

FOCUSING AND WRITING ABOUT DOING THE DANCE

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INTRODUCTION

My chief objective in writing this article is to demonstrate the wider application of Focusing and the felt sense in the pursuit of creative and/or expressive endeavours. Written from the perspective of my personal experience in researching and writing a Master of Philosophy thesis, I will show how my understanding of Focusing and the felt sense bridged two entirely different modes of expression: doing Croatian folk dance and writing about it. I hope that the reader will gain insight into the richness of the phenomena I present, and the unique possibilities inherent to having an awareness of Focusing and the felt sense of one's creative work.

BACKGROUND

As a child, I remember watching my mother spinning on stage. Although I had watched her spinning many times in the many different formations of the *kolo* (circle dance), this time I was intently aware of her skirt: I watched in awe, as the hemline furled and unfurled around her ankles, while she danced to the music of the *tamburica* (stringed instruments). I remember her beaming, smiling face, and her spontaneous high pitched yipping, 'Yu, yu, yu, yu, yu!', which was greeted with the loud approval of the audience.

For as long as I can remember, Croatian folk dance, music and song have been a part of my life. In fact, *folklor* (folklore) has not only been a part of my life, but an intrinsic part of life in my family. *Koleda* Croatian Folkloric Ensemble was founded in Sydney in 1967 by my parents, Ljubo Crvenkovic and Vera Crvenkovic, when I was three years old. Although my early upbringing was filled with the movement, sights and sounds of *Koleda*, my official Croatian folk dance training commenced later, at age twelve. My parents were initially reluctant to allow me to join the ranks of folklore dancers and singers, but for me, there was never any question about my involvement in the spinning circle of the *kolo*. For as long as I can remember, the urge 'to do' was always there: I wanted, or rather *had to* participate.

Many years later — exactly thirty years after the formation of *Koleda* — I had reached a turning point in my relationship to dancing in the *kolo*: now the urge 'to do' was enhanced by the urge to delve more deeply into my dance experience and to write about it. As I recall, there was a distinct sense of something wanting to be 'carried forward by explication' (Gendlin 1995), so I embarked on a formal research program as a postgraduate student at the Department of Performance Studies, The University of Sydney, Australia. What was most appealing was that my research program would involve the study of other dance and movement genres, embodiment theories, and the phenomenology of dance, which would culminate in writing a 60,000 word thesis.

At first, I imagined that writing about a passion which is ‘in my blood’ would be a relatively straightforward task. I could see myself writing with the same ease I experience when I dance in the *kolo*. I soon realised I was wrong. As my research progressed, not only was I required to examine a dance genre which I had taken for granted for almost a lifetime, I was also required to re-examine my own taken-for-granted ability to write about it.

In addition, I found much of the existing literature unrelated to my own rich experience of Croatian folk dance phenomena. More often than not, the various approaches adopted by dance scholars were either ‘missing the mark’, or conflicting with my own embodied understanding and felt knowing of Croatian folk dance. The various historical, cultural and gender theories were saying one thing, while my body knew more, knew better. Out of this, I soon realised that my chief objective in writing my thesis would be to try to get back to the original embodied experience of dance, with particular emphasis on folk dance.

Concurrent with my dance research, I commenced studies with my aunt, Nada Lou, to become a Focusing Trainer-in-Training. Driven by the desire to heal the legacy of a congenital condition which led to kidney failure, haemodialysis, and finally a kidney transplant at the age of twenty-seven, I enthusiastically embraced the training. Little did I know that this profound body-based process called Focusing would not only guide my healing process, but also provide the key to writing about my own body-based dance experience. As my understanding of Focusing and the felt sense deepened, so did my research and writing.

WRITING ABOUT DANCE EXPERIENCE

There are things I learned... with my body, and some of these things it has taken me years to learn to articulate in writing. But that is not to say that they were without meaning when I could only speak them through dance (Browning:1995:xi).

