

# Dancing Towards Personal and Spiritual Growth

Hildegunn Marie T. Schuff

## Preface

As I take the first few steps on the dance floor I half hesitate, half rejoice. I have done this many times before, but merely as a dancer not as a participant-observer. How will this be different? Very quickly it feels natural. I move, I dance and I feel myself opening up to the music, to the air and space around me, to my co-dancers – as a sensing, experiencing, expressive body among other bodies. I take on the challenges of the dance class as it proceeds and enjoy the feeling of mastering and exploring new ways of relating to my surroundings. I seem to sense some of the same release in the dancers around me; sometimes the less we speak, the more we are moved. I take a deep breath and slide forward again.

As I sit down to write about what I have learned through my research on dance, I hesitate again. How can I express the participating dancers' embodied knowledge and embodied faith in words when they often find it hard to articulate their experiences themselves? Having shared some of the experiences that I intuitively relate to myself, how can I capture these personal and spiritual dance experiences in such a written form that will help my readers relate to them as well – even if they have no similar experiences themselves? I have a vague idea that thick descriptions and narratives, framed within a phenomenological approach, might help. And I trust that my body and mind can work this out. Still, many of the things I have learned make me want to dance rather than write. I take a deep breath and keep the words coming anyway.

## Dancing, Interviewing and Writing Towards Understanding

The above-described personal experiences and reflections form the starting point for this paper. I want to explore the place where dance and religious faith meet and to look at what learning experiences and processes of personal and spiritual growth take place there. Something of what my body knows I want to grasp and share verbally as well.

This paper is based on an ongoing research project about dance in Christian contexts in contemporary Norway, which is part of the RESEP (*Religion as Aestheticizing Practice*) research project based at the University of Agder, Norway. A working hypothesis in RESEP is that the aesthetic dimension of religion is coming more to the fore in contemporary religious life. A central question is whether the increasing aestheticisation of religion can be empirically and historically pinpointed. The growing popularity of dance as an activity and art form used in church life might be one element in the aestheticisation of religion. In this context, the term aestheticisation of religion is understood as a process where an aesthetic mode of engagement becomes more central. This aesthetic mode has been defined by Herbert (2011) as a mode “in which an appreciation of beauty, form and style, of sensory impact and configuration, is in the fore, rather than (though not necessarily excluding) other properties such as moral worth, spiritual edification or truth content” (Herbert 2011, 2). While this paper will not discuss this broad hypothesis directly, it does highlight practices that are simultaneously religious and aesthetic. It likewise discusses their importance in people's lives.

My project within RESEP focuses on the diversity of dance forms in Christian settings, on what meaning the participating dancers find in these dance activities and on potential tensions between the aesthetic and other

dimensions of their religious life. To explore these questions, I have talked to and danced with dancers who dance in churches and other Christian settings. To be more precise, I have:

- participated in/observed dance at a Bible school, a Christian ‘folk high school’,<sup>13</sup> a Christian retreat centre, a Christian festival, a Christian women’s conference and in three congregations/churches from different denominations,
- interviewed 36 dancers (35 female, one male – mostly amateurs, some professionals) from the above-mentioned settings, mostly in group interviews,
- gathered written answers to the interview questions (same questions as those used in the group interviews) from 17 dancers and two coordinators<sup>14</sup> of dance in Christian settings (18 female, one male).

After presenting this quantified overview of my material I feel a need to underline that I do not intend to argue in terms of numbers or generalisable findings. My focus here is on the experienced phenomenon of dance with its personal and spiritual dimensions as expressed through words, gestures and movement by the specific dancers I have talked to, observed and danced with. Co-relative to the subject of the study at hand, any evidence for my claims will also have to be experiential, relational and phenomenological. No claims to objectivity will be made; the truths I attempt to bring together here are experiential, subjective, intersubjective and embodied. They therefore depend on concrete and unique examples, contextual descriptions and narratives rather than on generalised numbers or statistics.

