

WHERE HEALING STREAMS MEET

A Danced Retreat

Sue Topalian

The incarnation offers us a mysterious and astonishing vision—the Holy Trinity as a dancing community of divine poverty. Each eternally, joyfully, dispossessing themselves; emptying, pouring themselves out to the favour and glory of the other. Nothing claimed, demanded or grasped. They live and know each other in the simple ecstasy of giving. We are invited to participate in this dance. (David Runcorn)¹

IN THE MIDDLE of an outwardly successful life, I lost my way. After decades of being a Christian, I found I could not remember what it was all about. I told God I was going to give it all up unless God did something. For the next year or so, I had a dim sense of being called to ‘come home’, without knowing what this meant. I saw a weekend of Christian dance advertised, and decided to go. That weekend brought a spiritual awakening, the dramatic start of a healing journey of contemplative prayer.

Nine years later I surprised myself, following a silent retreat at St Beuno’s Ignatian Spirituality Centre in North Wales, by giving up the security of my secular profession for training in Dance Movement Psychotherapy (DMP) and Christian spiritual accompaniment. My MA research project explored combining both of these in a danced retreat, examining how this affected participants’ sense of themselves, and their connection with others and with God. This article is based on that research. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Dance and Christian Worship

The spiritual does not always translate well into the verbal. Dance has been experienced as a spiritual healing activity since the earliest times.

¹ David Runcorn, *Choice, Desire and the Will of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 7.



Dancing Madonna, by Maureen Coatmen, St
Luke's Church, Duston

Traditional dances have been part of religious celebrations and ceremonies worldwide for millennia.²

Christian theology sees men and women as created in the image of God; God as incarnate in Jesus; God as a Spirit who dwells within and without; God as the one in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28); our bodies as 'temple[s] of the Holy Spirit' (1 Corinthians 6:19). Dance was used in worship in the Old Testament (see, for instance, Exodus 15:20–21; 2 Samuel 6:5, 14–15; Psalm 149:2–3, 150:4) and remains a part of the Jewish tradition. Dance is integral to Christian worship in many countries. It is perhaps surprising then that the major

Churches in the West have a history of suspicion of dance and the body.

In the early centuries, church leaders were influenced by educated cultural suspicion of dance as both immodest and associated with pagan rites. By the third century the Church was adopting Platonic ideas of the duality of body and soul, and of asceticism. Yet dance in Christian worship persisted, even in the West, as is evidenced by its continued condemnation by church leaders.³

There is little historical Christian writing about dance, and even less in the context of personal and spiritual growth. Dancers were not among those involved in the development of Christian literature; and literature carries culture across time and space, whereas dance leaves little record of its existence. A notable exception is literature produced

² J. G. Davies, *Liturgical Dance: An Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook* (London: SCM, 1984).

³ Davies, *Liturgical Dance*, 19–81.

by the Shakers, a group active in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for whom dance was central to worship: 'Dancing is the gift of God to the church In this exercise we receive ... strength and consolation.'⁴

In recent decades liturgical performance dance has become increasingly accepted,⁵ and the charismatic movement has revived Christian dance as a form of participative worship.⁶

Dance Movement Psychotherapy and Christian Spirituality

The Association of Dance Movement Psychotherapists' website describes DMP as:

A relational process in which client(s) and therapist engage in an empathic creative process using body movement and dance to assist integration of emotional, cognitive, physical, social and spiritual aspects of self.⁷

Participants in DMP often find they become aware of a greater healing Presence. However very little has been written about DMP in a Christian context. One practitioner who has also written some short booklets is Paula Dowthett.⁸ She describes the difference between contemporary dance therapy and her particular Christian approach as 'the conscious awareness of the Lord's presence in the work ... God is the healer'.⁹ Some contemplative retreat leaders, such as Anthony de Mello, Sue Pickering and Tilden Edwards, use body awareness and movement (rather than dance as such) in prayer.¹⁰ And Christine Valters Paintner and Betsey Beckman have written on the arts in spiritual accompaniment, including dance and movement.¹¹ There has been little research into the impact of Christian

⁴ Thomas Brown, *An Account of the People Called Shakers* (New York: AMS, 1972 [1812]), 20.

