luke 18:15), and Jesus healing the multitudes (Matthew 14:36; Mark 3:10; Mark 6:56; Luke 6:19). He never once touches another without absolute consent. In yet another story, Jesus went with a man named Jarius, who pleaded with him to heal his dying daughter by asking, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live" (Mark 5:23).

These are just a few examples of ways in which Jesus used calls to action to encourage physical movement, specific consent, and healing through touch. The calls to action Jesus verbalized encouraged a shift in posture, movement, or direction for the people Jesus healed. If touch was utilized, consent was given from Jesus and/or the person receiving the healing. Sometimes calls to action, consent, and touch were utilized together, sometimes separately, but they were all important elements of Jesus' ministry and how he interacted with humanity.

### *Empathy*

In Genesis 1:27, “God spoke, “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature...” (*The Message*, 2018). God’s nature is that of Love (*The Message*, 2018, 1 John 4:16), and Jesus’ existence demonstrates to us what that nature looks like lived out in a human being. Just as Christ is, so is all of humanity. This love comes in many forms, and is expressed in many ways. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 describes love as “patient and kind; love does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (*English Standard Version*, 2016). This love is human nature, created in God’s image, and is what Jesus shows during his existence in a human body. This love for humans can be seen in the love of oneself or love for others - platonically, romantically, or otherwise. This capacity for love is synonymous with empathy.

Mechthild of Magdeburg, a poet from the Middle Ages, wrote a poem about the body and its connection to this concept of Love that 1 Corinthians speaks of:

“As love grows and expands in the soul,  
it rises eagerly to God  
and overflows  
towards the Glory  
which bends towards it.

The Love melts through the soul  
into the senses,  
so that the body too might share in it,

for Love  
is drawn  
into all things.”

(Wuellner, 1987)

When love melts through the soul into the senses, as Mechthild describes, it echoes the sentiment of empathy for oneself and experience. Love is manifested in accepting both spirit and

body as a whole unit. When body and spirit together are fully accepted and integrated, empathy for oneself is able to grow. When both the physical and the spiritual are in harmonious existence, in the human body, the love it creates can help strengthen the empathy one has for another.

Paul the Apostle wrote about the relationship between body and spirit, specifically in regard to humanity, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price...therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit...” (*English Standard Version*, 2016, 1 Corinthians 6:20). Paul speaks here of the spirit, or pneuma, as well as the body, or soma, being one. The spirit in this verse is literally a breath or oxygen sustaining the body’s life. Paul explained that both the spirit and the body are important when synthesizing these two in spiritual practice, just as spirit and body were synthesized in Jesus’ being. Accepting the unity of spirit and body in oneself becomes visible in the love (empathy) one has for their community.

According to Williams (2007), the action of God embodying Jesus and living life on earth changed the way we inhabit our own bodies. We went from being separated from the spirit to being connected to the spirit, through the act of Jesus’ embodiment (Williams, 2007). It was out of God’s nature - His love - that humans were created. According to the Bible, Jesus was the embodiment of love, and out of love, Jesus was sacrificed (John 3:16). The choice God made in Jesus was to connect the human body to the spirit/breath in a healing and emancipating way.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy**

The practice of healing through movement and dance has existed throughout human history and across cultures. In the 1960s Marian Chace, Claire Schmais, Sharon Chaiklin, Catherine Pasternak, and Beth Kalish, among others, founded the American Dance Therapy

Association (ADTA) (Devereaux et al., 2016). This helped organize the practice of dance as therapy, and allowed for deeper growth in the academic realm in the United States (Devereaux et al., 2016). Similar organizations were founded overseas in Argentina, the United Kingdom, Australia, Israel, Germany, Canada, China, Greece, India, South Korea, Sweden, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, and Spain (*International programs & courses*, ADTA, 2015). It is important to note that the utilization of healing movement through dance is practiced globally outside of these associations in indigenous, pre-colonized collectivist societies, and beyond.

