

Chapter 6

Soul loss and retrieval: Restoring wholeness through dance

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Prelude

My journey with dance started at a local ballet school in a small village in the Netherlands, at age 7. I happened to be a lucky child, whose natural exploration of movement was never thwarted, but instead encouraged. My pre-professional training at the *National Ballet Academy (Academy of Theatre and Dance)* in Amsterdam (age 10–13) and *Codarts' Havo voor Muziek en Dans* in Rotterdam (age 14–16) gave me a wide movement vocabulary, leading to subsequent professional training at age 16. Through the strict school regimes and pedagogy, the exhilarating sense of expression and connection that I used to feel when dancing slowly disappeared. Technique became a prison, disconnected from feeling, intuition, meaning and the world around me. This loss of connection was one of the main reasons I decided not to pursue a career as a professional dancer. Over the years, I came to realize that dance can embrace so much more than performance; I returned again to appreciating the precision of mastering a technique, but as a way to enjoy freedom within structure.

I decided to study cultural and medical anthropology, where I became fascinated with healing and other ways of knowing. In 2005, I was introduced to basic shamanic techniques during a workshop called *Soul in Nature*, facilitated by Dr. Christian de Quincey, Dr. Stephan Harding and Jonathan Horwitz at *Schumacher College* in Devon. This three-week intensive course fundamentally shifted my compartmentalized outlook on life to one of a profound, *felt, embodied knowing of interconnection*. When I discovered I could converse with a tree, *become* stone, travel through time, and dance with spirit, I knew I had found the ‘missing piece’— although now I would say it was not so much missing, rather that I had simply forgotten how to use my ‘antennae’ for perceiving such connections. I was taught to journey to the spirit worlds while lying down, but soon found that my body naturally wanted to stand up and engage with these other worlds through movement. At the end of the workshop, Earth mother Gaia encouraged me to ‘keep dancing with spirit’.

Looking for a community to practise this, I came across the work of Ya’Acov and Susannah Darling Khan, who were, at the time, in the process of establishing the *School of Movement Medicine* after representing Gabrielle Roth’s 5Rhythms™ as core faculty and directors of the *Moving Centre School UK* for Europe. Movement Medicine is an improvised, non-stylized movement practice, informed by, amongst many other strands, shamanism and ecstatic dance (Darling Khan and Darling Khan 2009; Kieft 2013, 2014, 2017). Although dancing was, of course, familiar in many ways, I had the uncanny feeling I entered an entirely new landscape, while at the same time simply reviving long lost memories. It was a recognition of awakening and moving the creative life force within. I learned to dance again, not just with my body, but with heart, mind and soul, and to recognize and appreciate these aspects as fundamental to my original and

individual expression in relationship to the vibrant web of life. I joined the first professional training in Movement Medicine (2009–12), and this practice also became the topic of my Ph.D. in Dance Anthropology at the University of Roehampton, London. Meanwhile, I continued studying with Jonathan Horwitz and later Zara Waldeback from the *Scandinavian Center for Shamanic Studies*. Among many things, I learned about the phenomenon of soul loss, which is considered a major cause for illness in shamanic diagnostics, and its remedy soul retrieval. My eyes started to open to the moments and experiences where I too had lost parts of my soul.

This chapter explores the concepts of health and healing in a framework of the active management of wholeness and restoring balance through examining the concepts of soul loss and retrieval. It consists of six sections parts. First, I briefly introduce shamanism and its application in contemporary western contexts. Secondly, I discuss ideas on soul, soul loss and soul retrieval from a neo-shamanic perspective. In the third section I offer my own recipe for (spontaneous) soul retrieval through dance, followed by a description and analysis of the structured and ritualized Movement Medicine ‘Phoenix Process’, a specific form of soul retrieval in section 4. In section 5 I explore the choice for a new story after a soul piece has returned, not just on the dance floor, but integrated into daily life. Finally, in the Discussion, I extrapolate some insights of my personal journey to develop a wider, more inclusive, understanding of health and wellbeing informed by dance practice and neo-shamanism.

(Neo-)Shamanism

The umbrella term ‘shamanism’ generally indicates nature-based practices from all over the world, which are not usually considered a religion in themselves, but rather as a set of tools that can be recognized in many cultural traditions and are applicable in many different circumstances (Eliade [1951] 1972: 8). The term may refer to social phenomena, healing techniques, ideologies, worldviews and ways of life. Based in a strong relationship with nature and recognition of mutual exchange, these tools include mediation between the profane and the sacred, the human and spirit worlds. Strength and knowledge can be accessed by using altered states of consciousness for the purpose of maintaining or restoring individual and community health and balance – and sometimes for divinatory purposes (Glass-Coffin 2010: 207; Morris 2006: 42; Sylvan 2005: 149; Jakobsen 1999: 1). Other elements include working with spirit guides, such as power animals or plants, and also practices such as magical flight, lucid dreaming, shape-shifting, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and a variety of healing tools.

The word ‘shamanism’ is often criticized for implying a universal, homogenous and unchanging phenomenon, while the term originates from a very local context of the Evenki or Tungusic people of Northern Asia. Largely through Mircea Eliade’s work (1972 [1951]), their term for ‘spirit medium’ or ‘priest’ later became descriptive of all similar practices worldwide. Nevertheless, there is no general definition or theory of shamanism that scholars agree on. Notably, some suggest the use of the plural term shamanisms, to do justice to local, cultural and historical variations (see for example Atkinson 1992).

