Embodying Nature: An Experience in Deep Ecology
With Anna Halprin and Ken Otter
April 8-12, 1998
At Mountain Home Studio in Kentfield, Marin County, California[1]

Craig Pesti-Strobel © 2019

Introduction

Much has been written concerning the environmental movement and the various philosophical and ethical positions concerning the environment and environmental crisis. Less well-explored, although certainly not ignored, has been the development of environmental or nature-based spiritualities which either derive from these environmental philosophies, or which precede the more formal process of philosophical articulation. Even less explored have been the particular sets of practices such as rituals, role-plays or other performative acts which serve to create the conditions in which experiences of connection with the earth or the natural world can occur. In this article, I describe what can be considered to be an environmental performance ritual known as the Planetary Dance, which in essence is a danced form of prayer or an embodied collective expression of intention and desire towards the achievement of a particular goal. Before discussing the Planetary Dance, which is sponsored every year by Anna Halprin and her associates in Marin County, California, I will describe an environmental dance workshop that was led by Halprin and Ken Otter, as a joint project of Halprin's Tamalpa Institute and the Institute for Deep Ecology in April 1998.

The Institute for Deep Ecology was initially co-founded in 1992 as the Institute for Deep Ecology Education by Fran and Joanna Macy, in close association with Bill Devall, Stephanie Kaza, Elias Amidon, Elizabeth Roberts and others, and situated in Boulder, Colorado. By 1996 the organization had moved to Occidental, California, shortening its name to the Institute for Deep Ecology (IDE). For the first several years, IDE sponsored workshops and trainings in deep ecology. Many of the trainings featured various teachers of deep ecology or environmental activists who ascribed to the principles of deep ecology. In the late 1990s, IDE went through a self-evaluation process that resulted in a shift from small, workshop-styled trainings to larger conferences co-sponsored with

other progressive groups, such as the Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Cultural Conservancy, Global Exchange, New College of California, Youth for Environmental Sanity, and the Indigenous & Non-Indigenous Youth Alliance. This marked increasing coalition-building around social justice issues. Since 2002, however, IDE stopped offering workshops and closed its offices. Although it has not officially dissolved as a non-profit at the time of this writing, its activities have been drastically curtailed. Because of this, it is important to place in the public archives a record and analysis of the work done by IDE. This article contributes toward that goal.

Brochure and description of the workshop

Every year during its existence, the Institute for Deep Ecology sponsored a number of workshops and trainings in Deep Ecology. The brochure sent out each year describes these workshops as well as gives a brief overview of the philosophy and purpose behind the trainings. On the first page of the 1998 brochure, they ask the question, "What is Deep Ecology?" The sidebar contains four short statements: "A Philosophy Based on the Inherent Value of All Life," "An International Movement for Social Change," "A Path for Personal Growth," and "A Compass for Daily Action." The following explanation of the trainings is given:

> The deep ecology trainings guide us in transforming our way of life. We gather to uncover the root causes of our society's degradation of nature and peoples. As we seek to heal contemporary alienation from self, community, and the Earth, the deep ecology perspective encourages us to undertake a fundamental shift in the way we experience nature and how we respond to the environmental crisis.
>
> All IDE trainings are grounded in a belief in the essential value and interdependence of all forms of being. We learn tools for minimizing humanity's destructive interference with the natural world and for restoring the diversity and complexity of ecosystems and human communities. We engage in practices to help change old patterns of thinking and acting, while nourishing the human spirit. And we explore new ways to bring ecological perspectives into personal, professional, and community life.
>
> Please join us in 1998 to develop a community of support and action to face the political and ethical challenges of our time.[2]

From this statement, it is possible to distill several touchstones or parameters by which the work of the deep ecologists studied in the workshops I attended can be analyzed and investigated. These would include the following:

1. Investigation into root causes.
2. Healing from alienation through experiential shifting.
3. Minimizing human destructiveness and restoration of biodiversity and complexity of human and ecosystem communities.
4. Change in patterns of thinking.
5. Nourishment of human spirit.
6. Development of a community of support and action.

In this paper, I will focus upon one of the workshops I attended, which was put on by Anna Halprin and Ken Otter. The workshop, entitled "Embodying Nature: An Experience in Deep Ecology," took place April 8-12, 1998, at Mountain Home Studio in Kentfield, California, located at the home of Anna and Lawrence Halprin on the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County, California. The workshop represented the first collaboration between Anna Halprin, who is one of the pioneers in Modern Dance as well as a leading figure among those who integrate the expressive and healing arts, and the Institute for Deep Ecology. Ken Otter embodies this collaboration within himself. According to the short description of him in the section on faculty in the 1998 Brochure, *Action for Earth*, he is "an educator and group facilitator in participatory and transformative approaches to leaning and change toward a world rich in biological and cultural diversity. Ken is on the faculty of the California Institute for Integral Studies, John F. Kennedy University, and the Tamalpa Institute."[3] Ken is a graduate of the Tamalpa Institute, which was co-founded by Anna Halprin and others to offer "training programs, workshops and classes in the Halprin/Life Process, an integrative approach to movement, the expressive arts and therapeutic models supporting personal, interpersonal and social transformation."[4] In addition he teaches classes in Deep Ecology, Systems theory and Group Facilitation.

Anna Halprin has developed over the course of several decades a movement-based process whereby a person is enabled to "experience their personal embodiment of the natural world."[5] Having trained with many of the leading innovators in modern dance, such as Margarret D'Houbler, Hanya Holm, Martha Graham and danced in the company of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, she moved in the mid-1940s to establish with Welland Lathrop the Halprin-Lathrop Foundation, Inc., which became the acknowledged dance center of the West at that time.[6] In 1956 she left the Foundation and gathered a small group of dancers at her home studio on Mt. Tamalpais to explore as the "Dancer's

Workshop" the unique movement vocabulary within each individual. Halprin has continued to be an innovator and experimenter, expanding the place of dance into city streets, mountainslopes and beaches, and has in the last twenty years established the Tamalpa Institute. Influenced by the work of her friend Fritz Perls, Halprin has explored the relationship between mind and body and movement and feeling. Her early work in improvisational dance, wherein the dancer responds to spontaneous psychological and emotional sensations within the body, has been combined with the therapeutiuc orientation of Gestalt therapy, which embraces mind and body in a manner similar to Halprin's work. Movement is used along with other expressive art forms (visual arts, poetry, vocalizing, etc.) to unlock emotions and experiences which are hidden in the body's muscle memory.

