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Dancing dialogue, Gestalt therapy and the 5Rhythms. An obituary for Gabrielle Roth (1941–2012)

Helena Kallner

Gabrielle Roth, founder of the 5Rhythms dance and movement meditation practice, died of lung cancer in October 2012, at the age of seventy-one. Gabrielle was a dancer, author, teacher, artist, mother and a musician – with a special interest in shamanism and healing. Her work is practised by thousands of people all over the world, and her institute 'The moving centre school' has certified over 300 teachers. Gabrielle was very much inspired by Gestalt, which is evident in her work. In this text I will briefly introduce you to Gabrielle, the 5Rhythms, my experience of the work, and links I make to Gestalt.

'Do you have the discipline to be free?'

Heavy snow is falling over the winter-cold city. It has already been dark for hours; I am tired after a day at work and very tempted to go home. But, I don't. There is a 5Rhythms class this evening and my love for dance calls me. The music is already playing as I enter the room, it smells rich of incense, and candles meet me with a warm light. All around are people warming up, gently moving their bodies – stretching, softening. I take a deep breath, and I drop into myself – as if I could feel my bones, my joints and my muscles. Feeling into how I want to move right there, right then. I follow my breath, trusting that I will find my dance. Trusting that I will surprise myself, and knowing that no matter how I feel myself now I will feel different, be different, after a few hours of sweating and moving with the music and the beat of other dancers. I surrender myself to the dance.

I first met the 5Rhythms in a Gestalt therapy group about thirteen years ago. Then, I felt sceptical to begin with. During a life crisis my way to cope had been, like for many others, to make a split between 'me' and 'my body'. Movement at that time meant extreme exercise, and noticing my body in therapeutic settings was synonymous with pain, shame, demands, and struggle. But that morning in the therapy group I discovered something new. As the music started we were gently guided to notice our different body parts, and invited just to pay attention to our movements and the beat. Surprised, I found myself relaxing, curiously exploring how I wanted to move my spine, my knees, my hips, my hands, my arms . . . I felt playful and curious. No one asked me to 'feel' or 'do' anything with my movements.

I felt pure joy – and since then I’ve been dancing on a regular basis.

To me and many others, 5Rhythms is more than a dance; it is a practice where I develop an embodied awareness of myself and how I resonate with others through movement. As with yoga or meditation, the dance demands a commitment to practise, to show up in whatever shape or phase of life you are in. Combining therapy, and later training, with the 5Rhythms has been an important support and source of inspiration for me. The non-verbal language that I have discovered (or maybe re-discovered) in dance has given me a clearer and more direct way of experiencing and expressing myself. Through this practice I have developed an interest in how I influence others and how others influence me, through movement. An interest that has brought me to study with Ruella Frank.

Finding dance

For Gabrielle Roth, dance was medicine: ‘Put your psyche in motion and it will heal itself’ was a standard phrase of hers. She fell in love with dance early in her life, and she enjoyed turning up the volume and dancing freely. Moving like others was not her thing, and that very philosophy would in itself be her ‘thing’ – and her path. However, her journey to reach this confidence was, of course, not straightforward. Gabrielle studied dance for many years, and in one of her books she describes her struggle to find joy in the strictly choreographed dance. Through an upbringing in strict Catholic schools, she picked up the message that her body and desires were sinful, and through hard dance practice and self-control she tried to conform, improve, and live up to these ideals. In her teenage years she had anorexia, a journey she describes as

... taking the body/spirit split to the edge. My crisis came from the feeling that I had to choose, choose between heaven and hell. My body was hell, struggling with the passion of my emerging sexuality. The ‘high’ I got from starving myself was heavenly. When I finally broke out of this pattern of self-destruction, it was a radical decision to choose life, even while dancing on the edge. (Roth, 1998, pp. 6–7)

In dance she would find a way to heal this split between body and soul.

During her time at college, Gabrielle taught movement to children, elders, and disabled people. This work brought to life new aspects of dance for her. She realised that it was impossible for her to impose on her students a ‘right way’ to dance and move. She had to let go of her ambitions as a teacher and instead notice *how* they moved, and carefully listen to where they got stuck in their movements. She became curious in how she

moved *with* them, and in the intensity, rhythms, flow of energy, and movement patterns that they created together.

