

Reclaiming Personal Power Through Sacred Circle Dance

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## Comments on 2020 Revision

It's hard to believe that 10 years have past since I wrote this paper! The revisions made were minimal. Reading this thesis was like seeing an old friend. It also reminded me of my abilities as a dance teacher and somatic therapist. This has been most reaffirming.

Professionally many changes occurred since the *rigors* of academia. The challenge of accruing those 3,000 hours and sitting for the licensing exams have happened. Through it all, I did not give up my Sacred Circle Dance!

My skills as a teacher continue to develop. I have my own choreographies and am able to apply the principles of my thesis to the dances. My San Leandro Group has been going strong for 11 years. I have led dances in a variety of settings which included grief support at a local hospice agency where I did one of my internships. I am a regular teacher with another Circle Dance group in the San Francisco Bay Area and we do other special events, including an annual dance camp. I lead my own dance retreats whenever possible and do a yearly Summer Sacred Circle Dance worship service for a church in the San Francisco Bay Area. I am leading a movement group at a drug and alcohol residential program in the Santa Cruz Area where I live. The people I serve greatly appreciate the combination of fun and contemplative dances offered. This year I have started a monthly women's group Sacred Circle Dance group close to my home.

The future looks bright! Now that I am licensed, I am envisioning using my skills in conjunction with being a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist as well as in my work as a drug and alcohol counselor.

A special thanks to long time circle dance teachers and friends Stefan and Bethan Freedman for encouraging me to revisit my thesis. I am indeed honored that they have taken notice as they have both been instrumental in my development. 4/3/20

## Abstract

Sacred Circle Dance can be a way to reclaim personal power. Before the therapeutic affects of Sacred Circle Dance can be achieved, a therapeutic container is built first. This is my contribution to the genre of Sacred Circle Dance. Safety is the main element in the therapeutic container and informs the other elements: the physical space, decorations, choice of dances and music. Also considered is the population being served which includes, but is not limited to age, race and physical ability. Self care of the facilitator, therapeutic alliance in group and individual settings is discussed. Reclaiming personal power through Sacred Circle Dance is achieved through various disciplines in field of Psychology. I found resources in Somatic Psychology, developmental movement patterns from Body Mind Centering, humanistic psychology, dance therapy, trauma research, including PTSD, attachment theory, and brain science. I obtained information about reclaiming personal power through Sacred Circle Dance from the different settings where I teach Sacred Circle Dance: interviews with members from a group I founded, volunteer work at a woman's recovery home, individual client therapy and in an expressive arts group. Examples of how different dances can be applied to different theories are given. My style of teaching expanded as a result of my studies in somatic psychology. I have presented a group of dances known as "Birth Rite" and "Finding our Power in Our Days of Powerlessness: Dances that make Us Feel Strong" as a result of my research.

Ten years ago I came to believe that a person could reclaim personal power through dance. At that time I had been dancing for seven years. It was in those earlier years that I noticed some profound changes in myself. I could see that dance was bringing me out of my shell. In 1993 I discovered a type of dance that did not emphasize technique. Known as Circle Dance or Sacred Circle Dance, it promoted a feeling of well being. In 1995 I began teaching. As time passed, my personal power emerged in other areas of my life.

As an undergraduate, I was asked to lead a warming up exercise for a theater class, and I chose one of the meditative dances. After class a woman told me how much it helped her breathing. She suffered from asthma and the dance enabled her body to relax which facilitated better breathing. This was a moment of clarity; I was well aware of the joy it invoked, but the fact that it affected this woman on a deep physical level got my attention. I began to note, more and more, that individuals would share their experiences about Sacred Circle Dance with me. Some said that they were deeply moved, sometimes to tears. Some were grateful because, having felt uncomfortable about dance before, they were happy to say that they felt safe enough to try dancing. Others expressed feelings of deep peace and release. I could see a therapeutic potential in Sacred Circle Dance.

Since those early years I have taught in a variety of settings. I have taught to large groups as part of worship services and presented at dance camps. I presented dance for a multi-cultural program in an elementary school setting, worked with developmentally disabled students, and senior citizens. Currently, I lead a group at a local church in San Leandro, a weekly group at a women's recovery home in Oakland, and co-lead another group in Berkeley. As an MFT trainee, I have recently started to offer this kind of dance in individual and group settings. I have also had the opportunity to share the dance with my colleagues. In these

different settings I have learned that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Every group or individual has different needs; some people prefer slower, contemplative dances while some may be drawn to more physically active dances. When I acknowledge a group or individual's needs, I establish a relationship with them. This is when the reclaiming of one's personal power can begin.

This paper discusses the possibilities of how Sacred Circle Dance can be a way to reclaim personal power. In order for this to take place, foundational work needs to be established first. Before discussing the foundational component, an explanation about the dance is in order. At this time attention shall be given to the *type* of sacred dance that has, and continues to inspire me, along with a brief history of the dance.

### **Sacred Circle Dance and It's Beginnings**

Within the genre of sacred dance there are sub groups. Some dances are done for exhibition and some are participatory. The focus here is on participatory dance. In this kind dance there is not necessarily an emphasis on technique; it is more about the personal and shared experience. Many of the dances have roots in international folk dance. The dances can be celebratory in nature. At times there is a ritual, spiritual or meditational quality. Sometimes there is a message. Some dances honor births, deaths or rites of passage. There are also dances done to celebrate the earth, the seasons and other holidays. These kinds of dances are done worldwide. Sacred Circle Dance, the type of dance that I teach, was what inspired me to pursue somatic psychology. German dance master Bernard Wosien who lived from 1908 to 1986 was the founder. Originally he named it Heilige Tanze—Holy or Healing Dance. He also referred to it as Sacred Dance (Watts, 2006).

It was around 1949 that Wosien discovered folk dance. He was drawn to the old European folk dances from Greece, the Balkans, Ireland and Poland. In these places life was often celebrated with collective dance. In 1960 he left stage dancing and devoted his energy to teaching dance. In 1966 he began making trips to Greece and Yugoslavia to collect dances, Wosien believed that our highly mechanized society was the cause of stress, leading to an increase in mental illness, pressure and even suicide. He saw the healing potential and personally experienced a feeling of community and togetherness when he did the dances. About the benefit of doing Sacred Circle Dance as a form of a moving meditation he said:

With such attunement in our Sacred Dances we have an aim, and the aim is healing. This means doing—a personal striving for development. On our journey together we want to experience awareness—not least self-awareness—and to discover life within the community. All this naturally has a therapeutic effect.