Many of Halprin's earliest work was done in collaboration with her husband, Lawrence Halprin, an internationally-recognized environmental designer. The Mountain Home Studio itself is built on one of the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais, and much of the work is done either out on the open deck, or on the trails of the mountain, in the backyard, or in the woods and beaches of the Marin coastline. Halprin's work with dancers as well as with the Tamalpa Institute has combined improvisations with nature, within the self, and with a group. She has often collaborated with other artists such as painter Jo Landor, actor John Graham, and musicians La Monte Young, Terry Reily, and John Cage.[7] These collaborations have often resulted in large environmentally-based happenings, often involving chance events and spontaneous improvisation. Some of these experimentations have evolved into dance rituals involving large groups of people who are not trained dancers, blurring lines between performer and audience. Many of these rituals have become annual events at various places around the world, and make explicit the connections between human health (AIDS, breast cancer, etc.) and the health of the earth. These events have included *Circle the Mountain*, *Circle the Earth*, *Dancing with Life in the Line* (for persons with AIDS, HIV and ARC), *Going to the Mountain* (for those with breast cancer and their caregivers), and *Planetary Dance*, which was the event which concluded the Embodying Nature workshop.

Description of the Workshop

Day One

Each day began at Mountain Home Studio with warm-ups and movement rituals designed bring the participants into a deeper awareness and eased with our own movement vocabulary and inner dialogue. On the first day, we began by gathering outside on the dance deck, which overlooks a small wooded area filled with California Live Oaks, chaparral, and Redwoods. Anna Halprin oriented us to the four directions: to the North were two fruit trees planted on the upward sloping landscape as a memorial to one of her students killed in a car accident; to the East was San Francisco Bay and the lower slopes of Mt. Tamalpais; to the South were the Sun and the Sky; and to the West was Mt. Tamalpais itself. She then retold briefly the legend of the mountain which is that it is a reclining Indian woman, who will arise only when there is peace on Earth.

We then moved in to the dance floor inside the studio. Anna led us through another orientation to that space, inviting us to explore the floor, walls, ceiling and windows by asking "what is the experience of the space?" Then she finally led us through a series of body orientations involving forward, sideways and backward movements. At the finish of that exercise we had been oriented to our geographical, dance studio and body movement environments. What was next was an orientation to our internal environment.

Having moved to the outside deck again, we were given pieces of newsprint and crayons or pastels and were told to draw a visual representation of what we felt like, of "where we were at" at that point in time of the week and of the workshop. We then wrote down the feeling, the image and the movement suggested by the picture of our current experience. We then shared our pictures and words and performed our movements in groups of four persons. Each person in our group shared and performed their own "pieces" and the group then performed back those movements and words for the person, mirroring back to them what we had seen.[8]

We then posted the pictures on the walls of the studio. Every time we engaged in an exercise which involved drawing a picture, we then posted that picture on the walls, so the walls of the studio became a gallery of our experiences during the workshop.

After sharing our pieces within our groups of four, we returned to the inside studio space. Anna led us through a movement ritual which began with a focus upon the

breath, how it moves the rib cage and the spine. We then allowed this breath movement to move down the spine and bring us to the floor. We kept our connection to the earth and moved about slowly -- crawling, slithering, rolling -- always maintaining our connection with the ground. Anna encouraged us to make what she called "earth sounds" if any suggested themselves to us. The description of such sounds was left deliberately vague so as to encourage individual exploration. Still on the ground, we then began to move around the space with our eyes closed, occasionally connecting with others. Our eyes were kept closed in order to allow our other senses and awarenesses to come into play. At some point we began to move into more upright positions and orientations, all the while maintaining this strong sense of connection to the earth. At the end of the exercise we were encouraged to reflect individually upon our experience, and to write down our reactions, especially in a few poetic phrases.[9]

Day One Afternoon

In the afternoon, we made our first hike on a trail a short distance from Mountain Home Studio. Ken Otter led us along the trail instructing us to experience the trail with all of our senses. Along a more level portion of the trail we stopped and engaged in a Deep Ecological exercise originally developed by Joanna Macy as a variation on a blind trust walk. We paired up, with one person being blindfolded and the other person being the leader. We were instructed to lead our blindfolded partners along the trail and to engage our partner's non-visual senses in experiencing the trail. People smelled leaves, rotting trees, and moss-covered rocks; felt proprioceptically and kinesthetically the changes in elevation and rocks, tree roots and dirt of the trail; tasted leaves, raindrops on flower petals, bark and rock; listened to the rush of the rain-swollen creek become louder or diminish as we drew near and then moved away, heard the cries of hawks, flickers, jays and ravens. After a specific period of time, Ken rang a bell and the leading partner directed the attention of the blindfolded partner to a specific spot along the trail and then took off the blindfold with the words "Behold yourself." We then switched roles and continued down the trail.

At one point the trail crossed over the creek by means of a bridge. We gathered in a small clearing next to the bridge. Ken invited us to go off and find a spot to go and

simply be in. He suggested that we simply allow the place to be, and to allow ourselves simply to be, without making demands upon ourselves or upon the spot. After about thirty minutes we regathered at the clearing and shared a few impressions, and then returned to Mountain Home Studio.