However, while acknowledging the differences between, ongoing changes within, and also the discontinuation of certain shamanic practices (see for example Winkelman 2004b; Jakobsen 1999; Walter and Neumann Fridman 2004), I believe it is still helpful to use the term shamanism to depict a generic set of tools, techniques, practices and relationships that appear across the globe; all are embedded in a nature-based worldview and enable contact with the spirit worlds.

It is interesting to note the apparent adaptability of such practices to modern day (urban) contexts often termed ‘neo-shamanism’. Neo-shamanism is mostly presented as a way of working with (altered states of) consciousness and healing, with an emphasis on self-help and self-actualization (Morris 2006; Heelas 1996; Stevens and Stevens 1988; Harner 1980). Although neo-shamanism differs from traditional shamanism in many ways,¹ the basic practices are accessible to each and anyone of us, and not just the domain of the classically trained shaman. Most people can start using techniques, such as journeying to the spirit worlds to ask for help with a specific question, after some simple instructions. Once they have an understanding of how to access and understand the geography of the other worlds, the spirits become the most important guides and teachers to explore these other realms.

As a movement, neo-shamanism receives fierce critiques. These include concerns for a Disneyfication of indigenous cultural identities; pitfalls of appropriation or translation of other cultures’ traditions, and the question of authenticity in relation to spirituality drawn from other cosmologies (Kieft 2013). Nevertheless, I see the current resurgence of such practices in the west as a legitimate and necessary revival of our own cultural spiritual heritage (see also Eyers 2016).² However, even if that were not the case, and we indeed ‘merely’ respectfully borrowed from other indigenous traditions, that would, in my view, not diminish their essence and their potential impact as a meaningful source of healing, reconnection and understanding, nor discredit their original context. In order to successfully face the current global crises of climate change, dwindling resources, and extinction of species, we need to be humble enough to learn from *living* traditions that have not forgotten our concrete physical communication with nature, a close connection between subject and object, animistic recognition of spirit in everything, and a correspondence between micro and macrocosm; in short, all that which *cogito* seemingly conquered (Lemaire 2002: 161). Such other ways of knowing remind us that we are part of a larger whole, which may be all the more relevant for various levels of disconnection in our modern day western contexts.

Having grown up in a Dutch protestant and positivist milieu that supported the concept of a male transcendent god, learning about nature-based traditions provided a validation of personal experiences beyond the cultural and religious values of my immediate cultural environment. With a framework for perceiving spirit as immanent, such worldviews provided a structure to connect with the mysteries of life through dance, nature, and the elements – offering an invaluable possibility of a direct experience of, and relationship with the sacred. It was a relief to come home to a form of prayer, celebration and worship that allowed me to dance barefoot in the grass.

Insert Figure 1:

Figure 1: Photographer: José Kieft. Mover: Eline Kieft, Sligo 2017

Soul, soul loss and soul retrieval

‘Soul’ is a deliciously intangible and elusive, and much-debated concept (see also Kieft 2018). Some people just know they have one, while others are convinced they don’t. It is often paralleled with concepts such as original nature, instinct, intuition or inner compass. The term appears in cultural, religious, philosophical, psychological, alchemical and even neuroscientific discourses. Although most definitions relate soul to the breath that animates living organisms, many questions remain unanswered: is the soul separate from or intertwined with matter? What are the differences between soul, spirit and psyche? What faculties does ‘a’ soul have – is it for example able to think? Is it limited to animated bodies of humans or animals? If so, can it survive without the body after death? Do we have one or several souls, or does ‘a’ soul consist of different parts? Is the soul able to travel away from the body? How does it relate to consciousness and the brain? How can it be known?

Amanda Williamson (2017) observes how the concept of soul is fluid rather than solid, and soul-making is an ongoing act of re-balancing. A picture emerges of the paradoxical and process-like nature of the soul, which mediates self and context while at the same time remains an ungraspable essence. Soul, in this view, is not a fixed noun (Hillman 1975 in Williamson 2017), but a movement of deepening and reflecting, which includes a melting of boundaries between spirit and matter through an imagining of the metaphoric and symbolic, as strongly present within alchemical language (Williamson 2017).

In this chapter, soul implies something closely related to life force or vitality (compare Horwitz 1996), i.e. we all have it or else we would be dead. Alberto Villoldo, in his translation of ancient soul retrieval practices to contemporary contexts, describes how medicine people compare this essential part of ourselves to ‘a seed that can grow and manifest if properly cultivated’ (Villoldo 2005: 28). The soul, for shamans, is the ‘luminous energy field’, that part of us ‘that continues beyond death and into eternity and into infinity. We could literally say that our soul has a body, much more than saying that our body has a soul’ (Villoldo, 2018). Much like the acorn’s natural imprint to become an oak tree, the human blueprint appears to have an innate drive to wholeness. This individuation process happens naturally, whether or not we are aware of it. However, we can aim to provide the healthiest soil and the most nourishing circumstances for our ‘tree of life’ to grow and for our soul to develop.

