

# Life Dancing Itself

The Role of Movement in Play and Evolution by

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A dancer, alone in her studio, allows her body to drift freely, spontaneously moving, gesturing, reaching, extending. Of all the movements she makes, she will feel drawn to some, either by look or feel, and these movements will be repeated, honed, choreographed into a dance she will perform. At home, her young son is listening to music. His three-year-old body is jumping to the music, exuberantly flailing every which way. He is gleefully enjoying the sounds, his body, his aliveness. In the back yard, the kitten stalks the old dog, sneaking up silently, alternately freezing and creeping forward, all alert and contained. At the pinnacle of tension in the kitten's body, he pounces, exploding onto the sleeping dog. A wild tussle ensues, in which the two move impulsively from the dictates of their physical urges, tempered by signals and restraints that keep the mock battle fun and safe.

Movement is the *modus operandi* of the universe, life dancing itself. Our bodies whirl and spin in space, and all bodies in space, celestial or otherwise, breathe and pulse, rotate and spiral. Be it the beating of a heart, the squeeze of breathing muscles, or the sizzle of electrochemistry across a neural net, life is determined by movement. And movement defines and delivers evolution. This article examines the primacy of our bodies' birthright of twists and tugs, lurches and leaps, pushes and reaches the call to move—as life expressing and evolving itself through the mechanism of play.

All living things move, and life requires a body, a structure, to do so. The structure and form of each creature determine how it will move, whether it will slither or fly, for instance, and repetitive movement has determined the shape and form of that particular creature down through time. Proto-humans that could extend their spines the most, the ones who then freed their hands to practice grasping and manipulating objects, were the ones who conferred the most advantage to their children. Movement and matter determine each other in an interdependent dance. Their interaction creates bodies, which in turn move through space in new and unique ways, which in turn shape life into new forms.

## Biological Movement

Movement can be thought of as being in three forms and governed by two principles. The first form of movement is biological, the thrummings of the body itself, shaping and creating itself through its various interior metabolic vibrations and pulsations. *Intrinsic biological movement* is our bottom-line definition of life. The heart must beat, the lungs must fill and empty. We are required to neurotransmit, to peristalt, to secrete. It is these movements that

basically create our unique body pattern, our recurring structure over time. It can show up, for example, as fluids pumping. For our fluids to circulate, we need solids (veins, arteries, capillaries) for them to push and flow against. The solids channel the fluids, the fluids hydrate and flush and sometimes dissolve the solids, much like a wetland. All these biological hummings and goings on occur to form individual identity—these movement processes define our sense of unique and separate self (Keleman 1985). It is, after all, my peristalsis, not yours. We are all unique individuals because of our movement processes, and at the same time, biological movement is shared by all life—the dance is the same—and we are only beginning to understand the synchronicity, the entrainment that splendidly occurs across the seemingly vast distances between two live bodies. We all sizzle and thrum inside, and when we get in close proximity to each other, we can do it to a mutual beat.

Most biological movement is by its nature autonomic—it goes on and on, responding to various feedback controls, while being blithely uninterested in our conscious state. Some biological movement is under volitional control, an example being breathing, but most can and do occur without a thought, a will, a conscious "Yes, do that now." The first movement principle involves pattern, and biological movement is almost wholly patterned. It is committed by all life in an ordered and predictable and recurring way, and only some systems are affected by individual whim. We need the constancy of patterned, recurring movement. We could never juggle all of our metabolic balls at once consciously, so we are dependent upon imprinted movement pattern to take care of our basic aliveness.

In a sense, we can say that intrinsic biological movement is our physical unconscious. I am not aware of my pituitary gland as it releases its hormones, yet it is me doing it, no one else. My basic aliveness is only partly in my awareness. Carl Jung once said that the unconscious is infinite, and it is good that it is so. By having our basic life imprint under the deep water, in the back of the dark cave, we preserve its ultimate function. We are then creatures of mystery and exploration, always and in all ways being astronauts. Our need to investigate, to step into the uncharted, is quite primal. We oscillate between the frontiers of inner and outer space, and this is our ultimate quest—to keep moving. Just as scientists have not seen the end of the universe, we have not discovered the full depths of our biological movement. Yogis and adepts can practice for decades and gain more awareness of and conscious participation in metabolic processes such as heart rate, blood flow, or body temperature that were thought to be unmoved by our will. Perhaps this is how we can define enlightenment, as that state where we are awake to a fully explored inner and outer universe. But it is the exploring, the riding out at the frontier that seems to provide access to our deepest joy and satisfaction at this moment in our evolution. Maslow called this our need for growth and transcendence. Captains Kirk and Picard call it going where no one has gone before.

