

ENTERING THE HEART OF EXPERIENCE: FIRST PERSON ACCOUNTS IN PERFORMANCE & SPIRITUALITY

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In this paper, we take up arguments for the development of a rigorous first-person methodology for consciousness research (Varela & Shear, Petitmengin), and apply them to the study of performance and spirituality. We shall outline the implications of adopting and including the first person perspective in performance research, and then explore its applicability to the particular case of the enquiry into relationships between performance and spirituality. It is our contention that the promotion of rigorous and contextualised first-person accounts can provide this field of study with significant data; high-quality descriptions of what Varela and Shear called “The View from Within.”¹ (1999). Such descriptions could provide detailed insights into, for example, the nature of the performative phenomena which yield spiritual experience. Further, we shall explore the extent to which the adoption of the first-person mode of enquiry can increase, as well as illuminate, the experience in question.

At the same time, however, we are mindful of the need to allow for a variety of modes of expression and to leave space for that which resists explanation. Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Susan Kozel articulates something of the intertwining of thought and experience that can be viewed as a struggle between irreconcilable opposites or, perhaps more usefully, as an ongoing dance:

It is impossible to prevent thought from trying to pin down experience just as it is impossible to prevent experience from blowing holes in structures that attempt to codify it. Merleau-Ponty knew this, and attempted to respect the being of thought and the being of sensation, hence the circle he described in which reflection and the pre-reflective enter into relationship, and his dynamic notion of hyper-reflection.²

¹ See: Francisco Varela & Jonathan Shear, eds. *The View from Within: First Person Approaches to the Study of Consciousness* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 1999), 3.

² Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (Cambridge MA/London: Leonardo/MIT Press, 2007), 22.

In this spirit we cannot simply assume that something cannot be given linguistic form anymore than we can assume that the linguistic products of our experiences are the last word on the matter. This inherent instability offers the possibility that we keep open to the resonances and challenges of the experience of others.

Theatre and Performance Studies has predominantly focused on the third-person perspective. In the editorial for the October 2011 edition of *Theatre Research International*, Elaine Aston noted that:

Traditionally, the role of theatre and performance scholars is to examine theatre from critical and theoretical perspectives that adopt an outside-in approach. That is to say, our vantage point locates at some disembodied, critical distance from the process and the practice, from the making and the moment of showing. Increasingly, however, there are signs of inside-out approaches to theatre where avenues of theatre and performance enquiry are shaped by means of getting closer to practice.³

The examples of the latter which Aston presents emerge from methodologies of practical engagement, fieldwork, and participant-observation (this kind of writing is much more the norm in other parts of the field than Aston's editorial suggests). First person methodologies go much further than these in their implicit critique of the exclusive use of “disembodied, critical distance.” Writing from a first-person perspective not only requires that the writer experience something of the practice or phenomenon they discuss, but also that the writer develop an advanced access to the inner aspects of the phenomenon in question. This method is particularly useful for research into those aspects of performance which emphasise internal and experiential phenomena; for example, psychophysical training, acting emotion, or work which is located at the interface between performance and spirituality.

First person methodologies enable us to “look inside.” Beyond the external aspects and the social, spatial, cultural and philosophical framings we might apply to performance, there lies a further layer, not so much of discussion as of data. Varela and Shear, in describing the phenomenal character of first-person methodologies, made reference to Thomas Nagel’s question, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (1974), and noted that:

³ Elaine Aston, editorial in *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (October 2011).

A phenomenon... is an appearance and therefore something relational. It is what something is for something else.⁴

A primary question, then, in relation to performance might be phrased as “What is it like to be in this practice?” “How does this experience appear to you from the inside?” In place of the “disembodied” voice, this question calls for an “embodied” response, one that both takes into account the role of the observing researcher and provides access to the detail of the “lived experience” of performance.

Researching Lived Experience

Claire Petitmengin, writing ten years after Varela and Shear's *The View from Within*, describes their work as laying “the foundations of a research program on lived experience.”⁵ Exploring approaches drawn from introspection, phenomenology, and Buddhist and Vedic meditation practices, Varela and Shear argued for the inclusion of a rigorous methodology of first-person accounts of experience in the study of consciousness.