This vital soul essence however, can, and most likely will, be impacted and reduced by life’s experiences. In shamanic paradigms this phenomenon is called ‘soul loss’, which is seen as one of the two major causes of illness in shamanic diagnostics in which the patient lacks something that is essential for their vitality and wellbeing (Morris 2006; Harner 1980; Horwitz 1996; Ingerman 1991).³ This absence can lead to conditions such as tiredness, inertia, depression and illness, and therefore, these parts of soul need to be retrieved to secure or regain full health. Soul loss is often triggered by experiences that we perceive as shocking, although they do not necessarily have to be traumatic. These can cause part of the soul to be separated from the person ‘in order to survive the experience’ (Ingerman 1991: 11).⁴ In the West, even average, untraumatized adults will have had plenty of such moments. It may be a fleeing of the soul to

protect that vital essence in a threatening situation, or a conscious or unconscious decision or ‘energetic command’ in which we send this essence away, in the face of something (seemingly) more valuable. Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls this making ‘a bargain without knowing’ ([1992] 2008). Sometimes those precious parts disappear almost unnoticed; sometimes they literally leave with a soul-tearing pain. However it happens, it happens to most of us, and not just once but many times. The psyche keeps striving to function normally without these essential parts, which will lead to survival strategies or unconscious perceptual bias. We can fill in the blanks based on our personal history and development that in order to be loved, we [.....]; in order to receive attention, we [.....]; in order to succeed, we [.....], and so on. These strategies might have been or seemed effective in the original circumstance, but may simultaneously twist our essential nature into a parody or shadow of our true potential.

One does not have to believe in life after death, reincarnation, or other metaphysical explanations, to consider the reality of ‘loss of wholeness’. Psychology for example speaks of ‘dissociation’ or ‘fragmentation’ either during ‘normal phases of intensified conflict, development, or complex activation’, or in ‘pathological cases in which the personality is disempowered or poorly adapted to outer reality’ (Roberts 1999). Observing the continuum between shamanic soul retrieval and Jungian individuation, Maureen Roberts uses the word ‘self-retrieval’ as synonymous to individuation. In Jungian thought, according to her,

the Self corresponds to the Gnostic divine spark, or central core essence of the personality. Individuation, or becoming a whole individual through self-realization, as an ongoing process of maturation involves a spontaneous ‘re-collection’, or Platonic anamnesis (remembrance) of an innate wholeness and centre, the Self. (Roberts 1999)

Philip Cushman’s analogy of ‘the empty self’ as a condition of our times also shows similarities to soul loss. He describes feelings of disconnection, loneliness, emptiness, fragmentation, isolation and estrangement, often resulting in symptoms such as low self-esteem, confusion of values, absence of meaning, eating disorders, substance abuse and chronic consumerism as expressions of inner emptiness (Cushman 1990: 604).

Practices offer different possibilities regarding *where* the fragmented soul pieces go once they split-off. Some generically speak of the spirit world(s). For others they reside in the ‘cave of the lost children’, ‘the womb of mother earth’ or the ‘memory mine’. In Movement Medicine it is assumed that they go to ‘soul school’, where they continue to evolve, and learn essential lessons that they will bring back when the person is ready to call and welcome them home.

However they left, it is time for action when we realize that not all of us is accessible and available in situations that require our strength and courage, or when we experience specific ongoing symptoms. The lost soul piece will not usually return spontaneously, but must be called back, for example, by performing soul retrieval. In traditional cultures, this skill solely belongs to the domain of the shaman. However, most neo-shamanic trainings teach their practitioners to perform soul retrieval for others as an essential healing tool. In such contexts, the shamanic practitioner and the client will usually lie down side by side, touching at

the hips and shoulders, and the practitioner embarks on a journey to the spirit worlds to retrieve the person's lost essence.⁵ Sometimes more than one split-off part is found. If the piece(s) consent to return at that particular time, they are brought back into ordinary reality and blown into the head and heart of the client (for a detailed description of this process and its effects, see Ingerman 1991, 2003; Villoldo 2005). This process can lead to an increase in physical and psychical energy, a greater sense of aliveness and vibrancy and a feeling of coming home to oneself. In general, people feel more empowered and better able to make decisions and take action in their lives: 'It's as if you've cleaned out a room for a guest, opened the windows, let in the light and the fresh air, and now you are ready to invite more of *yourself* in' (Darling Khan and Darling Khan 2009: 70, original emphasis).

Carl Jung described five forms of rebirth, and one in particular, '*renovatio*', is of interest regarding soul retrieval. This metaphorical renewal or improvement suggests not a change of personality in its essential nature, but parts of the personality or its functions that are 'subjected to healing, strengthening, or improvement' (Jung [1959] 1971: 114). Some people hold that one cannot perform soul retrieval for oneself, but personally I have found this to be very possible through dance; this is also acknowledged in dance movement (psycho) therapy (Noack 1992: 186).

Insert Figure 2:

Figure 2: Photographer: Amy Clark. Mover: Jasper Drent, Devon 2011

Spontaneous danced soul retrieval

Although I thankfully count myself relatively untraumatized, I still lost quite a few soul parts through my life. Dance has always (consciously and unconsciously) been a way to reconnect with and retrieve soul parts, allowing me to catch up with myself, slow down, take stock and re-align. When I start moving, I fold into liminality, a heightened awareness that feels like a stepping into, while already being in. It allows me to drop into fuller presence, focusing my entire being 'on opening, calling, connecting and remembering' (Kieft 2014). The mere act of moving opens me to spirit. I appreciate that this is not the case for everyone, nor that dancing is necessary for soul retrieval, but for me it is as immediate as a direct ticket to Source on a fast train. I might not even be aware of something missing, but its spontaneous return is like finding a piece of the puzzle, which renders me more whole, more empowered and more in tune. This happened for example when I discovered myself in the archetypal story of the Handless Maiden (Grimm and Grimm [1944] 2008), spontaneously moving with the loss of vital energy after terminating my professional dance training:

I become aware of a tense blockage in my wrists, as if my hands have been severed, leaving my arms ending in stumps. Without my hands, I literally am without grip on life, without tools to create. Traveling back along my personal timeline, I remember when, as a 17-year old, I cut myself off from dancing as a deep source of nourishment, exchanging my passionate and wild creativity for a caricature of the good student, the good daughter and later the good wife. Instead, in order to be accepted in a non-dance world, to prove my worth, to not fail 'again', a rigid 'Miss Perfect' character was born.

