

Running head: THE ESSENCE OF CONTACT IMPROVISATION

The Essence of Contact Improvisation

in Dance/Movement Therapy

by

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Dedicated to my Great Teacher

Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi  
(1923-2011)

And to all my teachers

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## Abstract

Reading the book *Caught Falling* (Koteen and Smith, 2008) led me to explore and reflect on the relationship between touch and movement in Contact Improvisation. This thesis also integrates and examines Body-Mind Centering research (Cohen, 1993) in relation to *Caught Falling* in order to fully understand how touch and movement offer psychotherapeutic benefits. Although different from Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), Contact Improvisation has elements that are relevant to DMT practice. These include connection, attunement and development. Case examples are introduced to highlight the benefits of attuned movement for connection and transformation.

### **Personal Statement**

Before crossing the ocean to the United States to attend a Dance/Movement Therapy program, I excitedly promised myself that I would apply Dance/Movement Therapy to education so that it could benefit Vietnamese students. After a year of schooling at the Master of Science in Dance/Movement Therapy program, I realize that I am trapped by my ego. The ego and super ego blinded me to the fact that to transform others, one needs to take a small step to transform oneself first.

Dance springs into my self-knowledge journey with excitement and wonder. What leads an educator who has no dance technique to be passionate about a Dance/ Movement Therapy program? There are many times I let fear prevent me from being ME. Unknowingly, I often find myself leaving out the word “dance” when speaking about Dance/Movement Therapy. “I do not have a dance background at all” or “My body is now too ugly, too old and too stiff for dance” or “I was born in a family that believes dance is luxurious” are some of the excuses I say to myself and others to save face from the emotional cost of ego deflation involved in being a beginner. I believe that compassion is a resource to help me to live with my vulnerability and forgive myself, forgive all failure of nerve, timing and initiative. I am beginning to become a beginner of knowing and daring. I am at the beginning, one step at a time, toward being authentically ready for my journey.

The urge to work on the body comes from an instinct to discover the unknown, to find what is buried in my body, to strengthen my inner sense, body, self-esteem, ego, and imagination to move to self-realization. I know my body has a pure desire to move and dance in an effort to experience the meaning of dance and to be with my spirit.

Contact Improvisation defines my personality and my dance journey. Children with autism and the elderly whom I have been working with during my internship are my great teachers. They teach me to honor my body and how to dance, to improvise to connect to myself and others in a therapeutic way.

*I am a dancer*

*I move like I don't care*

*Not as smooth as silk*

*Nor as cool as air*

*But I am everywhere*

*Like a light beam*

*I am free, I am free.*

*Since I was small*

*My parents could never ask me to do what I did not want...*

*The problem is I like*

*Everything I see*

*Everyone I meet*

*Everywhere I go*

*But just for only a few seconds*

*Then I will run away to search for a new out there*

*So I am everywhere, everywhere.*

*Then one day*

*When I cried like that....*

*I felt pain here...here...here*

*Oh why?*

*How the tears up here, make the pain all through my body?*

*I did not know, but*

*Feelings and body are one*

*Scared*

*Searching for my own journey*

*I start again*

*Step by step*

*Learn to*

*Breathe*

*Crawl*

*Walk*

*I run and fall again*

*... Trauma, trauma, trauma*

*“Yes*

*Life is trauma, trauma is everywhere. Trauma or whatever it is called  
is just when you do not feel connected*

*So breathe,*

*Step by step” My Master said*

*But no! Let me be myself, I can't do step by step*

*"If you want to change, do something you never try before."*

*The day I see you*

*A child with autism*

*You are quiet in the corner*

*You cry and laugh alone*

*Won't you let me come along?*

*A few seconds when eyes touch eyes*

*A few taps of fingers on a drum*

*A smile on your face*

*Brightens my day*

*Teach me to honor any movement of being, yielding for connection.*

*Another day*

*I meet you, an old woman*

*Whose son died in Vietnam War*

*You have dementia*

*Your body shakes and shakes*

*You ask me about Vietnam and cry,*

*"Can you find my son for me?"*

*I sing for you a Vietnamese lullaby*

*We dance with fingers*

*... One, two, three, four and five...*

*You teach me how to dance*

*You teach me how to deeply listen to myself and you*

*You teach me how to love my body and yours*

*You make me believe that*

*I am a dancer.*

*Yes, I am a dancer.*

*Still not as smooth as silk*

*Nor as cool as air*

*It is a heart dance*

*I dance to share with you*

*My secrets, my fears, my failures,*

*All my dreams and love for you*

*Do you feel that?*

*I dance to be*

*Closer to you...*

*We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that*

*Deep inside us is something valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred  
to our touch.*

*Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight*

*Or any experience that reveals the human spirit.*

*Attributed to e.e. cummings*

Contact improvisation is a duet movement form originated by Steve Paxton in 1972. The art form combines physical touch and expressive movement as primary tools to integrate the whole body-mind in an internal focus on the moment to create an authentic dancing dialogue between two people (Koteen and Smith, 2008). By sensing weight and listening to the message conveyed by touch, body and sensory awareness are developed. This connects the internal world of body, mind, emotion, and spirit with the external world, promoting kinesthetic empathy, connection, attunement, and development.