A common dilemma, shared by practitioners of many dance and movement genres, I believe, is to try to put into words what they actually do and feel when they dance. Indeed, the breadth of this massive, murky territory is so great that many dance practitioners may wonder about the futility of such an exercise, questioning, ‘Why bother?’ Some may argue that writing about dance experience detracts from the experience itself, while others may not consciously recognise the ability to crossover from one medium to another. Many simply do not know how to communicate what they do in language so that, to borrow Gendlin’s phrase, ‘the implicit intricacy continues to function’ (Gendlin 1991:18).

This was made clear to me in my very first dance writing endeavour. After an initial six-month period of researching dance texts and attending seminars on embodiment theories, I was asked to produce a long essay on any aspect of my dance experience. To ease myself into the task, I chose what is for me one of the most enjoyable aspects of Croatian folk dance performance, namely, wearing original folk costume. But as I started to write, I found myself grappling with my inability to explore my own dance experience while trying to integrate the theoretical models to support my argument. The end result was less than satisfactory: my sentences were stilted, my choice of words wrong. A flow was clearly missing.

From my previous experience in writing literary analyses and short-story fiction, I was aware that the writing required something altogether different. This writing was about something directly related to my own first-person experience of dancing steps and moving in a *kolo* (or circle) with other people. It was something directly related to the many auditory, olfactory, tactile and kinaesthetic sensations involved in wearing a costume. It was something about forming the right bell-shape with my skirt while rotating on my axis. It was something about knowing how far to lift my foot up and down from the floor, or knowing how much endurance is required to maintain movement in the *kolo*. It was something about having to be in-synch with a partner or a group of dancers. It was all of this, and much, much more. Ultimately, it was writing about things which are, according to phenomenologist Leder, always part of a 'corporeal gestalt' (1990:25).

Croatian folk dance — like other dance and movement genres — incorporates a complex fusion of finely tuned, yet shifting foci for the dancer. For me, the greatest challenge in writing about my dance experience was to learn how to isolate the shifting foci and other elements that are always inseparable in practice. In addition to this, I had to express what my body knows in an entirely different 'language' from Croatian folk dance. I could not convey my knowledge of doing the dance in the same way I did to an audience at a performance. I had to learn how to convey the doing to an audience of readers by bringing my experiences to life on a blank piece of paper. And in both cases, I had to ensure that my writing would resonate with dancers and non-dancers alike.

I was acutely aware of my frustration and disappointment in not achieving what I had set out to do. After a long discussion with my supervisor, I recognised that I would have to find a way to analyse aspects of my own dance experience, as much as I would have to acquire new discursive skills to experiment with forms of language and theoretical models. I realised that I had to develop or even discover an approach which would permit me to mediate between the two highly variable, yet equally valuable modes of expression: dance practice and discourse about it.

But where to start? At the time, I didn't consciously acknowledge that this approach was 'right in front of my nose'. In fact, I became increasingly reluctant to write, and even when I tried to, I found myself struggling, literally 'lost for words'. I was now in the midst of what is commonly known as writer's block.

FOCUSING AND WRITING

As I reflect on the presence of what I now call 'my writer's block'. I can no longer recall how long it lasted. I do recall, however, that I tried to rationalise its existence, reasoning that I was tired or that it was simply a 'passing phase.' Yet this so-called phase wasn't passing; it looked set to stay, and I finally reached a point of desperation.

The moment I decided to use Focusing to get in touch with the writer's block was neither planned, nor something I had consciously thought about. I was still fairly new to Focusing and was using it primarily to get in touch with the debilitating effects of years of medical intervention from my early childhood onwards. I didn't make the connection that

Focusing had other possible applications, especially in relation to the creative process, until one day, when I happened to stumble on it.