### **Locomotive Movement**

The second form of movement is *locomotion*. Moving the body through space is required for the internetting of life in a larger scale. Locomotion is our method of relationship to the world. From a sunflower turning its face to the sun to a curious child turning over a rock, locomotion is movement organized toward contact across the semipermeable membrane we call body, contact being an ongoing life need. Locomotion is also highly adaptive. It allows us an almost instantaneous ability to change our relationship to the world, to first make it more safe, then more nourishing, then more penetratingly conscious. Much like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1971), locomotion gets more sophisticated, more blissfully intricate, as we go up the developmental and phylogenetic scales. We evade a predator, we reach for an apple, we hold our young child, we scratch an itch. All these motions create and affirm our status in the environment, and can span functions from safety, survival, and reproduction, to emotional expression, curiosity, and fun.

The advent of culture in humans (and other species) creates a unique parameter to locomotion. Posture, stance, spacing, and gesture move a culture. They are movement as communication, our nonverbal locomotion. We begin to see basic forms of play in this movement form. It is through locomotion that we play basketball and dominoes. Children choreograph King of the Mountain, Red Light/Green Light, and other games to organize and systematize play. Locomotive play can rehearse social status, refine hunting or courting skills, teach nonverbal communicative language, and identify individual, group, and species characteristics. Locomotion is semipatterned movement in that it is only somewhat hardwired at birth. A human newborn knows only how to suckle and root and turn its head in an organized way. The more complex the organism, the more locomotive movement must be learned through experience and practice. Culture sculpts patterns of movement in intelligent primates. Play on this level is a bodily rehearsal and polishing of social and imaginative skills needed for optimal functioning later.

Locomotion can contain within it repeated movement patterns that create an ongoing sense of identity. I know who I am through my recurring gestures, stances, positions. I am the one who always puts my hand to my mouth when I listen, or I am the one who puffs up and clenches my fists when I get angry. I announce myself with my walk or my smile. In some ways, I am that chronic tightness in my shoulders or that fragile knee I injured playing baseball.

Locomotion also has another special capability in that it can be either patterned or impulsive. Impulse is the second movement principle. Impulsive movement arises spontaneously and serves no obvious ongoing need. It is unconnected to anything but the desire to move for its own sake. In a sense, impulse movement serves only our need to move as a life imperative. Impulse movement is the face we spontaneously make when we taste something bitter. It is the shudder or the sigh, the urge to move that wells up in us when we are affected by life. It is my

belief that the principle of impulse is a prime mechanism for the evolution of life. The principle of pattern ensures stability and continuity. Within locomotion, impulse movement ensures mutation and adaptation, the raw materials of evolution. Who knows why Martha Graham raised her hand in front of her face, extending it like a beacon above her head, captivating audiences all over the world? That expressive gesture was born of impulse movement, and it and millions like it are the ingredients of our art, our creativity as a species.

### **Expressive Movement**

The third form of movement is almost purely in the realm of the impulse principle. I call it *expressive* movement. It is movement that is required to be immediately superfluous. It is designed to *deautomatize* previous motion, to unravel it, to deprogram it. We all need pattern to exist, and we also need impulse. This third level of movement generates and nourishes impulse, as impulse is a necessary balance to pattern. Expressive movement is life's need to depattern, to be nourished by randomness, to experiment again with a different and possibly more perfect union. Entropy occurs when we express ourselves. We discreate ourselves in expression because expression is the end point, the completion of the cycle that begins with stimulation, proceeds to perception and meaning, and terminates in expressive action. Expression is the death of an event that has moved us, moved through us. In this way, expression creates the conditions for future conception.

Through expressive movement we make individual, group, and species evolution possible in a single lifetime. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry spoke eloquently of this idea in their book *The Universe Story*. In it they examined the second law of thermodynamics, which is about entropy. They introduced the concept of cosmogenesis as a companion to entropy, a balance to the fact that everything disorganizes. Cosmogenesis is the universe's constant of forming, of shaping, of creating itself. Cosmogenesis explains a star's formation; entropy explains its eventual collapse. Because of collapse, the raw material for cosmogenesis is made available.