In *Caught Falling*, Koteen and Smith (2008) define Contact Improvisation as spontaneous moving dialogues that shift from stillness to energetic exchange. Self-awareness is developed through an energetic state of physical bewilderment, trusting the primary survival instincts and the law of gravity. The dance is a free, mindful yet joyful improvisation with balance, which supports emotional and physical response in each shared moment of the movement. The definition of Contact Improvisation is beyond words since Contact

Improvisation is an internal dance encouraging freedom and liberation to express the unique self in rhythm, space, time, and the internal world of emotions and imaginations. The dancing dialogue is a path toward an open-ended learning of the kinesthetic possibilities of the wholeness of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Consequently, Contact Improvisation has no obvious rule defining right or wrong. However, it has its edges—the edges of truth that each person needs to sense and explore through hands-on experience in the natural energy flow of touch and movement.

Touch is a meaningful part of human expression, exploration, and relationship. Tiffany Field states “touch is the mother of the senses” (2014, p.88) as it is the first to develop in humans. She explains that the first sensory stimulation in life starts from the sense of touch in the womb. From the beginning to the last stage of life, oral and skin contacts continue to be the most vital tools of life experience. This touch-based social sense keeps developing and functioning as a means of communication even though other senses such as hearing, seeing and tasting fade in late life (Field, 2014).

Field (2014) suggests that touching basically implies an interaction with others. Thus, by touching, self-awareness, sensitivity and cognition of various facets, including temperature, shape, resilience and even emotions are developed. Movement is a primary language and the root of human existence and experience, starting with the motion of cells, the pulse of blood, and the rhythm of breath and heart-beat. Anna Halprin asserts that dance/movement is “the Mother of the Arts” (2000, p. 29) since it engages creativity and awakens the whole being—body, mind, emotions, senses, and spirit. Fran.J.Levy (2005) states that in the unison of body and mind, physical movement reveals inner emotions, and,

in response, the emotions shape the movements. Shifting movements re-directs and transforms emotions, promoting health and development.

In *Caught Falling*, Smith (2008) explains how touch and movement in Contact Improvisation are integrated with each other and play primary roles in the art of healing. She claims that movement flow based on contact points in Contact Improvisation becomes powerfully therapeutic when the intention of touch and movement are embodied with insight, curiosity, and the pure desire and motivation to connect and communicate. In this state of focus, the hidden messages under the touch are kinesthetically empathized and attuned with mind-body awareness and compassion, promoting freedom and liberation in expression. In this thesis, I would like to explore the essence of the connection between touch and movement in Contact Improvisation and discuss how elements of Contact Improvisation are relevant to my Dance/Movement Therapy clinical experience.

### **Connection**

The experience of touch and movement are primary human means to explore oneself in relation to others and to explore the questions: Who am I? Who are you? And how could we dance in this life together? (Cohen, 1993) Touch and movement are the basic focus of Contact Improvisation since they support and create the flow of dancing dialogue between two dancers. The dancers do not try to achieve a performance goal or to freeze their movement in specific dance techniques and particular aesthetic rules. They co-create the dance together in the moment by listening to their own bodies and sensing the weight and

energy in the touching points between the bodies. This connection is energy itself. It is generated by the positive feelings of being seen, recognized, and valued when people move, express, give, and receive without judgment. By listening and sensing each other's weight and energy, the dancers' empathic communication allows them to immediately make a spontaneous decision for the next movement in a new space and new direction. Smith (2008) clarifies that in order to be open to these sensations, to kinesthetically listen and respond, the bodies need to relax and release excess muscular tension. There must be a certain willingness to trust and to surrender to the law of gravity and experience the natural flow of movement and energy. (Koteen and Smith, 2008)

Interpersonal communication can be frustrating. Words may cloud the essence of information and trap our egos, illusions, or assumptions about what information we expect to project and receive. Communication by touch can be considered taboo due to its connotations of intimacy or abuse. In Contact Improvisation, the dancers cross that taboo in order to make touch revolutionary. Koteen and Smith (2008) explain that through touching and being touched in the moving dialogue of Contact Improvisation, sensory and self-awareness are developed. Focusing on the touching points is the basis for improvisation that allows for lucidity in the dancing dialogue. The experience within the dancing stimulates many layers of emotions and internal images. The dancers confront and adapt to variations of interpretation, timing, temperament, and technique. The physical movement processes the messages which are communicated through the quality of touch to support the dancers as they cooperate, choreograph, and dance together in the moment. In this dancing dialogue, the flow of movement, based on the touching point, builds self-awareness as well as social cognition. The use of spontaneous— yet multi motivation-based—touch in Contact Improvisation

becomes a vital revolutionary means of being attuned to self and others, making contact to establish and maintain a connection.

In *Sensing, Feeling and Action*, Cohen (1993) describes how touch is central to the growth and development of human beings. Cohen describes the three layers of the embryonic plate—an endoderm, a mesoderm, and an ectoderm—the inner, middle, and outer layers. She depicts the development of both the nervous system and the skin from the ectoderm of the embryo. The fact that the human nervous system and the skin arise from the same embryonic cell's outer layer explains a commonality of touch and the nervous system. They interact with each other and the skin layer functions as an external reflector of the nervous system. (Cohen, 1993)

In the mother's womb, the fetus interacts with a steady pressure and gentle touch by fluid. When the mother or the fetus moves, its body parts rub, pat, rock, or push against its mother's organs, offering a sense of itself and its surrounding to the fetus (Cohen, 1993). The Vestibular Nerve, which organizes movement throughout the body, is the first cranial nerve to myelinate. The fetus's hands are usually touching its face. Cohen (1993) explains that this touch stimulates the second group of cranial nerves, which involves sensory and motor control in and around the head, including oral activity. This particular touch experienced in utero prepares the infant for early survival based on the rooting reaction used for breathing, sucking, and swallowing (Cohen, 1993)