I vividly remember sitting at my desk, feeling a sense of desperation at the prospect of being unable to write, yet again. My long essay was in front of me, as well as a piece of blank paper for note taking. But instead of trying to rationalise away the block or fix it, I decided to consciously take my awareness to my felt sense. With this decision, I started to leaf through my long essay, reading and re-reading the material. All the while, I was checking and re-checking my felt sense in relation to what I was reading.

As I did so, I started to feel a sense of something different: Although I was aware that something was missing in my writing, the whole sense of what was missing started to open up. I realised that my writing was mimicking the style of other dance writers, and that ‘I’ was not being myself. In a bid to ‘fit in’, the foundation of my writing was not my felt experience of doing the dance, but the theories and writings of others. Instead of developing my own concepts and terms, I was trying to slot my writing into existing modes of discourse. And with this, I experienced a profound shift. I felt a great sense of relief, and with a big out-breath, knew exactly what I had to do.

As an experienced Focuser, I can now clearly identify what took place during this process: paradoxically, the shift in my writing came about by precisely being with the vague sense of what was missing, or rather, what was implied in that which was missing. This experience resonates with Gendlin’s example of the ‘blank’ or in discussing the poet’s creative process:

The poet stops in midst of an unfinished poem. How to go on?...

The poet reads and re-reads the lines. Where they end something does come!
The poet hears (knows, reads, senses...) what these lines need, want, demand,
imply... What the next line must say is now already here — in a way...

The blank is vague, but it is also more precise than the poet can as yet say.
It cannot be said in common phrases... This... demands and implies a new
phrase that has not yet come. So the... is more precise than what has ever been
said before in the history of the world (Gendlin 1991:19).

In the same way as the poet’s process, there was a sense — through my Focusing — about what the written lines ‘wanted’, ‘needed’, or ‘implied.’ Rather than perceiving that which was missing as something that was simply missing, I found myself reading and sensing into what was *implied* by my bodily sense of what was missing. In effect, what I initially perceived as missing was now fraught with meaning and possibility. What’s more, I was surprised by the exactitude of what was implied by the felt sense which would not ‘let up’ until I deciphered its meaning.

Because I deciphered the meaning of the felt sense, this exercise proved to be a turning point in my writing. On one level, I recognised that my felt experience of doing the dance was not so much ‘missing’, as it had been excluded from my writing. On another level,

I recognised, with absolute conviction, the primacy of the body in language and discourse. With these two insights, I experienced a transformation in my writing: instead of reaching another block, my felt sense implied better sentences, more well-rounded sentences, and words that reflected my experience of doing the dance more precisely. Perhaps even more significantly, my felt sense of that which was missing implied the next step in terms of my writing style. Because I was engaging with my own embodied experience, and because I would be combining theoretical and anecdotal material, there was a sense that ‘being myself’ would involve writing in a first-person, down-to-earth style. Although this first-person writing style was unfamiliar to me in my previous academic work, there was a knowing that such an approach would free up my writing, and allow me to engage with my dance experience more fully. All in all, through this exercise, I consciously discovered that ‘the written lines imply something that will revise — those very lines’ (Gendlin 1991:19).

In addition, I started to contemplate the natural connection between the felt sense and creativity. Gendlin has said that,

Creative people have probably always used this method [Focusing]. What is really new in it is the specificity with which we can describe the steps and teach them (1980:15).

As a person who considers herself ‘creative’, my first encounter with Focusing and the felt sense in terms of my writing was not entirely new. Prior to learning Focusing, I was marginally aware of the presence of a ‘fuzzy’ inner sense whenever I engaged in a broad range of expressive endeavours, including folk dancing, singing, playing the piano, and of course, writing. However, I neither had a name for it, nor could I completely identify its origins. What came to me after this first encounter, was the recognition that I had accessed what Gendlin variously refers to as the felt sense, the implicit and the direct referent, many times and to varying degrees, over and over again. What was different this time, and what has continued to be different since, was that I directly and consciously sought out, located and identified the felt sense in relation to both my writing and my dancing. I no longer perceived this part of my expressive and creative process as indefinable or mysterious, but as something I could deliberately and practically engage with. And I now had a name for it: the felt sense.¹