I feel bereft of the so-so important life force moving freely through me, like a well dried up. I become aware of limiting my movements, not fully taking space, shying away from inhabiting my dance. Relentless voices in my head warn me not to point my ballet toes and avoid high legs (*'don't be such as pretentious, arrogant show off'*), and to curb my feline femininity as such sensuality is not safe in this world. Resigned to an amputated shape that seemingly befitted my environment, I cry tears for the painful realization that I chopped off my own limbs in order to adapt and fit in.

In the dance, I give myself permission that I can and may take my place, reinstating the importance of dancing as a wildly creative source for me. Standing tall, chin up, eyes open, I fully stretch my limbs with joy instead of shame (*'how scary!'* and: *'what a relief!'*). Without shrinking, apologizing, or diminishing myself, I consciously inhabit all of my being, physically, emotionally, mentally as well as energetically and soulfully. A full *'YES!'* instead of a whimpering *'sorry'...* (Dance diary, 28 April 2010)

I have danced soul pieces back in sunlit bluebell fields, on raging cliff tops, in stone circles and sandy hollows, on dance floors, in Neolithic burial mounds and the surf of the ocean, on windswept moors, in magical forests, and even in a 700-year-old ruin in Coventry. Sometimes these retrievals were one-off events in which a part returned with lightning clarity, sometimes it was a longer dialogue of negotiating, patiently letting go of what no longer served, adapting habits and patterns to create a more conducive environment for a specific soul part to return.

Insert Figure 3:

Figure 3: Photographer: Amy Clark. Mover: Catherine Wright, Devon 2011

When I know 'something' is brewing but do not quite know what, I establish a sacred space around me. If I happen to be outside, I greet the place, introduce myself and ask if I can work there. Sometimes my body receives a feeling of closure, block, a 'no', which I respect and then leave the place in peace. However, when the feeling is affirmative and welcoming, I create a circle through visualizing it, walking its circumference or marking it with stones or drawing in the sand. I ask for my guides to be present, as well as any beings willing to support this work. Then I begin dancing the 'effects' of that 'undefined something' in my body, through shape, voice and repetition, giving expression to feelings. Usually my attention is caught by visual things around me as well as sensations inside. These then guide me through a process of reflection, insight and, if the time is right, soul retrieval.

Out on the moors I find a space in a sandy hollow and start moving. Without warning, the hollow turns into a pit of dark soil and steep edges, a pit of fear. My face contorts and my limbs twist as I become aware of a metallic taste in my mouth. I am utterly afraid, of failing life, of being unworthy or stuck in skins I cannot shed. A fear of falling through the cracks, with no significant contribution, unable to pay the bills; of eternal restlessness, and wandering without a stable base – and nowhere to put my head at night.

Dancing this, through this, it washes over me, until I find that this fear can only take hold when I disconnect myself from nourishing roots in the soil, from bare feet in the sand, and when I no longer feel the wind in my hair or the rain on my face. The fear subsides when I realize that, even if I dissolve into a thousand pieces, and be scattered to all corners of the universe, there is no separation. Even if no trace, scent or substance remains of this home, my body, failing my purpose would simply be impossible, as we always, *always* grow towards wholeness and all is infinitely extending.

The walls of my tightness level out, sweet spaciousness returns and I can breathe again, resting in the simplicity of mother earth supporting me, every day of my life. This experience brings back the ability to fluidly dance in multiple worlds, and being able to ride the waves of intensity in different directions without getting disoriented, 'just' following the compass of my heart. The piece that was lost was trust in knowing that I am supported, knowing that I am connected, without which the world is a very scary place. (Dance diary, 13 August 2013)

Recipe for dancing your soul back

Whether or not you are a confident dancer, you can dance back towards wholeness. For me 'dancing' simply means moving your body consciously in communication with everything around you. It is not about performing a specific routine or acrobatic performance. You can follow the steps below as a guideline. However, as with any recipe, these are suggestions, and you can adapt this in any way you like.

1. Start by finding a quiet spot. Feel your feet on the ground, and the wide sky above you. Remember that you are carried by the earth. Awaken your senses, and observe what you notice through sight, hearing, smell, even taste, within your body and in the space around you. What surfaces does your body meet? Also let your body consciously meet the air around you.
2. Become aware of the three-dimensional sphere about a meter around your body. This is your energy field. Some traditions call this your 'luminous egg'. In its whole and relaxed state, it is permeable and transparent. Information can come in and go out. Through and beyond that, you feel the world around you. If you are outside, feel the relationship with the plants, trees, rivers, birds and other animals around you. If you are inside, navigate the walls, doors and windows first (they too are part of your environment).
3. Now tune into your energy field again. Focus on finding any gaps, holes or something missing. You can do this with your hands, your senses, or your imagination. You might perceive it in pictures, in colours, or even as a sense of 'thinness' in your field. Explore all around you, above and below you as well.
4. When you have found such a spot, imagine your hands as antennae. Through the 'gap', you try to pick up a radio wave from the energy matrix all around you. The wavelength you are looking for resonates with your own soul. Is there a piece that disconnected at some point and is now ready to return? It may feel like a gossamer stream, a laser beam or a subtly scented smoke. It can be anything, but you will recognize it intimately. Feel its texture, its quality. Feel the direction of energy in it. Pick up any information about it that you can. What colour is it? How does it smell, taste? Is it pulsating or steady? Does it have a sound or a melody? You don't have to think about this, simply let information filter through you.