Touch plays an important role in neuro-physical development (Cohen, 1993). In her research, she explains that the first traditional principle of development is that movement proceeds from head to tail or head to foot. Physiological flexion comes up from the feet in the early stage of fetal development. The fetus's feet begin to curl into flexion. Then the

fetus's body gradually curves into a C-shape, a high-tone flexion pattern which prepares a baby to be born. When an infant's feet are touched, he or she pushes into a total body extension from the feet, spreading to the legs, spine, the arms and head. The movement of pushing into the stimulus point is called physiological extension. After these total-body/primitive physiological flexion and extension patterns that start from the feet, the baby develops extension, and then flexion proceeding from the head to the feet. (Cohen, 1993)

Cohen (1993) also states that touch is not only a mechanical stimulation but also an interactive process. Sensing and perceiving are not passive responses. Motor movement is not a direct response to stimulation. Learning is the process of opening oneself to explore life (Cohen, 1993). Cohen asserts that when an individual is prepared to move into new experiences, the body movement and sensation will be naturally widened to absorb and emerge into a new space and direction. If these experiences are congruent with the individual's background, culture and history, the integration will lift the individual up into a whole new level of cognition and awareness (Cohen, 1993).

Koteen and Smith (2008) state that, in Contact Improvisation, touch is an exploration of communication through kinesthetic listening and understanding of the authentic message beneath the skin. The energy flow within oneself and others is transmitted, sensed, and improvised upon. The dancers move and directly touch skin, the most social and sensitive sense organ of the body, transmitting kinesthetic information in an interaction with each other's skin (Koteen and Smith, 2008).

In *Touch*, Field (2014) explains how skin, the largest sensory organ, wraps our body in its own shape and defines us as independent individuals. Skin acts as the primary boundary that distinguishes one's physical body from other physical bodies. Field (2014) states the

outermost layer of the human body has no eyes to shut, and no ears to cover. The skin is always in a transparent state of readiness to transmit messages directly and honestly when it is stimulated. It is a social sense, serving as a means of communication bridging our inner world to the outer world (Field, 2014). People sense pain, pleasure, cold, heat, and comfort by touching and being touched.

Smith's (2008) description of dance is that it is a democratic moving dialogue. It requires body-mind-awareness, sensitivity, and a great deal of patience to sense and listen to touch through the surface of the skin. The dialogue process increases internal skills of attunement and kinesthetic empathy to support and maintain the balance of weight, time, space, and rhythms together in the dance. (Koteen and Smith, 2008)

By sensing the different touching points of skin while giving and getting weight from each other, the dancers' bodies themselves are not only instruments of communication but also a cognitive, sensory, and affective source for self-expression. In the dancing dialogue, people learn how to empower self-esteem, self-responsibility, and self-direction through moving with honesty, sensitivity, and wisdom.

Smith (2008) clarifies that it is essential to listen to the wisdom of the body first. The voice of the body always expresses the most straightforward message. The body is a foundation, base, and center point to receive and give information even as it is the idea and interpretation of the information. For example, Smith describes how sensing an approaching touch of sexual intentionality or muscular or aggressive physical rambunctiousness triggers uncomfortable feelings. Shifting body weight, opening movement space or slowing down the tension flow rhythms will redirect the content of the moving dialogue. (Koteen and Smith, 2008)

### **Attunement to Self and the Other**

Reflecting on *Caught Falling* (2008), I view the integration of touch and movement in Contact Improvisation as an art of mindfulness being in the present to attune to self and the other. The dance harmonizes the wholeness of the body by increasing awareness of the body-mind relationship. In a psychosomatic unison of body-mind-emotion, the brain is the organ that orchestrates the humans' interactions with an external world. (Barrol, 2006)The brain—a highly complex system with billions of nerve cells radiating throughout both its hemispheres, has a global mission to operate a person's every thought and outward meaningful actions and behaviors (Barrol, 2006). Barrol (2006) also states that the brain is in charge of collecting massive amounts of simultaneous sensory information. It selects and interprets what an individual is experiencing based on past associations and then coordinates the response. Meanwhile, the body is the core energy, the carrier of our being in the world. The body is a bridge connecting our internal world of the mind, emotion, and spirit with other bodies. Hence, the source of healing lies within the body. All movements pass through the gate of the miracle movement—breathing. Mindful breathing is simple yet powerful. It connects to inner energy flow, making the individual aware of the pleasure of the present moment. This active interchange between the brain and body is an ongoing process, even in stillness (Barrol, 2006).

In Contact Improvisation, the touch-based movement encourages internal focus on the body and sensory awareness. The rhythm of breathing and touch-based movement with the flow of energy supports the sense of gravity and a sense of the body. Breathing and moving mindfully directly benefits the brain and neurophysiological regulation systems. It

gives vitality and relaxes the nerves, vessels, and muscles. Mindful breathing and movement also support the organization of perception, arousal, and regulation at its psychobiological foundation. “Physiologically, sensory awareness approaches initiate a down-regulation of the nervous system, engaging the vagus nerve.” (Homanm.K, 2010, p.83)

Balance and focus on the present are necessary for every movement of Contact Improvisation. Movement starts from the basic rhythms of breath, heart-beat, or blood cells and progresses to the expressive movement of the torso and the whole body. Contact Improvisation dancers start moving with the basic rhythm of breath, yielding from the body's energy center or tan t'ien, following the nature of gravity and the flow of Chi (energy). The dancers focus on the contact points with the partner and maintain the dance together. At the same time, the dancers can sense and be aware of rhythm, timing, and space with the whole body. The dancers use the principle of filling and emptying weight not only into and out of the legs but throughout the whole surface of the body by touching the floor or shifting weight to and from the partner. (Koteen and Smith, 2008) Being aware of breathing, the dancers reconnect to the source of energy. This promotes relaxation, calmness, safety, balance, and containment. Mindfulness movement in Contact Improvisation builds the connection, attunement and enhances awareness of the spiritual, mental, and physical energies within the dancers.