Discussion of the Exercise

While appearing to be a blind trust walk, the exercise is actually designed to increase identification with the non-human world. The sense of sight tends to accentuate differences and distinctions between objects, focusing upon separateness and individuality. By removing dependence upon the "tyranny of sight," other sensual connections are made with the environment which are more fluid and less easy to delineate out as distinct or separate. Sight functions analytically by distinguishing the characteristics of objects generally perceived as being separate from the perceiving body. The sense of touch, on the other hand, functions only when coming *in contact* with the perceived object. The same is true for the sense of taste, which is closely allied with the sense of smell. The sense of smell functions more three dimensionally, creating or articulating a strong sense of space and place, while taste is strongly localized with specific objects. By removing sight, the other senses which function more connectively are brought to the fore. This serves to emphasize identification with the perceived object rather than separateness from it. When the blindfold is removed with the words "Behold yourself," and the first thing to enter the visual field is a flower or a tree or rock, the body undergoes a slight cognitive shift. What is normally interpreted cognitively as a separate object is reinterpreted as a connected object. The natural world in this exercise functions as a mirror wherein the usual notions of self and other become blurred and less distinct. To see oneself in a blade of grass or a grain of sand[10] involves an exercise in *not* seeing. This sort of blind walk functions, then, as an enacted paradox or riddle wherein the accustomed way of perceiving reality is challenged aesthetically and logically. The imagination is engaged in a way that forces a reconfiguring of relationships between things perceived and the constructed sense of self. This exercise serves as a way to expand the self from the isolated individual to the larger self, the ecological self described by Arne Naess:

> Traditionally the *maturity of self* has been considered to develop through three stages, from ego to social self, comprising the ego, and from there the metaphysical self, comprising the social self. But Nature is then largely left out in the conception of this process. Our home, our immediate environment, where we belong as children, and the identification with human living beings, are largely ignored. I therefore tentatively introduce, perhaps for the first time ever, a concept of *ecological self*. We may be said to be in, of and for Nature from our very beginning. Society and human relations are important, but our self is richer in its constitutive relations. These relations are not only relations we have to other humans and the human community.[11]

Day Two: Blurring the Boundaries

The second day of the workshop moved more deeply into bridging the work done in the studio with the work done on the mountainside. Anna Halprin explained that the work we were doing was designed to break down the artificial boundaries between ourselves -- our bodies-- and the natural environment.

Morning

The morning began with a circle gathering and check-in where people were allowed to briefly state how they were feeling at that point in time. Anna then led us through a movement dance exploring the dynamics of lightness and heaviness. We began by generating movement directed toward the sky. We explored the kinetic difference between moving our arms toward the sky as if it were very heavy and then as if it were very light. We then explored that same dynamic with other parts of our body. This moved into choosing a very specific image which arose out of that movement that would assist with the movement. We then broke into groups of five or six people and shared it with one another. The group then mirrored the movement back to the person sharing. We then created a group dance by having all the movements flow into one another. This was then presented to the rest of the workshop participants.

From this exercise, we then were invited to go outside. It was at this point that Anna explained that the purpose of our work was to break down the boundaries between ourselves and the natural environment. Anna invited us to get to know a part of the natural world (outside of the studio) with boundaries blurred. We could go “in the buff” if we wanted. So, most of us did. We took off some or all of our clothes, stood in the sun, got

wet, smeared mud and leaves on our skin, laid on the wet earth, laid on moss-covered tree trunks, and allowed parts of our bodies that rarely feel the earth to do so.

Afternoon

After lunch. we gathered out on the dance deck where one of the participants who is a naturalist, Annie Prutzman, introduced us to a few of the trees we would meet along the way: Coastal Redwoods, California Live Oaks, Tan Oaks, Madrones, Black Oaks, among others. The purpose of the introductions was to serve like introductions at a party or gathering where all the guests do not know each other.

We then hiked along the same trail from the day before and stopped at the small clearing next to the bridge. Ken Otter then gave us the instructions for the afternoon exercise. We were to go off in different directions no more than a three to five minutes' distance away and let the land - a particular spot of the land - impress itself upon us. Ken chose this expression deliberately. We often impress ourselves upon the land, altering it, leaving footprints, perhaps noticing how we change it. But the land changes us as well, often in ways we don't recognize. This was an exercise in recognizing how the land impresses itself upon us.

Ken suggested some ways to facilitate this process of impressing:

1. To feel how the land in that spot carried our weight in different ways (recalling the experimentation with weight in the studio that morning);
2. To experience and/or explore the spot with our eyes closed;
3. To be aware of and attentive to the relationship between the earth and sky, which is particularly dramatic on the slopes of a mountain.

People went off in all directions and spent the next hour finding ways to let the land impress itself upon us. After an hour, we re-gathered in the clearing and returned to Mountain Home Studio.

Personal Reflections

In an earlier footnote, I indicated that I started out the week with an intense pain in my left foot near the heel, which made it very difficult to walk, let alone dance. Nonetheless, I participated to the fullest of my abilities. A curious thing began to happen. On

the first day's walk along the mountain trail, I allowed my body to conform to the terrain of the trail, rather than try to fight it. This is a practice I have used for many years. I visualize I am a mountain goat and my feet are hooves. I loosen my knees so they can absorb the uneven jolting of the trail, and allow my feet to rock slightly from side to side, bending and flexing just enough to respond to the slope and variations of the trail. I began to notice that when my foot was allowed to engage in that more natural free range of motion, the pain subsided. When I resumed walking on concrete and asphalt the pain returned, although not as severe as before. At one point I even began not to wear socks in my boots so that my feet could feel more closely the ground upon which I walked.

Conversations with my chiropractor revealed that there are a number of proprioceptors in the feet -- neural sense receptors in the joints and tendons and muscles that "monitor" the internal state of the body. It is these proprioceptors that Anna Halprin has focused much of her technique work around, for it is in connection with these proprioceptors that the body is said to store feelings and experiences. One of the prices we have paid for not going around barefoot is that we have stunted the development of a network of neural communication between the sense receptors on the surface of our feet and the proprioceptors within the feet. Important information (to utilize a term from systems theory) concerning the movement of the body in the environment is therefore lost. By taking off my socks while walking the trail, that communication began to be restored. In addition, by allowing my body to develop a rhythm of walking which conformed to the landscape rather than fight against it, my body began to move in a manner more in concert with the way it had evolved over thousands of years. Dolores LaChapelle tells a similar story about how one day of mountain climbing helped her body to heal from therapy related to an earlier hip dislocation.