5. If it feels right, you can invite it back into your body. Listen out for a sense of permission, a 'yes', a 'curiosity'. Be perceptive, and do not manipulate this. Sometimes it is not yet time for it to return. (If you perceive a block, a sense of 'no', a hesitation or refusal, then acknowledge it with gratitude and leave it for now.) You can repeat the process until you find a piece that is ready to come home. If you don't find any at all, then simply continue with steps 6 and 7. If however, it is ready to return, let the stream flow into your fingertips. For example, you can gently pull it in towards a specific body part; breathe it in and swallow it; or massage it into your skin. Your hands will know what to do. Then knead it into your body, muscles, bones, so it firmly becomes part of you again.
6. When that feels complete, mend the membrane of your luminous egg around you. Through your imagination and with your hands as sensitive tools you plaster, weave, glue or otherwise repair any holes, rents or tears, until it is whole again, shimmering with aliveness and vitality.
7. In your own way, give thanks for what you have experienced, and bring this to completion. Notice how you feel now, and consciously return to the rest of your day. Afterwards, pay attention to your energy for a few days, and observe any synchronicities, dreams or unusual encounters. If you have received any concrete cognitive or visual information, address how you can integrate this in your life and start making changes accordingly.

Insert Figure 4:

Figure 4: Allowing my sparks of fire. 'The part of my soul that came closer to me is the one who is brilliant, sparkling, artistic and full of expression and energy. She is the one who does not hold herself back. She creates.' Artist & Photographer: Kristin Glenewinkel, Basel, Switzerland 2011

The Movement Medicine Phoenix Process

Movement Medicine offers a highly structured form of soul retrieval for systematically dealing with difficult moments of the past, releasing energy and reclaiming lost soul pieces. The 'Phoenix Process' derives its name from the symbolism of the mythical Phoenix, rising from its own ashes as a metaphor for transformation and rebirth into a new state of being (Cirlot 1971; Cooper 1978).

The survival strategies mentioned in the section on Soul, soul loss and soul retrieval are called 'understudies' in Movement Medicine, after the person who, if necessary, is able to replace the main actor on stage (see Kieft 2013). They are also referred to as unconscious (perceptual or implicit) bias, a term borrowed from psychology. Understudies are considered to hold the role of the soul until it is ready to take its rightful place again, but they often grow beyond their appropriate support role, and instead permanently run the show. Like 'masks' or 'persona' recognized in psychotherapy, understudies provide security on the one hand, yet simultaneously cause a limiting structure, preventing a person from expressing their real nature (Noack 1992: 186). We all have many such understudies, although some are more present or dominant than others. They shape our identity, self-confidence and actions, even if their message is incomplete, inadequate or self-destructive. At the time they were created, they provided essential understanding of the world, and

what was considered best action for survival. Again, these survival strategies can be personal, i.e. created in one's own life, but also cultural or ancestral, consciously or unconsciously carried through generations.

The Phoenix Process offers an embodied methodology to become aware of these understudies, discover something about the nature of the original event in which they were created, and then release the power of that event. Beforehand, through a guided writing exercise, the dancer reflects on the story of a specific understudy and its view on the world, feelings, and subsequent actions. The cycle of this story is neat and repetitive, and is called 'the Dance of the Understudy'. This could address questions such as 'What happens when I'm under pressure?' 'How do I respond when someone is angry with me?' 'How do I cope with failure?' 'Why do I feel I have to do everything by myself?' The dancer then steps into a strong ritual circle or medicine wheel, which includes four specific aspects, energies, or archetypes that are part of, or support, the work to follow: the compassionate witness, the understudy itself, the original event, and the soul piece.

Moving through a sequence of re-enacting, remembering, and release, this process gives an opportunity to express what could not be expressed during the original event, rather than being re-traumatized by it. It is unnecessary to consciously know or even recognize the original event. After what can be a gentle or cathartic release in the earlier parts of the process, the fragmented part that resulted in the creation of the understudy is actively called back. There may be some dialogue or a specific exchange necessary before this soul part is willing to come back fully (Field notes, 5 March 2009). Finally, the dancer looks for a way to stabilize that new orientation about who they are and their new perception of the world, reflecting whether choices for different responses and actions emerge and how they could be integrated in daily life.⁶

Insert Figure 5:

Figure 5: Photographer: Amy Clark. Movers: Eline Kieft & Guro Gabrielsen, Devon 2011

During one session, I started moving with a seemingly small and personal feeling of tiredness, weight and responsibility, which turned out to be part of a deeply rooted historical event that took me back many generations.

Sitting on the floor, I am exhausted. A huge weight is pressing on my shoulders, and I feel a responsibility for carrying it. My face is buried in my left hand and with my right arm I hug myself. I rock gently, but mostly I feel frozen, frozen with a debilitating sense of unworthiness, so I have to work harder to keep it all together. But I am so tired, worn out, and stretched thin from the trying so hard. Opening the eyes in my back, I search for the original event and travel further and further back into the past.