Smith (2008) explicates the similarities and differences between “sitting” meditation and “dancing” meditation. In sitting meditation, one also focuses on a particular point, witnessing the complexity of mind while glimpsing space, peace, and emptiness. In dancing meditation, one observes thoughts, watches his body engaged in movement, and is aware of the physical contact spot to maintain continuity. Staying in the present and paying attention

are keys to moving in balance and communicating with respect and authenticity during Contact Improvisation's "dancing" meditation (Smith, 2008).

In Contact Improvisation, both active dancing roles of mover and witness interact at the same time. Moving in silence, focusing on the contact points, Contact Improvisation dancers pay attention inwardly with a sense of detachment as they witness and kinesthetically listen to the whole body with all sensation. They reveal these internal images in each breath and movement. Silence allows the dancers to increase self-awareness and listen to the call of instinct, intuition and the inner resource of emotions and creative images. Smith's conception of Contact Improvisation coincides with Chodorow (1991)'s description of Dance/Movement Therapy which requires active imagination to foster the healing process in psychotherapy as body and mind are in mutual interaction. Breathing, listening, and sensing the touch on skin and moving from these touching points, one becomes truly present to authentically dialogue and attune to the dance partner. At the same time, the dancers witness what happens between them, and realize when they are off balance or lose the connection.

Smith (2008) highlights the essential role of attention and mindfulness in the moving dialogue. Contact Improvisation becomes a metaphor for life: to live with wholeness, one needs to relax and enjoy each moment of the present, surrendering all thoughts and worries about the past and future. Ambition and excitement create positive feelings for exploring a new experience. However, these motivations may overpower and take us far away from the present. With excitement, one may move too speedily and miss an opportunity to witness and respond to subtle curiosities and creative impulses that occur in the moment. By slowing down and taking small steps, the dancers maintain the curiosity to witness a single minor change and stay on track to follow the creative opportunity and imagination. Staying in the

present will improve sensitivity to express and respond honestly and respectfully to the message in each physical touch and movement. Improvisation only occurs in the moment. Smith (2008) warns that mindfulness is essential in Contact Improvisation. Movement without mindfulness is hazardous as the mind is not present to witness and respond to circumstances immediately.

### **Development**

In Contact Improvisation, changing the intention of touch creates new information, triggering new possibilities, ideas, and opening up new directions to dance. Cohen (1993) states that it is a recapitulation of the entire early relationship of the touch and movement process of human development. Two dancers are persistently engaged in experiencing the process of initiation through touch. Being in the moment, the movers can spontaneously improvise with possibilities that the touching points inspire in them. They may discover different gestures and movement. They may play with rhythms, speeding it up to high intensity with spinning, rolling, or lowering attribution flows to rest and breathe together. The dancers also extend the touching points to discover the space around them. Cohen (1993) says that Contact Improvisation illustrates the opening up of perception and options for motor intention and sensory awareness, as well as the ability to respond, makes decisions for the next move, and attune to self and other in the dancing dialogue.

The nature of the dialogue in Contact Improvisation minimizes cultural influences. Koteen and Smith (2008) explain how the dancers investigate different physical styles,

gender roles, ages, races, social status, and training techniques. Pairs in a dancing dialogue may be from diverse backgrounds: Asian-Western, Black-White, big-small, young-old, friend-stranger, male-female, performer-non-performer, and disabled mover- non-disabled mover. Diversity enriches life concept with the values of different human experience. It provides a lesson for each individual to have different facets to understand, recognize and accept for who we are. Diversity develops and opens us to those things that set us apart, such as race, gender, culture, physical and mental ability, and language. Contact Improvisation invites an equal opportunity to have a democratic dancing dialogue without controlling, forcing, or oppressing each other. The most significant factor in this dialogue is people: how they respond to touch; how they apply their combined intentions in the moment; how they release and shift their weight; how they reply to time, space, and weight; how they express their sense of rhythm, humor, trust, and responsibility to each other; and how they express spontaneity to balance the natural flow of movement. (Koteen and Smith, 2008)

In *Caught Falling*, Smith and Koteen (2008) honor every movement as dance and every person as a dancer. This is based on a direct sense of being on the physical earth and in one's physical body, and communicating with respect, intelligence, compassion, joy, peace, and love across community boundaries of language, race, generation, and dance forms. The dancers remove ego to learn how to respect other's identity and integrity, how to be sensitive and spontaneous to negotiate back and forth, and how to embody and attune to others to create the dance together. This moving dialogue stimulates self- awareness, attunement and a deep subjective feeling of connection that leads to personal and social development.