In the U.S., a dance/movement therapist credentialed through the ADTA utilizes the healing properties of movement and dance in a psychotherapeutic setting. The body is the first source of information and observation when a dance/movement therapist is looking for answers to help a client. The physical self is a deep well of knowledge and understanding, and it is believed to hold the answers to problems in each client's life. Instead of using verbal interventions, such as in talk therapy, a dance/movement therapist may utilize props, movement, and stillness to support and facilitate a client's healing.

One of the main goals of dance/movement therapy is to integrate the full person - body, mind, and spirit - in a cohesive relationship. A dance/movement therapist aims to “promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual” (adta.org). Instead of focusing on just one part of a human's existence; the entire person is considered, welcomed, and appreciated into a therapeutic relationship with a dance/movement therapist. The key to connecting all aspects and facets of a person is through their physical body. Ways of integrating the full person are discussed below under the topics of breath, touch and consent, action and movement, and empathy.

***Breath***

The Bartenieff Fundamentals (Hackney, P. & Weeks, M. K. 2002) are a system used in dance/movement therapy which help to understand and analyze human movement. Within these fundamentals, is an understanding that breath is the foundation of human life. Bartenieff's theory explains breath as one of the founding movements at the beginning of human life. It allows expansion and contraction, physically and emotionally. "[It] is the central biological process among the core functions of the live organism" (Hackney & Weeks, 2002, p. 54). Checking in with one's own breath allows for a connection that gives life. It can also be the foundation for a cultural connection - everyone breaths, everyone's breath gives life.

Breath work is frequently instilled into dance/movement therapy practice. This process consists of analyzing the patterns of one's own breath by noticing the quality of the breath, and then connecting the quality to how it affects the human body. Doing this allows a person to sense their own body more acutely - tense muscles can relax and a heightened awareness of the surroundings is developed. Awareness of breath can also help regulate intense emotions and offers a sense of groundedness. For a therapist, breath can also be a key to understanding how a person is doing. If a person isn't breathing freely, this can be a sign of a deeper struggle within the individual. Movement, awareness, and safety all come into play when assisting a client's capacity for breath (Chodorow, 1995; Whitehouse, 1977; Roberts, N. G., 2016).

Breath is also important for engaging the parasympathetic nervous system. This part of the nervous system is what can bring calm and tranquility to the physical body by returning it to a state of equilibrium after heightened activation, either physical or emotional. When the senses are heightened, such as in moments of fight/flight/freeze, the sympathetic nervous system takes over (Tantia, 2012). This is what many people feel when they have anxiety. When the body is

threatened - mentally, emotionally, or physically - the sympathetic nervous system engages. For example, if person A is angrily running towards person B, person B might want to run away (flight), or stand their ground (fight), or be shocked and unsure how to react (freeze). The parasympathetic system is what calms and eases the sensation of anxiety connected to fight, flight, or freeze. Breath is a positive trigger because it allows the parasympathetic nervous system to engage and sends breath and life throughout, relaxing the body and allowing conscious thought to regain control.

Noticing breath, and listening to it intently, creates a deeper, richer inner awareness and experience of the body for a person. Through breath, the body itself becomes a resource of understanding and connection, rather than the body becoming a reason for separation or isolation, or a way of distancing oneself from another (Roberts, 2016). Breath is key, as Roberts explains, to finding our own embodiment, and the acute awareness of one's own experiences in a body (Roberts, 2016). Breath can be the connection to the body through meditation, moments of silence, and thoughtfulness.

### ***Touch & Consent***

Matherly, a dance/movement therapist, describes touch as, "to cause or permit a part of the body to come in contact with so as to feel" (Matherly, 2013, p. 77). Touch is a major factor in the healing properties of dance/movement therapy, despite some ethical concerns (Willis 1987). Without clear consent, touch has the potential to cause harm rather than healing, and could be interpreted as sexual advances, or triggers for trauma victims (Willis 1987). Understanding boundaries in regard to touch within a therapeutic relationship is extremely important in order to avoid misrepresentation and misunderstanding with the purpose of therapeutic touch. The ADTA

Code of Ethics states that touch provides many therapeutic benefits to clients such as to “support the client’s grounding, organization, and regulation; establish body boundaries; facilitate self-awareness, human connection, and group cohesion; comfort and ease pain” (American Dance Therapy Association, 2019).

