***Earth, Tree, Rock and Sea*** ***Helen Poynor***

After many years working as a movement practitioner in natural environments,[1] both alone and with people from all walks of life, including dancers, artists and practitioners working in healthcare and therapy, it is clear to me that time spent being with and moving in nature can be both deeply restorative and artistically inspiring.

Each person's response to the invitation to experience our natural surroundings kinaesthetically, through the body, is different. For some, it could simply be a release from the demands of an over busy life, a literal and metaphoric breath of fresh air, time out from responsibilities, complications and problems, or a way of replenishing depleted resources. For others, it may provide time and space for reverie allowing memories and imagery to arise. The experience might also offer a renewed sense of bodily wellbeing, a deepening experience of the body, a moment of transformation, a sense of empowerment or an opportunity for expression.

Giving oneself time to experience a receptive and reciprocal relationship with nature offers a way to return to oneself. It allows us to 're-member' that we are an intrinsic part of a larger body, that our muscles and our bones, our breath and our blood are made of the same elements as the living environment around us and that we have kinship with earth and rock, with sky and wind, with rain and sea. The understanding that as human beings we have a relationship with both microcosm and macrocosm engenders feelings of wonder and of awe and offers us a sense of proportion. This awareness of our inter-connectedness nourishes a sense of belonging and affirms our place in the world. The cycles of change and of renewal in nature reflect the rhythms of our lives and our bodies, inviting us to embrace them more fully. The weather in the landscape is a mirror of our own 'weather', the challenges of our personal lives, our feelings and our circumstances, reminding us (especially in the UK) that 'weather' is inevitable and that it can always change. Perhaps if we could move beyond labelling it as good or bad life would become a little smoother. Nature itself is non-judgmental.

This awareness of the co-existence of inner and outer landscapes supports the capacity to experience ourselves at the same time as being in the world, not being so lost in our internal

[1] I am using the term 'natural' environments to indicate environments where elements such as rock, water, earth and tree predominate rather than built or urban environments.

world that we are unable to relate to a wider context nor being so externally focused that we lose touch with ourselves. This is a necessary life skill and an essential element in somatic dance practice. It is particularly important for those of us who work with others and for artists attempting to transmute personal perception in order to communicate with their audience.

*Earth, Tree, Rock and Sea* arises from my experiences of moving and being in two contrasting environments in East Devon where I live. I offer it as a window into a practice of moving with the natural environment, of giving oneself time to experience nature somatically, through the body and the senses incorporating stillness and breath into the movement, rather than merely observing our surroundings or trying to achieve anything.

## *Earth, Tree….*



Coming back to nature.

Coming back to myself.

Escaping from the confines of buildings, from cars, screens and phones, from constant noise, demands and expectations, from the pressure to achieve, to solve, to communicate, to understand.  Meanwhile eluding myself, failing others.

Lying on the earth.

Surrendering the weight of my body, washed by the river of my breath.

Giving myself time and space.

Allowing body, mind and feelings to settle. Little by little. Letting the bustle of life subside.

Watching the clouds pass.

Lying under an ancient oak – an old friend. Seeing the dappled light, the movement of the branches, listening to the wind in the leaves, the birdsong. Sun, rain, wind caressing my skin. Receiving myself, receiving the environment. Slowing down.

Returning across seasons, years – in all weathers.

Witnessing the ordinary miraculous cycles of change and transformation, of loss and renewal. Offering my weather: delight, grief, hope, survival. Receiving solace and inspiration.

The tree stays.

It endures the vicissitudes of its life: loped braches, twisted limbs, careless humans, wild weather. It continues to flourish, rooted and flexible. Watching over me impassive, it asks nothing of me. It will be here when I'm gone.

Lying cradled in the roots: scent of leaf, moss and earth. Movement of breath in my back. Timelessness. Opening my eyes, I see the world in microcosm, delicate, alive, full of colour.

Changing position, I experience myself and the environment differently. Sitting with my back supported by the trunk, grounded by earth and tree, I stay rooted in my body as I receive the world around me. Relaxed, alert but not overwhelmed.

The tree teaches me to stand.  Facing it, my feet planted on the earth, recognising its body I receive my own.  Sensing the support of my back, the flow of my breath, I feel my power and strength.  I am here.

### *…. Rock and Sea*

The tide ebbs and flows, banks of pebbles shift and change.  Caves, pools and ledges are revealed and concealed.  Cormorants come and go.  In fair weather or foul.

Moving by the sea evokes the free play of childhood, leaping from rock to rock, rolling in wet pebbles, curling up in crevices hidden from the world.

Chalky boulders allow me to melt into their sea-smoothed folds.  How can something so hard hold me so gently?

Moving over and between the rocks, my animal body responding without thought, one move leads to the next, following I find myself in unexpected places and positions.  Momentarily wedged, I breathe out, release, and find my way through. Waking up vitality and strength, I stretch, push, clamber, reach and lean; my bones in conversation with the bone of the rock, its clarity of form tutoring me in the structure of my own body.

Inspired by the cormorants I perch motionless, turning my face to the sun, then ruffle my feathers in the wind.

The scale of the cliffs offers me a sense of proportion.

Anchored by the rocks I open to sea and sky receiving a sense of spaciousness within and without.

Waves and wind loosen my joints, unlocking my voice: singing, crying, roaring, laughing, all is received.  The intensity of my feelings harms no-one.

Restored to courage and gentleness I breathe freely once again.

As I leave the incoming tide erases my traces.



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