

Moving into Community
- A Phenomenological Approach to Exploring Space and Movement -

Eurythmy at the Biennial Practice Conference
McGregor, South Africa
8 - 11 May, 2007

Liz Smith

*Thou art not set in space, space is set in thee,
If thou wilt cast it out, thou hast eternity.
Angelus Silesius*

“How would you describe space?”

I asked this question of the group who had chosen eurythmy as the art medium in which they would work for the duration of the four-day Biennial Practice Conference. This conference was the second of its kind run by the Cape Town based Community Development Resource Association, in the small village of McGregor situated on the edge of the Little Karoo. It drew 80-some social development practitioners from all over Africa and the world to explore development practice and articulate its core purpose. An exploration with the intention of claiming the place of the development sector as more than just the go-between, straddling the chasm between haves and have-nots, marginalised and mainstream, government and community, and the so-called ‘developed’ and ‘developing’.

Some of the questions asked were; What draws us all to this sector that professionalises the work of the heart? How do we maintain our integrity of purpose amidst the growing pressures and constraints of a thinking governed by resources and delivery? What is that purpose? And who are we?

The way of working in the conference was through story telling; telling our past stories, both individual and collective, and generating stories for the future. If we were really to tell a new story we would have to open ourselves to a new way of thinking, to become creative in the truest sense of the word. To help us reach these hidden places in ourselves, the process included working intensively in one of six art forms. These were painting, clay work, dance, voice, graphic art story-telling and eurythmy - the relatively new art of movement based on the creative principles underlying living process. Eurythmy takes into account that we are spatial beings, with certain spatial orientations. In eurythmy we do not just move *in* space but engage with it in a qualitative manner.

“Hmm, how would I describe space?”

The group looked nonplussed, bemused. Knitted brows and a scratching of heads.

“Well, it’s open,” said one.

“It’s the empty bits between the solid things.” We all laughed - the irony of it. We are spatial beings, we live in space, take up space, try to claim our place in space, and yet we don’t know how to think about it. What is space?

With this simple question we began a journey together to explore the space we inhabit. A journey extraordinary for its unexpected outcomes. Using ourselves as the instruments of exploration we became both the observer and the observed. Working in this way, experiencing ourselves in relation to space, revealed not only the qualitative differences of the various realms of space, but threw open windows into ourselves normally hidden from our consciousness. Meeting the other from this heightened sense of self, we collectively stood on the threshold of a truly creative space and experienced the sense of grace that wells from within it.

We began our journey by walking a straight line forward and backwards a few times, quite vigorously, to get moving, to get the blood flowing. A type of walking we do every day in our busy, goal directed lives. Then we brought a different element to our walking. We started paying attention. When I walk forwards, what do I see? What happens to the visible world? When I walk backwards, what do I see? We made an astonishing discovery. As we walk forwards, we see less and less of the visible world. As we walk backwards, more and more of the world is revealed to us. Some of the experiences expressed were that the forward movement resulted in feelings of narrowing and constraint, while moving backwards resulted in feelings of growing large, accompanied by a sense of freedom. Moving forwards space contracted and was compressed, moving backwards, space expanded, went on forever and felt relaxed. We then paid attention to what parts of ourselves we use when we move forwards and when we move backwards. Forwards, we use our eyes. Backwards, we become aware of our whole selves, of our back and arms and legs; we become aware of ourselves *in* movement, how we move; and we use what was described as an inner 'sensing' to find our way. When we had to negotiate our way around others, we discovered that we are more present when we move backwards, more aware of ourselves and open to what is. When we moved forwards past others we tended to look ahead to what, theoretically, should be. We were surprised that moving backwards in this case was easier, more flowing, with more space, whereas forwards we had to work hard to find our way through.

Paying attention in this way, we discovered that the world we move forward into and the world we move backward into are two vastly different worlds. The forward space is a world of light and colour; of surfaces and edges and boundaries; of discrete things, separate from myself. The back space is a world of movement with no clear distinction between inner and outer, between myself and space - an expansive world with no beginning and no end. And between these two worlds; the visible and the invisible, the formed and the forming, we find ourselves. We live at the interface of these two different worlds and, because of the way we are constituted, we find that we, ourselves, are the link. With this new awareness, that we carry these two worlds with us, we then walked forwards, conscious of the world behind us, and backwards, conscious of the world in front. This brought a new quality to our movement. Moving forward with an awareness of the back space, we felt much bigger, moving out of a vastness with a greater sense of certainty and purpose. Moving backwards, paying attention to the visible world in front, brought light and clarity to the invisible world enabling us to see so much more.