For me, the act of recognising that I could deliberately attend to and engage with the felt sense in relation to my creative work was revelatory: I started to see changes come about not only in my writing, but in the content of my work. As I consciously engaged with my felt sense in relation to my writing, I noticed a natural overlap between the felt sense related to my writing and the felt sense related to my felt experience of doing the dance. For example, I would check the rightness or wrongness of a word or phrase I used to describe a step or movement against my felt experience of a step or movement; often, I would also wait for a word to come out of my otherwise ‘word-less’ felt experience of a step or movement. In my research too, I found myself checking the rightness or wrongness of what I was reading against my own understanding and felt experience of doing the dance. In effect, I noticed an interactive process whereby each felt sense would inform the other, and vice versa.

Further, as I delved more deeply into my dance experience, an imperative need to move, to dance and to sing would often emerge out of the felt sense. Quite naturally, I would switch from the writing mode, to the dancing/performing mode and back, to elucidate and articulate my felt experience. I would repeatedly stamp out step sequences on the kitchen floor, clap out various syncopated and unsyncopated rhythms with my hands, and sing various song phrases in full voice. Guided by my felt sense, I employed these, and many similar methods, in an effort to get closer to the immediate, moment-to-moment awareness inherent to dance experience, and to give words to what up until now, had been ‘word-less.’

FOCUSING, THE FELT SENSE AND RESEARCH

As words were given to what had been up until now ‘word-less’, my writing progressed. But once again, I was faced with another obstacle. This time it was not writer’s block; it was something else altogether: I felt as though I had come up against a ‘wall’ with my research. Earlier, I mentioned how I found much of the existing literature unrelated to my own rich experience of Croatian folk dance phenomena. I also mentioned how I found the absence of phenomenologically dense descriptions bewildering, given that dance is concerned with living, breathing, moving bodies. I was once again confronted by the scarcity of appropriate material, except this time it was specifically in relation to the role and contribution of costume in dance.

What I was looking for was material which would resonate with my felt experience of wearing costume in the *kolo*: how the dancer ‘works’ the costume to visually emphasise and enhance movement through a range of shapes and effects; how it displays skill and technical mastery of a step or movement; how it smells, feels and even ‘sounds’ during movement; and how in some instances, it may even encumber movement. After scouring many dance texts, it appeared to me that the countless illustrative and pictorial images displaying dancers performing in costume far outweighed meaningful discourse on the subject. Overall, I was left with the impression that most scholars deem costume to be a purely decorative accessory in the dance, not a phenomenon in its own right. For me, the incongruity between this major facet of my felt experience in doing folk dance and the existing discourse was frustrating, and I had no idea how to proceed.

As my research continued, I turned to obscure texts in an attempt to discover something close to my own felt experience of the specialness integral to wearing costume. As I did so, I began to notice a vague yet familiar ‘smell’ wafting in and out of my conscious awareness. At first, I didn’t pay much attention to this smell; it seemed insignificant, and I chose to ignore it. Yet with time, the smell intensified, becoming more and more persistent. In effect, each time I sat down to research and troubleshoot the topic, the smell would emerge, without fail. It soon became apparent that this familiar smell was not unconnected from my work or the research at hand. Indeed, the smell was a ‘memory’ that came from my felt sense of wearing a particular costume during dance.²

When the smell first emerged, I immediately recognised its origin: it was the highly specific, deep, musty smell of a costume I have worn at performances and for special occasions since I was thirteen years old. The costume is an ‘original’, meaning that it was made

‘from scratch’ by a peasant woman in a small village in Croatia, over one hundred years ago. Each piece of costume — from the most basic item to the most intricate decorative feature — is hand-made: the heavy flax and linen material from which it was made is hand-woven; several panels on the back of the skirt, and the borders around the blouse sleeves and apron are hand-crocheted; the silk-thread floral motifs adorning the blouse and apron are hand-embroidered. The smell itself is a pungent combination of the age of the fabric and the accumulation of sweat from a lineage of dancers who have worn it, including me. The smell is not only a potent reminder of the antiquity of the garment and the dances, but embodies my experience of dancing in the *kolo*.