The goal of this study is to grasp the meaning people ascribe to their experiences of the phenomenon of dance in a religious/Christian setting, and it can therefore be situated within the field of phenomenological research. Simply put, this makes *listening* a key activity of the research process, in this case both in an auditive and a physical sense. In keeping with the phenomenological emphasis on experienced meanings and the primacy of the life world as it appears to individual subjects, the qualitative interview is usually seen as a suitable method of data collection (Postholm 2005) because it “gives a privileged access to our basic experience of the lived world” (Kvale 1996, 54). This also implies that dance *as it appears to the interviewees* is a valid element in academic research on dance, and “not merely a few entertaining curiosities in addition to some basic scientific quantitative facts obtained by experiments and questionnaires” (Kvale 1996, 54). To capture more of the unspoken dimensions of dance in the settings chosen for the project, I have also found it necessary and fruitful to conduct participatory observation in them; I danced along with my eyes open and an analytical perspective. Many of the other dancers’ statements and moves resonate with my own experiences as a participant-observer. These experiences both form a valuable part of the empirical material and aid the interpretation of the rest of the material (Fangen 2010).

My former experience of dancing within Christian as well as other contexts for more than a decade informed both my pre-understanding of the field and the methodological choice to move between dancing and writing (e.g. LaMothe 2004). I also complemented my participant observation with interviews with the research subjects. Since dance is not reducible to words, one strategy to be able to actually write about dance is to “keep moving between dancing and writing, keeping the sensibilities required to dance alive in the body that sits and thinks” (LaMothe 2004, xiii; see also Eeg 2010).

As I proceed with my narrative analysis, I will return to more contextual information when needed and methodological reflections when relevant. I will also bring in theoretical aspects when discussing my findings. Similar to the way in which this project grew out of my own dancing experience, here my intention is to let the experiential material I have collected from the dancers take the centre stage by way of descriptions based on my field notes and quotations from the interviews.

---

13 ‘Folk high school’ is the literal translation of the Norwegian term ‘folkehøgskole’, a one-year boarding school without grades or exams, where young people can focus on a topic of interest, e.g. dance. These schools are a supplement to the regular education system, and aim at nurturing “the whole person”. There are both Christian and secular folk high schools in Norway.

14 The responses of the coordinators of dance are only used in this paper when they refer to their own experiences of dancing.

## Dancing Towards Growth

Silence reigns as a handful of women of different ages move gently around in the chapel at the retreat centre. This retreat focuses on dance, movement and prayer. The day started with prayer and continues with various dancing sessions. Being still in the same comfortable position for a while was restful, but as we start moving again in the same spirit of prayer, it is suddenly clearer to me than it has ever been that this is when I truly experience the peace and quiet I have been seeking. While moving, I find my inner point of balance and there is peace.

After this dance retreat one of the participants wrote in response to my questions:

*I dance because it makes me happy! My experience is that when I dance I can express something from my heart to God that cannot be expressed in words. Dancing is a point of contact<sup>15</sup> with God for me. It gives me an experience of God as the origin of creativity and beauty.*

While emotional and aesthetic benefits of dance are also mentioned here (happiness, beauty), the quotation quite clearly points out that dance is experienced as a spiritual practice. The research participants practice a wide range of dance styles (contemporary, jazz, break, salsa, African, etc.), but they have one thing in common: They all tell a story of dance as a path to wellbeing and health. With only a few exceptions, their dance experience is also connected to some type of spiritual experience or transcendence. Many also mention the communicative or didactic potential of dance as a reason as to why dancing is important to them in a Christian setting.

## Dance as an Arena for Learning – Dance in Religious Education

The sound of laughter fills the room at the top floor of the church along with the thumping sound of approximately forty legs running around in a circle. “Okay, we’re done warming up, let’s spread out on the floor and repeat the dance you learned last week,” a teenage girl calls out. The children; all girls, seven to eleven years old, find their positions, some a bit too close together, some making sure they see themselves in the mirror that covers one of the walls, others making sure they stand in the back. They walk through the motions together with their instructor, “turn around, three, four, and JUMP!”, before the music is turned on. “Jesus, thank you for being here with me, when I’m up and when I’m down . . .” The children jump up and squat down following the lyrics of the song. They are more focused now, but there is still some giggling here and there.

