

Cultivating Presence and Relatedness:  
The Role of Grounding in Dance/Movement Therapy

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### Abstract

This thesis examines the role of grounding in the evolution of individual presence and group relatedness often experienced in dance/movement therapy sessions. The physical and psychological concepts of grounding are discussed, investigating the relationship between the body and gravity as a foundational piece for one's sense of being in the world. The felt experience of the body in communication with gravity, awareness of these sensations, and the resources within the body associated with grounding are examined as they apply to presence and interconnectivity. These concepts, as well as the potential for self-discovery via grounding, are portrayed through case examples.

*Keywords:* dance/movement therapy, grounding, presence, interconnectivity, gravitational security, developmental movement, sensory awareness

## Table of contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction/The Session.....	4
Grounding.....	5
Gravitational Security and Insecurity.....	6
Developmental Movement.....	8
Case Example: “M”.....	11
Vertical Grounding and Alignment.....	14
Awareness of the Body.....	16
Bodydynamics.....	18
Closing.....	20
Vignette.....	21
References.....	22

### **The Session**

Seated in a tight circle in the small, musty art room of a Brooklyn, New York inpatient adult psychiatric unit, were seventeen adults. Fifteen patients and two dance/movement therapists sat in plastic chairs and vinyl couches, with their hips and knees nearly touching the persons' on either side. The stirring energy from the previous thirty-five minutes of high energy dancing was beginning to settle, bringing softness and stillness to the bodies. The group had reached the cool-down of the evening's dance/movement therapy session. With their elbows resting on their knees and their gaze slightly beyond their toes, each person sat quietly into the weighted support of the ground, the chair, and their own body. The music continued to play softly as the dance/movement therapist offered suggestions to deepen the experience through breath and the release of tension, then her voice quieted. Radiating through the silence was each patient's presence, from the grounding of the feet to the visual focus connecting the internal and external world. In a balanced place of rest and receptivity, the support the bodies accepted from the chairs and the ground was reciprocated by the inner strength seen in the elongated spines.

As a co-leader of this group, I felt the energetic support in the connectivity that moved through the circle of seated patients; memories of the conga line and partner dances from earlier in the session that now resonated as the group sat in active stillness.

The time spent here was brief, the dance/movement therapist inviting the group to raise their gazes and lengthen through their spine to gently close the movement portion of the session. Smiles emerged reflecting a mutual understanding of what was just felt. "Cleansed," one patient responded to a reflective question by the dance/movement

therapist. “It feels like a family,” another answered, responding to connectivity he felt in the group.

These moments of cohesion, connectivity, and balance of internal and external exploration can often be unmistakably felt yet only abstractly described. From the perspective of a dance/movement therapist, observing the physicality of the group can provide insight to the identification and fostering of these experiences.

In the described session, the members had reached a relative balance of awareness of self and other, grounded in the self and present moment while available for connection and exploration. Physically, the weight is streaming through the architecture of the body, continuing through the soles of the feet and into the floor. The body, now with the potential for release and intake of new information, is in a cyclical exchange at the points of contact with the chair and the floor, releasing an energetic flow of weight and receiving an upstream of support.

The dual evolvment of individual presence and group interconnectivity is a striking component of dance/movement therapy. In this paper, I will examine the observable feature of grounding in the body as an avenue to cultivate presence of the whole self and relatedness.

### **Grounding**

Grounding is the relationship between a person’s body and the earth’s gravitational field, with vertical grounding specifically referring to the feet as the point of contact and the body standing vertically (Anagnostopoulou, 2015). It is both a physical and psychological concept involving a physical experience of connectivity with the

environment and inner experiences of autonomy, control, and wholeness. A discharge flow of energy, often referred to as excitation (Anagnostopoulou, 2015), is released through the point of contact allowing the weight of the body to drop into the surface with a reciprocated upstream of felt support. Physically, the body is in a place of efficiency and strength with its innate resources more readily available. The concept of grounding, termed originally by *Bioenergetics* founder Alexander Lowen, was comprised solely of the notion of discharge flow as means to explore psychological functioning and connection to the concrete world. It was later expanded by body psychotherapist David Boadella to include the felt connection to the environment and the communication of downward and upward flow of energy to all portions of the body, both an intake and release of felt energy (as cited in Anagnostopoulou, 2015). The action of grounding provides physical and tactile information about the self in the present environment and one's relationship to gravity: the true, active, and ever-present conversation with the earth. Thus, grounding can be regarded as a valuable tool to awaken presence and potential relatedness as it provides reference to the self in immediate relation to the concrete world.

