

## Channeling the Body's Wisdom



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**Abstract:** This article describes the author's experience with dance as a sensory experience. The author discusses dance as an experience, an art form, and a way of investigating the author's connection with the past and her ancestors.

**Keywords:** Dance, Ireland, movement, somatic practitioners, ancestry, performance  
doi:10.18113/P8ik159885

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### Gut Feelings

I recently saw an article title alleging that scientists have now confirmed the “gut feeling” to be a real thing. I imagined the eye rolls, smirks, and rib jabs somatic practitioners and movement specialists might be giving their scientist counterparts. The concept of knowing in and through the body is not a foreign belief in my world. Even before I entered the academic arena of dance, the concept of trusting my visceral, intuitive, and cognitive responses equally was a touchstone for me throughout my life.

Someone once asked me why I picked dance as my art form. This is a complicated question. I didn't “pick” dance. If I were to pick an artistic talent or medium, I would choose singing for many reasons—it's easier on the knees and more readily accepted as a worthwhile talent. Dance, as I told this person, is where I am most Me. I started dancing almost as soon as I could walk. Movement is in me in a way that my small self naturally recognized and embraced; it was truly second nature. It is through movement that I know myself. By moving, I have learned, grown, and shared myself. It is, quite simply, the language of my soul. As a moving body, I

know myself in a way that I could never understand through mental processes alone.

**Figure 1. Dancing in Ardmore**



### **The Larger Context**

Moving gives firsthand knowledge of one's body, its' abilities, likes, and dislikes. We move before we speak; a baby experiences his environment and himself physically long before he can verbalize. Dance can convey ideas and details that cannot be expressed through verbal language. Movement allows for metaphors, archetypes, images, and emotions to be passed from one person to the next in a shared, sensory experience.

Dance, for me, is a tool of communication. I believe it has the capability to cross boundaries of culture, language, place, and time. Dance may be used as an agent of change, a call to action, or a place of coming together for humanity. Through examining my personal story, I explore and relate to the larger human condition. I have strived to make works that speak truth about emotions and experiences. Through making and performing dances, I have longed to reach others and give them a bit of the ecstasy that movement provides me.

**Figure 2. ETCH Dance Co. Rep Shot**



### **Trips of Discovery**

My first trip to Ireland in 2011 was one of recognition and acceptance. I have felt the call to visit my ancestral homeland for much of my life. I craved a connection to the land in a way that I could not communicate or understand. It was as if I needed the experience and the opportunity to encounter the past, so I could navigate my present and future. I recognized the Irish terrain. I recognized myself there. It was a sense of peace and homecoming.

During the trip, two sites were especially transformative for me: Timoleague Abbey and Dromberg Stone Circle. As I looked at the ruins, climbed upon the rocks, and touched the gravestones, I felt part of something larger. Visiting Timoleague Abbey was a completely surreal experience of arriving inside myself. In the midst of these crumbling stones by the sea, I began to move. I realized that my body is like the

abbey. It is becoming a beautiful ruin that houses all that has come before and the possibility of what will grow upon that groundwork. “I need to dance here,” I said, standing inside the Dromberg Stone circle, feeling the energy of the place coursing through me. Here was not just that circle; it was the whole of the Irish land. It wasn’t a clawing need or even a hunger that I was feeling. It was a beautifully serene acceptance that I had found my place in the world and, to experience it fully, I needed to move in it. I carried this throughout my trip in the country and left knowing I needed to return. At the time, I knew my heart had been touched, but I was not aware of the depth of the seeds that were planted that would change my creative life so fully.

**Figure 3. Working at Timoleague Abbey**



**Figure 4. Working at Dromberg**



### **The Underpinning Project**

In 2013, I conceived the project Underpinning. Underpinning was an examination of how ritual and identity form the layers needed to make a site a place, something that is inscribed, embodied, and material. The objective was to create an embodied practice of dance that used memory to excavate a movement vocabulary. The role of place, memory, and ritual was explored as a catalyst for creating community through collective experiences.

**Figure 5. At Dolmen**

Underpinning was a new type of process for me. I developed a place-based process for the project. Work was centered around Timolegue Abbey, which I had visited in 2011. I also spent time in Dublin and on the Blasket Islands. The place-based process went deeper than previous site-specific or site-focused work I had created. This allowed for greater inquiry and pushed the generative aspects of the place to take it to a deeper level.