After we were off the rock, we raced down the trail to the car and were back into town well before sundown. Only after that did I realize there was no pain in the groin and hadn't been for most of the day. I don't even know when it left me. But it was gone for good from that time on. So I puzzled over this. How come a vertical rock climb could accomplish in one day, what was supposed to take nine more months? It didn't

take long to figure it out. The only thing that we adults do in our modern life that exactly mimics what we did in the trees for at least 100,000 years is rock climbing. So that's why all the parts of the body for once can feel totally "at home" when climbing steep rock. For once in this modern life everything in the body is doing what it was designed to do by millennia of evolution. No wonder there's bliss. And because of the total relaxation of doing just what every part really wants to do my back was able to pull the pelvis up and thus no more pain. I realized that I could no longer ignore ethology because that's who we are -- animals.[12]

I realized on the trail that my body was shifting in its normal relationship to itself as well as in its normal relationship with its environment, which usually was an environment altered to certain human conceptions of comfort and ease. Along the mountain trail, with the exception of clearing a path for walking, the mountain terrain and topography ruled. As I moved in conformity with the natural environment, my body responded according to its design, and facilitated the healing of whatever was causing the pain in my foot.

During the morning session of the second day, I was one of those who removed all their clothing and rolled on moss-covered tree trunks and felt the mud, rocks and dried Live Oak leaves against my bare skin. My bare feet slowly relaxed into the new tactile sensations and the connection being reestablished between my proprioceptors and my surface sensory receptors. This experience helped prepare me for the afternoon experience.

In the afternoon, after we had been sent in all directions, I headed straight up a rather steep slope, allowing myself to move fully like a primate, grabbing branches and tree trunks to help pull myself up the hill. All four limbs were clearly needed and used in ascending the hill. Having located the spot that seemed to call to me, I set about taking off my clothes and exploring fully the feel and lay of the land. I crawled up trees and felt the roughness of Oaks and smoothness of Madrones. I slithered along the ground through leaves and dirt. A dance began to emerge in which I mimicked the slow growth movements of the branches of the trees around me. I realized that the twisting and shaping of the branches around me was actually a sort of dance by the trees, just drawn out over a

period of years, rather than the narrow time frame of a few minutes to which humans are accustomed. But indeed, the shapes of branches are nothing but a record of the trees' interactions with their environment, a movement pattern nearly frozen in time, at least from the standpoint of human perception. Thus, by shaping my body in analogous ways to those of the trees around me, I was truly dancing with the trees.

Day Three: Reconnecting with the State of Pure Awareness

The major intention of the third day was to alter our consciousness into a state of pure awareness for its own sake. It was explained that our experiences of being in nature, being with nature rather than against it, involved reconnecting with the state of pure awareness.

Morning

We began with a brief check-in in a circle. Then Anna started the morning with what she called the water experience. We began by lying on our backs, directing our attention to our breath and our body. We rubbed our hands briskly together to raise the *chi* and placed them over our eyes. We breathed in through our noses and out through our mouths. Occasionally we vocalized a sigh. Then we placed our hands on our chests to feel the breath come in and out. This went on for several minutes. Then we moved our hands down to our bellies, to feel the breath there. After several minutes, we began to vocalize deep, low tones, allowing whatever sound came from the deep belly breathing. People began toning, chanting, some made swishing sounds, harmonies, and overtones. After some minutes, Anna encouraged us to allow movement to arise out of the breathing and toning. Some people moved imperceptibly, others moved freely about the space. This continued for many more minutes. The total time for this exercise was about one hour.

At the close of the water experience, Anna told us to find one other person whom we trusted or felt close to, a special person, and make some sort of physical contact or connection with them. She allowed 10-15 minutes for this. Some people started sobbing, some sobbed and laughed, some were silent and still, many embraced or laid next to each other. This was an important transition, and served as a physical grounding after the trance-like experience induced by the breathing/toning/movement exercise.

Anna then suggested we spend ten minutes outside connecting with a tree, any tree. After we did that, we re-gathered in the studio. Anna then invited us to imaginatively enter the life cycle of a tree. Anna invited us to picture the tree we wanted to be, and then embody it, beginning in a curled-up position as a seed. We worked next on rootedness, then establishing a trunk, and so on through the whole life cycle. At some point we might die, or be uprooted, or struck by lightning or attacked by a disease. We were given about thirty minutes to embody this process. Afterward, we took paper and crayons or chalks or pastels and drew a picture of our experience, depicting the cycle from seed to death that we had bodily imagined and performed. Then we spent a few minutes imagining what one thing this tree might tell us.

Afternoon

In the afternoon, Ken led us once again on the mountain trail to the clearing next to the bridge from the previous two days. We gathered in small groups according to where we had gone the day before. We met with people whose spot in the woods was nearest to the place we had chosen, or had chosen us. We each took turns taking the group to our spot and in whatever performative way we chose, shared the spot, and told its story to the rest of the group. Some people narrated their experience from the day before, others spoke and moved/danced, others simply moved. This process took the rest of the afternoon.

Day Four: Summing Up

The final day of the workshop took place entirely at Mountain Home Studio. There was no afternoon session on the mountain. The focus of the morning work was to provide a structure wherein people could incorporate and integrate the experience of the workshop with their lives and work outside of the workshop. During the afternoon, we were shown the score for the Planetary Dance, which was to take place the next day on Mt. Tamalpais.

Morning

Leadership was shared between Ken Otter and Anna Halprin. The first exercise recapitulated the experience of learning to walk. We began on the floor, feeling gravity and the support of the floor. We experienced how the floor carried us. We lifted up our

chin, and took notice of how that affected the body and the sensations in the body. We lifted up our legs, and likewise took notice of how that affected the body and the sensations in the body. We then did both chin and legs, all the time taking notice of the sensations within the body. We opened and closed, curling and uncurling, like a flower opening and closing. We were to be aware of how the spine moved and how its flexibility facilitated this movement. We slowly came to our hands and knees, and began to move like cats and dogs, stretching and flexing the spine, bending, all the while on all fours. Then we rolled from side to side, eventually rolling on to our knees, and then slowly came to a standing position.

The purpose of the walking recapitulation was to help us experience how we carry within our bodies the memory of our development and the our experiences, and that it is accessible though movement. Based on this idea, the next exercise was specifically designed to allow us to symbolically express through movement our experience of being in our place in the forest. We were to develop a movement phrase based on that experience. We refined the movement into a short, repeatable pattern. We then shared our phrases with others in small groups, and mirrored the phrase for one another. We then combined the various phrases into a short dance piece which we then performed for the rest of the workshop participants.