Body-mind awareness in Contact Improvisation encourages the sense of a centered self and develops self-esteem. This art form liberates the movers from the personal

boundaries of physical size, body image, and muscular strength. Trust is revealed in the dancing dialogue, filling each dancer with the feeling of safety and comfort in order to express themselves wholeheartedly. Trust supports the dancers to release any fear of being touched and of touching. Trust helps people to think that they are not alone in their problems, and allows them to reach out to receive and give help in improvisation. Smith (2008) explains that the natural moving communication characteristic of Contact Improvisation creates feelings of freedom and liberation originating from the ability to be fully comfortable with the body.

As a consequence, Contact Improvisation gives a fundamental lesson in the law of gravity and how to acknowledge and accept oneself as unique without pretending to be like another. The awareness of this concept empowers the individuals to accept themselves as who they are and move as their bodies require. This positive attitude lightens the mind and body, encouraging relaxation, trust and confidence in body image and body weight, opening and engaging relationships to gravity and others. As a result, it releases the weight and empowers the person to feel his or her own full weight directly in relation to the partner. When both dancers share the same attitude and skill to “let go,” they freely give and take each other’s weight with all the information they need to be able to make the essential adjustments and dance in harmony with the flow of gravity.

Having self-esteem, trust, and confidence, the dancers develop self-care and social skills, especially skills to communicate and set boundaries by redirecting movement to be responsible to themselves and their partner. When the dancers sense a risk of personal injury from a larger person’s weight or from their partner jumping on them, they express their message by sliding against or redirecting their partner’s moving mass. Koteen and Smith

(2008) suggest that assuming and projecting what others would think or react to is not an effective and authentic dialogue. Staying in the moment and simply listening and responding with honesty and openness is the nature of communication.

Smith (2008) states that the experiences within the touch and movement stimulate many layers of emotions and internal images. With this statement, she emphasizes the unity of body-mind and emotion. When the body moves in the present, the mind reaches into the unconscious and opens the channels of sensation and hidden emotions full of memories and inner images. The moving dialogue between the dancers becomes truthful and authentic.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Interacting with other humans makes human beings become more human. By sensing, touching, and moving together, the human interaction of Contact Improvisation promotes values of compassion, self –esteem, and confidence as well as social skills such as kinesthetic empathy, self –understanding, sensitivity, and creativity. The nature of dance keeps flowing over time. It enriches the dancer’s life as different partners contribute their own unique self, values, and culture and spirit to the dancing dialogue.

Dance itself is naturally therapeutic due to its physical, emotional, and spiritual components (Chaiklin, 2009). “An individual’s connection to the world, the awareness of oneself, is dependent on touching and being touched.” (Blackmer, 2009, p.29) An individual attains the highest levels of personal development and fulfillment in interaction with other individuals. The person evolves from within, radiating outward according to the principle of mutuality, expressing unification and new energy toward healing and developing together.

Dance by its nature is healing and therapeutic because in dance, people enter into an authentic, equal, and democratic dialogue. The touch-based movement characteristic of Contact Improvisation stimulates vitality, awakening the whole person in the past, present, and future; the mind-body-intelligence-emotion-creativity-spontaneity and intuition. Contact Improvisation is the way to invite the dancer to enter in dialogue with their innate self before attuning to others.

The dancers in Contact Improvisation move with the vision and imagination to express their emotions, identities, liberation, and freedom in the present. Yet, their bodies are grounded by gravity, flow of energy, and a sense of HOME when skin touches skin. In Contact Improvisation, the dancers move and touch to liberally express the desire to be connected, attuned, recognized, and understood in an authentic way for development.



Photo 1: Bryan Wilson and Minh Bui are in Contact Improvisation (Hoang.T, 2015)

This personal photo illustrates how Contact Improvisation liberates the dancers from physical limitation (size, weight, gender and culture) to stay in balance and maintain a dancing flow through the contact points.

## **Clinical Experience**

The American Dance Therapy Association defines Dance/Movement Therapy as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process that furthers the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration of the individual.” (ADTA, 2014) Decreasing the experience of emotional isolation and enriching body awareness and relational interactions are at the core of Dance/Movement Therapy goals. Contact Improvisation uses touch and movement to wake up inner kinesthetic sensations and encourage the dancers to respond to each other. This opens them up to self-awareness for connection, attunement, and transformation. The combination of mindfulness and playfulness in the dancing dialogue of Contact Improvisation leads to a kinesthetic empathy and natural connection and attunement among humans in terms of personal life, feelings, thoughts, and spiritual life.

Although it is not feasible to apply Contact Improvisation directly to Dance/Movement Therapy, its essences—connection, attunement and development—are relevant to Dance/ Movement Therapy. Working as a Dance/Movement Therapy intern with children with autism at their first stage of life and with the elderly with dementia at their last stage of life, I am able to connect and apply Contact Improvisation’s essential concepts to my clients.

Connection is the root of Dance/Movement therapy. Chaiklin and Wengrower (2009) state that Dance/Movement Therapy is based on a concept that the dance/movement needs to be focused on individual’s needs toward self-integration. Through the dance, individuals connect to self and define themselves as the part of the whole. Through the dance,

individuals integrate to the collective in order to be recognized and supported. With self-awareness and community experiences, the individuals are more confident to express their own impulses to overcome incoherence and enrich new connection (Chaiklin and Wengrower, 2009).

Attunement is a concept about what it means to be “tuned in” and meet others’ needs. In dance/movement therapy, attunement which includes “mirroring” or reflecting expresses an effective correspondence. Attunement to others’ movement qualities such as rhythm, the use of vocal sound, weight, space, time and flow increase the ability to understand and kinesthetic empathy to what others feel. And it is deep-rooted in the nature of human interactions (Chaiklin and Wengrower, 2009).