**Figure 6. Underpinning in Performance**

**Figure 7. Underpinning in Performance**



**Figure 8. Underpinning in Performance**



Because of this amazing exploration, my whole thinking of dance, my understanding of my body, and my experiencing of place began to change. I have struggled to find the words that can adequately explain the complete inevitably as well as colossal nature of the shift. I am not sure I can do it justice. The connection to the sacred ruins intrigued me. Why, in ancient, decaying stones, do I feel so rooted, so alive, so purposeful? Why do I need and how can my need for ritual become rooted in my artistic life? How can embodied actions counter the disconnect/dissatisfaction with modern life? These questions become the root of the Pilgrimage Project in 2015.

### **The Pilgrimage Project**

The Pilgrimage Project revolved around visits to sacred sites, including holy wells and ruins as well as pilgrimage treks throughout the country. The footage generated by these trips will result in several dance films to be released over the course of the next year.

**Figure 9. Teampall Bheanáin on Inis Mór**



Through this project, much of my process has been refined. I now look at work only in terms of place based inquiry. Site rehearsals are treated dually as research and performance, due to the public nature of working in the open. Video installations and dance films are as important as traditional stage work, if not more so. Documentation and archiving of the project are fully employed in the process and are less an afterthought.

When I choose a site, I do preliminary research on the place, surrounding area, pertinent history, key figures, etc. Historical and fictional text is used. If possible, I talk to people who have been to the location to get an idea of what I might encounter. I gather pictures and check websites. Once I arrive at the place, I let most of what I learned move to the background so I can have my own experience. I spend time in the place, walking the area, noting feelings, images, and ideas that arise. I do not try to make sense of them but allow them to take shape without interference.

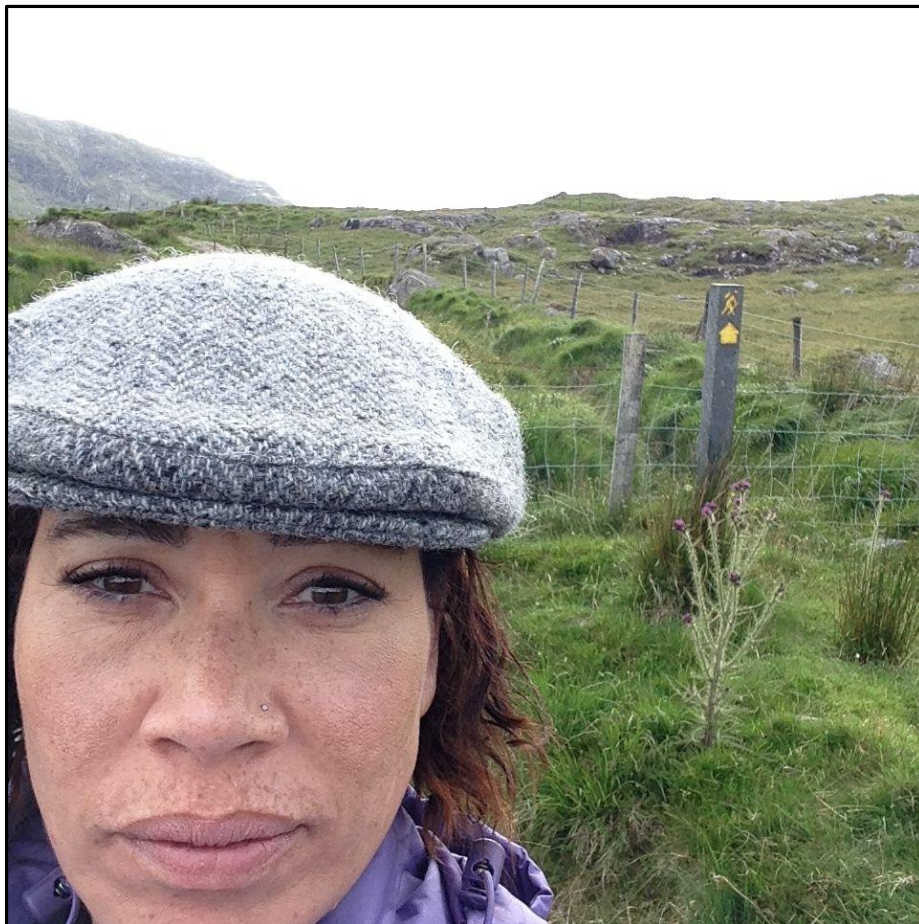
On my second research pass, I talk to locals and read local resources. I create my own map of a space. This is sometimes a map-like drawing at other times an abstract drawing. My map could also be a list of words or a story that I feel pressed to write. I also take my own pictures or preliminary video footage. I begin to visualize movement in that place and ask myself what the place is saying to me or what do I need to say to/about that place. When I begin actually creating dance in a place, it feels very much as if the movement just comes. I do not question why a desire to move a certain way feels right. I do not judge that I may not be moving like I would normally move. I do not worry about what the movement looks like. I just move. And, from wherever the movement springs, it feels in dialogue and pertinent to the place.