There I am crouching under the whip of a slave-driver, humiliated, someone shouting *'harder, harder, faster, faster, lazy swine'*, and the whip *zzuuuf, zzuuuf*, rents my back, bent through all the toil. I'm swaying, swaying, until I finally collapse. My throat is sore from screaming. The experience blends in with an understanding of the strictness of Calvinist work ethos with which I was brought up, where relaxing is mistaken for lazy-ness, idleness and unproductivity, for not working for your daily bread 'to the glory of god'. I have, in effect, become my own slave-driver. With an emphasis on use and usefulness, responsibility, how often do I bite off more than I can chew? How often do I push myself and go far beyond my limits?

'I can't do this...'

'You have to. Letting go is not an option.'

I become aware of an invisible box around me, its weight suppressing me, and my ankles shackled. In the dance, I release the shackles, lift the weight and push down the sides of the box, freeing myself from these limitations. Through the process I receive the gifts of humility, endurance, compassion, dignity, and the infinite freedom of the human spirit. The part that was lost not knowing how to pace myself, especially not knowing when to rest, pushing myself on and on and on. (Dance diary, 17 November 2010)

Old and deep as it was, this particular piece was not complete in one session. I returned to it regularly over the years, until its edges slowly started to soften, and I could finally see myself separate from such driving, self-punishing thoughts.

Indeed, patterns we carry might not always solely be our own, but can be passed down through time. 'Martha Graham spoke of a "blood memory" which is accessible through the body, spanning back thousands of years, starting with our parents and grandparents' (Graham 1973: 9–10, in Kieft 2013). Patterns can also represent archetypal forces in our collective (un)conscious that influence us without even knowing it. Historic and cultural events (such as slavery, inquisition, war, famine or the great depression), as well as religious trends (regarding women, sexuality, gay rights, procreation) or other cultural movements (communism, capitalism, Calvinism) create lasting effects. Behaviours that were essential for survival at the time go unquestioned and become part of our acculturation (*'keep your head down'*, *'stay small'*, *'don't stand out'*, *'don't be idle'*). A ritual space enables a blurring or dissolving of boundaries – of time and place, self and other, memory and imagination (Turner [1969] 2007; Rountree 2006: 104). Such space allows us to establish a connection with the collective unconscious or 'knowing field' (Cohen 2006: 226). Although we can access this alone, being in a group helps the process and adds to the intensity and focus.

Return: Choice for a new story

In the unknown and timelessness of the ritual space, the retrieved soul can bring about a sense of exhilaration and profound meaning. It is afterwards however, upon return to daily life, that the hard work of bridging begins, aptly summarized by Jack Kornfield in the title of his book *After the ecstasy, the laundry* (2000). The return or integration phase receives attention in both the hero's journey in literature and mythology (Campbell [1949] 1968: 30), as well as in theories of ritual initiations (Turner 1974, 1982). The hero or

initiated is asked to integrate her new self, with the insights, skills, tools, lessons or soul pieces, into a familiar context that may not have changed similarly. New understanding has arisen, through which perhaps the old ways and habits no longer quite seem to fit, like a piece of clothing that we have outgrown and has started to chafe (Kieft 2013). Bonnie Meekums writes about these processes of change – ‘the core identity remains the same, but our “take” on life may shift fundamentally [...] as if the old tune has been rearranged, with fresh harmonies that soothe the soul’ (Meekums 2002: 14).

We learn through repetition. *Unlearning* behavioural patterns requires even more repetition, as, once established, such patterns are constantly reinforced through social interactions and communication as well as through the roles we have adopted. This unlearning, or relearning, requires patience and dedication, and the integration of changes is seen as a litmus test that calls for commitment, strength and compassion at times of ‘relapsing’ into previous habits and patterns (Kieft 2013). An important part of this process is making a conscious choice for a ‘new’ story, changing the *meaning* we attribute to certain situations and events. Story telling provides structure, and helps us to invent and re-imagine our lives. If we do not consciously learn these skills, ‘our lives get made up for us by other people’ (Le Guin 2004: 208). Soul retrieval offers a possibility to revisit values and internalized beliefs that were previously taken for granted, to check if they still feel nourishing and life-giving, or whether it is time to change the story. The ‘remodelled’ memories and new thought patterns gradually become integrated in other situations and areas of life.

I am dancing with/as one of the ancestors of my female lineage, a beautiful witch with red hair and green eyes and dress. I feel her despair of being prosecuted, tortured and killed for a personal connection with Source and spirit. There is a sense of distorted power, injustice in the system, but also a fierce joy of living close to her original blueprint. Through movement she conveys: *‘it is a terrible thing for spirit connection to be monopolised by a few, or by a powerful institution, to be laid down in rules and behaviours so strongly that it becomes a danger to have your own ‘recipe’ for it, and be accused if you do not follow “theirs”. Yet life would become an empty travesty, devoid of meaning, if you deny your personal spirit connection.’*

I dance with a sense of unpacking, unveiling different lifetimes, coming closer to soul each time, obstacles becoming lessons, with a notion that our culture isn’t, perhaps, so different from earlier times, because our systems still often come across as dogmatic, narrow-minded, suspicious and inflexible.