In the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP), attunement is a technique that encourages empathy and social interaction. This technique is based on an understanding of tension flow attributes and tension flow rhythms. Attunement to tension flow attributes is a method of bridging the gap between the autistic individual and the Dance/Movement Therapist. An attunement concept is a helpful intervention in working with autistic children to bring about kinesthetic empathy. This method increases autistic children’s awareness of themselves and others through improved eye contact and sense of their bodies (Levy.F, 2005).

Development is a significant treatment goal of dance/movement therapy. By utilizing body movement as an instrument, dance/ movement therapy encourages people to express the whole self of emotions, thoughts, and spirit to promote self-knowledge, well-being and psychotherapeutical change (Chaiklin and Wengrower, 2009).

**Dance/Movement Therapy with Children with Autism**

Children with autism are described as living in their own world, for they often shun social contact. The classification of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a sickness, disease, or just a different way of being is still in question. Based on the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), poor social communication and restricted patterns of behavior and interests are two main diagnostics of ASD (DSM-5, 2013, p.50).

As a Dance/Movement Therapy intern, I have been working with four groups of children with Autism. The clients at the center range in age from three to twenty years old. They have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and are defined as people who may have one or more disabilities including delays in physical, sensory, cognitive, speech/language, and/or emotional development. Each group includes three to six children of different ages who require varying levels of support.

**Case Example # 1: S**

S is a Caucasian girl, about 20 years old, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and epilepsy who has been attending weekly art, music, and dance/movement therapy groups. Her physical limitations include poor balance, low tone, and delayed fine motor abilities. S seems to have receptive language ability, but not expressive language.

By my assessment, S fits in the third level of ASD, since children at this level require substantial support due to their limited initiation to social interactions. At this level, people

have severe deficits in both verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Their inflexibility of behavior, extreme difficulty coping with change and other restricted/repetitive behaviors markedly interferes with functioning in all spheres. They appear to have great anxiety and difficulty changing focus or action. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) S is the same—she needs to be reminded who she is and what she is doing. If the therapists introduce a new prop or a new activity, S's first reaction is to hollow her torso and stomp backward out of the circle.

In the Dance/Movement Therapy group, S appears very quiet. She excludes herself from the group activities. She repeats the word “soda” during the entire session and always tries to run out of the room. Her mother told me “She drinks soda about four times per day.” S always comes to the group with a huge stuffed tiger. If someone comes closer to her as if to take her tiger away, she expresses her anger by pushing her eyes, lengthening her neck, jumping up and down and shaking her head and whole face in a quick snapping/biting rhythm. High intensity is one of the tension flow attributes that reflects intensely and deeply held emotions. Movement with high intensity involves surging/birthing rhythms and jumping, spurting/ramming and straining rhythm as well. (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999) I observe that S often has quick and strong movements with high intensity as well as biting and jumping rhythms. She is often observed with her right hand shaking, body falling to the ground, head dropping to chest, hand touching the right side of her neck or pulling her hair.

My treatment goal for S is to continue increasing her attention and engagement with others. Working with S filled me with hope for the potential of applying attuned movement to benefit people with autism. At the beginning of my internship, I was scared to be close to

her after being warned by the supervisors and her mother, who said, “Do not touch or be close to her. If she is angry, you should run away as she can be very violent.”

In a Dance/Movement Therapy session, I sit next to S observing as she hollows her torso. She looks down to the floor and keeps moaning “soda, soda, soda. “The whole group is passing a ball to each other. If the ball comes to her, S pushes it away strongly. She does not join in the activity at all. After a while, she reverts to her typical behavior, stands up and starts jumping to get out of the room. Normally if she runs out of the room all we can do is call her mother to get her back. I know I cannot touch her to pull her back into the activity. My intuition gives me the idea to improvise. I quickly face S and attune to her movements in the middle of the circle. Hollowing my torso and shaking my hand and my head, I jump with high intensity. I also repeat “soda, soda, soda” to attune her voice. After about ten jumps, S eyes me for a second. I stand there, breathe in and out calmly and look into her eyes gently. She slowly steps back to her seat. S continues to repeat the word “soda,” but with a calmer and quieter voice. S quietly entrains “soda” in rhythm with the music as her way of interacting with the therapists and the group.

### **Case Example # 2: R**

R is a five year-old Caucasian boy who lives with his parents and has a therapy dog. R’s primary diagnosis is Autism Spectrum Disorder at the level of requiring very substantial support and his secondary diagnosis is sleep seizures apraxia. R has no physical limitations, but his verbal communication has not developed. R has high sensory issues and high intensity. R appears to enjoy all gently soothing touch. I have observed that he seeks out

tactile sensations and cool smooth surfaces by touching others' faces and ears or burrowing his face into cushions.

R has been attending an art, music, and Dance/Movement Therapy group at the center weekly since his diagnosis in 2012. I worked with R as a dance/movement therapist intern for a 45-minute-session each week for seven months. In the group, R demonstrates a range of expressive movements, even though he often excludes himself from the group activities. He often plays alone in his favorite corner where he can see his shadow on the floor. My treatment goal for R is based on his strengths and needs: Increase R's attention and social engagement with group movement activities so it is maintained for at least five minutes.

