

# WANDERING HOPES

*by*

*Philip Christofi and Annie Sakellariou*

## Intro/Scars-Trauma 0.00-1.20

(Two dancers, Philip and Annie, stand back to back with a slight lean.)

Whenever something happens that changes you. It marks you. Like a scar. Maybe it's a large scar across your chest from a bear that all can see. Maybe it's a little scar like a bullet wound that can't be seen but runs real deep. Maybe it's a mental scar from a nervous breakdown that is completely concealed. It doesn't matter what scar it is. Each and every one feels different about it and that is what makes us human. For somebody who lost his legs in an injury it is a big deal no matter what. But if that somebody was a prominent fighter, athlete or dancer, it makes it that much worse. When your dreams are taken away from you, snatched away, the loss is a nightmare. A scar can mean an adventure or something to take pride in, but sometimes it means a bad experience or a big mistake. Sometimes it's best to have experienced the scar so its healing effects can take place in order to change, adapt and move forward. Some scars are brandished as a sign of their life stories; other scars are always trying to hide and are embarrassed, and some scars are just so difficult that they can't be hidden and so painful that no brandishing needs to be considered. Some are just grazes that can be easily restored, some are treated by others and some we take to the grave.

## Placement 1.20-2.00 (moving about, push and pull sequence)

(It starts with a strange bow to each other that connects our heads. Here touch is minimal and only for so long. The dance changes constantly but we always keep a distance while circling around. It looks as if we are testing each other trying to find a way in from the outside.)

## Philip testimony/Loss 2.00-2.15

My career as a dancer is finished. The operation wasn't a success. My knee can't take it. I lost too much. I can never again dance to my full capacity. My dream to become a dancer is forever gone.

## Philip choreo 2.15-2.30

(Sudden outburst of energy as the music shifts into a dynamic beat. The choreography switches to Philip's personal cadence. Annie follows Philip's lead.)

## Philip solo 2.30-2.55

(A small excerpt from what Philip can do as a dancer.)

## Annie's words 2.55-3.25 Anger, Hurt, Despair, Fear, Misery

(Philip throws towards the audience these words while Annie copies these feelings into movement that can be felt but also identified.)

## Philip's words 3.25-3.47 Hardship, Burden, Affliction, Disorder, Injury

(Annie throws the words, and Philip dances them.)

Annie's testimony/Change 3.47-4.25

I'm only eleven, and I'm about to read a story in front of a crowd of people. As I try to open my mouth, everything blacks out and freezes. I lose my words. I search for sympathetic eyes out in the crowd, but no one seems to be there. I feel like there's a fear-monster attacking me, sucking my soul and releasing all of my insecurities.

With such a memory in my mind I realize that after we go through certain physical or even mental pain, the scars do remain open, but they are treatable. We can always find other ways to make up for what we lost. I, for example, choose dancing to express myself. If there is a will, there is a way.

Annie's choreo 4.25-4.51

(The music changes into a primitive instrumental composition that emanates a mixture of mystery and the oriental. Here Annie takes the lead while Philip follows her movements. Philip stops while she dances on.)

Philip & Annie's duet 4.51-6.05 Balance, Serenity, Hope, Support

(The epitome of our work. Annie, without looking back, falls backwards while I catch her in mid-air. Our dance matures into intimacy and so does our touching. We don't hold back and we envelope each other. As partners we trust each other and execute a series of movements that can't be done alone. The last part ends with Philip lifting Annie high up into a statuesque position while she proclaims the word "Support.")

Epilogue/conclusion 5.40-6.05

In words I find sanctity. Each word has a meaning, but the sound that it creates is as significant as the movement that embodies it. Writing means recognition that each and everything is one in nature, that we are infinitely small but boundlessly vast and that we must love our afflictions in order to love our blessings. Writing means forgiveness.

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## UNDERSTANDING ILLNESS AND TRAUMA THROUGH NARRATIVE

Dancing happens when you move your body voluntarily while trying to interpret different emotional states. Dancing becomes the medium through which we can understand what people feel. Dancing helps us cope with different states of being. Dance goes hand in hand with music. Pain, illness and trauma go through both mind and body. Nothing works in isolation. We perceive experience through our senses that are connected to our brain, and when the brain does not function, there are repercussions to the body. Constantly in my work I express the meanings of scars and their effects on the body and spirit. Siding with Christine Montross, I find that she is also interested in understanding the ailments of her patients in a creative way often consisting of narration. In her books *Body of Work: Meditations on Mortality from the Human Anatomy Lab* and *Falling into the Fire: A Psychiatrist's Encounter with the Mind in Crisis*, Montross focuses on the fusion of psychiatry, medicine and narrative. As she points out, "My patients' illnesses offer me mysteries to unravel, and lead me to dig deeply into the questions that their symptoms pose" ("No Guts, No Story"). I find her breakthrough research illuminating for my own work that focuses on dance as a medium of understanding, self-awareness and self-healing. Numerous studies show the health benefits that come with dancing, not only athletic benefits, but also benefits to mental wellbeing. The brain functions in very nurturing patterns triggering emotions that were once held back and allowing them to be controlled and enhanced by the dancer. Dancing decreases stress levels and releases an air of openness. That is the reason dancers are much more vulnerable but more receptive, not only towards themselves but also to others.