After a break, we then regathered in the studio for the wrap-up of the workshop. We took paper and crayons, chalk or pastels and drew pictures depicting "where we are now" as a result of having been through the workshop. We then reflected upon all the pictures we had posted throughout the four days of the workshop. We then wrote poems, stories or narratives expressing whatever arose for us during our reflections. We then shared our pictures and poems or stories with another person.

Personal Reflection – "The Story from my Four Pictures"

Beginning in chains, bound to the earth --
Not necessarily negative.
By the end -- chains are broken—
A River of light is flowing through
A River of life meanders through
Energy splits the bounded seams --

Stitching undone, sutures dissolved,
Forces unleashed --------

In between the beginning and the end
is sinking into the decaying verdant earth
seed bursting soil
trunk tearing sky
Death nursing abundance
Life inexorable life
"It is important to be family" comes the message
of sprouting burls, intertwined roots -- "the forest is one tree"
Being root-upped tree dance
naked on moss-covered Bay body
Boundaries broken
Seams unstitched
Flags unfurled
Leaves uncurled
Rooted in life - the river running through --
Family is found. (4-11-98)

Day Four -- Afternoon

The afternoon was spent outside on the dance deck. At various points during the week, people had brought back items from along the trail or in the studio land which had "presented themselves" to the participants. These items were collected in one central location, a temporary altar, on the eastern side of the deck We then made one last offering at the altar, and shared one thing which was significant to us from the workshop.

History and Etiology of the Planetary Dance

After a short break, Anna related some of the history of the Planetary Dance. The dance has its origins in 1981 when Anna and Lawrence Halprin started together with a group of people a project they called "A Search for Living Myths and Rituals Through Dance and the Environment." This project occurred at the time that a murderer was stalking the trails of Mt. Tamalpais. They found that the myth which was engaging their

community most deeply at that time concerned the feelings of fear, anger and betrayal concerning the presence of the killer on the mountain. Anna described the work in a 1984 article:

> The project involved the participation of some hundreds of people in seven workshops spanning a period of eight months, as well as the rehearsals of a company of dancers from Tamalpa Institute. These activities climaxed in a two-day community performance ritual in April of 1981.
>
> Most rituals take their meaning from a myth, a story that tells something important to and about the community performing the ritual.[13] The myth we discovered emerged when we confronted a major community issue -- reclaiming Mt. Tamalpais from the grip of a murderer stalking the mountain's trails.
> The mountain has always exemplified a mythic relationship between the inhabitants of the county and the natural forces at work in the environment. This relationship stretches far back to Miwok times and continues to this day. Now these murders were terrifying the people in Marin and destroying their relationship to the mountain. The need to restore peace to the mountain was strongly felt by people throughout the community.[14]

The culmination consisted of an indoor performance ritual in a theater space at the College of Marin, at the base of Mt. Tamalpais, and an outdoor performance ritual the next day on the slopes and trails of Mt. Tamalpais. Anna describes the event in her article:

> Our two-part community ritual took place one evening ("In the Mountain") and then during the next day ("On the Mountain"). "In the Mountain" was a dance performance in a traditional theater located at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais on the College of Marin Campus. The Tamalpa dancers performed dance offerings in honor of the waters, the winds, the earth, and fire. In the fire dance they enacted the violence of the victim and the killer, reversing roles until everyone embodied victim-killer. The evening's portion of the ritual ended with a plea for restoration and peace.
>
> After the dance, the audience and performers continued the ritual aspect of the evening by creating, in smaller groups, a "passage" to the next day's event. The main ingredients of this passage consisted of a feast, a dream wheel, and a sunrise ceremony. (The dream wheel is a community ritual in which members of the group sleep together in a circle with their heads towards the center. The intention is to form a group vision, which is constructed collectively in the morning as members share their night's dreams.) This passage gave people a chance to digest the theatrical experience and, for those who had not participated as performers, to become their own actors or dancers by drawing upon the performance as a source of inspiration to create their own theater the next day.
> "On the Mountain" completed the ritual, with the dancers and other participants challenging the killer directly by openly walking down the mountain. The ritualized walk up to the peak, and the procession down the entire mountain to the College of Marin, with music, poetry, and bamboo poles invested with the energy of the evening's performance, symbolized the reinvestment of hope and the rebirth

> of Spring. It exemplified what the whole project was about: bringing together all kinds of people to participate in the creating of myths and rituals that deeply reflected their personal and collective life issues. [15]

Significantly, a few days later the police received an anonymous tip which led to the apprehension of the alleged killer. The killings stopped from that time on. However, upon the advice of don Jose, a Huichol shaman who was visiting the Tamalpa Institute, the dance ritual was continued for another five years. From that initial project, they decided to hold a community dance ritual focusing upon various global concerns. One year they gathered to engage in a dance ritual to pray for an end to nuclear arms proliferation. Shortly after that particular ritual, the leaders of the United States and the U.S.S.R. signed their historic treaties halting the arms build-up. The power of a group of like-minded people who gather and ritually enact or pray for something is immeasurable, in Anna Halprin's eyes, and has been demonstrated to her through these gatherings and their aftermaths.

The focus for the Planetary Dance for 1998 was upon breast cancer. Anna and her Tamalpa colleagues and protégés had conducted several other workshops concerning breast cancer, and many of those participants would also be at the Planetary Dance as well. Anna shared with us the score for the Planetary Dance the following day. Over the years, the ritual has been simplified to the point that it consists primarily of a sunrise walk to the top of Mt. Tamalpais and then a gathering for the dance/run at a clearing somewhere on the slopes. This year, the dance/run was located just a short distance away from the Mountain Theater.

Planetary Dance Score

Diagram 1 below is the score as reconstructed from my notes and participation. The dance space was essentially a large circular space. As the score indicates, the dance consisted of three concentric circles with the drummers located in the center. There were four points around the circle, corresponding to the four cardinal directions, from which people entered the circle. As they entered the circle, they declared their intentions by shouting out for whom they were running, and then proceeded to run widdershins, or counterclockwise. At some point, they could move into the next circle, which moved slower and clockwise. The inner circle moved counter-clockwise again and the pace was

a walk. At some point, people could move out of the inner circle and stand facing the drummers. If a person wanted to leave the circle, they needed to move up through the concentric circles, in the appropriate direction and at the appropriate speed, and then stand around the space, or at its peripheries.