Fritz and Esalen

Gabrielle’s life took a radical turn when an injury stopped her from practising dance. Becoming a professional dancer was no longer an option, and that depressed her. She accepted a friend’s advice and moved to Esalen where she met Fritz Perls. I remember being in a workshop with her once when she described her first meeting with Fritz. I don’t remember the details of her story, but I remember the point being that she had no idea who this man was but recalls that she responded to him in a way that confused him but also aroused his respect for her. When Fritz found out that she had taught dance he asked if she could teach movement in his Gestalt therapy groups. ‘He saved me,’ she said. Gestalt influenced Gabrielle in many ways, and working with Fritz deepened her interest in dance as a transformative process. The formless form of the 5Rhythms started to take shape.

The 5Rhythms

Energy moves in waves. Waves move in patterns. Patterns move in rhythms. A human being is just that; energy, waves, patterns, rhythms. Nothing more, nothing less. A dance. (Roth)

In her work Roth identifies five different rhythms, or movement qualities, which are danced in a sequence (also called a *Wave*): *Flowing*, *Staccato*, *Chaos*, *Lyrical*, and *Stillness*. There are no steps to follow, and there is no choreography to learn – yet the Rhythms provides a holding structure within which you are free to move and explore. Similar to the sequence of contacting, the Rhythms are thought of as an emerging process, where each rhythm holds the potential of all the others. As you explore how you move with each rhythm you also embody yourself differently, practising new and familiar ways of contacting. Focus is on ‘what is’, on the phenomenology of the situation. So rather than interpret the way you move, the practice supports you to be curious and notice; ‘Look, this is how I move my hands today. Ah, when I’m dancing with you I shrink, and I feel shy.’

In *Flowing*, the dancer will form a connection to gravity and space, focusing on her feet, and moving through a continuum of circular movements with no end and no beginning. Similar to fore-contacting, this is a stage where no clear figure has yet formed. *Staccato* follows, and the beat gets clearer, as do the movements. This dance is sharp and has a direction, with angular and focused movements – contact and figure forma-

tion. *Chaos* is the peak of the sequence, inviting a wild and ecstatic but yet grounded dance. ‘Chaos is next to God,’ Gabrielle used to say, and by shaking and releasing, the dancer might, as in full contact, get a clear sense of themselves and that which is other than self – an elucidated experience of me and you, where we become a we. Lightness and play, repetition and curiosity are themes for the *Lyrical* rhythm. The final rhythm is *Stillness*, a dynamic stillness where the dancer incrementally moves in and out of shapes. I think of the two last rhythms as post-contact and withdrawal.

Just as in life, there are days when your flowing does not flow at all. Maybe you can’t find a direction in *Staccato*. Rigidly you hold on in *Chaos*, overwhelmed by the intensity. And later you find yourself wanting to fly lightly and playfully, like a lyrical butterfly, but instead clumsily stumbling over yourself and others. Just to find yourself restlessly making shopping lists in *Stillness*. Well, then that is how it is. Then *that* is your dance! Similar to the Paradoxical Theory of Change (and meditation practice), the dancer is encouraged to move with whatever is. If you can’t flow, then drag your inert self around on the dance floor – notice what that is like. If your dance brings up resistance, feelings, thoughts, emotions, the practice is to move with that and find a way to express, explore and breathe through and with. Personally I often find that I get bored with dancing the ‘stuck dance’ and then I have the choice of experimenting. Although I might feel uncomfortable to start with, just by changing speed, or finding shapes and movements that represent the polarity of my felt experience, I tend to find new dances, and with that become more flexible in my way of contacting.

Roth has developed a series of ‘Maps’ to guide her students in their practice. The first map is the basic practice, which I have described above (Waves) and introduces the 5Rhythms and how to embody them. The second map (Heartbeat) explores the physical expression of emotions. The third map (Cycles) is concerned with different stages of life, and the final map (Mirrors) takes the students on a journey where they explore how they embody different aspects of themselves.

Like Gestalt, the 5Rhythms is by nature relational – meaning that an essential aspect of the work is that we exist and grow in relation to others. An experienced 5Rhythms teacher will invite the dancers to explore how they move and feel themselves differently when dancing alone or with a partner, and continuously reminding about the connection to the wider group – raising awareness of how we influence each other.

