

**Paradigm Shift:  
Teaching from Internal Experience**

**By Hilary Bryan, © 2009**

This piece was published in i-tch Dance Journal #9 (Spring 2009),  
"predictions, outcomes and paradigm shifts."

Dance class. I was demonstrating how sending breath from the body center through flexible and fluid joints could provide dynamic support. The class was watching as I traced my hands along one student's core-distal leg connection, and pointed out specific landmarks: belly, sitzbone, psoas through hip socket feeding into adductors, hamstrings flowing through calf and malleable ankle, fanning out through an actively responsive, subtle foot with its web suspending 26 bones and its immediate, self-correcting, autonomic feedback loop. Then we watched together as this young dancer integrated her new awareness of connectivity into the movement phrase we'd been learning. Mandy spiraled right up from the floor and out into space, a powerful cyclone directed from her calm inner eye of connectivity. This was a new experience of grounding that she could apply, not only to the idiosyncratic swoops and spins she learned mimetically from me, but to the other rooms in her dance house: the room where she would send one end of her pink tights powerfully down into the earth while delicately unfolding the other up to the sky, as well as the room where she'd shuffle and chug from foot to fa-lapping foot. Our demonstration was complete – it was now time for the whole class to explore these connections in movement. I was reaching for the music play button, when a voice piped up from the back corner:

*Hilary, why do you teach from internal experience?*

Log jam. Brain freeze. Just when I was all pumped up for a gratifyingly practical application of movement theory, a student went meta on me. Could it really be that she hadn't seen the clarity in Mandy's movement? Or crazier still, that she didn't care for it? Did she actually prefer the way Mandy had moved before my intervention? I was frozen in the flood of possible responses jamming the keys of my linguistic translator from

thoughtform to verbal sign. Metaphors and possible answers traded places, clogged the drain, cramped my forehead, arrested my breath.

Mabel Ellsworth Todd, Irmgard Bartenieff, Irene Dowd, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Caryn McHose, Blandine Calais-Germain, Peggy Hackney... This was certainly new territory for college students schooled in competition dance, cheerleading, kick-lines, and musical theater: dance as product, dance as spectacle, dance as entertainment. We share an interest in dance which excites, seduces, grabs, melts, electrifies, softens, inspires, surprises; but there is something different in my approach. What? Despite their initial mystification that I assigned actual reading for my technique class (including texts that required trips to the library's reserves desk), they eventually came to gush about connections they were making. Yes, they'd studied anatomy, but not from an experience of their own insides as I was asking them to do.

It took me a moment to talk/feel/ease my way out of my mental logjam before I could unravel the most important reason I teach from internal experience:

*I value it.*

Internal experience is what reminds me that I am alive. I relish my body's ability to perceive, sense, respond, digest, recoil, melt, expand. Even this past teaching moment that I'm describing continues to live in my body as I first experienced it: caught breath, tense forehead, brain freeze (and hyperactivity); and then savoring the return of breath and ease as the knot detangled, giving expression to each separate thought, one at a time.

And yet it is also true that experience lies. Let's say – hypothetically, of course – that I have been tucking my tail for decades, and now someone I trust has found the magic words to invite a more functional freedom for my tail, a new “un-tucking.” Reversing my habit might give me the sensation of an opposite bad habit – “sticking my butt out” (the horror). It's going to take a lot of faith in my teacher to overrule the force of this weird feeling. The good news is that my sense of normal is fluid. I can train my senses to embrace a paradigm shift. Even better news is that bodies tend to appreciate and seek to

repeat functional movement patterns (and fun ones), so if I discover that my tail's paradigm shift helps me to throw my legs around more easily, I'll get over that "sticking my butt out" weirdness pretty quickly.

I am grateful for the logjam my student inspired and for the opportunity to articulate why I teach the way I do. Visceral experience teaches and remains in the body, with the body, through the body. Ease of function greases the paradigm in its shift.

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