

Three Insights from Six Reasons: Reflections on a Sufi Mindfulness Practice in Performance

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Abstract

This article is a brief, first person account reflecting on the dance *Six Reasons Why My Dance Card Isn't Full* performed for the Performance and Mindfulness Symposium at the University of Huddersfield in July 2016. For this presentation, I performed the solo dance and then guided audience members through a process that involves both individual and group reflection. This guided contemplative process is based on a Sufi practice of considering the presence of Divine Names and qualities within all of creation. The process reveals not just how performance can exist as an introspective practice for the dancer but also how it may inherently function as such for an audience, whether or not they initially intended for watching to be an act of contemplation.

Key Words

contemplative practice, dance, Sufism, audience engagement

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Introduction

This article is a brief, first person account reflecting on the dance *Six Reasons Why My Dance Card Isn't Full* performed for the Performance and Mindfulness Symposium at the University of Huddersfield in July 2016. As the choreographer and performer of this solo dance, I have been using it as a meditative process for myself and also as a way to engage audiences in contemplative practice over the past four years. Having performed this dance for many different populations, I am only considering the new understandings that emerged from its interaction with the particular audience present at the Performance and Mindfulness symposium in this essay.

As a performer, I depend on dance practices to teach me. I continually consider how acts of dancing create and reveal knowledge through the mindful act of focused physicality. For many years I have experienced dancing as a unique contemplative event in which I am given both open-mindedness and sharp focus. This simultaneous expansive and tightly focused awareness often leads me to insights, not only about the dance itself, but also *through* the dance. Deeper knowledge about myself, my life, and spiritual considerations surface through the act of performing. But why? What is happening in dance performance that allows for an awakening of awareness and transformation of understanding? My dance work does not seek to illustrate thoughts but rather to allow moving itself to be an active agent in a process of contemplation and revelation of understanding.

In particular, the development of self-knowledge has become significant for me as both a process for and result of contemplative practice. Performance of the solo dance *Six Reasons Why My Dance Card Isn't Full* has been a specific process of uncovering self-knowledge and a continuing practice of personal inquiry in the form of the question, 'Why dance?' in which *dance* functions as both a noun and a verb. Why do I continue to dance rather than simply meditate or pray? Why does dance performance impact the development of my consciousness and in what ways? How can a dance teach its performer? What can a dance offer to an audience in terms of contemplative practice? My movement is intended as an invitation for audience members to contemplate their own lives. By opening one particular pathway of motion, I am hoping to awaken others' sense of movement potential and to extend the invitation to explore a journey into self-knowledge together.

Background

Although the term 'mindfulness' might connote the importance of inwardly-focused and even secluded practice, the particular lineage of Sufism that I study, the Shaduliyya tradition, emphasizes a balance between inner and outer work of contemplation. Since, 'it is not so difficult to be balanced, dignified, and peaceful when you live in seclusion in a cave. But to hold to these qualities while living among people demands magnanimity, composure, trust, willpower, and self-control, as well as reflection, contemplation, and deep love,' this branch of Sufism encourages transforming oneself to become a reflection of Divinity while living in the world (Al-Rawi, 2015, p.8).

Students of this tradition are expected to spend time in quiet prayer and practices but also to participate actively in the external world with other people in a job, family, and society. When engaged in the external world, the student is encouraged to simultaneously be in continual remembrance of the Divine, internally. Rather than functioning as a means of separating the inner and outer experience, this practice of remembrance is intended to serve ultimately as a way of bringing the two aspects into seamless connection. Recognizing Divinity as both transcendent and immanent, Sufism considers that a deep understanding of unity and balance between inner and outer awareness can be developed through various efforts, including noticing ways that Divinity is present with the student in each moment *through* the world. This practice of seeing the Divine through the world does not indicate that God is indwelling in material objects but, rather, that Divine knowledge encompasses all things. From this Sufi perspective, the world in which we live is a continual invitation to be entrusted with and experience that Divine, all-encompassing knowledge.

Studying the Names of the Divine is one way to access such knowledge. Many spiritual traditions contemplate Names of God that are mentioned in sacred texts such as the Torah, Bible, and Quran, and the Divine Names that I cite as part of this performance process come from the Quran. My contemplative practices in both dancing and life include trying to understand what Divine Names are being presented to me in each moment and, therefore, what knowledge those Names are offering. For example, when I arrived in Huddersfield, I was given a key card to open the door to the building in which symposium events took place. Printed on my key card was the number 14. Whenever I see a number, I immediately think of the Divine Name that is connected with those digits, and 14 is frequently paired with the Divine Name Al Gaffar, the All-Forgiving. As I prayed, asking to be shown what gift of knowledge was being brought to me through the presence of the number 14 on my key card, at least one meaning became obvious: forgiveness opens doors.