While working on the choreography of my performance, I had to find the appropriate music for what I wanted to express through my dancing. I wanted music not only to express my own affliction, but also to articulate in a coherent manner words the audience could relate to. I found a track that I have always wanted to choreograph for a duet that invokes many feelings that I thought I had left behind in the past. I found music that brings out all the pain and the hours of dedication I had put into my dancing, that pulls me through all those feelings that I had bottled up in the smallest secret compartment of my soul, music that sets free the caged thoughts and allows them to evolve and grow. The track starts very slowly with a heartbeat thumping and wind instruments that steadily progress into a chaos of beats and sounds that synergize together to create a massive resonance that pulsates through the piece. The music triggers a sense of chaos that fades and re-emerges harmoniously throughout. Just like the performance, music helps to treat the scars and convey the emotions they trigger while all their small intricacies are brought into the open.

My partner and I use all these dance twists to our advantage in order to create a delicate plot around our own scars. The first part is about understanding the pain and pride that comes with each individual scar and appreciating its uniqueness. Together after finishing the narration, we indulge in a push and pull sequence. We do not allow each other to approach too close; contact is limited. We try to keep a balance while retaining a distance at the same time. The dance seems cracked and stilted, and although we are working together, we are kept apart by our own personal scars. After this part, I move on with the confession about my own scar. Just saying it out loud frees me from its clutches, and I am able to have a moment of my dream back. As soon my speech is over, my partner starts dancing, and I discard the words "Anger," "Hurt," "Despair," "Fear" and "Misery" while she interprets through her own dance movements each of the words I pronounce. Then I take over. My partner throws the words "Hardship," "Burden," "Affliction," "Disorder," "Injury" which are printed out on separate pieces of paper. My partner reveals her own scar by confiding it in the audience. After we both come out with our secret scars and we have discarded all the words that hold us back, we forget our boundaries. We move much closer to each other. We are now as one,

trusting in each other despite our shortcomings. The oral articulation of the words “Support,” “Serenity,” “Hope” and “Balance” envelopes our dancing. This is where I join with Dr. Montross. I came to realize by reading her work that she believes that by acknowledging our conditions we can move on. She strongly believes that her patients need to understand first what ails them and then seek for help. I believe that dancing is a healing method not only for dancers but for everybody. It is a way to open up so as to reach self-awareness. It is the language of the body that is in charge when, as Montross says, “the mind is in crisis.”

Dr. Montross as a medical ally would agree that in order for a trauma to heal, not only does time need to pass, but also the patient needs to reach an understanding of what ails him or her. You can't find the answer if you don't know the question. You can't find a solution when you don't know the problem. That comes with self-awareness. Although I lack the medical skills of Dr. Montross, I can sense deeply that which is hidden inside the body, the scars that make us who we are. Dance makes that possible. I am able to understand a lot about someone's inner being by watching his body move while interpreting music. All sorts of characteristics are released into the open. The dancer might not be aware of it, especially if he really feels the music. This has nothing to do with experience and dance abilities although these help you express yourself in more subtle ways, it is to communicate not only to others but also to your own self what often stays unseen, silenced and suppressed. You are recreating yourself. It's like you are drawing yourself in your own way but instead of using colors and a canvas you are using your own body

My new-found self triggered memories of all my past choreographies and dance performances. I caught myself remembering small details about my way of dancing. Together we started thinking about how to go about this specific performance that would be viewed through a scientific point of view. Words started to materialize. I would wake up and see them all around me: scars, anger, hurt, despair, fear, change, loss, trauma, misery, affliction, disorder, injury, hardship, burden. I tried to introduce these words to my choreography and after a few days of rehearsing different moves, it hit me. I would write these words down on big pieces of paper that all could see, and I would crush them into balls that I would throw away. With each word that I would dispose, the dance would change and the healing process would reach another level. Each word would be linked to the dance moves, and after all the pieces of paper were crumpled on the ground, a new set of words would emerge: balance, serenity, hope and support. These words would not be tossed away but remain with us, be part of us.