When utilizing touch in a therapeutic setting, a dance/movement therapist needs to be conscious of how touch is being used, and should be conscious that all touch is client consented. For example, questions like “is it ok if...” are often used to ensure no triggering or inappropriate connection is made between therapist and client, and touch is limited to places like the shoulders or the hands. If touch were used otherwise, this could insinuate intimacy or deeper relationship between client and therapist.

Touch is a primary form of communication between caregiver and newborn. Touch between caregiver and child at an early age helps children and babies learn to regulate their own sympathetic nervous systems (Carozza & Leong, 2021). Connection through physical touch allows for a mutual regulation of bodies, heartbeat, and breath. When a baby or child feels the regulated system of the caregiver, their body calms and learns how to regulate itself in unison with the caregiver. These connections and body knowledge are carried out through life - a gentle tap of a friend on the shoulder, a hug between companions, self-touch on one’s own body, or a reassuring support against another. These elements are frequently implemented in a therapeutic setting for dance/movement therapy, if the intervention is appropriate, timely, and consensual.

Dr. Tiffany Field, head of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami’s Miller School of Medicine, explained that a lack of touch between humans causes levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, to rise. Touch such as massage increases what she calls “natural killer cells,” or cells that are a major part of the immune system which kill viral and bacterial cells.

Touch encourages the lowering of cortisol levels, therefore preserving the body's natural ability to fight off sickness (Jones, 2018).

During a study examining the difference between children in Miami, Florida and Paris, France, Dr. Field discovered that Parisian children were touched more frequently by their families and friends on the playground than the children in Miami. As she watched the Parisian children, she observed the kids “touching each other and hugging each other and stroking each other more” (Jones, 2018). Her research demonstrated that the Parisian children “were less aggressive, both verbally and physically” (Jones, 2018).

Like breath, touch is imperative to quality of life and healing in the human body. When utilized ethically and with great care, it can bring regulation and balance to a person’s life. In dance/movement therapy, touch is used by touching hands when dancing, or making a circle as a group. It could be used to assist a person in movement, helping them rotate their arm, or spread out their fingers, when consent is given. This connection between therapist and client, or client to client is supportive, healing, and validating to the human movement experience.

### ***Action and Movement***

Movement is another major component in dance/movement therapy - it is in the very name of the profession. Movement is foundational to existence as a human. Movements may be small, or even internal, such as blood carrying oxygen through the veins. Movement does not truly cease until death - we breathe, our blood flows in our veins, our heart pumps. Whether big or small, movement is movement, and it is what makes us alive. We are alive because we move. If someone asks a child to sit still, motionless, and not to move, the child may find that it is nearly impossible.

In dance/movement therapy, movement is encouraged to promote release and healing. When a person feels intense emotions, for example, movement throughout the body is encouraged to give those emotions a place to go. Whitehouse (1977) explains how movement repression, stopping oneself from feeling emotion, leads to “movement that is ‘in spite of’ instead of ‘with the help of’ the mental life. She suggests that when a person accepts their emotions and allows the body to move how it naturally wishes to move during an emotion, this is healing. When emotions are given a place to go through movement, release can happen. Some examples of actions of release that give emotions a physical place to go are screaming, punching, running, yelling, laughing, and crying. Therapists often have a call to action, and look for a shift or change in the typical way a person moves (Dosamantes, 1990). For example, if someone struggles to move from side to side, or has issues with finding alignment in the spine, a dance/movement therapist might encourage the client to explore those areas of movement. They might also seek out creative avenues for the client to release these emotions. By allowing the client freedom of choice in their movement, a dance/movement therapist supports the client through emotional release, and is able to comfort the client after the experience of emotional and physical release.

In order to allow people room to explore these areas of movement and express what they need in a way that is beneficial to them, a safe space must be cultivated. This is imperative for the therapeutic relationship (Roberts, 2021) as it assists in allowing people room to explore these areas of movement and express what they need in a way that is beneficial to them. There is a feeling of “come as you are” and “embrace your whole self” when in a therapeutic relationship with a dance/movement therapist. Without this safe space, it is difficult for a person to feel

comfortable moving their body. Safety is imperative to movement, especially when the movement is being used in vulnerable ways to support healing (Whitehouse, 1977).