R's repetitive movements with jumping, running, and starting/stopping are rhythms with bound flow and high intensity. I attune to his movement in order to communicate with him. With head down, hollowing and shortening my upper body, and jumping from place to place, I mirror his movements. When I understand his game and attune to his movements, R naturally and spontaneously stops for a second to eye me and he smiles. We look at each other and laugh. I change my movement from jumping with two feet into hopping on one foot. R is able to mirror my movement and he appears interested to discover a movement that is new to him. This relational moment appears to be a start in expanding R's range of interest. He enjoys the movement and comes closer to me. By attuning to his body movement I build trust and security for R. This allows me to effectively lead him back to the group activity.

**Case Example # 3: A.M.**

A.M, a five-year-old Caucasian girl was diagnosed two years ago with (1) global development delays and (2) Autism Spectrum Disorder as evidenced by significant difficulty attending to individual and group activities. Her resulting affective cognitive impairment is evidenced by poor social engagement with non-verbal communication, limited sign language and restricted patterns of behavior. Her resulting physical limitation appears as poor vision, weak muscle control, poor awareness of her surroundings and significant delay in fine and gross motor skills. Positive changes have been observed in the past two years. In the group, A.M has begun to make non-verbal requests by taking an adult's hand to reach for an object. She is improving in her ability to use American Sign Language signs for functional communications of words such as "finish", "continue" and "bye". These signs are sometimes used without prompting. A.M is also saying words to fill in a word missing from her favorite songs, varying her pitch when vocalizing.

In the Dance/Movement Therapy group with four other children with autism, A.M is the oldest, most energetic and "dominant" member. She lacks a sense of body boundaries. She bumps herself into the wall or other people without awareness of being hurt or hurting others. She prefers to have very quick and strong surging/ birthing flow rhythms. This rhythm resembles the process of giving birth, strengthening to an intense pressure in the effort of creation and then followed by gradual release required to actually deliver the product of one's labor (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999) In the group, A.M demonstrates the poor awareness of her surroundings and poor muscle control that are noted

in her personal profile at the center. She cries and laughs for reasons that don't seem to match the group's situation. She tends to lean on people or things and at times she appears floppy.

My treatment goal is to develop A.M's quality of life by (1) improving her attention span to five minutes of focus without distraction during group activities and (2) engaging her in social interaction activities with others in a weekly Dance/Movement Therapy group. I focus on creating a dialogue by sensing and using non-verbal cues through attunement to develop A.M's expressive movement vocabulary. This goal is based on A.M's needs to set up her personal boundaries to establish rhythm for self-sensing and to be stable and focused on the group activities.

However, it is very challenging for me to attune to A.M as her movement does not have rhythm. She jumps everywhere with direct and indirect movements. I only can attune to her tension flow attributes, her shape and her efforts when she bounces on a yoga ball. Hence, the yoga ball is a useful prop to keep A.M centered and comfortable with even flow attribute. Sometimes I kneel on the floor with my face to A.M and attune to her high intensity bounding flow. In KMP, bounding flow is considered to be a protective mechanism or defense. "Its prototype is immobilization or freezing in response to fear or anger or unpleasant feelings which are suppressed." (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999, p.67)

The use of props, music and movement are the most effective ways to attune to A.M's movement and expression. I use the ABC song in sign language—A.M's favorite song— to encourage her to mirror and follow my fingers' movement and expression. Then she starts following and interacting with my movements. She keeps giving me a signal to

continue. Her bright smile and prolonged eye contact with me are obvious changes showing me how happy A.M is to be understood and connected.

In order to meet my treatment goal of improving A.M's attention to activity, I apply the Kestenberg Movement Profile (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999) to eliminate her self-stimulation behaviors such as hitting herself, banging her head or biting her arm. My focus is on shifting her active, high intensity attribute to low intensity attribute movements. In KMP, low intensity is observed in gently swaying rhythm to create relaxed and calm feelings to increase awareness of self and surroundings. (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999) Using movements with even flows also gradually helps A.M feel stable. This rhythm increases single-minded focus, so it is helpful to use more music and movement with even flow to decrease A.M's self-sensory stimulation. Based on KMP, even flow is used to help perpetuate a mood or feeling. The evenness of the flow steadies feelings, and keeps the mind focused (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999) I often try to use props such as a parachute or silk scarf to lead A.M to even flow and a sense of self-soothing, The "soft" body boundary promotes merging with others. Meanwhile, a swaying rhythm will create in her a sense of integration with the group. (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, Sossin. 1999) By shifting to these rhythms and tension flows, A.M can be expected to slow down, to sense people and her surroundings and to stay focused on her tasks in the group.

In autism, some parts of the brain take on different functions than is normally observed, so pressure on the body makes the nervous system calm down and relax. (*At the Gates of Autism*, Film Media Group, 2003) My experience with A.M in the Dance/Movement Therapy group is that squeezing pressure from being wrapped in a parachute and a blanket or

a stretching band effectively helps to set up boundaries for A.M so she can stay calm.

Ultimately, this squeezing pressure stimulation can be expected to give a better awareness and sense of her surroundings and improve her fine and gross motor skills.

### **Dance/Movement Therapy with Elderly People with Dementia**

The nursing home where I have an internship is based on the values of compassion, dignity, and respect. The goal is to provide quality health services by ensuring access to health, supportive and community-based services across the continuum of need. I work with the senior residents with dementia as a Dance/Movement Therapy intern.