⁵ Davies, *Liturgical Dance*, 74–77, 80–88.

⁶ See, for instance, International Christian Dance Fellowship, www.icdf.com.

⁷ Association of Dance Movement Psychotherapists, www.admt.org.uk, accessed 4 July 2014.

⁸ See Paula Dowthett, *Spiritual Principles of Our Life and Work*, 2, *How to Lead People into Praise and Worship Using Movement: Through In-Depth Workshops, Worship and Healing* (Milbourne St Andrew: Sacred Dance Group, 1986); Paula Dowthett, *Christian Dance Therapy: Healing for the Body of Christ* (Milbourne St Andrew: Sacred Dance Group, 1989); Paula Dowthett, *Out of the Depths* (Milbourne St Andrew: Sacred Dance Group, 1999).

⁹ Dowthett, *Christian Dance Therapy*, 17.

¹⁰ See Anthony de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God* (New York: Doubleday, 1984); Sue Pickering, *Creative Retreat Ideas* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2010); Tilden H. Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open our Lives to the Awareness of God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).

¹¹ Christine Valters Paintner and Betsey Beckman, *Awakening the Creative Spirit: Bringing the Arts to Spiritual Direction* (New York: Morehouse, 2010), especially 61–75.

participative dance. An exception is a study from Norway by Hildegunn Schuff of nineteen individuals dancing in various Christian settings.¹² This identified similar themes to those highlighted by retreatants below.

The Danced Retreat

I facilitated a 'danced retreat' in six weekly evening sessions, in a beautiful, spacious chapel. The group consisted of seven women and myself, aged from their fifties to their seventies. All had long experience of committed Christian faith and a concept of setting time aside to be open to God. Four had no experience of participating in dance in any Christian context, and none had experienced a danced retreat. The retreatants were initially mostly unknown either to each other or to me.

A circle of chairs around a candle provided a space for sitting quietly with meditative music as participants arrived. Sessions started with a brief introduction, a prayer and the sharing of responses to material for meditation. Then the group would move further into the chapel for a simple pre-choreographed dance of worship, before moving on to the theme of the evening:

- Session 1:** Introduction to each other, to free movement;
- Session 2:** who are we as dancers? What do we bring to the dance?
- Session 3:** dancing with the Father;
- Session 4:** dancing with the Son;
- Session 5:** dancing with the Spirit;
- Session 6:** a dancing community; endings.

The themes were based on the analogy of life as dance, and on the ancient Christian concept of *perichoresis*, the Trinity as a circular dance of equality and love into which we are all invited.

Sessions involved simple group circle dance, individual dance meditation, free dance in pairs or as a group, use of various props, pictures, styles of music with and without words, and journaling time. Each session was different, with progressively more opportunity for free movement and group interaction. Sessions ended with a return to the opening circle; each participant was given opportunity to share whatever she wished and to take away material—a poem, story or scripture text—for meditation.

¹² Hildegunn Marie-T. Schuff, 'Dancing towards Personal and Spiritual Growth', *Nordic Journal of Dance*, 13 (2012), 34–42, available at <http://www.nordicjournalofdance.com/researchPaper2.pdf>, accessed 11 February 2016.

Findings

At the end of the retreat, participants gave individual, unstructured interviews about its impact on them. I made a thematic analysis of these interviews: the table shows the key themes that emerged and the number and percentage of participants mentioning them.

| Theme | Participants |
|--|---------------------|
| <i>Impact on the sense of self</i> | |
| <i>Apprehension, vulnerability at the start of the retreat</i> | 6 (86%) |
| <i>Struggle with self-consciousness, inner critic</i> | 4 (57%) |
| <i>Being taken into painful places</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Accessing the inner child</i> | 5 (71%) |
| <i>Whole life integration</i> | 4 (57%) |
| <i>Shifting perspectives on ageing</i> | 5 (71%) |
| <i>Freedom and joy</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Shifting future directions towards creativity</i> | 5 (71%) |
| <i>Impact on connection with others</i> | |
| <i>A safe space</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Witnessing others' growth</i> | 3 (43%) |
| <i>Having fun, playing together</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Sense of beautiful group connection</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Sense of beautiful connection through touch</i> | 4 (57%) |
| <i>Being authentic in the group</i> | 4 (57%) |
| <i>Reflecting on one's reactions in interaction</i> | 6 (86%) |