### **Gravitational Security and Insecurity**

The body's capacity to give in to the support of the earth is rooted in one's earliest experiences (Frank, 2001) and emotional responses toward gravity. Through early movement experiences, including the discovery of the weight of the body and constant movement adaptations to the unavoidable resistance, a young child develops a personal relationship with gravity and thus his sense of physically being in the world. A feeling of

trust in the environment can be cultivated by sensing the gravitational pull of the earth, then organizing the sensations in the nervous system to understand the direction and function of gravity as it pertains to the body in space and movement (Ayers, 2005).

Ultimately, assurance is found in the consistency of the downward force and confidence that the self can move, adapt, and live fully in concert with gravity. Dr. Jean Ayres (2005), developer of the *Sensory Integration Theory*, names the sense of trust in feeling stably and safely connected to the earth with a consistent place of belonging as “Gravitational Security.” It is the foundation for which one senses stability in the environment as well as the inner capability to adapt, react, and take charge while maintaining relationship (Ayers, 2005).

It is argued that the neural system by which gravity is experienced by a human being, the vestibular system, begins functioning in utero by the eleventh week post conception, and by the fifth month the system is providing most of the sensory input to the child’s brain (Ayers, 2005). Therefore, a fetus’s relationship with gravity begins forming earlier than the mother-child relationship. Because one’s relationship with gravity, and thus the earth, is the most fundamental relationship of life, it underlies all future interpersonal relationships. Ayers (2005) states, “If the child’s relationship to the earth is not secure, than all other relationships fail to develop optimally” (p. 70).

The constant pull of gravity provides continual sensory flow through one’s entire life span, provides reference, and impacts interpretation of all other incoming sensations (Chee, Clark, & Kreuzber, 1977). The processing centers of gravitational input, the vestibular nuclei, also process and integrate information from muscles, joints, and skin as well as visual and auditory input, in order to maintain balance and orientation in space.

This unifying system creates a vital link between body sensations and surrounding occurrences, providing a “framework” for one’s overall experience of the environment (Ayers, 2005). Thus, an individual’s perception and physical and emotional responses to the environment are greatly dependent on the capability of the vestibular system to integrate sensory input. In particular, without typical integration of gravitational stimulation, a person can experience a primal fear of the feeling of gravitational pull due to oversensitivity and/or the incapacity to modulate the sensation of the downward force. A person can experience anxiety, distress, and other great emotional reactions when the body is not firmly connected to the ground, as gravity is experienced as inconsistent, unpredictable, and overpowering. In order to cope with “Gravitational Insecurity,” as Ayers (2005) names this inadequacy of modulation or inhibition of gravitational sensation, a person may feel forced to continuously manipulate his environment, other people, or avoid situations that are new or unfamiliar. Misconceptions of the person’s fear or misinterpretations of reserved or controlling behavior can stifle the development of interpersonal relationships and keep the person in isolated distress.

Understanding and discovering self-initiated resolutions to gravity is intuitive to human nature and vital to emotional stability (Ayers, 2005). A strong, innate inner drive to explore and overcome the early restraints gravity produces is alive in most human beings, indicating the natural significance placed upon the process of the relationship.

### **Developmental Movement**

Somatic theorists including Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (2012) and Susan Aposhyan (1999), propose that early motor development processes, which pertain to the

discovery and use of body weight, contain milestone experiences related to the emergence of autonomy, relationship, and other psychological developments. As the child grows and motor development matures, the points of grounding shift from a connection to the womb, to the caregiver, to the belly, back, arms, hands, sitz bones, knees, and feet as the child finds mobility and transitions to standing (Hartley, 1995). Through the stages of development and the establishment of a trusting holding environment, the child experiments with the manipulation of his weight and budding strength to begin to interact with the world around him. These early discoveries of the physical self in relationship, the negotiations of weight shifts and building of strength to become vertical in the world, are in direct support of the child's sense of autonomy, independence, and inner awareness (Hartley, 1995).