### *Empathy*

Developing empathy in the therapeutic relationship is vital to build a deeper understanding between therapist and client in dance/movement therapy. One of the main ways this is achieved is through the action of mirroring. Mirroring in dance/movement therapy “involves imitating qualities of movement” (McGarry & Russo, 2011, p. 178). However, it is often used beyond imitating movement of another.

This dance/movement therapy intervention is supported by the discovery of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma in Italy. Mirror neurons were discovered when observing how monkeys interact and respond to each other. Further study showed that these neurons are activated in the brain when someone visually observes another’s actions or when someone does the same action as what was observed. In doing so, these actions are registered in the brain as if the person themselves are experiencing the action (Winters, 2008). One example of this is when an audience member is watching someone perform on stage. The audience member may feel similarly to the dancer that leaps and soars across the stage, or a singer who passionately hits a high note: these are mirror neurons in action.

Dance/movement therapists take this theory to the next level by engaging in another's action physically during a therapeutic session. This could look like literally imitating another’s movement, or by observing the movements of another and reflecting their emotions and feelings back to them. Takahashi, Matsushima, and Kato (2019) studied the effects of mirroring to help individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) develop their social skills. Mirroring was

utilized with “rhythmic exercises, body contact, and expressive movement” (Takahashi et al., 2019). This process of mirroring helped the clients with ASD improve their social skills.

Mirroring another can help a person understand their own experience, especially when there are barriers or difficulties in reaching self-understanding.

Mirroring allows empathy for the client to grow, and more importantly, the client’s empathy for themselves is offered space to grow. Seeing one’s own movement in another can feel validating and comforting, depending on the cultural background of that person. It is important to note that the mirroring and interpretation of others’ experiences are filtered through a dance/movement therapist’s own world view, experiences, and cultures. It is imperative to keep this in mind when learning/experiencing/and observing those who are different from ourselves, in order to avoid misrepresentation of the client’s experience and causing further harm.

## **Discussion**

### **A Synthesis of Dance/Movement Therapy and the Life of Jesus**

#### **Breath**

Breath and spirit are interchangeable in the consideration of Jesus’ relationship to his body, and to the relationship with one’s own body. As stated in Genesis, breath gives life, which the Bible translates as “spirit” many times throughout the Old and New Testament. Finding one’s own breath aids in the ability to achieve a sense of wholeness, and, as used in dance/movement therapy, integration of the whole self: body, mind, and spirit.

For Jesus, his breath/spirit is what gave him strength and allowed him to find regulation when helping others. This breath that Jesus embodied is the same breath that is utilized in a dance/movement therapy session. In dance/movement therapy, breath is used by both the

therapist and the client, in order to find regulation and awareness of one's own physical experience. Jesus' embodiment enables connection to the body through breath - specifically, the divine breath. Finding one's own breath allows for development of a relationship with their own feelings and sensations by acknowledging and listening to them. Wuellner explains this further saying, "We are to learn to listen to the signals of our bodies, honoring them as one of the main ways God speaks to us and by which we can learn much unencountered truth about ourselves and our communities" (Wuellner, 1987, p. 22).

While in some forms of Christian belief the body is often viewed as a hindrance to connecting to the spirit (Wuellner, 1987), an examination of the life of Jesus suggests that in actuality the body is a door to understanding how spirit/breath is closely intertwined with the physical experience. Jesus' humanity shows how connection to oneself via the spirit (breath) and outward to community is created and mended.

The way the Spirit (breath) interacts with humanity is in the form of breath. The oxygen that gives life also soothes the sympathetic nervous system and relaxes muscles. Dance/movement therapists utilize this breath with clients to strengthen their own bodies, internally for their own awareness of their physical and emotional experience. Breath through movement in a dance/movement therapy session gives clients stability in mind and body, just as it did for Jesus in the wilderness.