Dementia involves memory loss or amnesia leading to mental distress, anxiety, depression, low social functioning, and behavioral risks. At the early stages, the residents have difficulty concentrating and decreased memory of recent events. In its later stages, dementia leaves people with no ability to communicate. They require assistance with most basic Activities of Daily Living.

As a Dance/Movement Therapy intern, I experience that the population here share - similar issues. Physical limitations make the residents depend on the assistance of others. Their physical and cognitive limitations result in social isolation and loneliness. Our goals in a Dance/Movement Therapy group are to use breathing and mindful movement to support body-mind connection, promoting self-expression and social integration and increasing self-worth and a sense of well-being. In order to meet these goals, we have been working in a weekly Dance/Movement Therapy group focused on the theme *A Circle of Life*. We use Reminiscences of four stages of life: Birth-Youth-Aging-Death, Examination of life practices

and rituals from Western culture (skilled nursing home facilities) and from Far Eastern culture, and Shape perception during the end of life experience.

### **Case Example # 1 Group Activities**

As it rests among a group of musical instruments, a small Kalimba catches my eye. I hold the brown wooden Kalimba in my hands. With my fingers, I tap the dried dark yellow back of the Kalimba. With my thumbs, I play with the iron music keys at the front of the Kalimba. The sound from this small simple brown Kalimba kindles my heart, reminding me that death and dying are part of the eternal circle of life. The dead dried dark yellow fruit shell transforms itself into a magical musical instrument to create and maintain the rhythms of life.

There are a great number of ethnic Russian residents. They cannot speak English well and I speak no Russian. They rely on wheelchairs for mobility. Whenever I sing the Russian song “Kachiusa” in Vietnamese, they look at me; smile and then we tap our feet or move our hands together. I am lucky to know the lyrics of many children’s songs in Vietnamese that share Russian rhythms. I use this music along with movement to establish a connection between the residents and myself. We sit in a circle, sing many different songs, and do movements with our upper bodies. I notice that some residents who are too sick to be able to join the group circle still sing along and do hand movements with us.

As they sing, the residents' breathing, vocalization, circulation and central body are naturally stimulated and involved. As I lead them, we lift our arms up high to the sky and down to the earth or move them from side to side with the flow of music and images from the songs. We wave our hands to shape the image of the sun, flowers, mountains or ocean. We use the body as a musical instrument—we tap to make different sounds and rhythms on the different parts of the body from the knees, thighs up to the shoulders and the head. These activities prompt the participants to sense body-mind connection and increase their ranges of expression and communication.

### **Case Example # 2: H**

For one-to-one Dance/Movement Therapy sessions I meet with H, a 70-year-old woman from Germany who has Alzheimer's. She appears depressed and anxious. When we get to know each other well, she has many demands, as if I am her assistant. I try to set up the boundaries between us by redirecting the conversation and movement. In Dance/Movement Therapy, *body boundaries* involve the demarcation line between one's own body and that which is outside one's body. Body boundaries are shaped by the past and become a basic of operation for dealing with the world. (Levy, 1995) Having strong body boundaries supports self-esteem, and sense of a presence to allow one to improvise and to be connected to others authentically.

A dialogue from one session with H

H: Can you turn the TV on?

M: I am here with you, why do we need the TV on when we can do something more meaningful together?

H: Yes, you are right. We do not need the TV

H: Can you give me a massage?

M: Yes, we can do massage together now

H: No, I want you to do it for me

M: Of course, I can do it for you easily. However, I am only here three times a week. If we each do a massage together on our own body, then you can do it for yourself whenever you want.

H: But I can't do it, my hands are shaking. I die now

M: (Looking into her eyes) I am here with you now. You can't die yet. You are talking and that, means you are breathing and alive.

I turn on the music from the *Sound of Music* and we both spontaneously sing along to the songs. At the same time, my right hand squeezes my left hand. I give a massage to my each of my fingers and encourage H to mirror me. Slowly H squeezes her fingers and follows my movement.

I try to have a clear structure and use repetition to enhance H's orientation. We often begin our activity with three deep breaths and sing AUM three times while lifting the arms up high. We use the song "*Do Re Mi*" that has a clear rhythmic beat to tap on different parts

of the body for body awareness. Along with lyrics to “I Have Confidence,” we punch with direct and strong movements. Then H spontaneously freezes her gesture.

M: What are you doing?

H: I am a super woman (pauses for a while) without power.

Then we have a good laugh.



Photo 2: A finger massage, Photo taken by Franschman, 2015

As I work with H, I find that the integration of movement and music contribute to connecting and building relationships. Movement and music reflect, express, and embody culture, and connect us to each other. The Dance/Movement Therapy session with H is first enriched by use of her favorite song *Edelweiss*, which leads us to experience body awareness, deeper conversation, expressive movement, kinesthetic empathy and connection. Our conversation opens up to many different topics about life, death, childhood, love, music, and hobbies. Though limited by the physical and cognitive disabilities characteristic of dementia or Alzheimer, attunement to movement and music are still effective modalities to promote connection, open up feelings and access joy and humor within this population in a way that language cannot.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting back on *Caught Falling*, particularly on Touch and Movement in Contact Improvisation, I understand the essence of touch and movement as means of attunement, connection and development. These are significant aspects of Dance/Movement Therapy. I appreciate the depth and richness of Contact Improvisation and its insights that are really metaphors of life. Over the past year of internship with two quite different populations, I have experienced how attuned movement in Dance/Movement Therapy sessions benefits both these populations by enhancing connections to self and others.

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