First person methodologies are what enable the “pre-reflective micro-dynamics of lived experience”⁶ to become an object of study, to provide data alongside and in conversation with traditional third-person perspectives. The methodologies are designed to bring into focus details which would otherwise be outside our awareness. Specific methodologies are required because, as Petitmengin points out, the task of observing and reporting one's own experience entails considerable difficulty:

usually, we have only a very partial awareness of the way we proceed. And when we have to describe these experiences, it is much easier for us to express what we know, what we have heard or read about them, than the way we have really lived them.⁷

⁴ Varela and Shear, 3.

⁵ Claire Petitmengin, ed., *Ten Years of Viewing from Within* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009), 7.

⁶ *ibid.*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

This very human tendency to rely on concepts, labels and received ideas is one of the reasons why subjective accounts have traditionally been viewed with suspicion (see Petitmengin and Bitbol for a defence against criticisms of the validity of first-person accounts).

For Varela and Shear “first-person events” are the “lived experience associated with cognitive and mental events” whereas “3rd person descriptions concern the descriptive experiences associated with the study of other natural phenomena.” A key point is embedded in that sentence – “experiences associated” – that there is a subjective dimension to objective description. Varela & Shear’s claim is that: “the subjective is intrinsically open to intersubjective validation, if only we avail ourselves of a method and procedure for doing so.”⁸

Of course, their purpose is to develop a science of consciousness that incorporates first-person perspectives. They are keen to point out that they don’t consider a first person report to be “incorrigible.” Nor is it an easy approach, nor what they call a “just take a look” approach; it must involve rigorous and careful examination. Nor do they think that 1st person accounts are sufficient on their own; rather, they are interested in building links between 3rd and 1st person, often with the mediation of a 2nd person account. A second person is one who has “been there to some degree and is able to offer hints and suggestions.” This is clearly something that occurs in acting where we are working with affect, but it’s also there if we’re looking for presence in movement.

Don Hanlon Johnson reports something that occurred when he was working with Charlotte Selver:

In a class one evening many years ago, Selver invited a small group of us to walk very slowly around the room, paying particular attention to the contact between the soles of our feet and the rush mats on the hardwood floor. I was elsewhere, floating among worries about conflicts from the day's work, my impending divorce, and a painfully stiff neck. Drifting through the room with my attention on that “elsewhere,” I suddenly woke up to the sole of my right foot brushing the mats underneath, the solidity of the floor supporting me, the sounds of others, the feel of the air, and Selver's voice saying,

⁸ Varela and Shear, 1-2.

“ah, at last, you are there for your feet.” Her ability to notice that precise moment when my attention shifted from my self-involved chatter into the experience of my foot gave me a sense of how I could more easily inhabit my muscles and bones, and become less preoccupied with internal conversations.⁹

In this instance Selver (2nd person) is aware of Johnson’s experience and is not only able to witness it but also to corroborate or verify it. This verification is important: it’s not simply a being-with another’s experience but a recognition and affirmation that it has an intersubjective dimension. For Varela and Shear, without this possibility of verification, there is a risk that first person perspectives become solipsistic. In this exchange between Johnson and Selver there is the implication that Selver’s ability to recognize with considerable precision the moment when Johnson’s focus of attention moved from his thoughts to the “experience of [his] foot” can be learned. As a result of Selver’s affirmation of his changed focus, Johnson perceives the possibility of a different way of being in the world.