After observing this dance group one of the instructors commented:

*When I dance, I feel truly alive and I feel that my praise to God is authentic. I want to share this with the children. We want the lyrics to convey a clear message and start each dance class with prayer so that we keep our focus on God. We don’t talk very much about what the songs are about because we see that the children prefer dancing to listening to us explain.*

Several other participants also consider dance an arena for learning as well as for teaching and want to communicate and teach the Christian message through their dance: “I believe dance is a great opportunity to reach people’s hearts,” one of them says. Another continues: “I dance because I want to spread a message of love, joy, hope and faith to the world.”

Especially with children and teenagers dance is often used as a didactic tool in Christian settings. It is seen as a fun, entertaining and life-embracing activity that communicates the Christian message, especially the *joy* of the Christian life, in a contemporary and attractive way. The state church’s Plan for Christian education (Church of Norway 2009) encourages dance as a positive activity for children and youth (ages 6–12 and 14–15) and as a way

---

15 In Norwegian, the metaphor strikes me as even more poignant: “Dansen er en kontaktflate mot Gud.” Another participant in the study, a student of dance at a Christian school, used the same expression.

of involving children in the liturgical and social life of the church.<sup>16</sup> Another systematic plan for Christian education from Misjonsforbundet UNG (Misjonsforbundet 2010), the youth organization of an independent, evangelical denomination, also recommends dance for children as young as three to five years of age. One of the research participants, an instructor of a dance group for teenagers at her church, strongly emphasizes that the main purpose of her dancing is to 'express Jesus' to young people:

*It is a blessing to dance for Jesus, with music that expresses Jesus, and at the same time to be able to spend time with young people and communicate to them that it is cool to dance for Jesus, and how cool it is to communicate Jesus to other young people in a language they can relate to.*

Even though dance is seen as a didactic and communicative tool here, the application of dance in religious education is not necessarily merely instrumental. Dance in itself can also add to the explicit verbal message, which is often connected to the lyrics of the song/music played with it. Among the dimensions added by the dance expression itself is the meta-message that there is room for the whole human being and life in its fullness in a Christian religious setting. Dance can teach children and adults a body-embracing way of living, believing and being in God's world. One participant says that through dance in general, "we want to communicate heaven to people down here, the message of salvation, our freedom in God, the joy in God, and the joy of dancing with fellow Christians."

Dance is seen as a powerful means of communication and teaching: "Dance can reach people without words, in their hearts where they can feel God's presence." There is, however, obviously more to dancing for the participants in this study than its didactic usefulness both in terms of personal and spiritual growth.

## **Dance as an Arena for Personal Growth**

Four people are dancing while the rest sit leaning against the wall and watch. During this specific contemporary dance class at the Christian folk high school the assignment is to dance with objects in a small group. As her object one dancer is wearing an oversized checked shirt over her black dance outfit. Another moves to the centre of the floor with a brown blanket, spreads it out and lowers herself onto it. A third dancer, with an orange in hand, joins her on the blanket as the fourth dancer invites the first into contact improvisation. As the music fades a few minutes later, their classmates applaud and all sit down in a circle to discuss the group's semi-improvised choreography. "That was really interesting. . . . You surprised me when you threw the orange," one fellow student comments as the discussion starts.

Since the instrument of dance is the dancer herself, there is a profound sense of vulnerability in the act of stepping out and exposing oneself while dancing. One of the students in the class, who was described in the former paragraph, talks about this as an opportunity for self-expression and growth: "I have grown so much over these last few months since school started. . . . It is a bit overwhelming, but at the same time it feels so great, to just be able to be yourself and stand up for it."