The Process

For my presentation at the symposium, I performed the solo dance *Six Reasons Why My Dance Card Isn't Full* and then guided audience members through a process that involves both individual and group reflection. This guided contemplative process is based on the aforementioned Sufi practice of reflecting on the presence of Divine Names and qualities within all of creation. The process reveals not just how performance can exist as an introspective practice for the dancer but also how it may inherently function as such for an audience, whether or not they initially intended for watching to be an act of focused contemplation.

After performing this dance, I posed a series of questions to the audience. First, I asked them to recall a moment or a movement that they remember—an image that lingers in their mind's eye or a sensation from their embodied experience of watching the performance. Once they identified this movement, I requested that they choose qualitative words to describe it. For example, would they characterize that movement as subtle? Strong? Forceful? Intense? Peaceful? After these descriptive words were generated, I asked the audience to notice where else in their lives this quality is currently appearing. Finally, I proposed that they consider in what additional ways they would like for that quality to manifest in themselves. Although I have performed this dance myriad times in many different locations in the world, I have never heard the same comment or quality described twice by audiences. Each individual viewer seems to have a unique expression of the way in which the movement offered them a chance

to reflect on their own lives. The remainder of this essay will discuss three distinctive insights that surfaced through this particular instance of performing—two that were provided by audience members and one that resulted from my own experience as a performer. Each of these sections begins with a present-tense description of the movement from my perspective as a performer, continues through consideration of the audience's experience, and concludes with how our interactions about the dance further caused me to reflect on the teachings that emerged for me during this performance about the nature of my own contemplative practices.



Figure 1: Compass Movement, dancer: Candice Salyers, photograph by Jim Coleman

Trust Your Inner Compass

Lying on the ground, I open my arms and legs as if to make a snow angel on the stage floor. The force of bringing my limbs together again propels me into a spin that changes my orientation in space, embodying a movement similar to the magnetic needle of a compass. I hover there, gently swaying for a moment before relaxing into the floor, only to open, close, spin, and hover once again pointing towards a new direction.

Following the performance and series of questions that I posed to the audience, I invited everyone to share what they had discovered in both dyad and full-group conversation. The first person who volunteered a description in discussion with the whole audience mentioned how one movement in particular had evoked the image of a compass needle. As the viewer contemplated the relevance of that movement in their own life, they mentioned their need to, 'trust the inner compass.'

Turning to my training in Sufi contemplative practices to better understand the lesson present in this movement, and in fact, the teaching given through the movement of a literal compass, I was drawn into remembrance of the Divine Name Al Hadi, 'The One Who shows the way, the Guide' (Al-Rawi, 2015, p. 335). As a student of Sufism, I am committed to trying to taste divinity in every human experience and to continually turn my mind, heart, and perception towards witnessing a divine presence in the manifest world. Remembering the Name Al Hadi evokes a sense of guidance and direction that can spin me back to a degree of mindfulness in which Divinity makes itself known through seemingly mundane objects and experiences in this world. These experiences simultaneously point to both the manifest object at hand and the way that object can reveal a deeper understanding beyond its surface appearance. Such perpetual effort to turn my attention towards witnessing Divinity in and through the manifest world does not equate to being immune to human difficulties, however. After

hearing the next audience member's comment, I was reminded of a reason that I sometimes resist trusting my internal compass and letting myself be moved.



Figure 2: A Moment of Surprise, dancer: Candice Salyers, photograph by Jim Coleman

Let Yourself Be Surprised

I stop moving. I can feel the audience's anticipation. Even I do not know what the next moment will bring. My physical task is not simply to maintain stillness for a particular duration, but more importantly to fully arrive at rest—to stop 'doing'—so that the next moment of movement can emerge. I am not waiting and preparing to move. My body is just opening to being present where it is now. This focus on presence unexpectedly readies me for timing and movement that takes me by surprise.