In order to be able to dance, I had to become a persona inside the music. I was suddenly the young boy who wanted to become a lead dancer, but he had just had an operation that ended his career. The operation didn't cripple him, but it meant that his dream of becoming a dancer was over. I won't say that I am unlucky; I appreciate what I have. But this young boy lost his dream. Somewhere inside me that character, who wanted to flourish through dancing, died. He got lost, unable to surface anymore, swallowed by the depth of his own weaknesses. His imperfection killed him. And that is what I felt while I was practicing my choreography. I gave this character a flashlight so that he could find his way out of the abyss. It was the joy of finding again a part of myself, rediscovering my passions. My whole body was upset that I awakened my former self. He was alive again. He whispered in my ear; he talked, shouted and, most of all, expressed himself through dance. He got angry at my limitations and pushed me harder, made me forget my flaws and pain. We moved in unison for a short time feeling invincible, but then my knee injury kicked in and I fell back. I was being left behind, or maybe he was the one who couldn't move on. I gave him a flashlight helping him to shine through the darkness, warning him that at the end the batteries would run out. He would be lost again, maybe never to be seen again. To experience those feelings again as they stem

from a conscious part of me that is already dead is excruciatingly painful. It is painful to try again when I know that failure is waiting for me. I lost the game before it even started. An internal fight rose between the two selves. He forfeited, and I paid the price. My other self is not a quitter. He won't give up; he constantly tries to find his way out. He will never die completely. He will always roam abandoned through my labyrinthine brain synapses. Always waiting for the next time, I will hand him a new light, animating him back to life. He always struggles to reach me, to tell me that I am worthless without him. I have forgiven him.

*Philip Christofi*

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“We grieve what we've lost and fear what we know lies ahead. We have each of us gone through feelings of loss, anger and frustration. We have been marked by some kind of pain,” Arthur Kleinman notes in the online version of his article with the title “Caregiving: The Odyssey of Becoming More Human.” I am sure everyone has experienced the feelings he refers to here some time in their life. In his piece of writing, he comments on the risks of caregiving by referring to his wife, who suffers from the Alzheimer's disease. In my personal dance performance, I am trying to take care of my own self.

Having chosen Kleinman as my personal Medical Ally I could do nothing more than correlate his work to mine. But with one big and vital important difference: I use physical movements and, in particular, dance for therapeutic reasons. In my dance performance, I start describing, as Kleinman does, how some scars and injuries, either of physical or psychological pain, stay forever in our mind. A realization that cannot be anything else but true. Undoubtedly, we have all gone through difficult moments in our life that have marked us. It does not mean that each scar is of equal importance for each one of us. The extent to which a specific scar affects us comes as a result of our own inner self, psychological background and limits. The experience I am elaborating on in my dance piece derives from a personal school experience when I was eleven years old and had to deliver a speech in front of a big crowd of people. As I was about to speak, not a single word could come out of my mouth. I ran out of the room in tears and now this memory stills haunts me. Although there must be many people who have gone through similar experiences, I am sure they have not all of them been affected in the same way. Each person's reaction to an emotional scar is subjective. That is why scars act devilishly; you do not know how hard they are going to hit you.

When I started working on my dance piece, I had difficulty deciding on which personal experience and trouble I should focus. At first, I could not think of anything. But when I started thinking more deeply, many things crossed my mind. I had to look for something that had left a scar on me, something either in my mind or on my heart, a wound that would still be there after all these years. There are many memories from our life that mark us but there is always one that has hurts us the most. I think this is similar to human relationships. There is always that one person who has changed your life completely and affected you in such a profound way, that he or she will always stay in your memory. At this very moment, I knew what I had to write about it. My mind blurred. I was not able to think anymore. I was falling deeper and deeper into the abyss of my past and the present no longer mattered. The memory had all of a sudden sucked my whole existence. Every feeling, every movement, every thought of my childhood experience was there, in front of me, alive. Suddenly, I was no longer Annie, the 21-year old girl. I was Annie, the 11-year old child on the school stage of my school.

*Hmmm, everything looks under control. Not many people have come. I am a bit nervous but ok, I can handle it. Every one before me has managed to perform their speech. I can do that too. So it's my turn. Hmm, why does my heart beat so fast? Ok now, let's take a deep breath. Hmmm, better. Now, where are the stairs? I need to get on stage. Can somebody help me? Here I am. Now, what's wrong? My hands are shaking and I cannot see the lines on my paper. Blurred lines. Blurred crowd. Blurred room. Where is my mum? I need her. Mum, where are you? I want to get down, I want to go home. I'll say a few things and then I'll get off stage. Oh no Annie, don't cry now. Be strong. Enough. Get me down! The darkness of the room comes creeping on as if it's haunting me...I feel sweaty. I am trembling. Get me down NOW!*

Back in reality. What has happened? Who am I? I see what happened. The memory took me 10 years back in time when I was still a child. So engrossing was that memory that I knew immediately what I would write about it.