Many of the dancers express a sense of fulfillment in mastering dance technique and expression: "I like to dance because I feel it is something I can manage, and I like the feeling of acquiring new skills and developing as a dancer." This sense of mastering contributes to making dance a meaningful activity. Several participants refer to dance as their language, their natural form of expression, in which they feel freer to express themselves than they do verbally, through singing or through other modalities. This freedom is strengthened by what is often referred to as a safe and supportive dance environment where dancers support each other rather than compete. About half of the participants mention that in this respect they have experienced Christian dance environments more safe, supportive and less competitive than other dance environments, in which there may be no common goal above and beyond each dancer's success.

---

<sup>16</sup> As part of the reform of religious education in the Church of Norway the project "A dancing church" was started in 2006 with the aim of developing a resource book and dance classes to "spread knowledge about and a zeal for the place of dance in the church". The project was not completed as planned and is temporarily postponed, while the will to finance and support the project is still strong (personal communication with former project leader Marte Kristin Hovig, 26.08.2010).

Self-expression is another frequently mentioned value in dancing: “It is completely natural for me to move and express myself through dance,” a participant states. Most often the dancers appreciate dance as a way of expressing themselves and their emotions. Also profound and overwhelming emotions, for which one may not find words, can be approached and embodied through dance. One participant mentions how dance was essential to her after the death of her young child:

*I discovered that the sorrow of losing a child could not be expressed in any stronger way than through dance. I wrote poems as well, but found bodily expression to be much more profound. When I dance there are no learned steps, just an interaction between the body and music. I feel a need to develop dance as prayer.*

The emotion the participants most commonly mention in relation to dance, however, is joy: “Dancing is my way of expressing my joy and energy.” An anecdote from the Christian festival visited during this study illustrates this link between dance and joy by way of an example in which the one could not be had without the other. On the night of the terror attacks in Norway on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011, the planned dance event with live music was cancelled, implying that dance, as a joyful activity, was not an appropriate activity to pursue at this time of national mourning.

While dance is a medium for *expressing* joy, it is also reported as *leading to* greater joy, more energy and a sense of fulfillment: “Dancing makes me happy and gives me a surplus of energy,” says one participant, and another: “Dancing does me well and gives me joy.” Another fruit of dance, which is highly valued, is the way it makes the dancers *more present* in the moment: “I feel I am more present and conscious when I dance.” This heightened sense of presence resembles what is nowadays often referred to as mindfulness. For another dancer, this is a quality that characterizes dance more than any other activity: “Dancing forces me more than anything to be present in the moment.”

Several dancers also refer to health, wellbeing and freedom as positive effects of dancing: “I dance as a way to physical and mental health,” one dancer in a church says, and another participant: “Dancing sets free.” Dance is their preferred form of exercise, because it is a more creative, aesthetically attractive and fun way of keeping fit. The positive effects of dance on health and wellbeing have been documented in other studies. Quiroga Murcia, Gunter Kreutz, Stephen Clift and Stephan Bongard (2010) asked 475 amateur dancers about health and quality of life benefits of dancing, and found beneficial effects reported related to the emotional dimension in particular, but also to physical, social and spiritual dimensions. The positive benefits were also linked to dancing as a means to cope with stress and increase self-esteem, not unlike the narratives of personal growth and emotional coping that the participants in the present study offer. Quiroga Murcia et. al. (2010, 149) conclude that the impact of amateur dancing on wellbeing “offers arguments for including dance on the agenda of health promotion.”

Health and wellbeing seem to be implicitly understood in holistic terms by my participants as simultaneously physical, mental and social. This is so probably, since they experience it as a whole and were asked to describe their subjective experiences. Some dancers emphasize connections between their bodily and mental or emotional states explicitly: “Dancing can make me freer when I am in a situation that feels hopeless and tied up. The physical and the emotional are connected.” Some interviewees present quite specific healing-and-growth narratives along these lines. One says: “I struggled with a heavy heart and poor self-confidence. But in worship and dance it was lifted off me, and I was free.” Another even more explicitly links the physical, mental and spiritual in her narrative:

*I have often come to a worship dance session tired and feeling down. But dancing and playing, where my body guides my way in worship makes me happy and I feel peace and the presence of God.*

These interview statements about increased wellbeing resonate with my field notes from dance sessions. During my participant-observation I often sensed a similar release of joy and contentment in the dancing group as the dance session proceeded.