My witchy ancestor starts cutting away these fears for a personal spirituality – both those fears of others toward me, as well as fears for myself to be ostracized for this connection. I dance my gratitude for the richness and abundance of life in and with spirit. For all times. For all lives. For all women. For all our relations. And in the clear space I bring in the four elements, warming my hands over the fire, ‘baptizing’ myself with plenty water, smudging my body and placing an oak leaf on my forehead. I rest in G[♁]D, and in community. (Dance diary, 7 July 2013)

This experience planted the seed of courage to start admitting that I feel connected to spirit and Source *outside* of a major religious doctrine. Later I became aware of soul loss both in the world of dance and in the academic world, and I felt as if I was encouraged to bridge the two. During a 72-hour Ceremonial Long

Dance in 2015, I consciously introduced the archetype of the Scholar into the Movement Medicine field. Moving through the space with a mortarboard on my head, I consciously brought academia onto the dance floor in three subsequent dances. The first time was coloured by fear and a sense of ‘shock to the system’ – mine and the wider community’s. I kept giving love to the fear, and affirming ‘*you are welcome, this is welcome here.*’ My dance was an apology for the exclusion of this part and any abandoned part within myself and within the collective field, and also a prayer for displaced people who feel unwelcome wherever they are. The second dance normalized it, confirming the joy of the integration that had happened. The third time I intended to share the mortarboard around, and at some point a woman spontaneously took it off my head, wore it herself and then passed it on, and on, and it went through the entire group. It finally went home with a young woman who is now doing a Ph.D. on dance in Germany. I was also set the next challenge of bridging soulful dance (back) to academia. Two weeks later I had an interview for a post at the *Centre for Dance Research* at Coventry University, where I currently work.

Insert Figure 6:

Figure 6: Whole. Artist & Photographer: K.R., Devon, 2015

Discussion

This chapter offered a concrete example of a healing journey and step-by-step integration, from cautious possibility arising to manifesting a concrete change in daily life. It outlined the possibilities of (danced) soul retrieval and described some of my personal experiences with this powerful healing method. Integrating different worlds is a process that needs to be revisited time and time again, as the body-mind split in our culture runs so very, very deep. The process of transformation may indeed ‘be compressed into a single dream or into a short moment of experience, or it may extend over months and years, depending on the nature of the initial situation, the person involved in the process, and the goal to be reached’ (Jung [1959] 1971: 38–39).

The insights of this personal journey of discovery can be extrapolated to a wider, perhaps more inclusive, understanding of health and wellbeing. Combining shamanic explanatory models and ways of knowing with the potency of dance allows us to readdress the spectrum of what health and healing constitute, of what conditions might need healing, what treatments could be applied, and to look at how circumstances can be created that are supportive and conducive of good health. I would like to draw attention to the following aspects of health and healing, which I will further unpack below:

- 1) health is an ongoing *process* of integration and balance that includes physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing and personal growth;
- 2) healing requires regular and active attention and does not only occur when ill;
- 3) healing is part of the social fabric of life and cannot be addressed at an individual level alone;
- 4) healing can be encouraged through a ritual context and an awareness of liminality within the everyday;
- 5) meaningful narratives and stories are essential to health.

In 1948 the World Health Organization defined health as ‘a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’ (W.H.O. 1998: 1). This definition, which is still used today, was quite radical at the time because of its inclusiveness and ambition, and because ‘it overcame the negative definition of health as absence of disease’ (Huber et al. 2011). Now that population, demography and disease patterns are changing, and technology and advance screening allow for earlier diagnosis, a state of *complete* health is hardly attainable. Most of us deal with (multiple) chronic conditions at some point in our lives. In addition to interventions on a mechanical physical level, health and healing definitions shifted to include the *ability* to adapt, self-manage and develop healthy coping strategies (Huber et al. 2011). Aaron Antonovsky’s theory of salutogenesis considers the origin of health by managing stress and staying well, rather than pathogenesis that looks at the origin of disease (1993). Both Huber and Antonovsky stress health as a process rather than state. Holistic visions (including but not limited to dance movement (psycho)therapy and somatic practices) furthermore add spiritual wellbeing as an equally important dimension as physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing (Prince and Riches 2000).

In shamanic work, as well as in complementary medicine, health and healing are indeed seen as an ongoing process of integrating, maintaining and/or restoring balance between body, heart, mind and spirit, including personal growth. Healing in this sense is similar to Jung’s description of ‘individuation’ as ‘the process by which a person becomes a psychological “in-dividual,” that is, a separate, indivisible unity or “whole”’ (Jung [1959] 1971: 275). This implies that, regardless of the presence or absence of physical or mental symptoms, a healing (i.e. balancing) process is always occurring in some form and would therefore apply to most people most of the time. It also points to the difference between healing and curing, which again highlights the split between a mechanical focus on disease (curing) and a more holistic focus on health (healing). Although the English language includes many references to life as a (precarious) balancing act (juggling; carrying weight; dropping plates), we do not generally associate this with health and wellbeing. Even though we might perceive a certain level of stress, we seem to be at the receiving end of it, dealing with the effects of (un)balancing, rather than actively, consciously and regularly adjusting tasks and priorities to sustain health. This often only occurs when we fall ill or burn out. What would happen if we take a more active stance in our own health, instead of relying on expert advice, pills or surgery only in response to emerging symptoms (compare Roberts 1999)? As we have seen in the previous section, becoming our own active healers requires ongoing attention and dedication, perhaps even a daily practice (Fraleigh 2015: 56).