These interlinking principles can also be seen in movement. Pattern movement celebrates organization and form, impulse movement investigates the raw material necessary for cosmogenesis. We can see the structure of movement like this:

**Type of movement** - Biological, Locomotive, Expressive

**Movement principle** - Pattern, Pattern/impulse, Impulse

Expressive movement is perhaps best manifested in the form's flowings of improvisational dance, as well as music, painting, sculpture, etc. It can also be seen in the movement of free-association thinking that great scientists and philosophers do. Einstein had to be willing to suspend or deautomatize his belief

in Newtonian physics to conceive of the theory of relativity. By being willing to break the mold, we can create new form. Rollo May (1975) and others have observed that creativity of all kinds requires just such a suspension of "the way we usually do it," a disordering of old forms, coupled with dedication and a driving urge to "express" whatever emerges from the rubble

### **Play and Expressive**

Expressive movement reaches its pinnacle in free play. It is observed in many mammals and all humans and is individualistic. It can consist of the spontaneous leaps and gambols we see in sheep, horses, and wolves. It is seen in humans as free associative movement that unfolds not through any external dictates, but motion that arises from a deep immersion in direct experience, following the moment to moment stimuli of the senses, of feelings, of images.

I observed this in my ten-year-old son a few months ago. He was sitting at my computer, teaching himself to use a graphics program. At one point he stumbled upon the way to create spirally lines on the screen, and his resulting excitement was so great that he wiggled and bounced in his chair and made large alternating punches in the air. This spontaneous dance was not linked so much to the computer as it was dictated by the surge of energy he felt in his body. The energy required *expression*, and he impulsively created a channel for it. By impulsively expressing our energy flows in spontaneous movement, we give birth to new form. Two nights later, I observed him using those same alternating punches as he danced to a Michael Jackson song. The impulse can also develop meaning over time, developing into locomotor play. Perhaps alternating punches in the air will come to signify for him a feeling of success and empowerment. He may use this, test it out on his peers. If the movement is echoed and mirrored back to him, it may enter the lexicon of nonverbal language, much as the common gesture of bringing the fists quickly toward the body while saying "Yes!" has become a universal signal of being immensely pleased with some outcome

Stuart Brown has stated, "I think of play as spontaneous behavior that has no clear-cut goal and does not conform to a stereotypical pattern. To me the purpose of play is simply play itself; it appears to be pleasurable." This is an important part of expressive movement. It just feels good. Just as pleasurable sex keeps our and other species reproducing, so does pleasure in play keep our species evolving. And expressive movement is the cornerstone of free play. It is inherently satisfying. Its self-reinforcing qualities ensure that it is repeated

Expressive movement also has healing properties. In the 1940s, professional dancers used to notice this when they worked in their studios with their students. People who had no hope of ever becoming professional dancers would study with them, and when asked about this hopeless pursuit they remarked that they didn't care, that they came in order to feel better. They reported feeling calmer, happier, and more functional in their lives when they danced

regularly. From these observations, the entire field of dance therapy was born. Intrepid choreographers and performers visited mental institutions and began to do expressive dance with patients. Interestingly, many were able to reach patients who had never responded to any other treatment. Catatonics and autistics were able to move how they felt, making contact with the outer world in many instances for the first time in their lives

As a psychotherapist and long-time dancer, I am acutely aware of this in my private practice. I diagnose almost entirely through the body. Can the client allow him or herself to be moved by emotions, events? How does this "being moved" manifest itself in the body? Almost all of us informally diagnose people as crazy by their dissynchronous movements, their lack of physical grace, their inappropriate gestures. I also effect treatment through the body. I teach clients to breathe fully. I ask them to track sensation in the body to understand where their feelings come from. And I encourage them to take a stand for their physical presence in the world, trusting their intuition and using direct experience as a guide. Recovering impulse movement is one of the most important factors in the recovery of body/mind health. It is always the case that my most dysfunctional clients are the ones who have lost impulse movement, and who exist in a hell of being either overly controlled or out of control with their biologic and locomotive movements.

The sicker a person is, the less expressive movement there is available. This brings a potentially useful technique to the field of mental health. It may be that as much as struggling to help the mentally ill *organize* their thinking, it may be of service to help them at the same time *disorganize* old dysfunctional thinking patterns through expressive movement and other forms of free play. Remediation is then accomplished through the reestablishment of the homeostatic oscillation of impulse and pattern. This may be the fundamental healing property of play and a motivating force behind the emerging field of play therapy. If we do not have a childhood that involves abundant play, play that involves both expressive and locomotor movement, we cannot as adults balance pattern and impulse. The balance of pattern and impulse is so fundamental a need that we will become "sick" when it is too heavily weighted in one direction. Since we can always draw upon biological movement to reinforce pattern movement, we need large amounts of free play to sustain the healing and transformational properties of impulse.