| <i>Impact on the sense of connection with God</i> | |
|--|----------|
| <i>Sense of 'dancing with God'</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Memories of significant experience of God</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Symbolic material emerging as gift</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Self/group expression in danced worship</i> | 7 (100%) |
| <i>Affirmation of God's care, reassurance</i> | 6 (86%) |
| <i>Impact on personal prayer patterns</i> | 3 (43%) |
| <i>Positive outcomes for individuals</i> | 7 (100%) |

Here are some of the direct responses of the retreatants illustrating the themes that emerged.

The Sense of Self

Almost all felt apprehensive at the start of the retreat and self-conscious about movement.

Noreen: *It was a question of before we stood up taking a deep breath and thinking, 'OK. I might look a bit silly doing this', but we all did it.*

All found that dance took them into painful places.

Nelly: *I was crying quite a lot, but I only did it the first week. But it was, you know, handing over to God all the ... I'll go on record as saying ... crap.*

For **Pix** the retreat awoke traumatic memories of bringing up children in the midst of coups, violence and natural disasters in the Philippines. *'I think it was bottled-up fear that brought it all back again. Yes. I think I've never really overcome it.'* She experienced the dance as a way of expressing this internal pressure. *'You could just go for it, you know ... you could unleash that volcano. You could just wave your arms around and jump about and, you know, there was no hindrance ... that was a release, that certainly was.'*

Five found themselves regaining contact with the sense of an inner child.

Noreen: I felt very much as the weeks progressed that the child inside me was being unlocked ... I didn't have an easy childhood, and it's so lovely, even late in my life It allowed me to play.

Four experienced a sense of whole life integration.

Nelly: I feel as if all the disjointed selves—loosely linked by something that was slack and very stretchy—have been yanked together (with a twang!)—to make a whole It's a better, stronger and more 'real' place to start from for the next phase ... more whole and wholesome. It was a happy feeling. And I thought, 'Oh! I remember her!'

Noreen: Dancing with three episodes from my life was powerful. I found myself wrestling with the first phase but was able to leave it in God's loving hands. This enabled me to move on and again realise God's deep love for me, so I could finally move into the last phase with freedom, joy and playfulness.

A more positive attitude to the retreatant's stage of life emerged as significant in five interviews.

Noreen: It's lovely that He's never finished with us, has He? He's always got joy for us A horrible, dank, cold place ... I was there for about forty years of my life, so to feel the freedom that I feel now, even at seventy, I'm over the moon about that.

All participants conveyed a sense of freedom and joy.

Irene: You could go for it, or you could just sit, or you could wave your arms—just whatever you felt was worship, and that was beautiful, really releasing to be able to do it ... a sense of joy and liberty.

June was struggling with illness and low spirits during the retreat period:

I like that energy up there And the flags swirling ... I think, the negative energy can be transported up into that sphere of dance and movement.

Noreen: Worshipping God in a new and exciting way ... a new-found freedom, with the added bonus of joy and laughter This has been a rich and fulfilling time.

Five participants had a sense that the retreat was the start of new creativity, or confirmation of a direction that had been beginning to emerge beforehand.

Noreen: Focusing on the different things that are going to bring me life and energy Because I find such freedom in it, I want other people to regain some of their freedom as well.

Connection with Others (Being the Body of Christ)

All participants experienced the group as a safe environment, rooted in mutual acceptance, authenticity, valuing, respect, support, care, shared worship, trust and the dance itself.

Meg: *Such a lovely thing ... all supportive of each other, all honouring of each other, and all listening to each other, and learning to interact.*

Several talked of 'knowing' people beyond words.