## Dance as an Arena for Spiritual Growth

On the last morning of the dance retreat light permeates the chapel as we dance. We have moved from quiet moves on our own into a gentle interaction in our dance, we give and receive impulses and dare more than we did just two days before. The music changes, our interaction slows down and we gather by the fireplace smiling, breathing freely with our shoulders down and our spirits high. It is time to end our last dance session for now and soon end the retreat with a last prayer reading.

So far several quotations from the interviews have touched upon more than the physical and mental dimensions; they also refer to the *spiritual* or religious dimension that makes the participants' dancing meaningful to them. Dance in Christian settings is usually interwoven with the dancers' faith, and dance rehearsals can often be started off with a round of prayer. But also in the act of dancing itself many dancers say they communicate with God. It becomes a spiritual as well as a physical practice. Dancing is, in effect, an integrated part of their religious life. "Dance is a way of living out and strengthening my faith. It is as if I am closer to God when I dance," a dance pioneer in the Church of Norway tells us.

In this way dancing can be an arena for growing in faith and growing closer to the divine: "Through dance I feel my faith is strengthened because I get closer to God – and feel his presence". For some, dance is, in essence, prayer – and being physically focused is connected to being spiritually focused, as one says: "Using dance and movement in meditation and prayer helps me listen to my inner voice and to God."

This spiritual dimension is sometimes referred to as a source of that which is good, a source that can be reached through dance: "I dance to be in touch with the source of life." And as another dancer puts it: "Through dance I experience God as the source of creativity and beauty." This quote underlines that this source reached through dance can also be a source of inspiration for further dancing. There are also dancers that say that they are literally moved by the Holy Spirit when they dance and that they seek God for inspiration in choreography. One dancer who is quite explicit about this 'dancing with God' says: "I sometimes imagine myself dancing with Jesus. He likes to dance, too!"

Spirituality or religion is not only a metaphysical understanding of reality nor a set of dogmatic and ethical stances; it is also bodily practice. A phenomenologist of religion who acknowledged this is van der Leeuw (1963), who studied such phenomena that appeared as dance and religion simultaneously. LaMothe (2004), who builds on van der Leeuw, argues that dance should be included in the study of religion. This appears to be a relevant perspective in understanding the religious life of the dancers who participated in this research project and dance in Christian settings, for whom dance is an important part of their spiritual practice.

The interviews also address the interpersonal realm. Many of the interviewed dancers see dance as a part of practicing their faith by sharing it with and serving others. Dance can inspire and encourage others. One dancer says:

*I feel I can give something to others through dancing, and through teaching dance. . . I want others to see the joy it gives me to dance for God. By spreading God's message through dance others can also see that there are many ways to serve God.*

While some of them mention that all sorts of talents can be used to serve God and people, the dancers personally prefer this specific way of living their faith: "Dancing to honor God is *my* way of praising Him, since I don't sing in a worship team nor am a talented preacher." In sum, by most of the participants of this study, dance is experienced as a way of expressing and embodying faith, a way of growing spiritually and communicating with God.

## An Experience of Being Whole: Phenomenological Perspectives

Dance is, simply put, movement instilled with meaning. In line with a phenomenology of the body (Merleau-Ponty 1994 [1945]) dance can be viewed as an immediate and natural 'way of being in the world', insofar as movement

is a universal human activity. Dance can also be understood as an embodied way of knowing and communicating (Barbour 2011), as an embodiment of a person's presence in the world, of emotions, thoughts, identities and relationships.