The womb is the first holding environment of the human's existence; a warm, supple encasement fully supporting the weight of the developing human and providing the vital needs. It is in this primary stage of life where the child experiences a "letting down" of his weight (Belz-Knöferl, 2015) and begins to establish a quality of physical contact that is the basis for a future sense of grounding. This action, termed "yielding," is the release of body weight into a surface with implications that refer to the felt sense of support and trust in the environment (Aposhyan, 1999). During this first encounter with gravity, the child yields into the womb sensing the physical support and also the emotional states of the mother. If the child perceives environmental safety through the love, care, and warmth of his mother, the child may feel secure enough to accept the support of the womb and release his weight (Belz-Knöferl, 2015). If the womb, and thus greater world, is perceived as an unsafe place the child may resist a letting down, holding

himself as separate from the environment to avoid dangerous contact. These perceptions are stored within the neonate's body, manifesting in the child's later use of grounded support, establishment of sense of self, and overall sense of being and purpose in the world (Belz-Knöferl, 2015).

After childbirth, the child arrives into the new world with a foundation of perceptions of his environment and his place within it. Now existing in the world of gravity outside of the safe container of the womb, the child yields his weight into the support of the ground and caregiver, integrating prenatal experiences and new information (Belz-Knöferl, 2015). Particularly in a caregiver's arms the child senses the security of the hold and further releases his weight, receiving the reciprocated physical support and also the sensitivity, warmth, and relatedness of the caregiver. These early experiences of yielding and reception of support provides crucial information to the child about the cooperation between the self and the environment, cues about physical musculature necessary for mobility, and the foundation for choice of action (Frank, 2001).

Whether the child is lying on his back, front, side, or is in the arms of a caregiver, the postural tone of the child is in constant adjustment and serves as the indicator for the child's experience of his weight (Frank, 2001). As the child learns the permanency and strength of gravitational pull, he is urged by the culmination of newly integrated systems to lift his head, then legs, arms, and upper back, stimulating the musculature needed for future spinal alignment (Ayers, 2005). As the child's sensitivity toward gravity increases, his movement patterns respond to gravity with greater precision and organization.

By the age of six months, the child's vestibular system is searching for strong experiences of gravity and movement sensation (Ayres, 2005). At this point, the child is ready to integrate greater sensations of the self in motion and receive strong somatic input, defining the self as a physical being in the world. The joy and satisfaction children find in these movements such as dynamic rocking, swinging, and being moved by a caregiver, reflects the organizing and integrating characteristics of weighted movement, which is supportive of the desire to experience the self in physical existence.

The following section is a case example that demonstrates the utilization of gravity and experiences of weight to organize sensory input and bring the client into the present moment. With increased presence and an experience of the environment working to meet his needs, the client, a nine-year-old non-verbal boy with Autism, demonstrated increased self-expression and relatedness with the therapist.

#### **Case Example: "M"**

Walking down the school hallway freshly decorated with photos of blooming young smiles, the therapist tightens her grip on the young boy's hand as he begins to rapidly shake his head, nearly losing his balance. The shaking settles and his feet begin to quicken as he turns the corner and leads the therapist down the second hallway toward the therapy room; a familiar routine that begins in a world of self-stimulation and disconnection.

Upon entering the small therapy room, the young boy (now referred to as "M") runs past the therapist, his weight tumbling forward with his feet barely keeping pace. He reaches the other side of the room, only to quickly turn around and repeat the toppling