Free play is, by its nature, recreational. It re-creates. This points to the need that we all have to engage in nonproductive activities. When we recreate, we disengage from the momentum of our working lives, and this discreation of work patterns allows us to re-create the primal nourishment that occurs when we allow our energies emergent freedom. We reaffirm our creative natures by resting away from pattern for a time and opening to impulse. Our contemporary culture has trouble with this concept. The idea that we need to do things that are not immediately useful or productive is usually equated with laziness or

sloth. And in turn, in many subcultures, recreation has increasingly been associated with drugs (we call them recreational drugs), passive entertainment, and mindless consumption. Impulse then perverts into oblivious actions (we often chide ourselves for being impulsive, which we equate with mindless disregard). This perversion of impulse is the origin of addictions and much of the violent behavior in our society.

Not understanding the true nature of work and play begets both rigid fundamentalist ethics and wasteful indulgence. Rigid work ethics are very expensive to all human systems, as evidenced by the cancerous proliferation of stress-related disorders in our society. Mindless indulgence also has tremendous social costs, as evidenced by the billions of dollars we spend treating addictions and their social fallout. Both are phenomena of control. When we enter the system of control, our two choices are to be in control or to be out of control. We equate "in control" with work, productivity, and pattern, and we equate "out of control" with impulsiveness, with being juvenile (i.e., playing all the time and not doing anything useful), and with being a drain on society. In the system of control, which distorts both work and play, we suppress the natural nourishment that pattern and impulse provide

By negating play and engaging in control, we construct our fear of death. By becoming unfamiliar with the discreating, entropic features of free play, we come to fear any ending, any falling apart. Steven Levine has called us a "death-denying" culture, and it is my belief that this is largely the result of our misunderstanding and fear of the nature of impulse and free play. One of the most valuable gifts we can give our children is to allow and support their experiences of jumping into the unknown, the creative void, the unexpected. This freedom to explore, and our support and encouragement that children do this naturally, allows them to grow up to be the kinds of experimenters who discover new medicines, understand the complexities of ecosystems, or help solve social problems. And we do this supporting, this nourishing of experimentation, by cultivating "impulsive" free play. When we fear and withdraw from the little deaths that result when we let go of familiar pattern, we cut off our basic ability to be fully alive.

By revaluing play, we can remember what it is like to be out of the system of control and into an experience of creative process, of the natural oscillation of pattern and impulse, of creation and discreation. We can renourish ourselves and our world in a primal manner. We can welcome endings, because they presage beginnings. We can ride the energies that move our bodies, and boldly go where we have not been before, into the creative center of life.

### **Life, Movement, and Play**

All movement is a process of life sustaining and nourishing and evolving itself. It is also life playing with itself. Play is a life imperative, because play is required

for change, for transformation to occur. If we sink our cognitive hands into the grainy sand of chaos theory, we can feel play as the randomization of movement for biological (life) adaptation, survival, transformation, and evolution. Play is the container for impulse movement, and from there it can diffuse into locomotion, and perhaps even into evolving biological movement. Can we someday let our very cells and fluids dance? Locomotion in this sense is a laboratory for the negotiation of the boundary between impulse and pattern—a kind of buffer zone where the two forces (like matter and antimatter) can safely interact. Play is stored and operationalized in the laboratory of locomotion. But it is conceived, gestated, and born in impulse movement.

What "banged" into existence at the beginning of the universe was movement. Movement is one of the most fundamental organizing principles of the universe, and it is also a fundamental disorganizing principle. Both are required. Our frontier lies in the explication and support of impulse movement, its relation to the need for chaos, and its seeding of the elements of play. A dance therapist named Mary Whitehouse once said that there are two qualities in movement—moving and being moved. In moving we plan and execute. In being moved we allow life to play with and through us; we are moved by it. In expressive movement we experience ourselves transferring our locus of control over to impulse—we are moved, in other words, not by our individual plans and agendas, but by the greater force of life itself. In a sense we can say that there is a fourth form of movement, that the most encompassing movement is universal, the exploding whooshes and streamings of planets, stars, and galaxies. It is this elemental dance that we participate in in expressive motion. Our local universe moves into and out of being. We play in life, and life plays in us.

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