An urban shaman

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to experience Gabrielle’s teaching in person. She was a living legend that gracefully would guide her students deeper into their dance. Gabrielle was not interested in the pretty and good-looking dances, and she embraced both dark and light. This poem, by her long-term student Martha Peabody, speaks in a special way to me.

She was a white woman with the soul of a black
preacher man
A mother with a teenager’s heart
A dancer with a starving poet’s body
An anthropologist with a silver shovel gaze
A loner who attracted crowds
A healer who wrote prescriptions with her feet
A survivor of an ancient wisdom cult held in modern
rock & roll
A wanderer obsessed by maps
A witch shaman warrior priestess guru mistress
drinking red wine at the table next to you
She was the softest black leather trench coat with
ballet shoes as a belt
She smelled like all your best memories
and could point to the core of your most vivid
nightmares
She was shy and nothing and everything scared her
Fierce and fragile she’d stand-up-comedian trick you
into the deepest wholes of yourself then saw this
unravelling as art
She believed in the physical power of motion, the
wisdom of gravity
The emptiness of true love, the fact that there is no
way out but thru the body,
No way up unless we all go together, no way down
unless we follow the beat,
and no way in unless we embrace the dark
She was the darkest shadow of the brightest light.
Into this soft dark she slid
dancing free
now and forever

Martha Peabody

Last time I danced with her I was really struck by how this apparently ill and fragile-looking woman could embody such presence. With an alert stillness, she really held the space. And it felt to me as if she was noticing every single movement in the room, as being part of the whole. Her teaching was sharp and full of wisdom; she used rituals and taught philosophy – with a wicked sense of humour.

I remember entering one of her workshops feeling deeply disappointed when I saw how crowded the room was. There must have been almost 200 dancers trying to

find a way to move in what seemed like a very small room. We were all holding on to our own little spot, bumping into each other. Not much fun! Gabrielle spoke: ‘The more space you take, the more space you make. Move!’ And we did. We walked, for a whole day. We shifted in speed and direction; running, tiptoeing, backwards, forwards, sideways. Gabrielle would constantly remind us to seek out (for) the empty spaces (in)-between us. Never stopping, we were circulating around each other, opening up to sense and listening to each other’s movements. ‘You can never think yourself into clarity.’ By the end of the day the room felt spacious. The purpose of the exercise was to get us fully to drop into our embodied selves, to feel how we moved together in this given situation.

Gabrielle’s practice has taught me to feel the difference between merely ‘having a body’ and experiencing myself through movement. I bring this awareness to my clinical practice, and one day I’d like to write more about how her work has influenced my own. But just to say something brief about my interest; I find myself questioning the usefulness of interventions when I just ask my clients what they feel, or what a body part might say to them. I think that I first need to support them to feel themselves kinaesthetically, and how they feel themselves being with me. Awareness continuum.

And the beat goes on

As Gabrielle was dying we, the 5Rhythms global community, danced in her honour and as a way to stay connected. Her family set up a Facebook page where poems and thoughts were shared, and special dance gatherings were organised. Personally, I found myself a bit surprised by the intensity by which I was affected. I worked at Metanoia during those days and I did not have the chance to gather with other dancers, but I danced. I dance-walked the streets of Ealing, and my

hotel room became my dance floor. In my dance I found a space to reflect on how much Gabrielle’s work has influenced me, and the joy and clarity I find in moving. By writing this paper I begin to understand how much Gestalt, movement and the Rhythms come together as a ‘whole’ practice for me.

Gabrielle’s work will be carried on by many teachers and students, and foremost by her son Jonathan Horan and the faculty at the Moving Centre School. By the end of her life Gabrielle invested a lot in ‘The 5Rhythms reach out’, a project that aims to bring dance back to where she started her work – with kids, elders, the institutionalised, and people in need. In the intake for the 2013 training program they are specifically asking for students who feel passionate about integrating movement into their social work with people.

Although Gabrielle has left life on earth, her dance continues on dance floors, in hearts and in sweating prayers among dancers in the worldwide 5Rhythms community. And it will certainly continue in me.

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