The next step was to make my experience seem alive. At first I thought about performing my experience on my own in the form of a monologue. Then I remembered that my fear of talking in front of a big crowd of people was still there. I could not do it. As days passed by, I felt that dancing could be the solution I was looking for. Having been a dancer for the last 10 years, I realized that my passion for dance would again be the solution. Whenever I want to express myself, I dance. Whenever I feel sad and want something to cheer me up, I dance. And whenever I am happy I still dance and get even happier. Of course I knew I could not put the whole performance together on my own. Two is much better than one. So a co-student came my way, a former dancer with a knee injury, a person who also saw dancing as a way of truly and deeply expressing yourself. We immediately started rehearsals. We had only 10 days at our disposal. The challenge was there.

Talking about the contribution of this dance experience, I have to admit that this performance made me realize some things about my body and my feelings. With this performance, I came closer to my own body and more specifically I realized my mind through my body. I do believe as a dancer that body and mind are two "weapons" and only under the perfect function of both or under the combination of both can one come close to what it means to be human. "Take care of your body because it's the only place you will live in," are known common words of wisdom which state something really simple: your body is a means through which you can get in touch with your inner self. In my performance, every movement had a meaning. We started with eye contact: this is when everything begins. Eyes are a means to connect with the person next to you at any level. The music started slowly and melodically. We started moving around each other so as to get a sense of familiarity. Then, at first, we seemed unable to trust each other. Trust is something that develops slowly. As far as our movements are concerned, they were a bit aggressive at the beginning as it happens between a hunter and a prey. We were both hunters and preys, we did not have a particular role. That way we wanted to show how careful and coy we all are at first. However, after a few seconds we started coming closer until our bodies finally synchronized. Eventually we became familiar with each other's bodies because as dancers, we both knew how bodies work and our artistic view of the world helps us depend on each other freely and truly.

Next, an important part of our dance performance had to do with the uttering of certain words. Each word had a particular meaning for us, which we tried to express through dance movements. The words prepared the audience and us for the narration or the choreography of our personal experience. We used words such as "burden," "hardship," "trauma," "anger," "despair," "fear," "misery" so as to prepare the path for the narration of our own traumatic experience. Each word was accompanied by a specific body movement. For example, I

personally crawled like a reptile or fell down the floor so as to show how difficult it is to get up on your feet. When down, I tried to imagine that there was a ladder that would help me get up. I moved around the space I had created pretending to go up the ladder, but I immediately fell down again. Through my vacant eyes' look, I tried to show everyone how lost and miserable I felt and how painful the thought of that experience was for me. What is more, in another dance movement I moved as if I were hung by a rope. I was under complete control of the rope and I was moving around this invisible rope exactly like we move around our own personal fears, burdens and scars, without being able to find the way out. My hair was loose so that I would come closer to a free expression of emotion. Some of my movements were fast and intense, but immediately afterwards they became slow and heavy. With this I tried to highlight the psychological ups and downs and how they can affect your whole mood. Last but not least, I also performed a movement where I pushed my hands from my chest towards the audience, as if I was trying to make all the traumatic experience go away.

My partner performed his own piece the same way I did. It was really important that we connected both physically and mentally. We have been both obsessed with dancing and the idea of a "healthy body" that can be used as a means of expression and, furthermore, we have both had scars we wanted to come in terms with. So we were convinced that we had to show to everyone what it meant to learn to live with our traumas and then move on. There was no desperation any more but a new, strong self. The scars were there, but we had already moved beyond them.

Dancing had always been there for me. There is no other way I can express myself. To me, dancing is a way of projecting your inner self. Sometimes, words are not enough, texts can be misleading and we are left with is our body. Our body can perform miracles when our movements are accompanied by the right music and the appropriate freedom of feelings. This is why dancing has helped me highlight yes my scars. Kleinman in his own work about scars and mental illnesses has chosen the medium of writing in order to be able to talk about them. I have chosen storytelling that, to my mind at least, has been embellished by our dance choreography. Words alone without dancing would fall to the ground. Dancing has come to lift them up. Just like the end of our performance, both my partner and I danced together in a much freer, faster and more expressive dancing manner. Healing had come after we had shared our traumas with other people and after we had danced them away. They were no longer there to hurt us. Our initial, stiff, rigid and angry movements had turned into loose and melodic ones. We had danced for our enjoyment, we had connected with each other and we were happy. My dance partner had been the escort and I had been the doll he had played around with as I was pushed and twisted around. He gave his hand and I touched it. And finally, in the end, he lifted me up in the air and I felt like there was nothing that could hurt me. I was free from fear. My experience belonged to the past. I had reached the peak of my own self-power.

*Annie Sakellariou*

### **Works Cited**

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