In 1976 Wosien brought his dances to the Findhorn Foundation, a spiritual community in Scotland. From Findhorn the dances spread to England. Once in England, it became known as Circle Dance or Sacred Circle Dance.

Soon Wosien and others began to choreograph new dances. More groups formed as Sacred Circle Dance grew in popularity. It came to the United States in 1985. Later that year a group was formed in Berkeley, California. Over the years it has developed to include old traditional dances and modern choreographies. New teachers have emerged who have brought both fresh energy and ideas.

### **My Beginnings in Sacred Circle Dance**

When I started dancing in 1993, I experienced the same feelings of healing connectedness that Wosien described. I also shared his feelings regarding the negative aspects of mechanization in our society. At this time I was going through significant emotional, physical and spiritual changes in my life. Looking back, I noticed that when times were difficult, I would still show up, do the dances and feel better. I did not question it; all I knew was that it worked for me. Two years later I felt a strong longing to present this type of dance to others closer to my home.

As a teacher, I have brought forth my own personal teaching signature. Like Wosien, I began choreographing and choosing music that is unique to what I like. I have become keenly aware of the joy that I experience when I teach the dance. The preparatory work involved and the work I do after a session are not seen as negative tasks. I am one of the contributors in the legacy of this special dance genre. One of my main contributions is creating a safe therapeutic container.

### **The Parts of the Container**

The foundation needed in order to reclaim personal power is the use of Sacred Circle Dance as a therapeutic container. The therapeutic container can mean many things. It can refer to the physical space that is used, the way the room is set up and how it is decorated. It also refers to the facilitator, participants, music and dances that are chosen. All of these need to be considered in creating the therapeutic container. Before positive transformation can begin, safety, the main element that holds the therapeutic container together, should be addressed. Everyone, participants as well as facilitator, should have a strong sense of safety.

### **The Physical Space**

To ensure safety and prevent distractions, the logistics of the physical space need to be taken into account. Size, easy access, quality of the dancing surface and adequate lighting are important. If the session is outdoors, it would be advisable for the facilitator to practice the chosen dances at the location to make sure the ground is level and free of rocks or roots. Another factor would be to see if there are any foreseeable activities such as concerts or sporting events happening in the surrounding area. This could mean changing the time of the dance session. Sudden loud sounds can have the potential to be triggering to trauma survivors or can be disruptive to the collective energy of a group. Hearing other conversations can pull peoples' attention away from dancing.

### **Decorations and Set Up**

The dance space can be transformed into an inviting place. The use of colorful fabrics as drapes, candles, flowers and other objects can dramatically change the space. Chairs should be made available so that the participants have the option to step out and take care of their needs. It is also helpful to include refreshments and literature about Sacred Circle Dance. All of these items provide beauty, comfort and information, thus enhancing the feeling of a therapeutic container.

The center, one of the main features of Sacred Circle Dance, offers dancers a point of focus. Having a central point of reference can also help alleviate anxiety. Typically centers consist of flowers and candles. Various objects can be used for decoration. With new groups, to allow for comfort, all decorations are universal objects that most people are familiar with. Natural objects such as rocks, feathers, seashells or a dish of water can be used. In my sessions usually at some point I will refer to the center and talk about the process behind choosing the items. I invite people to contribute to decorating the center. They can bring jewelry, flowers, a



picture of other favorite object to add to the center. This is another way to alleviate anxiety and is an opportunity to build solidarity within the group. Inviting the dancers to participate in this way slows down the process; it gives a strong message that the session is not about technique. It is far more than that. It is dance for the soul.

### **Choosing Dances**

The choice of which dances to use is informed by the space as well as the participants. If the space is small, causing dancers to be moving near the walls, I would not choose dances that have a lot of spinning, as the confined space causes a dizzying effect. Longer meditative dances may feel too confined in a small space with no room to travel. Gentler dances are best if the floor is uneven or hard. Longer dances can be too physically tiring for some people. Some groups find too much repetition boring. Dances that are moderate in speed and length and not complex are best for beginners. In my experience I have found that it is best to teach just a few new dances so that the group can integrate these with the ones they are familiar with. This enables people to embody the new ones and not feel overwhelmed. When these dances are done on a regular basis, participants not only gain mastery, but they can relax more into the dances and have fun with the more playful dances.

Based on what I learn from the participants, I can teach more organically, offering dances that can be reflective of a mood or a particular situation. In the beginning and periodically I will check in with the group so see if they want slow, medium or fast dances. Besides what is said, I can also tell by observing if dancers are tired, frustrated or content. This has made my job as a facilitator easier and has enabled me to become more attuned to the present moment. Sometimes a dancer will share a happy or sad event; I have been known to change entire

dance lists to better fit with the present moment. This has become a springboard for informing me how to offer dances to clients in individual sessions.

### **Choosing Music**

Sometimes hearing familiar music can bring pleasant memories. At a sacred dance retreat I taught a workshop on how basic dance steps can be used to create dances to familiar church music. The Tridpudium or Jubilate is an ancient dance that can be done in large congregations to many different types of music. Consisting of three walking steps forward and one step back, groups feel empowered by the steady rhythm and simplicity of the dance. Done to familiar music, it feels safe; it encourages mastery and fosters a sense of belonging. Lyrics can be a source for positive messages of belonging, freedom, peace or personal power. As the dancers move, they can embody these ideas.

### **The Participants**

The population that the facilitator is serving must be taken into consideration. For example, inner-city young women of color may not relate to traditional Bulgarian folk music and dance. It is possible to take a similar dance or a simplified version and use music that the group can relate to. Sometimes a piece of world music that is from a completely different part of the world can be fun; it allows the facilitator and the participants to share in a new experience together. As times goes on, once the therapeutic container is intact, it can be possible to bring forth more variety in musical genres. Many times it is the music that can make a dance popular with groups. Favorite dances are repeated in subsequent sessions. This heightens the sense of safety and predictability during the session, thus reinforcing the integrity of the therapeutic container.

Besides cultural considerations, physical ability is important. I learned about Mixed Ability Dance as an undergraduate student at Cal State East Bay. After taking a class called Dancing for All Bodies and Abilities in 2006 and 2007, I gained a heightened awareness of presenting dance to people with disabilities. One dancer with Meniere's disease called Sacred Circle Dance "Dancing Yoga". One of the characteristics of Meniere's is dizziness. This client practiced self care by leaving the circle and sitting as needed. She would dance sitting in her chair. My interactions with her have inspired me to present sessions on certain days that feature doing the slower meditative dances. This offers more of a framework for me and the dancers. I am also reminded of past encounters with others who have health and mobility issues; they were grateful for the opportunity to be able to participate in a type of dance that was physically accessible.