During the afternoon of the last day of the workshop, we practiced the dance in order to be key resource people during the dance the next day, which was Easter Sunday. Following our practice, the workshop disbanded and people scattered again to their various residences. Several participants had arranged to camp out at a campsite on Mt. Tamalpais, so as to be close to the spot where the sunrise gathering would occur, as well as for the dance/run which was scheduled for late-morning/ noontime.

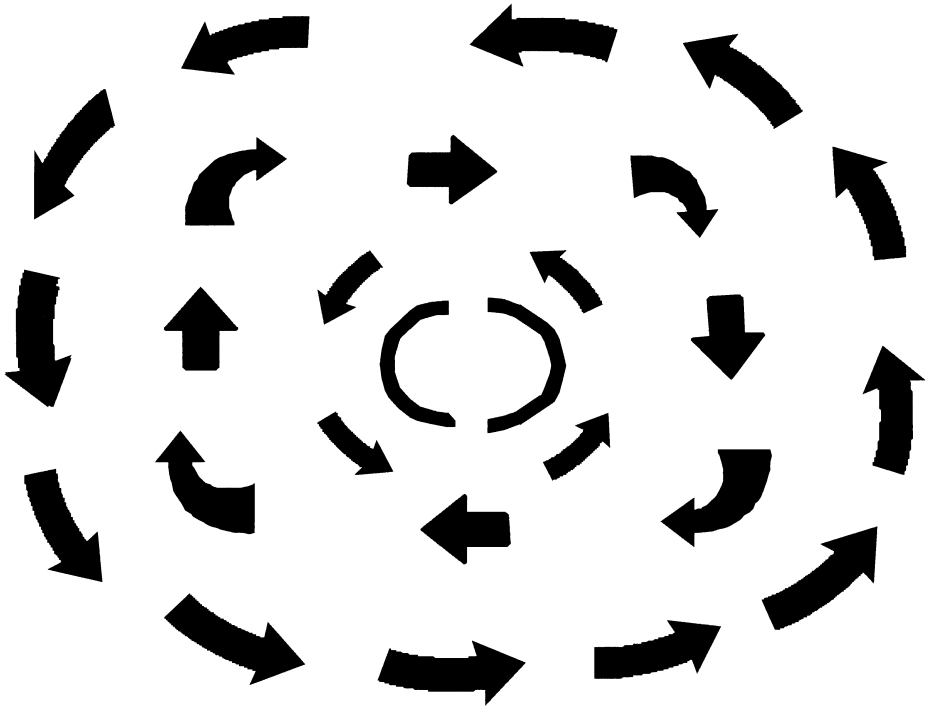

Diagram 1. Planetary Dance Score

The Planetary Dance: April 12, 1998

The brochure entitled “Going to the Mountain: A Creative Response to the Breast Cancer Crisis” describes the 1998 Planetary Dance as follows:

> **Anna Halprin and the Planetary Dance** community invite you to take part in the 1998 Planetary dance, a dance to invoke the spirit of the earth & ourselves in a spring ritual of healing, renewal of community and affirmation of life. This annual community event has grown into a worldwide gathering. The Planetary Dance is free & open to the public, & dedicated this year to the breast cancer crisis and environmental concerns.[16]

I was joined for this event by my wife at the time and our 4-month-old daughter. We had camped out with the group at the campsite located about halfway up the mountain. We chose not to rise before dawn in order to see the sunrise at the top of the mountain. Instead we fixed breakfast, broke camp and made it to the dance site near the beginning of the ritual. The site was located in a large opening in the midst of several old Madrone trees. A large outer circle denoting the dance perimeter was laid out using white flour. In the center of the circle several percussionists stood with drums, rattles, gourd shakers, etc. Colorful strips of cloth hung from branches and poles. One person on stilts was costumed in a large red and black raven suit, and walked around the perimeter of the area, dancing and moving in sympathy with the dancers in the circle. At one point later in the morning, he was brought into the circle and danced a solo.

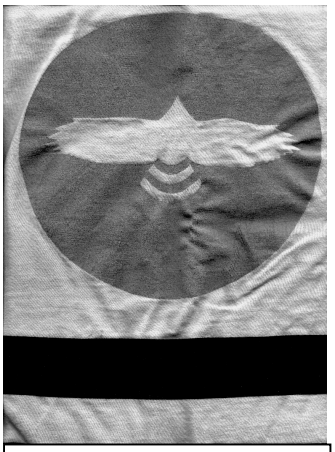

Illustration 1. 1999 Planetary Dance T-shirt Logo

The T-shirt design scanned to the left was worn by the leaders of the Planetary Dance and those of us who attended the workshop, "Embodying Nature," and who had learned the score the previous day. The hawk image in the center of the circle represents the soaring of the prayers of the people gathered. The circle, which is yellow in the original silk-screen, represents variously the original roundhouse dance circle, the sphere of the earth, the sun, and the wholeness of creation. The two parallel black lines at the bottom represent the surface of the earth, the land upon which all creatures have their habitation, including the water creatures.

People stood around the circle in various levels of participation. Those who remained observers and supporters stood back from the circle, sat on the ground, leaned against trees, etc. Those who were ready to dance/run stood along the white flour circle. Anna explained the purpose of the dance and the score described above in Diagram 1. People came into the dance/run by entering at one of the four cardinal points of the circle,

announcing loudly for whom they were running, and then began to run in the counter-clockwise direction. As they began to tire, they would move into the next circle and jog at a slower pace, or enter the inner circle and walk. People even rested in the center by standing next to the musicians.

There were a series of about four runs. At one point Anna invited all those persons who were desiring healing, especially from breast cancer to gather in the center. The rest of the participants were then invited to walk around these persons and direct our intentions and prayers for healing to those in the middle. This lasted for several minutes. At another point, all the children were invited to come into the circle and run. Several children did, and I entered carrying our 4-month-old daughter. This run was simplified in that all the children ran in a counter-clockwise direction rather than in the concentric circle score.