As I turned my attention to the musty smell in a Focusing way, other images, sensations and memories emerged: I recalled the dust inherent to this particular costume and my frequent hay fever attacks when I wore it; I saw an image of myself dancing, rotating around and around, with the pleated skirt trailing around me; I sensed its heaviness against my skin. As I reflected on these and other elements, I experienced a profound shift in relation to my research. My olfactory felt sense, with all of its inherent memories, images and sensations, was entreating me to ‘follow my nose’ and go to ‘the source,’ namely, the costumes and my felt experience of wearing them.

What was initially a difficult and frustrating task shifted to self-discovery as I extended my search to include the actual costume and footwear of Koleda, as well as photographs and video archives. I found myself sifting through and poring over literally hundreds of photographs of dancers in costume and movement, discovering previously overlooked details. I unfurled carefully folded aprons and skirts, dug out other dusty costumes deemed too antique to wear, admired the richness of the many textures, and the nuances and intricacies of the needlework. I wore various costume pieces and noticed the smell of each fabric, savouring the felt sense of just dancing, of just being in the *kolo*, coming to the surface. I found an amalgamation of auditory, olfactory, tactile, and kinaesthetic sensations: memories, performances, venues, incidents.

In amongst all of this, I found myself not only regarding what was previously disregarded, but perceiving what was previously unperceived. In short, as I reflected on my experience, I started to perceive my experience reflexively, finding what anthropologist Victor Turner describes as a hall of mirrors:

...magic mirrors, each interpreting as well as reflecting the images beamed to it, and flashed from one to the others (1986:24).

Ultimately, this process — facilitated by my awareness of Focusing and the felt sense — provided an entirely new methodology as both a participant and an observer in my study of Croatian folk costume and dance. In turn, the effects of this new methodology reverberated throughout my work, whereby I developed fresh arguments, and utilised a different approach in my discussion of the role of costume in folk dance. Following my nose to ‘the source’ freed me up to engage more creatively with the subject matter, which was appropriate, given that I was writing about the intricate interplay of the processes involved in the creation of dance and material culture.

While I was satisfied, even elated, with the end result, I began to contemplate the deeper ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ workings of the felt sense. Apart from reiterating the wider application of the felt sense in relation to theoretical discourse, writing and research, I was struck by the intricacy of its involvement in each situation and stage of my work as it unfolded. As Gendlin has said, “Our bodies feel a situation directly” (Gendlin, 1993:22). In the given situation, the deep, musty smell was an embodied response to the dilemma I experienced regarding my research. In fact, it was not only a response to the situation, but a solution. It was effectively what Gendlin refers to as ‘right next-step implying.’

Gendlin has said that “the body implies not just more, but the right next step” (1993:30). In this instance, and in the instance with my writer’s block, the felt sense led me to the right next step. On a deeper level, what I find even more compelling was the complex interaction of the felt sense with a range of existing factors: not only did it encompass my embodied experience and understanding of Croatian folk dance, but my knowledge of theory and discourse, and of course, language. Referring to the example in Einstein’s autobiography of the guiding ‘feeling’ he had while working on the problem that led to the theory of relativity, Gendlin says that,

Certainly by ‘feeling’ he didn’t mean an emotional reaction; he had a... that implied a further step that was hard to form. The body can imply something new, after it has absorbed language and humanly sophisticated knowledge. Einstein’s body learned a lot of math and physics. But the new step came not just from the math and physics. No new theory followed from those. That is why it was a problem. After absorbing all that, his body had gone on to imply a right next step (1993:30)

For me in my mini ‘Einstein moment’ — and many other Einstein moments — the right next-step implied by my felt sense was impeccably and finely tuned with all of the necessary elements already in-place.