### **Self Care for the Facilitator**

The facilitator needs to make sure that she is exercising self care for herself. The facilitator must feel safe and comfortable while presenting the material. The attitude of self care begins during the behind the scenes preparation of the therapeutic container and continues during the session with the participants. Proper nutrition and rest are important. This helps to keep the mind clear and the body strong. From a somatic perspective this also means listening to my bodily cues of muscle tightness, tenseness in my stomach or other feelings of uneasiness. Clear thinking translates into allowing enough time for gathering materials, getting to the location with ample time to set up in a relaxed way or changing which dances will be presented. As I look back at over the past fifteen years of teaching, I have experienced what works and what does not work. While I think of the participants' comfort, at the same time I also need to think of my own comfort level.

Other ways I exercise self care is to make sure that I am well versed in the dances I am teaching. Sometimes this means going over dances before the session. If I do not have a solid sense of a dance, I will elect not to teach it. Somatically, I can feel the difference in my body; when movements are fluid, when muscles, especially the facial muscles around the jaw line are relaxed and there are no hesitations when I move, then I know that I have a solid sense of the dance. Once a dance is embodied, I can quickly review it without dancing it in its entirety. I will often review a dance regardless because it puts me in a positive energetic mood before the session.

If, as a facilitator, I have discomfort, I am not going to be able to present to the best of my ability. If I do not take care of my needs, how can I offer a positive, empowering experience to the participants? The participants need to have a facilitator who is confident and clearly enjoys what she is doing. In my role of facilitator and therapist I have a sense of responsibility that I will be offering resources to participants and clients that will enable them to leave feeling empowered and wanting to return. My own embodiment of a safe container is a reflection of self care which serves as a model for others.

### **The Therapeutic Alliance**

An open attitude of inviting collaboration is not only helpful for the facilitator, but also builds trust and safety within the group. When dancers bring decorations for the center or provide refreshments for break, they become active participants in building the container. Other forms of collaboration can happen in the creation of new dances. Sometimes a participant will want a dance choreographed to special music they like.

Showing up on a regular, predictable, basis also strengthens the therapeutic alliance. I consistently create a safe place for self soothing, socialization for the lonely and exposure to new

experiences. I also provide an opportunity to present a structured activity with a beginning, middle and end. My awareness of safety in the therapeutic container naturally enhances the therapeutic alliance.

In my work with individuals, the parts of the therapeutic container are slightly different. While many of the elements are similar, there is less emphasis on decoration. I do not use a center. My work takes on a more organic and client focused approach. What the client brings forth to each session informs me if I think dance is appropriate. I always ask the client first if they want to include dance in their session. Usually only one and, occasionally two dances are done. This allows the client to have enough time to process what gets evoked from doing the dance. Because of the more intimate one on one setting, I want the client to feel safe with the idea of using Sacred Circle Dance in the session.

The therapeutic container, therefore, is not just one element. It is a combination of things that consists of the physical space, decorations, music, and the dances. All of these elements inform one another. This is further enhanced when the participants and facilitator are added into the container. There are also the interactions and alliances that occur among the dancers and also between the facilitator and the dancers. All of this is vital information that I take into consideration when leading individual or group sessions. There is a constant flow of energy happening, sometimes as subtle as placing an object in the center, or as obvious as a dancer stepping out of the circle in the middle of a dance so that they can practice self care.

### **Sacred Circle Dance and the Field of Psychology**

Somatic psychology has been instrumental in developing my teaching style of Sacred Circle Dance for the purpose of reclaiming personal power. As I journeyed through academia reading through countless books and readers, I saw many road signs that made me think of

Sacred Circle Dance. Besides somatic psychology, I noticed connections to the ideas found in humanistic psychology, trauma research, attachment theory, brain science and dance therapy. As I studied, I would jot down the names of certain dances that resonated with various theories. As I look back, I can see that this was the fuel that kept me on course with my academic pursuits. I have taken these ideas and blended them into my own experience and wisdom around Sacred Circle Dance.

### **Somatic Psychology**

Reading James Kepner's book, *Healing Tasks: Psychotherapy with Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse* (1995), confirmed to me that I had made the right decision to pursue the field of somatic psychology. I had no formal training in this field, but I had a strong sense that I was on the right path. Kepner describes how we can organize somatically as a result of being subjected to emotional or physical abuse:

We adapt to being yelled at or criticized as much by pulling in our shoulders, hardening our chest muscles, and bowing our heads in shame as we do by becoming self-critical and forming mental concepts of ourselves as diminished and powerless. (p. 237)

Kepner shows how somatic resourcing can reclaim one's bodily experience of self. Examples include the use of movement to encourage "grace and flow" (p. 243), working with posture and stance and working with ways to release tension and gain physical strength.

Another concept that influenced me in the field of somatic psychology has been the study of developmental movement patterns. Linda Hartley, a teacher of Body-Mind Centering stresses the importance of initiating movement at the extremities. Hartley (1989) explains that many people may never fully develop these patterns or can lose the ability to do the patterns in childhood or later on as an adult. Fears or frustrations can cause one to not reach out to explore

the world; if severe enough, this withdrawal can result in physical or emotional disturbances later on in life (1989). Three of these developmental movement patterns, the ability to yield into the earth, the push patterns and the reach and pull patterns can be experienced in Sacred Circle Dance. The movement pattern of yielding can offer a secure feeling of sensing the earth, and of feeling supported. In describing the importance of pushing Hartley stresses “. . . it is an expression of great power, strength and presence” (p. 69). Reach and pull patterns encourage outer focus and elicits qualities of “. . . lightness, alertness, ease and spirited spontaneity”. (p. 72). She believes that the principles of Body-Mind Centering can also be applied to creative movement, dance and other movement practices.

In 2008 I incorporated Hartley and Kepner’s ideas into a group of dances that I have entitled, Birth Rite. Pushing and the ability to yield into the earth can be experienced in the traditional Breton dance, Hanter Dro. The steps consists of two diagonal steps forward, the push, followed by a step straight back, the yield. Done with the arms linked together, the dancers get a feeling of being rocked as they move, like the way an infant is rocked in its mother’s arms. In the dance, River of Light, there is a gesture that the choreographer, Stefan Freedman describes as “Embracing the Universe” that simulates Hartley’s (1989) reach and pull concepts. As the title suggests, Birth Rite is about becoming reborn. I feel that River of Light can represent coming out of the birth canal and into the light. Kepner’s (1995) ideas of grace, flow, posture and stance can also be seen in River of Light.