It is, perhaps, important to remember that Selver had set a specific task: the participants in the session were invited to “walk very slowly [...] paying particular attention to the contact between the soles of [their] feet and the rush mats.” Johnson experienced a moment when he “suddenly” became aware of the contact of foot and mat, and likens the shift of attention to waking up: he moves from being “preoccupied with internal conversations” and internal somatic tensions (“stiff neck”) into a present moment contact with the world. Whilst it may not be possible for an outside observer to access the *content* of those internal conversations it is not unusual to be able to notice that a person is preoccupied in such a way. On the other hand, the person who is thus preoccupied may be so involved in the content that they are unaware that they are caught up in an internal conversation. Once the person becomes aware that they are caught up in such an internal conversation, they are immediately in a different relationship to it. What’s not clear from Johnson’s account is whether he was *aware* that he was preoccupied with his “self-involved chatter” before he “suddenly woke up” or whether the sudden awareness of contact shifted his perception of what had been happening prior to that moment (whether the “waking up” was a “waking-up-to-the-preoccupation”).

⁹ Don Hanlon Johnson, “Body Practices and Human Inquiry: Disciplined Experiencing, Fresh Thinking, Vigorous Language,” in Berdayes, Vicente, Esposito, Luigi and Murphy, John W., eds., *The Body in Human Inquiry: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Embodiment* (New York: The Hampton Press, 2004).

The majority of what we *know* is implicit¹⁰ or pre-reflective,¹¹ and by unfolding our experiencing and bringing what is pre-reflective into reflective consciousness we can not only articulate what is happening in this present moment but also re-visit past experiences and recover further details. Johnson may have woken up to his “self-involved chatter” and his foot’s contact with the mat at the same moment or he may have realized that he was captivated by his inner drama on later reflection, but the point of the story is less the process of becoming aware and more the sudden experience of a changed awareness. There is a shift in experiencing that announces itself to a trained observer. In such a context we can see a possibility of evaluating the validity of a person’s claim to be experiencing a certain shift in consciousness. In terms of theatre this is something which may not only communicate itself to a teacher, but also to members of the public.

Before Johnson’s sudden moment of awakening it appears that he wasn’t reflectively conscious of his foot making contact with the floor. As his foot *was* making contact with the floor (he wasn’t walking on air) there would have been a pre-reflective awareness of the contact and the potential for that to be brought into reflective consciousness.¹² Such pre-reflective awareness can be accessed not only during the event but also afterwards, although this can require that the individual is trained and guided by someone familiar with an appropriate methodology.¹³

If we wish to bring our experiences into “reflective consciousness,”¹⁴ then we must take steps to develop a method by which to cultivate a particular use of attention. Evan Thompson writes:

In seeing, I attend to features of what there is to see. But I can also attend to

¹⁰ See: Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul/Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1962); See also Eugene Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*. (1962; reprint, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

¹¹ See Petitmengin; See also: Pierre Vermersch, “Describing the Process of Introspection,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Vol. 16. Nos.10-12 (2009): 20-57.

¹² See Vermesch.

¹³ See Vermesch. See also: Eugene Gendlin, *Focusing: How to Gain Direct Access to Your Body’s Knowledge* (London: Rider, 2003) and *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).

¹⁴ Petitmengin, 9.

how seeing feels, to what the activity of seeing is like for me.¹⁵

This reflection on the seeing itself, the experiencing itself, can be cultivated. Petitmengin lists some of the ways in which specific “gestures” may constitute a method by which to develop the perspective:

specific gestures may enable us to learn how to stabilize our attention, which is usually extremely capricious, on the particular experience that we are exploring; or to identify and abandon ('bracket') the beliefs and representations which surreptitiously substitute for the description of the experience itself; or to redirect our attention from the content of the experience, the 'what', which usually entirely occupies us, towards the modes of appearance of this content, the 'how' [.]¹⁶

Petitmengin's 'gestures' are those processes by which we bring to awareness the details of experience which would otherwise be outside awareness; for example, “the rapid succession of inner images, inner comments, slight emotions.” She presents this process as unfolding at (i) the level of experience and (ii) the level of the experience of becoming aware of one's experience.¹⁷

Performance and the First Person Perspective

Some of the “gestures” which Petitmengin identifies may not be entirely unfamiliar to performers who have techniques by which to stabilise attention, “bracket” sets of thought processes (for example, those that are unhelpful or irrelevant in the moment of performance), and, sometimes, to sustain a mode of attention in which both the content of the experience (the emotional or energetic quality, for example) and the means by which it is being generated (the score of mental and physical actions) are held in mind.