### **Places of Process**

The process of picking the places for work in 2015 comprised a bit of research and lots of intuition. I read a book about Ardmore and knew we needed to begin our pilgrimage experiences there. It was a transformative weekend upon the cliffs with two holy wells and an ancient hermitage. A bus tour for students led to my

decision to revisit the Wicklow Mountains and St. Kevin's Hermitage. Another book on holy wells had me striking up and down the countryside to visit wells of the Goddess/Saint Brigit, Arch Angel Michael, St. John, St. Patrick, and others. Wandering in unmarked areas essentially looking for holes in the ground filled with water took some patience and lots of listening. I often felt shortly into our journey whether it would be successful. The act of listening to the stirrings of my heart from the land was a beautiful process of letting go and learning to trust. When I did trust the inner knowledge, the experience was always more poignant, even if the external goal was not achieved.

**Figure 10. On Pilgrimage**



I chose the Aran Islands as a main place for the Pilgrimage Project with no research. In fact, the name popped into my head and I said, "I need to spend time there." It was beyond the "right place at the right time" scenario. Many moments

of serendipity and rightness accompanied our work on the island, including finding the books of Dara Molloy and having the chance to meet the Druid Priest and author. We also had a wonderful occurrence of meeting an unlikely guide while lost in the countryside on pilgrimage to the church ruins of Teampall Chiarain, While climbing a hill a large black dog blocked the way, as I attempted to continue along the path, the dog began to growl and move forward. Deciding that we should wander away from the growling dog, we turned to move back down the hill. Behind us and over just a bit was the Teampall we were searching for. After spending several pleasant hours dancing at the church, drinking from the holy well, and touching the standing stones, we headed off again. As we paused at the bottom of a road to determine the next path, our furry guide bounded up to us, wagging his tail and drooling happily. Clearly pleased with the part he had played, he pranced around as I laughed and offered him thanks for sending us back in the right direction.

**Figure 11. Performing Scarf Rituals at Sundial**



### **Meaningful Change**

Through this project I began to know the sacred aspects of the ruins in a more in depth way. I also began to experience myself in a more sacred light. It is difficult for me to put into words what I feel, but it is not about religion or my preconceived notions of God. This work has pushed my understanding of the divine and the scope of how nature is a reflection of divine perfection. The dances felt as though they were channeled from the energy of the place more than forged by my understanding of the form and structure of dance. I felt in touch with my archetypal self and ancestral tribe in a way I have not previously known. Because of this project and these three treks, I no longer look at dance in the same manner. I can no longer separate the dance or myself from the sacred. This has been a profound and scary step in my creativity, but I cannot deny the changes of these experiences or what I feel called to create from them.

**Figure 12. A Cliff in Ardmore**



**Figure 13. Teampall Chiarain on Inis Mór**



What I know from these projects:

- When you act upon a KNOW, when you act upon an intuition, or when you move forward in yourself, transformative creativity and power that is unleashed.
- In order to know something, you sometimes have to forget or let go of other notions.
- Letting go of the tangible for the intuitive can be a rewarding, challenging, and awe-inspiring journey.
- Through my body I know myself. This is an ongoing and continual process. I can also know my archetypal self, exploring how myth is created through me and how I can continue these myths through my body.

- Through moving I know others and find my tribes, whether they are members of the dance community, the somatics/body workers community, the Celtic Christian/Neo-Pagan community, or my ancestral tribe.
- Through movement I can know place and the land. I can channel the memories and access the energy of place to experience it on a visceral level. I have access to the stories of my tribe through my interaction with the land. Though these stories do not carry words, they are transformative, emotional, and evocative.

## Photo Credits

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