Nelly: *I think there was that in the dance; there was that trust and burying of ego and burying of inhibitions ... a way of practising being authentic in relationship to other people, that was, you know, in a safe way, in a safe environment There wasn't a bum note the whole time.*

Irene talked about the challenge of interacting with other people, their different ways of moving: 'But somehow you found a way of relating in dancing ... you had to be really in tune with other people to do it. Which meant you got to know them in a different way.' **Pix** found the group adapted to her balance problem, allowing her to participate fully. 'It was very precious to do those different things that I didn't think I could do any more.' For **June**, the choreographed dances helped create the sense of safety: 'I found ... the holding circles and the set dance pieces ... to be a container, a safe space within the safe space of the setting'. **Nelly** too found this: 'I was shattered at the end of the meditative exercise. Repeating the circle dance was just what I needed—beautiful. A sense of the presence of God.'

Three participants talked about benefiting from witnessing each other.

Beth: *You could see everyone was growing over those weeks, and you could see emotions coming to the surface, so not just myself, you could see it in others as well.*

All experienced having fun, playing together, as positive and freeing.

Irene: *There was something sacred about having the fun ... that's what it felt like ... 'Let us play'.*

All participants discovered a sense of being beautifully connected as a group.

June: *I think from the gracious movements, to the gracious way we were with one another, it was as if we'd been in a masked ball, or something grand, and we'd all become a little bit more ourselves, and we'd taken something from our movements and we were able to give more gentleness and kindness*

to ourselves and to one another It was beautiful. It was connected, all connected.

Noreen: *When you got us to interact with one another [in free dance], I just found that amazing, because we just seemed to do it It was almost as if God was pulling the strings at times.*

Beth: *We were led by the music and words and without being given any instruction we moved as one. The body moving with the Holy Spirit.*

Irene: *There was this lovely unspoken synchronicity and so there was that very different connection with people, that didn't really seem to need words.*

June sat out for a session because of illness, and observed: 'The dances were clearly very honest and from the heart Each one was clearly expressing different facets of their relationship with God.'

The sense of beauty was also present in contact between pairs, mentioned by four participants.

Noreen: *It's hard for me to describe dancing palm to palm. It was gentle with a beautiful togetherness.*

Four participants described the impact of being authentically in their inner lives with God while also being part of the group.

Noreen: *Maybe the restful thing for me in all this, I was with a group of people, but I was also doing my thing, my thing with God We all felt safe enough to be able to do our own thing, which is very valuable.*



Irene: *It was really special to be able to worship and express yourself freely and to be in the zone with God while other people were doing the same ... there's something very powerful about that common activity 'Where two or three are gathered together, there He is in the midst.'*

Nelly: *It was such beautiful music, and it kind of had the sense of everybody focused on what they were doing and their task, it almost gave you the privacy to express yourselves, completely. It was almost like you were in your little bubble with God, and then there would be ... 'Now move around and relate to other people' and because you were already moving, having done it quietly on your own, in your own bubble, ... it made it possible then.*

Six participants described how dancing with others created opportunity to observe their own reactions.

One dance highlighted for **Irene** her desire for control: *'I found that exercise quite disconcerting Going with the flow became a theme for me which helped me to deal with a potentially stressful situation.'* For **Noreen** the exercise of being led, with her eyes closed, by another person made her think about trust. *'It is hard to take that step back and to really trust. I did trust the people that were there. I haven't, over my life, trusted people very easily, so maybe I am moving on with that as well.'*

Sense of Connection to God

The theme of dancing with the Trinity was significant for all participants.

Beth connected this to living in the now. *'It was as if I was the one that was kneeling down, I was on the ground. He came over and said, "Come on! Get up and dance, dance with me!" You can miss what you can enjoy now, in the moment.'*

For all participants, the retreat evoked memories of other experiences of God.

Nelly: *It reminded me of all the times where I'd felt God present in my life, helping me and supporting me ... to remember some of those incidents throughout my life and express them through moving was very powerful.*

All found symbolic material emerging, in movement, pictures (in the mind or on paper), scripture texts, words or synchronicities. For **Meg**, in a time of lack of felt sense of God, the whole retreat was experienced in the context of a particular image: *'Before this started, I had a picture of me standing at the edge of a large peaceful lake surrounded by hills and low mountains, not at all keen to enter the water, just glad to stand at the edge I seem now*



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happy to go in for a swim, but very gently I seem to have moved from standing on the edge to actually getting in the water.'

All experienced a sense of God in worship, and were able to use dance to express their sense of community and their response to God.