Aesthetic performance, of course, is a very special instance of “lived experience,” and performers, arguably, are required to have a cultivated ability to observe and manipulate the “micro-dynamic” details of their lived experience as it is in train. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that these micro-adjustments are also happening at a pre-reflexive level because a

¹⁵ Quoted in Petitmengin, 286.

¹⁶ Petitmengin, 10.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

performer's training and past-experiences have prepared the organism to respond rapidly and effectively to changes in the multi-level dynamics of live performance. It may only be after the performance that the performer is able to bring these events into reflexive awareness, and, even then, this process may not be as detailed as that of someone trained in one of the models proposed by Vermesch, Gendlin, or Stern.

Of key importance in consciousness studies is an awareness of the process of becoming aware which would enable it to be repeated. In the passage quoted above, for example, Don Hanlon Johnson, does not indicate the process by which he became aware of the contact of his foot on the mat: he describes a shift in consciousness which brings a wider experiencing but, in the text, the process by which that awakening occurred is left at a pre-reflective level. What happened in the moment when this sudden awakening occurred? Was it the result of an ongoing process of 'becoming aware of one's feet in contact with the ground'? Was it, perhaps, an accident of the foot making contact with the rush matting at an unusual angle? Without pursuing the matter with Johnson we have no idea what the answer to these questions might be, but if we want to understand the processes of becoming aware of pre-reflective experience and develop methods or "gestures" for activating these changes in awareness we will need this extra level of description.¹⁸

Performance practice and the study of performance are very different contexts to that of either consciousness studies or the study of the mind in Buddhist or other contemplative practice. Yet, performance practice shares this emphasis on developing a heightened awareness and discipline with regard to the movements of the mind and the behaviour of the body. Performers, trained to integrate mental and physical capacities in the service of experiential and expressive activities, have cause to develop their own awareness of and reflection on, the processes unfolding in their minds and bodies as they work.

There is a danger here of sounding as though we are making the performer's behaviour a special case, as if mindfulness in other occupations might not also extend the individual's capacity for engaging more with the intricacy of lived experience. That is not our aim: we want to highlight how the first-person approach might be useful for our understanding of the

¹⁸ These comments are not intended as a criticism of or commentary on Johnson's extensive and important work, a passage is taken out of context to illustrate a point.

relationships between performance and spirituality, including the spirituality of performance and the performance of spirituality.¹⁹

It might be argued that there is a correlation between the extent to which one is able to observe and articulate the details (and the totality of) of one's bodymind in action and the extent to which one is able to control and channel those same capacities. Thus, there may be a practical benefit to performers in developing the ability to observe and capture in a communicable form the detail of performative experience. As the meditator deepens her practice through sharpening mindfulness, so too a performer's mindfulness can extend her capacity to work in both fine detail and sophisticated complexity, in terms of controlling muscle, breath, thought, vision, etc. In conversation with Middleton, Tray Wilson (whose first-person account of a workshop experience appears in this issue) reported that her engagement in *kalaripayattu* sequences was sharpened by the challenge to sustain reflective awareness (with a view to writing the account). In particular, Wilson reported that in well-known sequences (in which she was able to perform from a cultivated capacity which could operate on a pre-reflective level), when she might otherwise have relaxed her conscious engagement, sustaining attention to the unfolding details generated an experience of heightened presence and acuity within the form.