In 2009 I participated in a weekend workshop; I named the session that I presented “Finding Our Power in Our Days of Powerlessness: Dances that Make Us Feel Strong”. In this compilation of dances River of Light was included because of the way it encourages a lengthening of the spine. Another dance included called Hex (Watts, 2006) has strong protective gestures, pushing movements and getting rid of motions in the form of shoveling “something” out of the circle. This is followed by gestures that gather up, listening (done by alternately turning the head to the right

and left) and smoothing out motions. Because I lead others in Sacred Circle Dance, I am able to teach the dances in a way that ensures a variety of these movements so that the dancers feel integrated somatically.

### **Humanistic Psychology**

In the 27 years that I have been involved in Sacred Circle Dance, I have experienced and witnessed “peak experiences” (as cited in Monte & Sollod, 2003). Abraham Maslow defines this as an experience in which a person “. . . exists momentarily in a state of joy, awe, and wonderment” (p.487). At times people will heave huge sighs, or would emit sounds like “ahhh” while moving, or do so at the end of the dance. Sometimes there is laughter or tears of joy. At these more emotional moments it is helpful to remain still at the end of a dance and hold the energy. Pausing still and holding the energy can keep people from feeling swept away by their emotions and allows them to feel safe. Usually this is done with hands joined. If the circle is small, causing dancers to move with hands not joined, or, if its is preferred to not join hands, joining hands can be added just at the end. I have found that the energy can still be held with dancers just standing together in a circle.

The therapeutic container of Sacred Circle dance is in many ways similar to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Security, a sense of belonging, self-respect, adequacy and mastery are parts of Maslow’s model (Monte & Sollo, 2003). Doing the dances as a group experience is a way attaining these qualities. When I ask the group which dances they want or make sure to include beginning or less demanding dances, I am able to attend to these various needs. An opening dance that entails purely slow stretching and reaching movements or contains only two movement



patterns are ways of doing this. Dancers will often elicit sighs or facial expressions of visible relief; this signals to me that their needs are being met.

### **Trauma**

My research in the field of trauma and somatic psychology included studying Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The hippocampus is part of the brain that processes events, giving the events a beginning, middle and an end. During trauma it shuts down. As a result, the traumatic experience never fully ends. Flash backs and intrusive thoughts often occur (Rothschild, 2000). The shut down of the hippocampus can be further exacerbated when alcohol and drugs are involved. According to Siegel (2010) alcohol and certain drugs are also known to temporarily shut off the hippocampus; this is what occurs when someone experiences and “alcoholic blackout” (p. 155). A dance session done in a safe environment can be an effective way to address trauma issues. When I teach Sacred Circle Dance I use the frame of a clear beginning, middle and end. I believe that this frame is similar to a healthy functioning hippocampus and can help trauma victims in regaining improved function in this critical area of the brain. With a healthier functioning hippocampus, they can become more empowered in their future trauma work.

Sacred Circle Dance can help facilitate the capacity to verbalize. Van der Kolk (1996) describes how “speechless terror” occurs when a traumatic experience activates the freeze response (as cited in Brooke, 2008, p. 63). Trauma researchers like van der Kolk discovered that action replaces symbolic representation (2008). When dancers ask me what a movement means, I tell them that they can personally name what a movement or a gesture means for them. Reaching upward could mean finding spirituality or experiencing release. This allows people to find their own words for what their feelings mean. Being able to tell one’s story helps to put experiences into a logical perspective.

In the creation of the therapeutic container there are parallels with other trauma interventions. In her book, *The Body Remembers*, Rothschild (2000) describes and discusses the benefits of oases and anchors. An oasis is an activity that elicits enough concentration to allow a person to not think about a trauma. An anchor can be a concrete object or activity that represents a positive aspect of one's life. When I teach the dances, like an oasis, I will include enough new material that will encourage concentration and attention. Dancing is an example of an activity that can cause what Rothschild describes as ". . . the reduction in hyperarousal as well as quieting of internal dialogue" (p. 93). A focused, visually pleasing center can serve as an anchor. Sacred Circle Dancing and the space created has been a source of providing a felt sense of well being and peace. Because the dance is in a known location, there can be an actual somatic memory through the sights, sounds and actions.

Alcohol and drugs can serve as a way to anesthetize from the pain of trauma. According to the Betty Ford Center (2008), a high percentage of women with alcohol and drug addiction also suffer from trauma. Feelings of shame are higher in these women than in men who suffer from substance abuse. Some of the dances have moves and gestures that are protective, strong or can foster solidarity within a group. Stamping, lunging, or crossing one's arms over the heart area are examples.

One of the hallmarks of shock trauma is the disruption of attachment bonds. Eckberg (2000) describes how this occurs on emotional and physiological levels. Withdrawal and a distrust of intimacy with others are not uncommon. When in distress, the body secretes hormones to cope with the situation. Hormones like adrenalin are produced in preparation for the fight/flight scenario. When a person goes into the freeze mode, they dissociate causing the

cortisol levels to drop and opioid levels to rise. The hormones that have a calming effect on the nervous system like oxytocin and prolactin become suppressed. If, however, a person is able to make contact with another caring person, their body is given the opportunity to produce the hormones that relieve stress. When people come together to dance, especially on a regular basis, they are able to be in an experience that allows their bodies to produce these more calming hormones. This is why it is important to assess the dance participants first before offering more intimate dances. In some settings I initially will choose to do many of the dances with hands not joined until the group or individual is familiar with me or when group members are familiar with one another.

### **Attachment Theory**

It is possible for children and adults who grew up in insecure homes to form secure attachments with people other than their parents. Friends, lovers, teachers, clergy or therapists are examples of people who can provide significantly positive relationships (Siegel, 2010). Wallin and Siegel discuss the importance of these “secure-earned attachments”, a phrase that was coined by attachment theorist Mary Main (as cited in Wallin, 2007, p.87). Siegel describes this kind of attunement as “feeling felt” (p.189). I am a potential “earned-secured attachment” for all dancers when I am in contact with them on a regular basis. When a dancer voices a specific need, such as a request for a specific dance and I provide this, the “feeling felt” sense is witnessed by the other dancers in the circle. My contact is readily accessible to all of the dancers largely because of the configuration of the circle. I am easily seen by all of the participants and this, too, encourages attachment.

### **Brain Science**

Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to change the way it functions on a physiological level (Siegel, 2010). New experiences activate neural firing, the production of

proteins and new neural connections. “Besides focused attention, other factors that enhance neuroplasticity include aerobic exercise, novelty and emotional arousal (Siegel, 2010, p. 84). Sacred Circle Dance is an activity that provides all of these factors.