June: *I loved the processing up to the altar with our lights ... like one body There was a sense of an organism working really healthily and together. So I did feel the Holy Spirit very much in those times of being together.*

For **Pix**, at a challenging time, the retreat provided space for her just to be with God without demands: *'Having the flags waved over us when we were lying down ... oh, just a bit of heaven You could just lie there feeling the beauty of that, just encompassed the whole of who God is. Yeah, that was beautiful.'*

Six participants spoke of reassurance of God's presence and care.

Nelly: *Through the more risky business of expressing 'It' through movement, and the experiences shared by the group, I realised we were all in communication with the same Character. Which is very affirming and reassuring.*

Three participants mentioned danced group intercession as particularly powerful.

Noreen: *I felt I was wrestling with God in prayer. There was a tangible atmosphere at the end. Praying in this way helped me once again come to a more holistic place.*

Irene: *I was twisting it around my hands, and it was like I'd been bound and then you were praying for freedom, and you could unloose it, and there*

were so many things that came out of that ... and I was moved to tears at the end You're expressing that angst, that, 'Oh, this is how it hurts me, it must be hurting You that way' So I found that really, really powerful.

Three participants spoke of the retreat's influence on their patterns of personal prayer. Just before the retreat **Nelly** had given up using formal prayers and started to just chat to God. 'As the retreat progressed, this way of praying became the most obvious, normal way to be with God ... warts and all, that kind of thing, here I am!' **June** was led in a different direction: '[The retreat] opened me up spiritually, and I started to use [the Church of England Book of Common Prayer] ... for my morning and evening and night-time prayer. And I'm loving it, because it's providing structure for me. Through the dance retreat I think I've discovered deeper than that, that rhythm is important to me for life, and I need that rhythm, and I'm now using this, and ... I feel held. I don't go wobbly or get so anxious or get depressed.'

Irene: I've found my quiet times at home have been more disciplined I find I keep dancing at odd occasions through the day in a spontaneous moment of praise. I have rediscovered the value of praise and the power of worship in daily life.

The retreat had a positive outcome for all participants.

Noreen: God's healing streams have certainly flowed through my life I have become more detached from my painful situation My relationship with God has changed through doing the retreat ... I am now able to look at this in a more constructive way... how I might take that forward and hopefully bring some joy and freedom to others.

Irene: I didn't think I needed healing, so that really was not on my agenda. However, I found that the retreat gave God chance to work within me. God 'mercied out of me a tumorous sense of guilt'.

Beth: It has given me a sense of 'self-worth', with more confidence to be myself I feel positive [with regard to retirement]. The retreat did give me that sense of joy. It's been very important that it came at this time.

Nelly: I feel as though all the disjointed selves ... have been yanked together ... to make a whole.

June: I felt just so energized by the end I probably store up a lot of negative energy through my work, so I think in a positive way ... I did take a lot out of it.

Pix: A sense of beauty. A real sense of beauty ... that was amazing ... because of the way we all were with each other. We're such different people, and how you know, we just felt as one. When you look back over the whole six weeks it's just, 'Wow!'.

Meg: It was a feast, I have to say. A very privileged feast.

The Contribution of Dance to the Retreat

This retreat positively affected participants' sense of themselves, in terms of feeling valued and supported by the group; overcoming apprehension about exposure and pushing their own boundaries; being truly themselves in the presence of others; experiencing themselves as beautifully creative; contacting their inner child; finding freedom and joy; gaining a sense of integration; moving on with issues currently troubling in their lives; and developing a greater sense of positive direction about the future.

Dance created a mode for the expression of freedom, play and joy, and for accessing an inner child. As the dance movement psychotherapist Jill Hayes writes: 'Play strengthens and deepens an emotional/mental position of connection By creating situations in which play can thrive, we ... give soul connectivity a chance to grow stronger'.¹³

Movement also helped participants to access memories, and deep and painful places in the psyche, surprisingly quickly. The educational psychologist Johanna Leseho has found that dance 'draws negative emotions from within the psyche and exposes them to the light of consciousness so that the individual may have an opportunity to heal at a deeper level', and that it has 'brought [people] back to a sense of themselves that they had lost'.¹⁴ Several of the retreatants experienced these effects.