run, now with his hands flapping at shoulder height and his head a-rhythmically whipping from side to side. The therapist watches and joins M briefly by vocally sounding the rhythm and quality of his run, embodying the disorganization and hurdling feeling of his movements. M doesn't respond, his self-stimulatory behaviors removing him farther from vertical orientation and deeper into an isolated world of self-involvement. He finds a blue bean-bag chair in the corner of the room and flops his body into the cushioned support, an uninhibited release of his full body weight safely caught by the chair. He rests there, belly down, as the therapist rushes over to intervene with deep-pressured squeezes into his arms, legs, and back, providing weighted sensory stimulation and a soothing interaction with the environment. M receives the squeezes, an introduction to contact with another being, but soon flips over dropping out of the bean-bag chair and re-entering his private world. M swooshes through the room again like a small human tornado of whirling hands and feet nearly propelling off the ground. This time the therapist decides to interrupt. She moves the bean-bag chair to the center of the room in preparation. As M dashes through the space, the therapist scoops her hands under his arms, swings him off of the ground and drops his loose body onto the bean-bag chair with impactful force. She stands over M as he lay still on the large blue cushion, anticipating some sort of reaction of either pleasure or disgust. She is met with vibrant eye contact, the first of the session, and an excited smile. Finally, the environment was working in his favor, providing him with the strong and direct input to allow him to feel his body as a distinct part of the world. Quickly, she signs to him and asks, "more?" He sits up. The therapist and M repeat the strong drop of weight, letting gravity powerfully pull his body back to the earth, completing the experience with a clear and firm meeting with the ground. After

each drop, M and the therapist meet eyes and share enjoyment; an increase of genuine relatedness via the body in gravity.

At the end of the session, the therapist invites M to hold her hand as they walk down the hallway to his classroom. He takes it without meeting her eyes and leads the way with length in his spine and an outward gaze. He walks with greater ease and fluidity, satisfied of cravings to feel his body on the earth. He is full in his body, existing in his weight as it transfers forward with each step and sequences through his torso.

Like many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), M displays deficits in social interactions and reciprocity including the capacity to perceive and organize ideas about the surrounding environment (Lord & Spence, 2006). In addition, though characteristic of children with ASD, M suffers from low sensory registration and demonstrates corresponding sensation seeking behaviors such as rapid head movements. In order for the movement interventions, thus the sensory input, to be registered by M's vestibular system as organizing and satisfying, the input must be strong, direct, and clear.

In M's case, the work is at the primary level of clearly and directly experiencing the full body via force of gravity; the foundation for developing a sense of self in relationship with the world. By receiving an experience of his own weight in direct relation to gravity, with great enough strength to be integrated by his vestibular system, it can be inferred that M felt his body in greater fullness and in connection with the ground.

The therapeutic interventions not only satisfied M's need for strong gravitational input, but also provided him with a feeling of mutuality with the environment, as the environment (the therapist) was functioning to support him in satisfying his needs. The subsequent eye contact and instances of relatedness that occurred, demonstrated the

unlocked availability for connection that gravity provided, bringing M in a full-bodied way into the present moment.

### **Vertical Grounding and Alignment**

The increasing desire to interact and communicate with the environment as an individual, locomotive being inspires progression through movement patterns to the ultimate point of standing (Olsen, 1998). Both Ayers (2005) and Olsen (1998) state that standing in vertical orientation to the earth involves the integration of all previous developmental movement patterns, the physical understanding of gravity, sensory integration from all parts of the body, and the shifting perception of one's self-concept. The physical and psychological sense of core strength and trust in the support of the surrounding environment allows for the homologous push with the feet and reach from the head and hands that brings the child to stand on his own two feet.

Pushing with two feet to find vertical standing ignites the inner sensations of weight, gravity, and movement providing immediate feedback related to the self in the present world (Hartley, 1995). According to Susan Aposhyan (1999), the available strength and sustainability of one's push underscores his sense of stability, support, and perception of his place within the environment.

In the standing position, the feet serve as points of connection to the earth in which to vertically ground the body. A sequenced thrust of strength moves through the feet, legs, pelvis, torso, and out through the head and hands as the body organically aligns the structure to most efficiently receive the downward thrust of gravity from above and take in the upward stream of energy from the ground. This is an optimal experience of the

vertical grounding, which utilizes the natural structural wisdom and efficiency of the human body (Olsen, 1998). If one did not receive sufficient physical and/ or psychological support during early developmental movement experiences with grounding and weight, the effects are revealed in the quality of connection between the feet and the floor and the stacking of the skeleton through the length of the spine (Conger, 1994).