Zarrilli himself offers a first person account of part of the process of preparing for and performing in Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*:

My attention shifts to my breath. I follow my in-breath as it slowly drops in and down to my lower abdomen. Keeping my primary attention on my in-breath and out-breath, I open my auditory awareness to Andy about three feet to my left....Listening for his

¹⁹ We are referring, here, to relationships as they are manifest in the very wide range of phenomena that can be seen to exist at the interface between the performative and the spiritual; this includes spiritual practices which have performative aspects, as well as those performance practices which have, or might open onto, spiritual aspects. Our broad definition of the word "spiritual" is perhaps best expressed by Andre Comte-Sponville: "we are finite beings who open onto infinity. [...] we are ephemeral beings who open onto eternity, and relative beings who open onto the absolute. This 'openness' is the spirit itself. Metaphysics means thinking about these things; spirituality means experiencing them, exercising them, living them." (2008: 136)

breath, I open my awareness further beyond Andy to the periphery, out through the top of my head toward the back of the theater, and behind me.²⁰

And:

I am perched on the edge of speech, sensing the potential words in my mouth, sensing the touch of the page of the book on the table with my left hand, and the touch of the weight of my forehead against my thumb and first two fingers. Following my breath, when I sense the lighting cue at its full warmth and intensity, and that the audience has indeed fully settled [...] the first line of the text unexpectedly comes out of my mouth riding a breath on a pitch with little colour [.]²¹

Except for the last sentence, these two extracts focus on the moment immediately prior to the beginning of the performance, the moments of gathering and waiting, of preparation. Zarrilli, in the full description from which these extracts are taken, describes what Petitmengin would call “gestures of letting go and reduction.”²² The aim of such a process is to drop the “knowledge that prevents us from entering into contact with our experience.”²³

In a passage that precedes his description of shifting his attention to his breath, Zarrilli describes his process of settling into the chair in which he is going to perform:

I check my placement on the chair, sensing the feel of the chair against my thighs and buttocks [...] I let my awareness open through the soles of my feet – sensing their relationship to the floor, and sensing the relationship between my lower abdomen and the soles of my feet.²⁴

By comparing Zarrilli’s description with that of Johnson we can get a sense of different levels of engagement with the world. Zarrilli’s sensing of his feet’s contact with the floor seems unproblematic, the gesture of letting go seems well-practiced, whilst in Johnson’s account it

²⁰ Phillip B. Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach after Stanislavski* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

²² Petitmengin, 11.

²³ Petitmengin, 11.

²⁴ Zarrilli, 43.

comes “suddenly” in the midst of being caught up in an inner conversation. Johnson seems to be describing an early moment in his awareness training, Zarrilli a much later one.

For Varela, Thompson, Rosch et al, and as the phrase “letting go” above will suggest, the development of the capacity for “embodied reflection” is less the development of a skill, and more an “*unlearning*” through which “Mindful reflection is then found to be a completely natural activity.”²⁵ What we let go of are “habits of mindlessness”²⁶ and the automatic conceptualisations that substitute for lived experience.

Getting Close - the First Person Perspective and Spiritual Experience

It is no coincidence that Varela's work on first person accounting was influenced by Buddhist practices such as *vipashyana* in which (amongst other things) one becomes aware of the distinction between concepts and the reality to which they relate. The meditator quickly realises how strongly conceptualisations stand in for reality, how frequently internal conversations stand between the subject and their experience.

Chogyam Trungpa pointed to this problem of relating to reality in the theatre:

In order to perform we have to relate to reality [...] So to begin, we have to have some training on how to relate to reality. It's not a matter of questioning the nature of reality, it's learning about your style of relating to reality. The theme of our theater practice is how we relate to things.²⁷

Trungpa went on to describe how we seem to ‘become completely incompetent’ on the stage. This observation is not original to Trungpa. It is a well-known problem in actor-training from Stanislavsky onwards, but Trungpa’s linking of this problem to the question of how we relate to reality presents the matter in a significantly different way: it’s not simply how we relate to life on the stage but how that is symptomatic of how we relate to reality in general.

²⁵ Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, & Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), 28-9.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 29.

²⁷ Trungpa, Chögyam. “Basic Sanity in the Theatre.” In *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*. Volume Seven. (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 667.