### **Dance Therapy**

Rudolph Laban developed a system, known as Laban Movement Analysis for analyzing movement based on space, weight, time and flow. (Halprin, 2003). Later his pupil, Warren Lamb added the concept of shaping and effort. Irmgard Bartenieff took these ideas and applied them to her work in body movement therapy (2003). My graduate work in movement exploration with a dyad partner gave me a new appreciation for the work of Laban, Lamb and Bartenieff.

My dyad partner, who described himself as a non-dancer, said that their ideas helped him gain more insight into movement and dance in general. Over time I noticed that the quality of my partner’s moves became more varied. I began to witness expansive, spreading, upright moves through space in addition to his more compacted, bound and downward moves.

I have since incorporated Laban Movement Analysis ideas into my teaching style. Bartenieff (1980) believed that the Laban vocabulary would enable the therapist to be a better observer, allowing them to assist clients in strengthening, modifying and changing movement patterns. When clients know that there are various ways of expressing movement and that there is no one correct way, they feel safe. In teaching a vigorous dance, I will tell dancers that they can put as much “oomph” (known as weight effort in Laban terms) in it as they wish. I often will tell dancers that a dance has a certain tempo (time effort). Sometimes I will create an introduction by waiting to start the dance. This is an example of sustained time effort. By doing this dancers do not feel rushed or startled at the beginning of the dance. By demonstrating that a step can be closer to one’s body (bound flow-effort) a dancer gets a

sense of balance, control and mastery in dancing. Laban Movement Analysis has enabled me to cultivate a sense of personal power in the dancers.

On a personal level Laban's theory has enabled me to become more aware of my own body. Whether I am exercising self care and reviewing dances before a session, or noticing how I move when I am checking over a potential new dance space, these ways of referencing my own felt sense continue to serve me in my own decisions of how and where I will teach.

From their work with Marian Chase in 1964-1965, Sharon Chaiklin and Claire Schmais (as cited in Lewis, 1984) were able to implement and pass on the fundamentals of dance therapy. Chase was one of the pioneers of dance therapy in the 1940's and 1950's. Her ideas about the concept of moving in a circle and the use of rhythm are similar in my views of what Sacred Circle Dance can offer. Chase believed that the circle provided equal sharing and a sense of security. She saw rhythm as a source of solidarity and a way to express shared feelings. Group work of this nature had the potential to increase strength and security (1984). There are similar parallels seen in Sacred Circle Dance. The dancers dance in a shared rhythm. The reclaiming of one's personal power can be greatly assisted by the power generated from the group's shared intention and shared movements. Clapping or stamping can increase the energy. Conversely, stopping at the end with hands on one's heart or with hands joined in silence, holding the energy for a minute can be just as powerful.

When I read *The Chase Approach to Dance Therapy* (Chaiklin & Schmais, as cited in Lewis, 1984). I noticed similarities in my teaching style and dance therapy pioneer, Marian Chase. Both my approach and the Chase Approach consist of a warming up, middle part and a closure. When I teach, the energy starts out with slow dances, sometimes with very little movement. Towards the middle of the sessions, dances will be quicker and more vigorous,

causing dancers to increase their energy. Once increased, the energy is gently brought down with slower and gentler dances and ends in a closing dance. With the Chase Approach the therapist begins with simple movements and in the middle the movements are intensified. Chase's closure was to return the group to a circle formation and have the group do simple repetitive communal movements, similar to the closing dance that is done in Sacred Circle Dance. With both methods there is the shared idea of closure in order to foster comfort, safety and camaraderie.

Marian Chase did not easily share her knowledge of dance therapy. She believed that while using the knowledge of others, it was important that this knowledge be incorporated with one's own point of view. Similarly, this is how my teaching style of Sacred Circle Dance has evolved. Originally I adhered closely to the teaching styles of other teachers and then gradually I developed my own style.

This is how I have blended in theory and how it has informed my work with Sacred Circle Dance. Like the elements of the therapeutic container, a constant flow of energy exchange is seen in the above mentioned theories. One informs the other. Laban's method encourages mastery and safety. Safety helps facilitate earned secure attachments. Feeling secure provides healing and the reclaiming of one's personal power.

### **Changing My Own Views as a Result of My Studies**

In year one of my graduate studies I was excited and inspired about how my work as a dance teacher could nurture and heal others. I was further ignited with inspiration early on when I read Irvin Yalom's (2005) comment on the importance of human contact: "People need people—for initial and continued survival, for socialization, for the pursuit of satisfaction. No one—not even the dying, not the outcast, not the mighty—transcends the need for human contact" (p.24).

Montague (1978, as cited in Chamberlain, 2001) talked about the importance of touch: "Touch, the first sense, is the cornerstone of human experience and communication, beginning in the womb" (p. 1). The feeling of community and the opportunity for healthy human contact could both be accessed through Sacred Circle Dance. This is because one of the main features Sacred Circle Dance is that the majority of dances are done in a circle with hands joined.

In year two, however, my studies in trauma, addiction and movement showed me another lens that I needed to look through. It was obvious that touch was not be conducive for everyone, especially trauma survivors. At first I was disappointed that Sacred Circle Dance did not fit perfectly for therapeutic use. By the time I completed year two of my education, I realized that I could take a broader view and, as Chase encouraged, develop my own style of teaching. This has also served to reclaim and enhance my own personal power. Today I can model the attitude of personal empowerment to my clients and other dancers.

### **Interviews with Individuals**

I was interested in finding out from dancers who have danced regularly with me for at least a year if they had experienced feelings of personal empowerment as a result of doing Sacred Circle Dance. I interviewed three dancers from my San Leandro group, asking them the same questions: (a) How long have you been doing Sacred Circle Dance? (b) What has been important for you about coming? (c) What is personal power for you? (d) Does doing Sacred Circle Dance support your sense or development of personal power? How? If not, why?

#### **Ellen**

Ellen is 45 years old. She has had a long history of therapy, over the last twenty five years, stating that she has been "brained trained in group terms, social structure and group process". I interviewed Ellen 5/6/10. She has been dancing with me for four years. Earlier this

year she told me that she decided to seek help for depression. I wondered if coming to dance on a regular basis was something that was helpful for her.

The main thing that Sacred Circle Dance provides for Ellen is a spiritual practice. She equates it to casting a circle and going to Sunday morning church. "That is what the dance feeds". The creation of the sacred space and the group experience were also important. It "feels like joyful participation". Besides dancing, Ellen brings flowers, statues or other items to put in the center. She likes the fact that there is no pressure of feeling assigned to bring anything. "It doesn't demand a lot of me". She describes the space as healthy, happy and safe.