Furthermore, healing does not only refer to integration of various elements *within* an individual, but also to the integration of different parts of life such as art, community, relationship and nature (see for example Halprin 2003: 231). As I observe in my thesis, the relational nature of dance as an activity is one of its defining characteristics:

Whether it is a private, solo dance, or a performance for a large audience, the dancer is *always* in relationship. Being the instrument of the dance, the dancer is firstly in relation to self and the inner landscape, including emotions, ideology and understanding of cosmology. Furthermore, the dancer moves in concrete relationship

with the earth (gravity), the sky (vertical alignment), air (breath) and space. And finally, the dancer is, whether aware of it or not, always positioned in a network of social, cultural, environmental and even political relationships. Through the dance, these relationships are not only established and maintained, but possibly also transformed (Henry et al. 2000). (Kieft 2013, original emphasis)

Dance allows for metaphorical travel from one place in consciousness to another, to visit unexplored territories and regain balance: 'Our thirst for soul will not be quenched by travelling abroad, but by travelling inward, and, when we find ourselves, we will rediscover the world' (Halprin 2003: 79). Shamanic views also show the elasticity of the boundaries of consciousness, and acknowledge the reciprocal exchange between the healing of self and the healing of elements of the outer world. Soul retrieval and integration are therefore not simply a matter for the individual concerned, but benefit the wellbeing of the entire society (see also Winkelmann 2004a: 65; 2004b: 150). Rituals can be an effective means for the transformation of self and social relationships, and even though their effect may be subtle, they can lead to 'a very substantial difference in the day-to-day happiness and fulfilment' of individuals and the viability of society as a whole (Samuel 1990: 86).

The ritual space offers a place for transformation because it exists outside the socio-structural rules of everyday life, which are temporarily abandoned. The individual needs to be in a state of *prima materia*, which can be 'reshaped to encounter new experiences' (Turner 1982: 84). However, in order to create a sustainable narrative of healing, we need to integrate the liminal state into the everyday, and not only experience this in special, set-aside events. An active take on healing requires mini-pockets of liminality to regularly return to basics, checking our frame of reference and making necessary adjustments.

The absence of a coherent cultural grand narrative that I could resonate with propelled me on an alternative search for a narrative that would place life events in perspective and provide a meaningful framework to deal with their challenges. Shamanic techniques and dance can help to reflect on values, call back what has been lost along the way, transform that which no longer serves and find ways that support us to thrive. Many (shamanic) traditions advocate the path of the warrior, to come into right relationship with all that exists within and around us through integrity, courage and responsibility (Coelho 1997; Cooke 2010; John-Roger 1998; Russel 1998). Although the concept of 'warrior' might initially seem at odds with messages of harmony, love and respect for self and others, such teachings can serve as an invitation and guide for transforming oneself and befriending life through dignified and purposeful action. A warrior is not necessarily something to become, but rather a path that one chooses to follow consequently and in every action:

The attitude of a warrior is a notion, a direction, a persistence in choosing the strongest and most authentic way in each action. Perhaps the most telling characteristic of a warrior is the perennial search for impeccability in every action, even the smallest [...] making optimum use of individual energy. (Sanchez 1995: 23)

We can invite the archetype of the warrior to play an active part in maintaining our health and wellbeing. Soul retrieval as a technique supports this, and following such a path can support equilibrium, fortitude and

an experience of abundance, which helps with navigating difficult moments in life, making strategic decisions (Sanchez 1995: 24, 25), and ‘being equipped to face what comes your way’ (Horwitz 1996).

Bringing together the power of symbols, stories, imagination and the transformative properties of improvised, ritualized dance and shamanic healing modalities has helped me to create ‘an internal narrative of restoration and healing, built from imagery which reiterated messages of wholeness and integration’ (Samuel 2008, 2010). The meaning and necessity of such individual journeys for health, wellbeing, and self-confidence cannot be underestimated, and soul retrieval is an essential ingredient to enhance coherence and our ability to cope with the many aspects of a demanding, fast and often multi-faceted life in contemporary western culture.

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Notes

¹ Differences include for example the length of the shamanic apprenticeship, the occurrence or absence of traumatic experiences or illnesses prior to the calling; the acceptance, recognition and assessment of shamanic experiences within the practitioner's culture; general occurrence or absence of fear provoking experiences; explicit shaman's knowledge versus knowledge available to all; being embedded in a culture's mainstream cosmology or part of a more alternative scene; costs involved; and tools mainly being used for society or individual (Jakobsen 1999). This differentiates a shaman from a shamanic practitioner; while the former is a distinct role in a specific culture and an honorary title given to someone by their elders, the latter can be 'taught' in workshops.

² The debate around the appearance of similar practices worldwide raises questions whether such similarities can be ‘measured’ at all, and if yes, how, and if similarities arose simultaneously (convergent evolution) or may have moved with various cultures through migration. Intriguing (recent) observations include genetic evidence of a potential common ancestry, similarities in Palaeolithic rock art worldwide, as well as in descriptions of nature-based traditions that include animistic practices and which have been documented in Europe throughout history (pre-Christian, medieval and contemporary). Because of their complexity, such questions require an interdisciplinary approach, including anthropology, biology, (neuro) theology and art history.

³ The other cause for illness is the harmful intrusion of external energies or forces into the system. This can be (but not always is) a consequence of soul loss, when the system is not as complete, whole and strong as it could be. Intrusion is remedied by a treatment called ‘extraction’.

⁴ In many cultures there are other causes of soul loss, for example soul parts can be ‘stolen’ by a third party, as a result of not observing the right moral conduct, overstepping a taboo or not honouring the spirit worlds.

⁵ There are variations on this, including soul retrieval when the client is not actually present.

⁶ As this is a very powerful and catalytic ritual, it needs to be taught and experienced in a well-held and safe space. I am therefore not at liberty to give more concrete detail of the various steps of the process.

Notes 3, 4, 5 do not appear in my version of this text so I cannot see or correct them; now even note 2 disappeared as I’m typing this???. Provide reference for note 3 and 4 5 – however when hovering over the note I can see the text is correct