For Trungpa, theatre practice itself was a potential vehicle for training in the ability to relate directly to experience. Indeed, he developed a theatre training system called Mudra Space Awareness (as well as writing a number of plays), which Lee Worley describes as being:

created in the service of awakening and developing awareness. This awareness, inaccessible through words and concepts, must be experienced directly.²⁸

Trungpa's exercises (which continue to be taught and practised by Worley and others) bring participants into an intense encounter with both the experience of their bodies and minds, and the extent to which our awareness of these is typically lacking. Participants make the discovery that Varela *et al* note in sitting meditation: “that the mind and body are not coordinated.”²⁹

The gestures and attitude of the first-person perspective are intimately concerned with dissolving this dislocation of mind and body, thought and experience, mental activity and reality. We have, then, inter-relationships and kinships between meditation and first-person enquiry, and between meditation and performance; an aligning of purpose with regard to a dilated and unmediated (by conceptualisation) awareness, an embodied and presence-ful encounter with experience.

In order to pursue further the ways in which the first person perspective specifically illuminates the performance of spirituality, and the spirituality of performance, let us look more closely at the characteristics of the process of developing this kind of awareness.

Petitmengin writes:

First, the process of becoming aware of one's pre-reflective experience does not seem to be a process of distancing and objectification, or to entail ‘a kind of doubling or fracture or self-fission’ (Zahavi, 2008: 90) between an observer and an observed...

²⁸ Lee Worley, *Fearless Mercy: The Mudra Theatre of Chögyam Trungpa*, 2007, unpublished manuscript, 15.

²⁹ Varela *et al*, 25.

On the contrary, this process seems to consist of coming into closer contact with one's experience.³⁰

Closer contact implies a dissolution of the gap between the observer and the object of their observation, as in meditation practices such as *vipashyana* (or *vipassana*) in which one gets close in order to “know” the object rather than to “know about” the object. The nature of the attention being proposed here is not discursive – rather than grasping onto verbalised details or labels or analyses, the attempt is to bring a sustained and open attention. “Closeness” is as a result of the suspension of the everyday, abstract attitude which Varela *et al* described as a “spacesuit, the padding of habits and preconceptions.”³¹ The closeness sought in meditation and in the heightened awareness of the first-person perspective entails the removal of the “spacesuit” or, as Trungpa put it, the “cocoon.”³²

Petitmengin continues:

Second, the gestures involved in the process do not consist of accumulating new knowledge, but rather of stripping ourselves of the knowledge that prevents us from entering into contact with our experience. They are gestures of letting go and reduction rather than accumulation and enrichment.³³

Suspending our knowing enables a state of what Shunryu Suzuki called “beginner's mind,” uncluttered by preconception and habitual thought. If I do not know to call this heat in my calf muscle a “cramp” and categorise it as pain which I would rather be rid of, then I am free to enquire into that heat on its own terms – what kind of heat is this, what is it like to experience this heat, what is it that I call “heat”? Such an enquiring attitude, which takes nothing for granted and which seeks to go beyond convenient labels and prior understandings, serves both a deeper engagement in the mechanisms at play in a given experience and the provision of detailed data pertaining to that experience. This implies a

³⁰ Petitmengin, 11.

³¹ Varela et al, 25.

³² Chögyam Trungpa, “Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior,” In *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*. Vol. Eight (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 46-50.

³³ Petitmengin, 11.

degree of rigour and precision that can be lacking both in academic discourse and in the stories we tell ourselves about what is happening in our practices.

Inherent in the shift towards a precise encounter with one's own experience is a shift away from externally-oriented object-consciousness – from research which makes truth-claims for consensual reality. Notwithstanding the validity of the “disembodied, critical distance” as a descriptor of how things seem to be in the world, the first-person approach contributes the phenomenal data of how things are in experience. This, along with the attainment of the particular kind of “closeness” outlined above, has the effect, according to Petitmengin, of dissolving some of our daily distinction between “exterior” and “interior”:

the separation which is usually felt between the objects, the other people, which are over there 'outside', and my own perceptions, emotions and thoughts which seem to be localised 'inside', is less rigid than [usual].³⁴

This is similar to the shift from “object consciousness” to a “mode of consciousness [...] in which boundaries are more diffuse,” which Arthur Deikman identifies as a characteristic of what he calls “mystical” experience.³⁵ Deikman contends that our dominant development is of an “Instrumental Consciousness,” one which serves daily life well, but that we are also capable of shifting into a “Receptive Consciousness.”³⁶ Perhaps it is the development of this “receptive consciousness” that lies at the interface between performance and spirituality, between each of these and the mode of first-person research which would seek to “receive” experience as fully as possible.