Ellen believes that personal power is always with her; it ebbs and flows. "Power is recovery—doing better and staying on the examined path". She noticed when she started dancing that she connected with other members, knowing some of them from other areas in her life. The group experience is good for her because as a child she was taught to fix things on her own and that there was no one to go to. The dance is an affirmation that she is part of a healthy community. In regards to the recent depression diagnosis, Ellen says that when she started not going to dance, "The bottom line [was that] I need to call the doctor and talk about going on meds".

Ellen's description of the sacred space was a reminder of the importance of the creation of a safe container. In the interview I noted that it was not so much the dancing as it was the creation of the container that was important. I was also reminded of the importance of the group experience and how Yalom (2005) stressed the importance of people needing people. Ellen talked about having to fix things on her own as a child and I wondered about her early attachment history. She mentioned the importance of the group. The group can be seen as a potential earned secure attachment for Ellen. Finally, her not coming to dance served as a



warning sign that facilitated her inquiry into depression. Since seeing her doctor, she has been put on anti-depressants and has been coming to dance on a regular basis.

### **Johanna**

Johanna is 43 years old. A little over ten years ago she was struck by a car. Her head hit the windshield, causing brain stem damage. She is permanently disabled. Since coming to dance, periodically Johanna would allude to “the accident”. When she would do this, I had not felt it was the right time to ask for details. It was the gratitude that Johanna communicated, verbally and energetically about dancing that got my attention. I was curious and wanted to hear more. In an interview from 6/3/10 Johanna told me her story. While she has recovered considerably, she suffers from low grade vertigo constantly, gets her right and left mixed up and states that her “math is gone”. She has been dancing with me for almost two years.

When I asked Johanna the second question regarding what has been important for her about coming to Sacred Circle dance, I noticed how interconnected her answer was with the third question that asked what personal power was for her. She describes her experience with Sacred Circle Dance “...like being in Indra’s Net”. In some ways her answers were also like Indra’s Net. Indra’s Net comes from the Hindu/Buddhist myth of a universe where everything is interconnected to one another. The god, Indra has a net and at each vertex of the net is a multifaceted jewel. Each jewel is in the reflection of all the other jewels.

What has been important about coming for Johanna is the idea of making a commitment and showing up. It is “really important to belong to a group where I really feel accepted just for being me”. She describes the dance as a “sacred ritual, communion; it is restorative”. Johanna receives a sense of well being and energy from the group and says, “No matter what, I always come out feeling better than when I came in”. She feels safe enough to show vulnerability.

Sacred Circle Dance is a place where everyone can feel welcomed and participate, or, just sit and watch. "To be able to participate is a huge deal. . . Having some place you belong is part of being human". Sacred Circle dance is something Johanna looks forward to. It is affordable and close to home. She likes being able to contribute to the creation of the "altar" (center). For her, this is sacred.

Johanna says coming to Sacred Circle dance has given her personal power. She has gained more confidence. She told me of an occurrence, which she called a "peak experience directly related to Circle Dance", that she had last summer when she attended a music festival by herself. She was befriended by a group of participants and she partner danced. She had never partner danced before. She described her experience: "This was personal power. I came by myself. I kind of met these people; I didn't know any of them very well. . . but I was opened to it. Johanna said the experience was "Amazing, thrilling and sexy". She received recognition from her partner and she felt like a "prom princess". Johanna also describes personal power as ". . . not just doing for one's self, but being able to ask other people for help and getting a feeling of belonging".

Sacred Circle Dance continues to support Johanna's development of personal power. It is helping her with left and right integration. She describes what she experiences when she comes to dance:

I am in a place where I can try left/right, forward/backward, complicated, in or out. . . truly without being judged...I don't have to wear a 'Be nice to the cripple placard'. . . I look at my left foot and it won't move. I don't freak out over it because it's 'Fake it till you make it'. It is very healing to be in a place where I can be disabled and be me.

Johanna does not have to hide or apologize for being disabled. She reports feeling more graceful. Dance is becoming a part of her and she will dance the steps at home during the week. The repetition of the steps helps with her memory. There is strength and satisfaction in being coordinated; there is mastery and accomplishment. Johanna describes Sacred Circle dance as being life affirming.

In interviewing Johanna (7/15/10) I noticed connections to the earlier mentioned theories from Maslow, Yalom, Laban and Siegel. She talked about her “peak experience” where she felt proud of her accomplishments. She experienced esteem when her ability was recognized when she partner danced. The importance of belonging and feeling safe are attributes seen in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (as cited in Monte and Sollod, 2003). Yalom (2005) also talks about the importance of human contact. Johann’s comments on belonging to a group where she can be herself reflect these two theories.

The teachings of Laban have enabled me to more deeply communicate self awareness movement to Johanna. Her remark “Fake it till you make it” has been a phrase I have shared with dancers over the years. It allows for more personal interpretation of how the steps are done. While there is a basic framework for learning the steps, Johanna knows that she can augment them so that she feels comfortable moving.

When she looks forward to coming to dance, Johanna is describing the feeling of novelty that Siegel (2010) mentions in his discussion on neuroplasticity. This feeling also encourages her to return and has helped her become more proficient in dancing. She mentioned that her sister noticed an improvement in her coordination since coming to dance.

Johanna has also noticed this and agrees with her sister. I believe that she has gained neuroplasticity as a result of coming to Sacred Circle Dance and that this has contributed to the improvement in her mobility.

### **Gerald**

Gerald is a 70 year old retired math instructor. He has been dancing for a little over a year now. When he originally came to dance, it was as his wife's chauffeur. He had no intention of dancing. It is of note that he was raised in a religious cult that forbade dancing. Dancing made him self conscious and he never felt he could dance. In an interview on 6/21/10 he talked about how he found out that Sacred Circle Dance was something he could do, which he described as "amazing".

What has been important for Gerald is that dance is a new activity that helps to keep his "brain fresh". "I like the challenge and it is something new that I can master. . . That matters to me". Gerald sees personal power as being in control of one's self, not being affected unwillingly to outside forces, being self directed, and experiencing a sense of accomplishment, Sacred Circle Dance has supported his development of personal power. Gerald has noticed that even though he is in the group dancing, he feels that he is also dancing alone and feels in control of his moves, He likes the idea that he has the power to sit out a dance if he wishes. Gerald has appreciated knowing that Friday nights are dedicated to the slower, more meditational dances. He did, however, come on a Saturday night, a night that includes livelier dances. To his surprise, he discovered that he was able to do most of the dances. "The sense of accomplishment of doing—that is powerful. It makes me feel good".

Gerald also talked about the importance of music. As a singer, he sees music as being very soothing. "It takes you out of yourself. . . It is a break from the busyness of life, away

from pragmatic and practical things. . . . Music is a time out in a very real sense". Part of the creation of the therapeutic container is the music. For Gerald this element has added to the enjoyment of the dancing.