At the end of the dance/run, Anna came into the center of the circle and spoke. She began by thanking several people who had assisted in various ways with site arrangements, decorations, bringing and/or playing instruments. One of the participants she recognized was a man who for almost every year of the Planetary Dance has run from Mt. Diablo in Contra Costa County to the Richmond-San Rafael bridge, taken a bus across the bridge and then resumed his run through Marin County to Mt. Tamalpais in time for the annual Planetary Dance. He runs in the same spirit of prayer, with each footfall acting as a prayer. Due to advancing age he indicated that this might be his last year to make that long-distance run.

She then related the history and etiology of the planetary dance, much of which is described above. The vision for the original ritual performance arose out of an extended period of meditation centered around the mountain and the terror which staked its hillsides in the early 80s. In one such meditation session, Anna received a detailed vision what the ritual performance should look like. Based upon that vision she called together a group of concerned people, and the performance grew and developed.

Having described the origins of the Planetary Dance, Anna then briefly related several subsequent dances and the developments in the world she has seen in what she believes to be a direct result of the danced prayers there on the mountain and around the world. Anna stated that she is a strong believer in the power of prayers that are offered

by people in an embodied fashion such as the planetary dance. In her article cited earlier, she quotes from James Hurd:

> Dance is the most important language the people know. It is a magical language of power. It is the language of the spirits. It is the language nature understands. It is the language in which are told the myths and stories that provide the people with the correct way to make sense out of their experience. To celebrate birth and marriage, to initiate the young into adulthood, to initiate the adults into the sacred mysteries, to prepare for war, to celebrate victory or lament defeat, to heal the sick, to help the dying on their journey into the land of the dead, to maintain the life of the community on the proper path, traditional peoples sing their songs and dance their dances.
>
> The re-discovery of the lost language of dance offers to us the very vehicle which people have traditionally used to form their cultures and face their crises, yet with an important addition. Strange to say, the dance we recover has been purified and renewed during its long burial in the West, for in a sense the ancient dances held their people captive. The tradition has to be preserved for traditional societies to survive. In a traditional society, it is probably almost as true to say that the dances create their people as it is to say that the people create their dances.
>
> One of the great gifts of Western culture has been the development of personal creativity and the freedom to explore. Great artists, scientists, and many others have lived, discovered and taught much about the process of creation. In re-discovering the language of dance, we have the opportunity to combine the alive-ness of this diverse creativity with the power and depth of ritual.[17]

It is this process of rediscovering the mythical and sacred aspects of dance and community that Anna understands her work to be about. She also understands human community to be a part of the natural or ecological community, and so all dances for healing of the human community are also dances for healing of the greater natural community of which the human species is a part.

Following this speech, the dance space was dissolved, and the potluck portion of the event began. Tables were pulled together and food was placed on the tables. People lined up with plates and utensils and shared food. Although a much more informal part of the ritual, it was nonetheless a significant aspect of the event, as people stood and sat around in one of the oldest expressions of human community: the sharing of food.

The ritual space was formally dissolved with the dispersal of the tables, the removal of the banners and ribbons, and the sweeping of the flour (i.e., that which remained after the dance/run) into the dirt. People walked along the trail, returned to their cars, and drove home. The time at that point was mid-afternoon.

Evaluation of the Workshop and Planetary Dance

The course description in the I.D.E. brochure advertising the workshop describes the workshop as follows:

> Set amidst the mountain and maritime beauty of Marin County, this workshop aims to reawaken our true identity as an integral part of the natural world. Sensory awareness and movement practices, as well as creative expression, reveal to each of us the meaning and significance of our connection to the living landscape. The vitality and self-knowledge harvested in this remarkable work liberate both mind and body in service to our world.
> Our days together will culminate in the famed Planetary Dance, an annual public ritual celebration on Mount Tamalpais dedicated to personal and planetary well-being.
> No prior movement training is necessary; all you need is a desire to deepen your joy in life and to let your body guide your work for the Earth.[18]

At the start of this article I suggested that the work of the deep ecologists I have studied in the workshops I attended could be evaluated according to several touchstones derived from statements made by the Institute for Deep Ecology in their publicity brochure. In review, they are:

- Investigation into root causes.
- Healing from alienation through experiential shifting.
- Minimizing human destructiveness and restoration of biodiversity and complexity of human and ecosystem communities.
- Change in patterns of thinking.
- Nourishment of human spirit.
- Development of a community of support and action

Investigation into Root Causes

Very little, if any, of this goal was accomplished at this workshop. As indicated in the course description just cited, the main focus of the workshop was on the experiencing of the human "connection to the living landscape." Uncovering root causes implies a more analytical and rationally discursive process. The nature of Anna Halprin's work as described in the preceding essay is based much more at the intuitive and somatic level. The work of analysis and rational discourse requires a certain distancing and disconnec-

tion from the phenomenon under discussion. The intent of this workshop was just the opposite, to move beyond separation and analysis.

Healing from alienation through experiential shifting.

On the other hand, this particular goal was readily achieved. The focus of the workshop was at the experiential level, and every exercise was designed to shift the awareness of the participants away from an alienation from the natural world fostered by our technological and comfort-driven culture to an awareness of being an intrinsic part of the natural world, indeed, an awareness of the natural world also being an intrinsic part of human being.

Minimizing human destructiveness and restoration of biodiversity and complexity of human and ecosystem communities.

This particular goal implies much more direct action at the level of established human communities and land developments. This goal involves political work as well as hands-on work such as habitat restoration, riparian restoration, pollution abatement, eco-systemic town and city planning, and architecture and landscaping. At the same time, however, it can also be argued that the process of raising human awareness of the connection between the human species and all other species as well as the land facilitates minimizing human destructiveness. While I have argued above that this workshop did not engage in a more formal investigation into root causes, it can be argued that the experiential work facilitated the minimizing of human destructiveness by directly addressing one of the root causes of the "degradation of nature and peoples": the felt experience of alienation and estrangement from the natural world. The experiential work of the workshop was designed to erase the perception of the natural world as *other* and to inculcate the perception of the natural world as *self.* This, of course, is one of the goals of deep ecology as articulated by some of the early writings of Arne Naess cited previously.

Change in patterns of thinking.