The second audience member to share a reflection on their own life after this performance commented on the moments when a quietness, stillness, or contraction led to a fast, startling, or expansive movement. For them, this contrast evoked flashes of surprise, and beyond those individual moments, the larger reminder to let oneself be surprised. The audience member's insight about this movement led me to understand that I often have to first let go of control and to relinquish my continual effort of 'doing' in order to let myself be surprised by the next moment—to let myself be moved. By being consciously present but not trying to change one moment into another, I can begin to appreciate a longer duration of time in which moments relate to each other in surprising ways. Such extended durations can reveal to me how seemingly contradictory qualities exist together and support each other—including the ways that the contrasting qualities of contraction and expansion together create movement. While breathing naturally illustrates the necessary physical reliance of contraction and expansion on one another, my experiences of contraction and expansion in contemplative practices have arrived with less ease. Despite all of my encounters in life that have taught me about the wisdom that is brought through contraction and challenge, I admit that I still enjoy ease, pleasure, and fun. I do not always appreciate difficulty and discomfort. In fact, I sometimes try to change contracted moments and manifest expansive experiences rather than letting myself be present and patient with difficulty. Conversely, holding onto a difficulty or contracted moment while failing to witness or accept ease alongside it produces excessive (and often unproductive) effort in both my dancing and contemplative practice.

The Divine Names Al Qabid 'The One Who Contracts' and Al Basit 'The One Who Eases' exist together much like breathing— 'connected like the opening and

closing of the heart, day and night, joy and sorrow' (Al-Rawi, 2015, p. 98). As I perform this dance, I continue to find moments in which I understand that expansion and contraction cannot exist without each other. Instead of secretly seeking only the experience of expansion, I am mindful to enjoy the moments of contraction as well for the presence of divinity (Al Qabid) within them. Rather than holding onto a contraction, I open myself to the possibility of new motion without forcing a change. Contraction and expansion together propel movement, and a willingness to be surprised by what emerges through that motion can be a gift of insight in both contemplative practices and performance—including an unexpected occurrence during the event at Huddersfield.



Figure 3: Downstage Leap, dancer: Candice Salyers, photograph by Jim Coleman

You Don't Have to Go Alone

Running backwards, I turn to leap downstage. To my surprise, this jump lands me in the embrace of a young man seated in the front row of the audience. Both of us are wide-eyed as I feel my hands grasp his shoulders, trace down his arms, and lightly pull on his fingertips. He rises and walks with me to the back of the stage.

While I have had experiences that reveal the vitality of performance as contemplative process from my position as a practitioner, I often wonder what can help the audience receive a similar benefit. It is my sincere hope that audiences will not feel alienated by the performer's depth of involvement in their own practice. But what opens a door for performance to become contemplative practice for the audience as well?

Although many strategies for engaging audiences exist, I have spent most of my career exploring intimate connections with audiences simply through the presence of my moving body. While performing this particular dance over the past four years, I have neither physically touched an audience member nor brought one onto the stage until my performance at Huddersfield. A seemingly simple misjudgment of the available stage space resulted in not only direct contact with an audience member (an unintended breaking of the '4th wall') but also an opportunity for me to invite him into the dance itself. I couldn't help smiling as this complete stranger became an instant intimate friend as he so willingly held onto my fingertips and walked with me on a two-minute journey upstage.

It was this humbling mistake as a performer and the resulting surprising sense of friendship which appeared in that moment that reminded me of the Divine Name Al

Waliyy, 'the Protective Friend, the close One' (Al-Rawi, 2015, p. 211). As a performer, I now think of my relationship to the audience as a friendship, whether I am in physical contact with viewers or not. As a friend, I strive to let audiences truly see me—to witness not only my physical presence, but to glimpse inside what moves me. Seeing into the mind and heart of a performer does not necessitate stopping with the performer's own story or practice, but rather provides the opportunity to use a performance as a doorway into greater understanding.

In describing a pivotal interaction with her mother as a child, choreographer Susan Rethorst recounts how her mother came to rely on Susan's internal map of the grocery store when organizing a list of needed items. She writes, 'I would walk her down the virtual aisles, telling her what we were passing, and she would see through me what she would otherwise forget' (2012, p. 15). This poignant statement about allowing another person to see through oneself what they might otherwise forget sits at the heart of my desire to continue performing this dance and offering my personal contemplative process to audiences.

Conclusions

Beyond the ways in which a sense of community can encourage the discipline of practice or help manage the challenges that arise when one is committed to living consciously, companionship in contemplative practice also allows for the joy of discovery *through* each other. Friendship can be a medium of learning. The qualities that are mirrored from me to the audience in the performance of this dance, and in return the qualities that are reflected back from the audience to me, provide ways for both of us to discover more about ourselves. Far from being just self-indulgent interest, this discovery of self-knowledge has implications for mindful living. Spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti proposes, 'there can be right action only when there is right thinking and there is no right thinking when there is no self-knowledge' (2013). My dance is not mine alone. It belongs to everyone who comes into contact with it, as it seeks to be a public act of friendship—and as an act of friendship, it can become a contemplative medium of learning.

References

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