In listening to Gerald describe his experience with Sacred Circle Dance and personal power I saw the potential of being a secure attachment for him. In the past he had mentioned the importance of being able to be next to me so that he could better learn the steps. his feelings of accomplishment are also seen in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (as cited i Monte & Sollod, 2003). Like Siegel (2010), he sees the importance of neuroplasticity, which he described as "keeping my brain fresh".

### **Sacred Circle Dance in Other Settings**

#### **In a Recovery Home**

My work on a group level with the women from the recovery home has deepened and enriched my work. Located in Oakland, it is a residential program for women who want to recover from drug and alcohol abuse. A typical residency is for 6 months. At this time I would like to specifically address the special relationship I currently have with the people there. I have been dancing there for eleven months.

At the recovery home, some participants never dance. They just want to be in the space. The music soothes them and they enjoy witnessing Sacred Circle Dance. I have realized that it is important to make the space as inclusive as possible to non-dancers as well as dancers and decided to bring books about sacred dance. This way the women can still feel like they are part of the group experience. The books are a way of encouraging them to stay and to let them know they are welcome. The women can also gain knowledge about the genre of sacred dance. Having the room filled with

women dancing, reading or just “being there” visually gives the strong message of an established therapeutic container.

A high probability of trauma occurs within this population. I have incorporated Rothschild’s (2000) ideas of oases and anchors. The women have the opportunity to partake in the setting up of our sacred space and putting the room back in order. I have encouraged the women to bring special objects to put in the center. To model this, I put in a ring or a necklace. The center is co-created with jewelry, rocks, figurines or photos of loved ones. The memories that the women gain from this co-creation can be used to construct a mental picture of a safe place and a positive experience. To further solidify these ideas, I have started giving a CD of the music as a graduation gift to the women when they transition out of the program.

With a secure therapeutic container in place, I have been able to offer dance as a means of personal empowerment for recovery to these women. Initially I started out with carefully planned lists, but over the months, after getting to know the agency and the women, I have been able to be more organic with my approach. I balance the sessions with new dances that offer an experience of novelty with the old familiar dances that offer accomplishment and security. One of the women recently has told me how good she feels because she has become familiar with the dances.

The dances, *I Shall Be Released*, created by Stefan Freedman in 2006 and *Wash Your Spirit Clean*, by Barbara Driscoll (n.d.) are two favorites because of the positive messages in the lyrics. The first dance gets its title from the Bob Dylan song, *I Shall Be Released* (1967). The chorus says, “I see my light come shining, from the west down to the east, Any day now, any day now, I shall be released”. The second dance uses the title from Walela’s song, *Wash Your Spirit Clean* (1997). The lyrics sung by the Cherokee trio are: “Wash your spirit clean...Be grateful

for the struggle. Be thankful for the lesson . . .” Both songs have powerful words to aid in recovery from addiction.

In *I Shall Be Released* the dancers walk in towards the center and their hands come up to their hearts. They back out still holding their hearts. They sway on the spot; then, they fling their hands upward in a releasing gesture and sway again. In the dance *Wash Your Spirit Clean* the dancers make washing gestures, symbolic of a cleansing as well as reaching and pulling movements. I refer to this dance as a left-footed dance because the majority of dances begin right-footed. In this way the dance itself can be viewed as an oasis. The dancers have to be more conscious of the fact that it does not start with the right foot the way most dances begin. The dance, *Hex* by June Watts is a favorite with the women. This dance is done to the song, *Gula Gula* (Boine, 1989) which encourages vigorous, loud stamping; the women feel empowered after they do the dance.

Somatic resourcing can be seen in three of these dances. Some of the moves match with the lyrics—slow and gentle, encouraging the grace and for that Kepner (1995) describes. Hartley’s (1989) developmental movement patterns are also utilized. The dances also serve to contradict the pulling, collapsing and bowing down that happen when faced with negative experiences, trauma and feelings of powerlessness. The strong rhythm in *Hex* has encouraged solidarity with the women, similar to what Chase (as cited in Lewis, 1984) taught. I have noticed more eye contact among the dancers as they become more familiar with this dance. We put the Zen chime in the center, if we stamp hard enough, our collective energy causes a vibration that makes the chime ring. This has become one of the trademarks of this group.

I make it a point to pay attention to the progression of the flow of energy. In my sessions I have always included clear beginning or “getting here” dances, a middle part, and a winding down part with an ending dance. The participants leave feeling complete at the end of a dance session. For instance, I would not end a session with a vigorous dance like Hex (Watts, 2006). As I have told dancers in the past, “That would be like leaving you to feel like you were flopping about”! Even though this dance ends with soothing motions, the intensity of it warrants at least one dance for cooling down followed ideally with a closing dance.

A counselor who dances regularly with the group gave me music that she liked and wondered about creating new dances. I choreographed a dance, but did not give it a name. I asked the women for suggestions. One woman came up with the name, *Freedom*. The group now has its own special signature dance. This kind of collaboration also serves to increase solidarity within the group.; it further strengthens the therapeutic container.

At the recovery home two of the women mentioned feelings of wanting to cry. Another woman, who opened up to her feelings described strong feelings of empathy from one dance. In another dance she stated, “I felt *something* during that dance”, but afterwards could not bring the feeling back. Judging for the tone of her voice, it sounded like she had a peak experience. With the women, other qualities that are considered after effects if Maslow’s ideas of a peak experience (as cited in Monte & Sollod, 2003) have been witnessed. These include playfulness, creativity, grace, freedom of inhibition, and self confidence. With the strong therapeutic container in place the women get the opportunity to dance their feelings. These kinds of experiences help them to see the world differently and can encourage a life free from drugs and alcohol.

When I first started teaching at the home, I re-worked many dances to have no or minimal hand holding. I discovered from listening to the comments from the women that they



still felt an energetic connection. One of the reasons, I believe, is because we are all doing the same movements together. The livelier dances, like *Hex* foster togetherness and at the same time provide an opportunity to feel an autonomous sense of power. I noticed over time, with regular attendance, that the women have felt more comfortable. I had the opportunity to introduce more physical contact and deepen attachment when one of the women requested doing a dance with more connection. I have slowly added dances with more hand holding, always checking first with the group. The closing dance is now done hands joined, similar to the closing prayer in the 12 step meetings they attend. Since adding more contact, the group has gotten closer. There is a deeper feeling of peace and serenity in the room. Besides seeing this feeling in the eyes of the women, one woman verbalized the feeling of peace along with a feeling of safety.