While an aligned stacking of the ankles, pelvis, rib cage, and skull provides the ideal configuration for a streamline of gravity through the body without muscular effort, the body is likely to be pulled from this configuration as it matures, adapting to developed muscular tensions, inner perceptions of the self and environment, and other life occurrences (Anagnostopoulou, 2015). Thus, what is often referred to as one's posture or alignment is in fact a unique organization of one's skeletal structure; a physical reflection of one's carried history and personal attitude toward the environment (Olsen, 1998). Within the first three years of life one's postural pattern takes form and continues to adapt to the forces of the earth, social and cultural environment, and developing perceptions of the self (Frank, 2001). The body in constant motion is creating a dynamic balance between the push and pulls of the earth, allowing movement and support for the inner organs, and interacting and adjusting to both internal and external stimuli. It is an ongoing expression of one's experience of their body, in particular their relationship with gravity, and therefore a suggestion of their relationship to the present moment (Frank, 2001).

The structure of the body, which is the biological matter, and the posture it expresses are mutually influential. The structure of the body influences how one relates to the environment, while a person's inner attitude toward the world inherently affects the

health of their structure (Olsen, 1998). With this influential exchange both structure and posture are capable of change, though often dependent on life choices made by the person himself.

The influence of posture and structure on one's processing of an experience and their emotional response is an unconscious occurrence. Perceiving an experience in a posture that is supportive of connection to the environment and a defined sense of self promotes clarity in perception accessing emotional responses true to the self and present experience. The body in an ungrounded position with little felt support, provides feedback to the self of disconnection and vulnerability unrelated to the present moment, coloring their perception of the experience. Research has shown that body posture accounts more toward negative emotional experiences than an actual negative experience (Anagnostopoulou, 2015).

Ultimately, regardless of the outward appearance of the alignment, the configuration of the structure should allow for the freest upward and downward flow of energy through open pathways that sequence through the trunk of the body and out through the endpoints (Conger, 1994). While therapeutic directives such as focusing awareness, touch, and physical adjustments can open energetic pathways and increase flexibility in places of rigidity, the body will innately determine the safest and clearest place of inner ground that lies between a current alignment and the ideal (Conger, 1994).

### **Awareness of the Body**

In exploration of grounding in the present moment, one's attention is shifted from a cognitive self-perception to awareness of bodily sensation. Turning the focus inward to

a heightened sensitivity of sensory experiences orients the self to the authentic experience of the present moment (Weiss, 2015); the true here-and-now of the body stripped from layered cognitive thought. Particularly by bringing awareness to one's felt experience of their body weight and the influence of gravity on the structure of the body, presence and orientation is awakened, as focused attention is brought to the body in direct communication with the environment (Frank, 2001).

Awareness is an alertness, a concentration, and wakefulness that can lead to a deeper and more direct understanding of the self (Weiss, 2015). Hartley referred to this awareness of physical sensations as “anchoring in the body,” which can open the possibility for deeper connection with the self and others (as cited in Weiss, 2015). A human being's original self-perception is navigated through a felt sense of being and the acceptance of the body as part of the self. By bringing awareness back to the body, the cognitive idea of the self can release and the original physical exploration of “this is who I am” can return to the forefront (Weiss, 2015). Within this practice, habitual responses and perceptions of the self are often uncovered and challenged by the heightened awareness of the present experience. Shining the lens of awareness on automatic responses and internal coping processes can bring light to pieces of the self that have been operating without attentive care and ultimately create space for alternate behaviors. Through precise attention of the embodied experience of the self one can work to restore natural impulses and his original nature, support the discovery of existing possibilities, a diminishing of limitations, and illumination of one's own inner resources (Weiss, 2015).

### **The Bodydynamics Model**

Somatic theorists including Bonnie Banbridge Cohen (2012) and Lisbeth Marcher (2010) have identified regions of the body that under conscious awareness can act as resources to explore emotions and psychological themes, respectively. Marcher, founder of the *Bodydynamics Model*, identified movement patterns that become active during developmental stages and made empirical associations with developing psychological functions (Bentzen, Bernhardt, & Isaacs, 2004). Her theory links specific muscles from the movement patterns to psychological themes with belief that the themes are ignited and supported via muscular activation (Bentzen, Bernhardt, & Isaacs, 2004). These muscles, when brought under conscious awareness, can be used as physical and embodied tools to access, explore, build, and rebuild the associated psychological skill that either did not reach its full potential during the developmental stage or became restricted in growth later in life. Marcher calls these physical resources, “Psychomotor Resources,” as they refer to the muscles that come under conscious and voluntary control during psychomotor development (as cited in Bentzen, Bernhardt, & Isaacs, 2004).