While it has been argued that dance is a universal phenomenon (Hanna 1987), it can be defined in many ways and there are also cultures and languages that do not have the concept of 'dance' (i.e. as distinct from a common concept of 'music/dance/play'). In a Western context, dance is often defined as rhythmic or structured bodily movement (e.g. LaMothe 2004). This definition could, however, include everyday activities such as walking or hanging up clothes. Another constitutive dimension of dance, then, is that it is a bodily activity with a purpose and value that goes beyond utility purposes; it is an *aesthetic* activity. From a dancer's perspective this implies that the *intention* behind the movements is central to their inclusion in the category of 'dance'; dance is then what is defined as such by the dancing subject.<sup>17</sup> In sum, dance is here understood as intentional and culturally shaped sequences of body movements that have aesthetic and not primarily utilitarian value. In relation to the participants in this study, this implies that the participating dancers' own application of the term 'dance' has been respected.

In exploring how dance as a form of movement with meaning is experienced as a meaningful phenomenon to the dancers in Christian settings who participated in this study, I found that it appears as meaningful to them both in relation to others, to themselves and to God in a manner that contributes to personal growth in multiple ways. Through dance these Christian dancers experience and practice their religion in a bodily way. This means that their spirituality takes an embodied form and that dance for them is not only a bodily practice, but also a spiritual one. This integrated experience of the body as spiritual challenges traditional mind-body or body-spirit-soul-separations other dancers have enacted before (e.g. Engelsrud 2010 about Øyvind Jørgensen). This implicit holistic experience is reflected in interviewed dancers' statements about 'feeling whole' when they dance 'in the presence of God'. This can be linked theoretically to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, which acknowledges that we do not *have* our bodies; rather, we *are* our bodies.

## **Moving Beyond Words: Perspectives from the Anthropology of Dance**

A social-anthropological perspective emphasizes the need to consider dance in its cultural context, as saturated by and providing a key to the culture it forms part of (Hanna 1987; Royce 2002). In light of this, dance in Christian contexts today can be seen as a contemporary cultural expression, an element which is often expressed in terms of seeking to be 'relevant', communicating the gospel to today's generation and providing young people with the opportunity to connect with and belong to a Christian community. This might apply as far as contemporary dance styles are involved (jazz dance, hip hop/break, modern dance). On a deeper level, the increased practice of dance in churches in Norway might be a part of larger cultural trends in today's Western societies that emphasize self-expression, self-realization and creativity and confirm the importance of the body and the senses as part of a more holistic world-view.

Drawing again on the anthropology of dance, which links dance to embodied knowledge (Royce 2002), I propose that dance within religious contexts, such as the ones visited during this study, can also be understood as *embodied faith*. The dancers in this study practice a wide range of dance styles and their emphasis on the didactic versus contemplative functions of dance, on technique versus 'free' dance, on the importance of a clear Christian message through song lyrics versus more open expressions, vary greatly. These different functions, forms and emphases embody different aspects of the dancers' faith and world-view including their understanding of God, themselves and life. Importantly, they also embody many other dimensions of their lives that are woven into their dance practice, such as cultural trends, gender roles, and historical changes in what is considered morally right and wrong. In their own narratives, most of them

---

<sup>17</sup> To complicate this further, there are situations where dance has not been called by its name, even by the dancers. In some Christian settings what would normally be understood as dance has sometimes been labeled otherwise, e.g. 'movements with music', to avoid controversy.

frame the current resurgence of dance in Christian settings as a return to earlier practices in Biblical times – practices that give room for aesthetics, emotions and the whole human being in the Christian life. Many participants experience dancing in a church or Christian school today as finding a ‘wider space’ for living and believing. In anthropological terms, openness to dance within religious settings, as well as groups and networks of religious dancers, can provide important social support for each dancer’s faith and sense of community. One dancer is quite specific about how the reception of her dancing has been decisive for her choice to remain within the church community:

*I would probably not have been a member of the church today had I not danced in it. My Christian education was very intellectual, and I probably would have turned to Buddhism or some other Eastern faith if I had not found that the church and its people could receive my dancing.*