The effort of 'seeing' simultaneously in both ways, using our normal sense of sight as well as an inner 'sensing' and consciousness *in* our movement, created a sensitivity in the group that was

previously not there. A sensitivity to how we were moving, a sensitivity to the others in the group and a growing sensitivity of the space between us and what was starting to emerge there.

We then explored the other two directions of space; right and left. Moving right and left, very strictly, with shoulders leading, was difficult. We discovered that you can't walk sideways for very long without almost bumping up against an invisible barrier that made you want to walk the other way. For most, walking to the right was easier and more outgoing, whilst walking to the left brought up feelings of wanting to contain something and protect. We discovered that we became more aware of each other, of the social element, when we walked sideways. We experienced ourselves as social beings standing between the more active and outgoing side and the more introvert and nurturing side.

We placed ourselves at the centre of this cross formed by the four directions; forward, back, right and left, and moved these four qualitatively different worlds which both create and are created by our human form. We used this creative principle of space as the basis for the eurhythmy exercises we developed over the days. Exercises relating to freedom and constraint, intention and emergence, and, as a leader, trying to hold the balance lightly using our new-found awareness. We worked with strengthening our own centre while re-orientating to put ourselves into someone else's shoes. While we struggled to find our way in the movement we simultaneously tried to maintain our awareness of ourselves *in* movement and, very importantly, of ourselves in relation to the other, to the group. We observed how these relationships shift, develop, come close, move away and change shape. We discovered that these relationships were held on a delicate web of lines, lines that became visible where we moved them, but actually originated in the vast infinity of space. As we moved more we realised that these lines were three dimensional and became planes and spheres that held us in our movement. A vast complexity governed by a certain lawfulness. And at the centre of it all was our centre, individual and collective.

But when we came to try to describe this centre, this common holding purpose, it wasn't that easy. It eluded and tantalised and brought us time and again to the questions; What is at the centre, what is our purpose? It defied being named, pinned down to a neat definition. It wouldn't be held and chained and yet, the more we moved together, the more we knew it to be present, both between us and around us. For what began to emerge out of this way of moving, and observing in movement, was a growing connection between us, a bond that had not grown in the usual way. We had never sat down and shared our stories, our likes and dislikes, our interests and irritations. We didn't even share the type of work we did or where. Nothing of the usual exchange that can lead to deep regard. It was as if we by-passed that level and met directly through a shared experience, on a fundamental level, of what it is to inhabit a human form in a spatial world. And in so doing, we changed, as did our world and our experience of it. We caught a glimpse of what Rumi, the Sufi poet, meant when he said;

“This mud-body
is clear epiphany.”

We stood in a quiet circle at the end of the second day realising that what had begun as ‘the empty bits between the solid things’, had begun to grow, through our awareness, into something powerful which was uniting us. Instead of the abstract non-entity existing between the hard, defined, edges of things, the spatial world had begun to reveal itself as a qualitative, living world with the creative ability to both change and be changed by us. We formed a small community not along the lines of personality, of likes and dislikes, not according to belief systems or political leanings, or any of the usual things around which groups gather and grow, but through a gradual and shared expansion of our consciousness, individual and collective. By actively paying attention *to* and *in* our movement, we revealed a bit of the living, creating world we inhabit together. This new ‘seeing’ seemed to awaken us to the nature and enormity of what it means to be human, and to enable us to recognise it both in ourselves and in the other.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that, on the final day of the conference, when it came to creating a presentation of our core purpose, it seemed to well up effortlessly between us, each individual contribution augmenting the whole. Because we lived it, and it lived, as a cohesive whole between us, we could finally articulate it – the intention to create a new way of being, to start a journey into the future, not knowing where it might lead but paying attention along the way. Discerning, holding the tension, with a wakefulness in every minute of every day, knowing we may get it wrong sometimes but always working out of the certainty of spirit, towards being the best that we may be. So that, in the words of one of our group, we might say, “The development of me is the development of us all, and the development of us all is the development of me.”

To quote Rumi again;

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field -
I’ll meet you there.”

Perhaps that is where we met.