Many others have also recognised the embodied nature of knowledge. Performance anthropologist Lowell Lewis has said that,

Our bodies are ‘knowing,’ they have a sort of ‘intelligence,’ precisely because our knowledge and intelligence are, and always were, embodied states’ (1995:232).

As a dancer, I can appreciate that intelligence and knowledge are not, as per the Cartesian mind-body split, simplistically located in my ‘head’ or ‘brain.’ I am aware of a certain intelligence in my feet when I stamp out a particular step, or the intelligence of my body in coordinating and adjusting many different body parts during rotation. As a writer, I am also aware that this embodied intelligence is the ‘backbone’ in my writing. However, what I find so unique about Gendlin’s description of Einstein’s ‘feeling,’ is the concession that all human knowledge, even math, physics and language, is embodied in a complex system of relationships.

This resonates not only with the examples I utilised for the sake of discussion, but with my greater experience in using Focusing and the felt sense to write about doing the dance. In the process of my research and writing, I was often surprised by the ingenuity and originality of what was coming out of me. In fact, in the early days, I expressed disbelief and wonder that it was possible for such ingenuity to come out of me at all. I'd frequently pose such questions as, 'How did it know what was needed?' or 'How did it know what to say?' As an experienced Focuser, I can now lay these questions to rest, with a straightforward, 'it knows.' And while I find these topics endlessly fascinating, I sometimes simply marvel at the rightness of the felt sense and the myriad ways in which it has shown me the right next step in my research, my writing, my dancing and ultimately, my healing.

CONCLUSION

One of the greatest lessons I learned in writing about doing the dance is that it is possible to do and sense so much more with one's body than language permits. As Browning puts it, 'the body is capable of understanding more things at once than can be articulated in language' (1995:13). Certainly, in embodied practice, it is possible to do many things at once. It is also possible to embody something so deeply through the 'blood, sweat and tears' of hours of training that doing many things at once becomes much like a 'second skin', a taken-for-granted aspect of one's self.

Apart from this, through Focusing and the felt sense, I have learned that language is not only an effective medium in mediating one's experience, but as Gendlin says, 'implicit in the whole human body... in our muscular movements and in every organ...' (2004:132). The lingering implication, from my own experience, is that there are opportunities for participants in other dance and movement genres to explore the wealth of their own experience through Focusing and the felt sense, not only as a means to enrich their own understanding, but to widen the range of discourse and the general understanding of dance and movement to humanity.

ENDNOTES

1. In her excellent article titled *Making the Unknown Known*, Mical Goldfarb (Sikkema) explores the relationship between felt bodily experience and the creative process, with specific reference to visual art. Describing the outcome of her interviews with a number of artists in relation to the felt sense, Goldfarb points out that,

... it became clear that although each artist could, with pause for reflection, speak of and describe the bodily experience of her or his creative process, it was not necessarily true that any one of them was aware that it was this felt experience that had been attended to while working. Thus, the felt sense guiding the bringing-into-being of a particular work of art was a touchstone for the artist outside of explicit awareness (in Sheets Johnstone (ed) 1992:184).

2. Gendlin elaborates on experiences that are like a felt sense except that they have not yet formed into such a distinct, direct object. As he says,

... most people don't know to turn their attention to their bodies so that these experiences could form and come as a felt sense. Or sometimes they do become a distinct felt sense, but not because the person deliberately lets it come. Such experiences are, therefore, spread out along a continuum from being hardly noticed at all the way to coming as a felt sense (1993:21).

Fortunately for me, the at-first seemingly insignificant smell evolved into a distinct and recognisable felt sense, which proved to be the catalyst in my research.

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