One might argue that the spiritual growth that these dancers relate to dancing might be more commonly experienced among dancers in religious settings. Thus, all who dance may not experience this dimension of growth. Also, one of the participants in this study says that for her there is no connection between her faith and her dancing.<sup>18</sup> I also talked with two non-believers who danced in churches for other reasons than faith and who, as non-religious dancers do not define the fulfillment they find in dance as religious or even spiritual. But the majority of the participants do indeed report a spiritual, one might even say mystic, experience as they dance. As dance is an embodiment of the lived experience of the dancers (Barbour 2011), the dance of believing dancers discussed here is a form of embodied faith. Since the religious context is woven into the dance that takes place in it, this can also be understood anthropologically as culturally and contextually saturated dance (Royce 2002). Then again, the anthropology of dance reminds us that an integration of the spiritual and the physical in dance is not a rare phenomenon, but rather something that has taken place in all parts of the world at some point in time (Royce 2002).

Importantly, while they struggled to find words in the interview situation, many of the participants in this study said that it is hard to find words for everything they experience and express through dance. In this way, they indirectly underline their need for expressions and experiences beyond words, i.e. in dance. After all, if what they need to express could be fully covered by words what would the point of dancing be? Dance can aid them in getting in touch with and expressing emotions, moods and dimensions of life that are hard to verbalize and, thereby, to live fuller and keep growing.

## **Dance and Fullness of Life**

Dance provides the dancers who participated in this study with multidimensional meaning. The value and growth potential in dance goes beyond developing physical-sensual-aesthetic competence and wisdom (Grasmo 2008). It also enhances the ability to express emotions. It is an arena for expressing and exploring spiritual, existential, philosophical or, for that matter, political issues and experiences (e.g. Barbour 2011). It is a language of the body. The way the participating dancers view it, the process of expanding its vocabulary also affects the dancer’s mind and spirit or, perhaps more precisely, dance is experienced as beneficial for the human being as a whole.

Through the narratives and quotations presented in this paper I have attempted in an experienced-based and intersubjective manner to establish an understanding of three ways in which participants in the discussed study experience processes that lead to growth through dance:

1. as a holistic and attractive way of learning and communicating,
2. as personal growth; by mastering dance, through self-expression in a supportive environment, expressing and processing emotions, and moving towards better mental and physical health and wholeness,
3. as spiritual growth; by providing an interface with God that strengthens one’s listening to both God and oneself, and as a way of living their faith in interaction with others.

---

<sup>18</sup> She says: “I don’t feel that my faith means anything to my dancing, or that my dancing affects my faith. But I think we are created to use the abilities God has given us.”

Some of these growth processes can be encouraged within most forms of dance education others will only naturally fit in dance in religious settings. When the phenomenon of dance appears in such a multidimensional manner, dancing becomes a way of expressing and experiencing oneself, life and its transcendental dimension, as body, soul and spirit move in sync as a whole. As such, it is experienced as an arena for significant personal and spiritual growth. It is of great importance to the dancers' quality of life, sense of meaning and active presence in the world. The potential of embodied learning and meaning-making through dance education is supported by other studies (e.g. Lundvall and Maivorsdotter 2010). Some of the emotional and especially the spiritual dimensions of growth through dance found by this study, however, have not received as much attention. More empirical study that sheds light on these issues would contribute to a deeper and more holistic understanding of how dance can contribute to people's lives.

Based on all the ways in which dance is considered meaningful and beneficial by the participants – in terms of self-expression, coping, emotional processing, freedom, wellbeing, communication with others and with God – they point to the fact that through dancing they live a fuller life. When I asked one of the participants why she dances, she simply returns the question in reverse: “Well, why walk when you can dance?”