The dances also have the potential to bring up strong emotions. In one instance we had to stop the dance and, literally, as Rothschild (2000) describes, “hit the brakes” (p.79). We were dancing *Jalaja’s Chakra Dance*. At one point in this dance there is a gesture of touching the heart chakra. According to Siegel (2010) “. . . research suggests that focusing attention on the heart can trigger both physiological reaction and an awareness of intense emotions. . . .”(p.134). This is exactly what happened at one session.

Suzanne was dancing with us for the first time. She had just arrived at the home, having come from prison. The mood at this particular session was playful; a lot of laughter was being generated that day. We had just finished dancing *Hex* and one of the women requested *Jalaja’s Chakra Dance*, a dance created by Jalaja Bonheim, PhD. About halfway through the dance I looked at Suzanne, who was dancing next to me. She began to cry. “This is just so beautiful!”, she exclaimed. She began shaking. I began to notice a

dissociative look on her face. Upon seeing this, I stopped the dance saying, "Let's just hold the energy till the end". Fortunately, the dance was almost over. We gathered in a protective circle holding the energy, making contact. This instinctively felt like the right thing to do. Afterwards, Suzanne told her story. She works as a prostitute and was raped at the motel across the street from the recovery home. She was having a flash back. She was in awe of the fact that what we were doing was such a polar opposite of the rape and its close proximity to the home. As she recalled the experience, her tone of voice had an indication that some sort of resolution had happened. By allowing Suzanne to reflect and tell her story, she was able to get out of hyperarousal. She stayed afterwards, helped put the room back in order and engaged in other conversations. I encouraged her to talk with her counselor and alerted her counselor to what had happened. Suzanne's counselor felt that the experience she had during the dance was a good sign. The following week Suzanne did not dance, but she saw me and said she was better and that she planned on dancing next time. Since this incident she has intermittently joined the group. Because of the creation of a therapeutic container, Suzanne has felt comfortable enough to come back.

I see the look of recovery in the eyes of the women during their stay at the home. Sometimes, while still living there, they acquire jobs and are not able to come to dance. Occasionally I hear positive stories about former members from our dance group. I have had the pleasure of being invited to graduation ceremonies. One of the women has told me that she has requested having Sacred Circle Dance as part of her treatment plan after she graduates. It is exciting to play a part in the process.

### **In an Expressive Arts Setting**

At John F. Kennedy University Center for Holistic Counseling, I co-lead a processed based expressive arts group where other modalities of creativity are used. Dance is not the main focus. Interest in Sacred Circle Dance with this group has been mixed. This type of movement is not always a good fit for groups. The members of this group have not always been opened to movement. Some them were not interested in doing "prescribed movements" and experienced pressure about doing the dances correctly. Initially, this was difficult to hear until I realized that one of the purposes of group process was to stay in the moment. Then I understood that this was causing them to get out of the here and now and look at the future outcome of what they were doing. Realizing this allowed me to step back, look at my own process and see if this served the group. I formed a therapeutic alliance that was more attuned to the group. My growing edge has expanded as as result of my eventual positive receipt of that experience. I may try to offer Sacred Circle Dance in the future when new members join.

### **Individual Work**

Louise is 30 years old. She started therapy in order to process a recent break-up. I have been seeing her for six months. Besides the break-up, she experienced a number of losses that included deaths of people and animals close to her as well as a friend who had been missing over the past year. She has a history of trauma, poor attachment and abandonment issues. Finding her own power was something that she wanted to work on. It was not until four months later that I was certain of a strong therapeutic alliance and I offered Sacred Circle Dance as part of her therapy. My treatment plan intervention was to use movement exploration, specifically Sacred Circle Dance, as a way to experience personal power, and to look at issues around giving, receiving and slowing down. At our twelfth session I presented two dances, an original Wosien dance, *Meditation on a Vertical Axis* and Stefan Freedman's dance, *River of Light*.

Meditation on a Vertical Axis enabled Louise to slow down. I often do this dance at the beginning of my sessions as a “getting here” dance. This is another dance that encourages an elongated spine and the grace and flow that Kepner (1995) talked about. Louise could also feel the energy between her two hands when they were above her head and parallel to one another. It reminded her of an energy dance she had experienced in the Philippines. “I totally felt it when I came back up, whoa! . . . We forget that stuff is there”. I explained to Louise that she could use this movement as a resource for grounding and centering when she feels hyper-aroused. After River of Light, which has giving and receiving gestures, Louise had the following realization: She had difficulty doing the receiving gestures but no problem giving. Twice she commented “*That’s funny!*” Louise believes that self love is the “work that needs to be done”.

At the next session Louise talked about an encounter with a male friend where she was made to feel guilty and have self doubt. To help her find personal power and establish boundaries, we danced Hex (Watts, 2006). The repetition of protective gestures over the heart area and shoveling away motions in the dance were beneficial for her.

I have offered dances in subsequent session when Louise wants to dance. To address her capacity for compassion, a quality in herself that she values, I have offered dances that focus on the heart chakra and I continue to offer dances that aid her in slowing down and being mindful. The dance Wash Your Spirit Clean by Barbara Driscoll has the capacity to slow her down and also honor her in her personal journey around life’s lessons.

It continues to be a joy to work with Louise in this way. I have noticed a change since we met six months ago. Originally when we met she was collapsed and looked smaller. She reported waking up crying and having panic attacks at varying times during the day. Since

dancing, she appears to have lengthened and expanded. She shared with me how she grounded and centered herself using somatic resourcing as well as self talk to ward off a panic attack. She has also reported crying less. Louise eventually expressed the emotion of anger, something that she would not allow herself to express in the past. She has good weeks and bad weeks still. I told her a story I learned about the Tripudium step (Shannon, 1998). This simple dance, consisting of three steps forward and one step back was done by the pilgrims in the Middle Ages. It represents human progress and frailty, i.e. we go forward and sometimes we have set backs. I showed her the moves. My intention was that she would see that she holds the power to keep moving through the challenges that she faces.

### **Conclusion**

The time spent in research and study, of re-discovering academia which eventually led to the study of somatic psychology, has enriched my wisdom and skills in teaching Sacred Circle Dance. All of the people that I have shared the dance with have shown me the importance of making dance accessible, inclusive and safe.

The therapeutic container, created by the location, the decorating of the space, the music, dances, the participants and facilitator are the foundation. Safety keeps this container intact. People gain mastery, accomplishment and social connection. They can overcome obstacles. They reclaim their personal power.

It is in the spirit of Indra's Net that I now think about Sacred Circle Dance, Along the way, the applied theories, dances, music, people, places and things—one reflects the other.

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