While not a registered dance/movement therapist herself, Wuellner (1987) utilizes similar theories in her spiritual practices and meditations as a Christian theologian and healer. Practices such as these could easily be adjusted into a therapeutic relationship for a dance/movement therapist, especially one working with others with faith - Christian or otherwise. When working outside the scope of clinical dance/movement therapy, breath work can support the development,

acceptance, and release of the individual within the understanding of their faith. Wuellner (1987) offers guided meditations tied with physical movement and breath, very similar to dance/movement therapy guided meditations, only they include the depth of spiritual faith. She also integrates self-touch as well as awareness of breath through parts of the body that might feel stuck, just as in dance/movement therapy.

### **Touch & Consent**

The ministry of Jesus is filled with examples of how touch is utilized to bring about healing and connection, just as dance/movement therapists often utilize touch in the therapeutic relationship. The only difference is that through the lens of Christianity, Jesus is divine, and his touch holds supernatural healing. His touch may differ from the touch a dance/movement therapist would offer, but the element of connection to Spirit is still there. Touch connects us, literally, whether we are supernatural beings or not.

Consent is at the heart of any form of healing physical touch. The touch Jesus utilized throughout the New Testament was consensual. Jesus cared about the people he healed and their autonomy, and showed his respect for them by utilizing consent. In a therapeutic context, without consent, past trauma could be triggered or new harm could easily be caused (Matherly, 2013).

A desire for regulation emanated from those who sought out physical contact with Jesus. People begged and wished for physical connection. They hoped that they could bring into their bodies the mental, physical, and emotional healing, regulation, and breath that Jesus freely offered. Just as touch is utilized in dance/movement therapy practice to help others regulate, feel connected, and to empathize, those around Jesus sought out the same.

Just as Jesus regulated his own bodily experience with the Spirit (Breath) in the wilderness, he regulated others. The balance he found with his breath was communicated to others through physical touch. While Jesus' stories tend to be more supernaturally dramatic in curing severe physical/mental/spiritual ailments, the basic understanding of healing properties in physical touch are still very present. These are the healing properties dance/movement therapists enact every day in their own practices.

### **Action & Movement**

There is a shift or change that happens when Jesus verbalizes a call to action towards those he is healing. Their movement, or stillness, changes from one form to another, such as when moving from a prone position to standing, or learning to straighten one's spine when slouching. When practicing dance/movement therapy, changes in movement and posture are observed in the client. Dance/movement therapists encourage movement shifts in their therapy sessions very similarly to how Jesus utilizes call to action in his healing practice. While a dance/movement therapist may not say, "Get up and walk," they may encourage movement in expansive ways. If a client has tight shoulders, and often clenches them up to their neck, a dance/movement therapist may encourage them to release and relax their shoulders. If someone struggles to move from side to side, or has issues with finding alignment in the spine, a dance/movement therapist might encourage the client to explore those challenging areas of movement. In a similar way, Jesus called those who were prone sick to stand, or the man with the crippled hand to reach out.

## **Empathy**

Jesus' embodiment reflects the practice of mirroring in dance/movement therapy, which allowed him to embody deep wells of empathy for humanity. Jesus was born into a poor, Jewish family, oppressed by Romans (Thurman, 1976). He lived as the "least of these" and so he was able to understand, empathize, and be a witness to the spectrum of pain that is part of human life. His life and experiences mirrored not only the people from his time, but also future peoples who will look back and see themselves in his experiences as well. By living the life of a human, Jesus gives others an opportunity to see themselves in his experiences. This allows the process of empathy to occur when reading and understanding what Jesus experienced.

Through pain and suffering people understand and connect with others who are also in pain and suffering. Therapists must acknowledge their own weaknesses, and their own struggles, or they will struggle with connecting and empathizing with those they seek to help. Howard Thurman believed that Jesus' embodiment gave courage to those who are suffering. He wrote,

"Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them" (Thurman, 1976, p. 19).

If Jesus, the embodiment of God, can live as a human, experience pain as a human, and die as a human, then there is hope for those in this world who are suffering as well. As dance/movement therapists, we are able to convey this spirit/body embodiment to others with our experiences and empathy as well.