## References

- Barbour, Karen. 2011. *Dancing Across the Page. Narrative and Embodied Ways of Knowing*. Bristol, UK/Chicago, USA: Intellect.
- Church of Norway. 2005. *Kunsten å være kirke: om kirke, kunst og kultur. Kulturmelding utarbeidet av Norske kirkeakademier på oppdrag fra Kirkerådet*. Oslo: Verbum.
- Church of Norway. 2009. *Plan for Christian Education: God Gives—We Share*. Oslo: Church of Norway.
- Eeg, Camilla. 2010. “Inledning. Dans i samtiden.” In *Dans i samtiden*, edited by Camilla Eeg, 7–15. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press/Spartacus Forlag.
- Engelsrud, Gunn. 2010. “Disiplinerings muligheter. Øyvind Jørgensens dansekunst og kroppssyn.” In *Dans i samtiden*, edited by Camilla Eeg, 36–59. Oslo: Scandinavian Academic Press/Spartacus Forlag.
- Grasmo, Anna-Lena. 2008. “Sanselig klokskap – et filosofisk perspektiv på dans som estetisk erfaring.” In *Dans og didaktikk*, edited by Trine Ørbæk Svee, 39–50. Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag.
- Hanna, Judith Lynne. 1987. *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Herbert, David. 2011. “Mediatization, religion and aesthetics.” Paper prepared for a RESEP seminar, Kristiansand, January 7.
- Hovig, Marte Kristin. 2004. “Dancing on Holy Ground. Embodied Expressions.” Master thesis in intercontextual theology, Faculty of Theology. Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Kvale, Steinar. 1996. *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- LaMothe, Kimerer L. 2004. *Between Dancing and Writing. The Practice of Religious Studies*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Lundvall, Suzanne and Ninitha Maivorsdotter. 2010. “Aesthetic aspects in meaning making – an explorative study of dance education in a PETE programme.” *Designs for Learning* 3(1–2): 30–41.
- Løvland, Anne and Pål Repstad. 2011. “How to play the emotional card. Studying the aestheticisation of religion.” Paper presented at a UiA/RESEP research seminar, Bø, Norway, September 1–2.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1994 [1945]. *Kroppens fenomenologi*. Translated to Danish by Bjørn Nake. Oslo: Pax.
- Misjonsforbundet UNG. 2010. *Levende tro. Pedagogisk plan for trosopplæringen*. Oslo: Misjonsforbundet UNG.
- Murcia, Cynthia Quiroga, Gunter Kreutz, Stephen Clift and Stephan Bongard. 2010. “Shall we dance? An exploration of the perceived benefits of dancing on well-being.” *Arts & Health* 2(2):149–163.
- Postholm, May Britt. 2005. *Kvalitativ metode: en innføring med fokus på fenomenologi, etnografi og kasusstudier*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. 2002. *The Anthropology of Dance*. Hampshire: Dance Books.
- van der Leeuw, Gerardus. 1963. *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

## BIOGRAPHY

Hildegunn Marie Tønnessen Schuff, MPhil, is Assistant Professor of Intercultural Studies and Psychology at Ansgar University College, Kristiansand, Norway. She has studied ethnic dance, danced in volunteer work and semi-professional settings since the 1990s and now she leads dance retreats/seminars at a retreat centre as well as a local children's dance group at a church. Her current research on dance in Christian settings is a part of the cross-disciplinary research project RESEP (Religion som estetiserende praksis – Religion as Aestheticizing Practice) based at the University of Agder.

*[schuff@ansgarskolen.no](mailto:schuff@ansgarskolen.no)*

## BIOGRAFI

Hildegunn Marie Tønnessen Schuff, Master of Philosophy fra Universitetet i Oslo, er høgskolelektor i interkulturelle studier og psykologi ved Ansgar Teologiske Høgskole i Kristiansand, Norge. Hun har studert etnisk dans, har danset i frivillige og semiprofesjonelle sammenhenger siden 1990-tallet, og leder for tiden danseseminarer på et retreatsenter og en dansegruppe for barn i kirkelig sammenheng. Hun forsker for tiden på dans i kristne sammenhenger som en del av det tverrfaglige forskningsprosjektet RESEP (Religion som estetiserende praksis), tilknyttet Universitetet i Agder.

*[schuff@ansgarskolen.no](mailto:schuff@ansgarskolen.no)*