A number of retreatants felt a sense of new direction. Hayes describes how dance leads one away from verbal ego-thinking, 'and the playful freedom of movement and image which is encouraged can lead a person back to his felt self, in which he knows what to do'; 'We may have a sense of a different pathway ahead from the one we are on'.¹⁵

¹³ Jill Hayes, *Soul and Spirit in Dance Movement Psychotherapy: A Transpersonal Approach* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013), 98.

¹⁴ Johanna Leseho, introduction, in *Dancing on the Earth: Women's Stories of Healing through Dance*, edited by Johanna Leseho and Sandra McMaster (Forres: Findhorn, 2011), 16–17, 21.

¹⁵ Hayes, *Soul and Spirit in Dance Movement Psychotherapy*, 108, 142.

The retreat positively affected participants' connection with others, in terms of experiencing a sense of oneness and safety with others; developing trust; being able to be authentically themselves in a group; having fun and playing together; accessing a sense of beauty in their group movement; and gaining additional insight into their reactions in relationship. Retreatants found shared dance enhanced a sense of safety. Painter and Beckman describe part of the role of spiritual accompaniment as 'to hold the space and make a safe container ... to explore new territory'.¹⁶ In the context of dance therapy, Sharon Chaikin and Clare Schmais also affirm:

A group moving together seem to have one breath and one pulse As feelings are expressed in a shared rhythm, each member draws from the common pool of energy and experiences a heightened sense of strength and security.¹⁷

Neuroscientists associate this effect with rhythmic sensory-motor activity in the womb and early life.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Paintner and Beckman, *Awakening the Creative Spirit*, 20.

¹⁷ Sharon Chaikin and Clare Schmais, 'The Chase Approach to Dance Therapy', in *Theoretical Approaches in Dance Movement Therapy I*, edited by Penny Lewis (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt, 1994), 17–36, here 21.

¹⁸ See Laurie MacKinnon, 'The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics: An Interview with Bruce Perry', *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 33/3 (2012), 210–218, at 214.

Veronika Prüller-Jagenteufel writes: 'The one who is trying to be consciously present is inviting the other to be present as well, to be who she/he really is ... this is what God is doing for ... us: being present as an invitation to be present'.¹⁹ Dance requires visible presence. It also allows contact. Several participants spoke of touch as precious and moving, reinforcing relationship. Dance involved the choice to let go of self-protective mechanisms and be truly themselves with the unknown other.

Finally the retreat positively affected participants' sense of relationship with God, through the sense of presence in the beauty and unity in the group, through creativity and through worship. It opened up a space for noticing, for reflection, for God to work through memories and symbolic material. There was a sense of reassurance of God's love, and being led further on the journey.

Dance allows the whole person to express a response to God, and makes this response visible. As Paula Dowthett writes:

Through movement, the body becomes a gateway into the soul, and in Christian dance therapy, an opening for the Holy Spirit's healing power to enter into the wounded places, the repressed hurts, the unacknowledged defeats and unmet needs to bring the love of God the Father which heals, transforms and brings miraculous changes and freedom to the person. To be able to freely flow in giving and receiving love is the mark of a whole person.²⁰

In this retreat, dance provided an experience of moving as the body of Christ, its different parts interacting supportively and in worship. It made the beauty of the group's relationship visible and literally tangible, and so reinforced it, embodying the participants' sensitivity to each other in spacing, in synchrony, in physically responding and supporting, and in trust and authenticity.

Paintner and Beckman observe a commonality between the arts and prayer: 'They are both rooted in an intense encounter involving a surrender of wilfulness, openness to inspiration, and lead to a deep engagement with mystery'.²¹ These authors echo the retreatants' experience:

¹⁹ Veronika Prüller Jagenteufel, 'The Power of Presence', in *Spirituality and Counselling: Experiential and Theoretical Perspectives*, edited by J. Moore and C. Purton (Ross on Wye: PCCS, 2006), 119–126, here 126.

²⁰ Dowthett, *Christian Dance Therapy*, 15.

²¹ Paintner and Beckman, *Awakening the Creative Spirit*, 23.