Jesus mirrored the experience of birth, life, and death. He came to live as one of us, to die as one of us, to fully understand what it means to be one of us. There is a great well of compassion and empathy in Jesus' actions in the New Testament. Jesus' incarnation is an act of

solidarity (Henriksen, Jan-Olav & Sandnes, Karl Olav. 2016) as expressed in Hebrews 2:14, “Because God’s children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood... That’s why he had to enter into every detail of human life” (*New Living Translation*, 2015). Jesus experienced birth, growing up in a poor, oppressed society, physical, emotional, and social pain and torture, and he died. All of these things he experienced mirror the experience of human life.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of a dance/movement therapist is full body integration - body, mind, and spirit - in a peaceful relationship. For dance/movement therapists who share a Christian faith with their clients, looking to the incarnation of Jesus is helpful and encouraging, as it so closely parallels the therapeutic work they do with the healing work that Jesus did. Orevillo-Montenegro writes, “Helping violated people make sense of their pains and empowering them to overcome the evils of violence is a task the followers of Christ must do” (Orevillo-Montenegro, 2006, p. 199). This call to action is very similar to that of a dance/movement therapist: to reach out and help heal that which has been violated and damaged by human experience through the integration of the body, mind, and spirit.

The focus of this thesis is on the observation and understanding of the elements of dance/movement therapy in the life of Jesus, and how the relationship of spirit and body can be healed in the Christian faith. Instead of suppressing our human nature - mind, will, emotions, our senses, our feelings, our deep-rooted desires - we accepted them as a gift, a divine connection to the spiritual. The integration of spirit and body in the incarnation of Jesus offers dance/movement therapists an example of how this practice can be applied to their work. Jesus’

personage closely resembles what it means to be a dance/movement therapist: one who is embodied, listens, observes, and connects.

The divide I felt as a young adult between my body and my spirit has been healed and fulfilled in the investigation of Jesus' life through the eyes of a dance/movement therapist. For myself, breath is my foundation for every therapeutic intervention. This connection to my spirit is what grounds me and allows a sensitivity to be held for those I help, no matter the background or faith. From there, I may initiate calls to action, if the client is willing. Simply asking, "what do you need right now?" and offering space for the client to discover their inner experience, and offering opportunities to "call to action" a shift in their awareness and movements. If appropriate, and consensual, I may offer a gentle touch on their shoulder with a deep breath, encouraging them to regulate and sense their own body and breath. While groups and individual sessions may not look like lots of movement or dancing is happening, the awareness of breath in the body and sensitivity to change is what is important.

The breath that grounds me, my breath (pneuma) that I find within my body, manifests into a metaphorical tree. When initiating my dance/movement therapy practice, my breath is rooted in noticing change, and the awareness of my own pneuma.

This practice is described below in a personal poem I wrote:

I have a spiritual tree inside my chest.  
Its roots dig deep in my diaphragm,  
Its leaves rustle in my lungs and out through my arms and neck.  
The roots, they tighten and groan,  
As I listen.

They express internal movement to external stimuli.

The roots groan,

Tighten with change,

Changes bring on an aching sensation,

As I listen,

to those around me.

My breath - the leaves - stabilize and regulate,

As I listen.

The trunk - my levity - brings joy to the moments that feel uncomfortable or difficult.

These are the internal sensations I feel when called to an intervention.

As I listen.

The practices discussed in the thesis above are not exclusive to just Christianity. While I have viewed these practices through a Christian lens due to my personal background and experiences of faith, I acknowledge their existence expands beyond. Jesus does not exist in a Eurocentric vacuum. He exists in many cultures and is interpreted differently based on those cultural lenses. Korean minjung theologian Suh David Kwang-sun, believed that God's revelation and presence (Jesus) is relevant in our individual cultures, not any single culture (Orevillo-Montenegro 2006).

Additionally, the interpretation of Spirit/breath goes beyond that of the faith of Christianity. Most global populations have breath incorporated into the roots of their beliefs, especially breath that is healing. This is not limited to the Christian faith.

Further study into diverse interpretations of the themes of breath, touch & consent, action & movement, and empathy across cultures is important and relevant for the profession of dance/movement therapy. This idea of a higher power living within peoples' cultures, and not separate, is imperative to understanding the embodiment of spirit within us, as well as ever present in the therapeutic relationship.

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