This workshop endeavored to change patterns of thinking by moving from the more rationally discursive mode of thinking which characterizes modern post-industrial

society to a mode based in direct sensory awareness and experience of the body in the environment. The mode of thinking stressed in the workshop is much in keeping with the form of intelligence described by Howard Gardner as a *kinesthetic intelligence*[19] (Gardner, 1983). The type of encounters encouraged by this workshop were more characteristic of subject-subject encounters reminiscent of the I-Thou described by Martin Buber[20] rather than a Cartesian dualism of subject-object. Significantly, the style of thinking promoted by this workshop is much more in keeping with that advocated by many Feminist thinkers: intersubjectivity, contiguity between observer and the observed, role of the body in thought and human experience, challenge to hierarchical patterns of domination and subordination, etc.

Nourishment of Human Spirit.

What can be more nourishing than four days of dancing and moving and hiking in the woods and on a mountain? Obviously, this criteria cannot be evaluated according to anything more than subjective standards. I can report that my own spirit was nourished, and informal conversations with other participants indicated that they felt the same. It is notable that at least one participant did not feel comfortable with the process of the workshop, and was particularly uncomfortable with the session when several people took off their clothes outside. She did not return for the final two days of the workshop. However, many of the participants were already students of Anna Halprin, so this type of work was not foreign to them. From the course description in the I.D.E. brochure, it was clearly the intent of this workshop to nourish the human spirit: "The vitality and self-knowledge harvested in this remarkable work liberate both mind and body in service to our world." It is also significant to mention that by the end of the week, the physical pain I had been experiencing in my foot had almost completely disappeared. Out of my own experience, I can report that not only was I nourished spiritually, but physically as well.

Development of a community of support and action.

It is not readily apparent that this occurred as a direct result of this workshop. All of the participants received the names and addresses of the other participants, so networking is possible. However, no formal structure was put into place, nor was there any

mechanism for follow-up instituted. Since this workshop was designed to be free-standing as most workshops often are, follow-up and further development of this work has not been addressed as of the time of this writing.

Summary and Conclusions

In their quest to cultivate a deep ecological consciousness within North American society, the people associated with the Institute for Deep Ecology during its brief tenure developed a series of experiential workshops which seek to engage people emotionally, physically, spiritually and intellectually from within the milieu of a deep ecological world view. The workshop, "Embodying Nature: An Experience in Deep Ecology" with Anna Halprin and Ken Otter explored how the media of dance and direct physical contact with the natural environment contribute to the development of such a consciousness. The workshop also sought to make connections between those trained in the expressive arts and those concerned with the environment. The inner self-exploratory work developed by Anna Halprin at the Tamalpa Institute was brought into interplay with the work of the Institute for Deep Ecology (represented through Ken Otter's leadership) stressing the interconnections between beings. While it is tempting to depict this as an interplay between inner and outer work, it is much more subtle and complex than that. The work of Anna Halprin already explored the essential connections between humans and the rest of the natural world, and her work with community rituals has always stressed the interconnections between persons. Ken Otter works at both the Institute for Deep Ecology and the Tamalpa Institute, and explores the relationship of the inner processes of the individual as they interact with the inner processes of other individuals, all within the greater context of a natural environment. Ken teaches systems theory and its applications to group work and social change. Thus, he works within an understanding of how personal change and social change are woven together, and made out of the same cloth.

The collaboration of Halprin and Otter, as well as the collaboration of the Tamalpa Institute and the Institute for Deep Ecology serves as one expression of the desire to heal alienation from self, from other humans and from the natural world. It accomplishes this by bringing performing artists and environmental activists into a working relationship. Theory and praxis become joined in a way that places the bodies of partici-

pants into the deep ecological world view, such that the participants actually experience at the somatic and psychological levels what is intellectually and rationally described in the principles of Deep Ecology.

Endnotes

[1] This paper is derived and excerpted from Chapter 4 of my dissertation, *Performance, Religious Imagination, and the Play of the Land in the Study of Deep Ecology and Its Practices*, (Graduate Theological Union, 2000, pp. 159-185).

[2] The Institute for Deep Ecology, brochure, *Action for Earth: Applied Deep Ecology, 1998 Programs,* (Occidental, CA: Institute for Deep Ecology, 1998).

[3] *Ibid.,* Faculty listing (p. 8).

[4] Tamalpa Institute, brochure, *Summer Workshops, 1998,* (Kentfield, CA: Tamalpa Institute, 1998).

[5] Institute for Deep Ecology, *Ibid.,* Faculty listing (p. 7).

[6] Susan Reisch, "Chapter One: Anna Halprin" in *Simone Forti and the Emergence of Performance Art,* (© Susan Reisch, 1991), found on-line at http://www.best.com/~ehodges/simone/annah.html as of February 2, 1999.

[7] *Ibid.,* p. 6 of 12.

[8] At that point in time, I was experiencing a great deal of pain in the side of my right heel due to an unknown cause. This made it difficult for me to move on my feet, whether walking, running or dancing. My three words were "bound" (feeling), "chains" (image), and "tied to the earth" (movement).

[9] My own reflections include these lines: "Tangled root appears from below / Grabs my foot, / Lets go -- I walk on."

[10] "To see a world in a grain of sand/ And a heaven in a wild flower, / Hold infinity in the palm of your hand / And eternity in an hour." William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence.*

[11] Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World" in Drengson and Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement,* 14.

[12] Dolores LaChapelle, *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex, Rapture of the Deep*, 56.

[13] (*Author's note*): This notion of the relationship between myth and ritual has been discounted by many recent scholars of religion. However, the idea of the connection between myth and ritual has been highly influential to people in the performing arts, particularly those within alternative and avant garde movements. Thus, regardless of its scholarly and academic standing, the relationship between myth and ritual has become an important creative principle in dance, theater and performance art.

[14] Anna Halprin, Healing the Mountain in IN CONTEXT 5 (Spring 1984): 57, copyright (c)1984, 1997 by Context Institute. Taken from the InContext website, URL: http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC05/Halprin.htm. Accessed Feb. 22, 1999.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Going to the Mountain, "Going to the Mountain: A Creative Response to the Breast Cancer Crisis," brochure (Kentfield, CA: 1998).

[17] James Hurd, *Philosophy of City Dance,* quoted in Anna Halprin, "Healing the Mountain."

[18] The Institute for Deep Ecology, *op cit*.

[19] Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1993.

[20] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.