In reference to the current discussion of grounding, Marcher associated muscles in the feet, legs, spine, and upper torso with the psychological implications of grounding (Fich & Marcher, 2012). By bringing awareness, movement, activation, or therapeutic attention to these areas of the body grounding in the present moment with connection to the environment can be explored via an embodied experience. In later stages of development, when grounding shifts to conceptual ideas such as spirituality and belief systems, these psychomotor resources can continue to provide a physical experience of reconnection to the ground that is direct and focused (Anagnostopoulou, 2015).

Marcher's discussion of grounding recognizes the relational component of being present in reality, acknowledging that ideal grounding exists when one can maintain connection to reality while in communication with others (Fich & Marcher, 2012). This concept expands the notion of grounding to regard the human existing in relationship and considers the affects of grounding on interpersonal connections; the capacity to ground in reality ultimately affects one's capacity for healthy relationship. In reference, Marcher's colleagues Bentzen and Bernhardt state, "The healthy individuated self moves naturally towards greater grounding in reality and greater connectedness with the world" (as cited in Anagnostopoulou, 2015).

This recognition of human relatedness in foundational psychological functions underlies Marcher's theory of *Bodynamics*. With the belief that the driving force of human life is the desire for deep connection to other human beings and the greater world, each developmental stage and psychomotor movement pattern is observed with reference to human desire for relationship. "Mutual Connection," Marcher's term for this fundamental desire for connection, also refers to the human need to be in contact with the self (Bernhardt, Bentzen, & Isaacs, 2004). In the process of developing movement patterns, psychological skills, and other developmental abilities, a child throughout his lifetime is ultimately searching for the ability to be one's full self in relationship to another (Bernhardt, Bentzen, & Isaacs, 2004).

It is through one's experience of the body, his awareness of body sensation, energy, and emotion, that one experiences the self in relationship (Bernhardt, 2004). The body is the container for the dynamic energy and emotion exchanged in communication and provides the most profound experience of connection that can not be felt through

cognitive thought. It is the quality of awareness and attention to communicative feedback of sensations that informs one's capacity to fully be in relationship, communicate congruent thoughts and feelings, and ultimately establish deep connections (Bernhardt, 2004).

### **Closing**

The body, in continuous motion and communication with the earth, is home to the embodied stories and polarities of human character, expressed in distinctive postures and the dynamic rooting and reaching that is grounding (Conger, 1994). It is the joining of unique individuals, grounded in contact with the self and the earth and arriving in a vulnerable presence of the whole self, that can cultivate felt experiences of interconnectivity.

To be in such connection is to be present with one's full being, accepting of and grounded in all aspects of the self. To the extent that one can acknowledge the pieces that form his individual character defines his availability for deep inner and outer connection, and thus his openness for a dynamic flow of grounding energy. Conger (1994) states, "In so far as we refuse to relate to others, the outer world, or inner agents of our own character which remain in the shadow, disowned or undeveloped, we unplug from our grounded nature" (p. 63). By approaching the self with delicate awareness and acknowledgment of the pieces that pull away from a true, grounded experience, the body can begin to meet these pieces with a release of weight and land with wholeness into presence.

### Vignette

A wave of emotions washed over me as gravity moved smoothly through the architecture of my body without obstruction. After a twenty-minute directed movement experience in grounding the body, I finally found what had been keeping me from truly arriving.

Through the awakening of neglected physical tensions, my upper body came to join my lower body in a unifying dance with gravity. Tiny muscles in my shoulders, chest, and upper torso revealed themselves and joined in the gravitational release, creating a cohesive feeling of full physical presence. It was as if these muscles held so tightly and in separation from my daily physical experience, were now invited back into my body to complete the full picture of me. They brought with them a glimmering perspective of my body in the world and the emotions I had been shoving away for many weeks. Even greater than this, they restored pieces of me.

I took a low, centered breath and flickered my eyes open receiving the sunlight that reflected off the pale walls of the room. My professor, my guide in this grounding experience, remained silent as I navigated this newly defined place of presence; a presence of my full being requiring acceptance of every part. I was in relation to her not just as a fully aware student connected to my current state of being, but as a complete version of myself grounded in my unique character.

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