The following account attempts to detail an instance in which I (Middleton) encountered a sense of “spiritual” experience – open, connected, receptive. The example comes from a lesson in the Alexander Technique in which I was exploring the way in which I used myself in activity while sitting in a cross-legged meditation posture.³⁷ I was not actually meditating

³⁴ Petitmengin, 12.

³⁵ Quoted in Jensine Andresen & Robert K.C. Forman, *Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2000), 80.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

³⁷ F.M. Alexander developed a process of inhibiting habits which compromise the 'use' of the psychophysical mechanisms. See F.M. Alexander, (1932/1985) *The Use of the Self*, Methuen/Gollancz. The lesson in question

at all, but, in keeping with the nature of the lesson, was adopting a particular mode of attending to the whole of my experience, and was responding to interactions with the teacher (including physical suggestions) by making minor adjustments to my poise.

A soft, firm touch against the back of my neck. I feel part of my neck move backwards in space. There is a softening that allows the back of my head not to press downwards. I breathe deeply. A pushing forward through the whole of my upper body (which I had not known I was making) releases, and I rest further back in space. My eyes are now looking straight out, and I am seeing the room, the audience, rather than the floor. A holding in my lower back releases and I feel my sitting bones sink into the floor. There is a sense of unity in my whole upper body, from the top of my head down to the bones contacting the floor. I feel a quietness throughout my body – the absence of low level discomfort. There is a lightness in my arms. My eyes take in the room and I notice that I feel no self-consciousness about being there, being seen. I am very still. My sitting bones seem to drop and drop, as if making contact with the earth beneath the floor. I feel that my skin is no longer a barrier between me and everything beyond me. I experience myself at ease, open, receptive.

Ironically, this experience, in which I was not actually meditating at all, was by far the most “spiritual” that I had encountered in several years of meditation training and practice. I designate it as “spiritual” because of the sense of connection, openness, and inner stillness and receptivity that characterised it. Carl Ginsburg describes Alexander's work, along with that of Feldenkrais and others, as “practices of embodied awareness.” He writes, “Such practices show a correlation between a phenomenology of awareness and the refining and reorganization of human skills and capacities.”³⁸ Such capacities would appear to include those pertaining to the generation of spiritual modes of consciousness.

On a purely pragmatic level, adoption of the gestures of the first-person methodology can provide greater access to detailed data pertaining to pre-reflective lived experience. In the realm of discussions of, for example, the spirituality of performance, the data from which we might benefit is at least twofold: details pertaining to the core performative experience, as

was with Don Weed of the Interactive Teaching Method of the Alexander Technique, and followed the 'Nebraska' approach to teaching Alexander's ideas through working in activity.

³⁸ Varela and Shear, 83.

manifest in mind and body; details pertaining to the ways in which those experiences come to have, for the subject, implications or consequences or connotations which they call spiritual.

Additionally, because the first-person perspective allows us to focus attention in such a way as to arouse a receptive consciousness, then the methodology might also serve both the performative and spiritual (or mystical or meditative) goals of a practice. In answering the charge that “mindfulness/awareness as a method of observation” might disrupt or distort the research, Varela et al state that “What mindfulness disrupts is mindlessness.”³⁹

The first-person perspective brings the participant into a closer relationship with their unfolding experience, and in the realms of both performance and spirituality, it is the unfolding of the micro-dynamics of this experience which provides the value. If, like Zarrilli, we are to get close to the heart of the moments which precede and generate performance arising, in order better to understand those processes; and if we are to experience the ways in which micro-adjustments in attention and psychophysical condition can bring about an encounter with the spiritual, then we would do well to explore the potentials of the first-person methodology.

³⁹ Varela, et al, 32.

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