

IN MEMORIAM

# Remembering Anna Halprin

*100 Years – A Life of Dance*

**Rick Lepore**



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I first met Anna Halprin after seeing her work *Circle the Earth, Dancing with Life on the Line*, created for people with HIV or AIDS. This was 1989, Marin County, and my partner, Brian, who had just recently received notice that he was HIV positive, was a participant. There were about a thousand of us waiting in the parking lot of the high school auditorium at dusk with a view of Mt. Tamalpais in the background. As bagpipers guided us inside the building, Anna, speaking through a megaphone, told us that what we were about to see was real, that those in the ritual were dancing their real lives.

*Circle the Earth* was a modern-day community ritual; it used dance to help people heal. The dancers included people who had HIV/AIDS and others who did not, representing the community of people affected by the disease. At one point, the dancers who carried the virus ran toward the audience and shouted, "I want to live!" At another moment, they danced, expressing what it was to have HIV in their bodies, looking like they were expelling a demon. They then collapsed into the arms of the other dancers.

Our job as witnesses was to be emotionally present for the dancers. Anna understood the power of witness, the power of attending to someone else. Brian died some years later, but he did heal

from the experience, empowered by his own embodied and creative responses to confront this overwhelming force.

Anna Halprin, who died in her home this year at the age of 100, was a pioneer, credited for transforming the field of dance into its postmodern phase even as she returned it to its early roots. Anna refocused the practice of movement and dance from making stylized forms to something more universal and spontaneous. This left her with the emphasis on exploration itself. What was so captivating about *Circle the Earth* was that rather than watching choreography, we watched each person create their own movements as they expelled those demons moment by moment, *in the moment*, throughout the dance.

As body psychotherapists, we provide witness for our patients with our unconditional presence, helping them deal with experiences that at times feel terrifying. And we provide comfort. We also know it is ultimately only our patients who can discover their own moments of internal sensations that can lead to healing. We provide them with relational containment and a process, as Anna did in *Circle the Earth*, but the impetus eventually must come from within each person to carry them through.

In the late 1930s, Anna studied with movement educator Margaret H'Doubler at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. "She never demonstrated anything," Anna said about H'Doubler. Unlike other dance programs of the time, H'Doubler, who was a master dance educator in her own right, returned to the study of the structure and function of the body. Anna learned about anatomy and body mechanics in part through observing cadavers and applied this knowledge toward a methodology of exploration. She focused on extension, flexion, and rotation of the spine to generate core movements, and differentiated non-stylized movement from stylized movement. Non-stylized movement allowed her to explore tension patterns in the body rather than glide over them. A process of exploration became a way to diffuse these patterns and access authentic emotional expression.

In an intimate interview with Anna, Jamie McHugh, who was core faculty at Tamalpa Institute, focused on her education with H'Doubler. Worth mentioning were the Jewish quotas at universities and colleges at the time, which made the Madison campus her only option and consequently changed the field of dance. Regarding the absence of demonstration by H'Doubler, Anna says, "She always figured out a way that we would find the movement which was very clever, she was a very clever teacher."



***"If I am going to dance, I want to dance about real things in my life."***

Anna was very clear about the importance of the kinesthetic sense to cultivate self-awareness. In her book *Movement Ritual*, about a sequence of movements to practice on a daily basis, she writes, "If you can imagine what it would be like to live without a kinesthetic sense, imagine how exciting and ALIVE you would be if your kinesthetic sense were to be heightened and cultivated leaps and bounds beyond its present consciousness." When we offer simple movement explorations with our patients, Anna would say this, in and of itself, leads to a sense of being *alive* in the moment. We then use our skills as body psychotherapists to help our patients process how their kinesthetic sense changes their internal awareness.



While assisting her at a somatic conference, she taught a class on the kinesthetic sense, and used blindfolds to quickly generate proprioceptive awareness. At first the task was not to touch as we moved through the space. As we made physical contact a new dance unfolded, and at the end she asked us to hold our shapes before removing our blindfolds. When we realized what we had created this connection of our bodies as one body there was a spontaneous and audible expression of awe and joy.

Anna often said, "If I am going to dance, I want to dance about real things in my life." Personal issues and societal concerns became material for her to explore. Later in her life she helped diagnose herself with cancer through her own body awareness, and used the same process to dance and expel her own demons as she used in *Circle the Earth*. This was a turning point in her career where she more directly integrated emotions and the body for healing, a type of dance one does for oneself rather than for others.

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Anna learned that if she wanted to make dances about real issues in people's lives, she first needed to find a way to channel personal material into a creative process. She used a process she called "scoring," which included the three levels of awareness: the kinesthetic, the emotional, and the imaginal, all of which she considered aspects of somatic awareness. Using movement, drawing, and writing, she created a feedback loop where these levels of awareness informed one another. Movement explorations generated emotional themes and images, and could be channeled back into the same process, a form of praxis.

If, as Sparshott says, architecture is counter to dance, why is it not more commonplace to use the art form of dance to address real issues in our lives, since our bodies are our homes? (1981) When Anna brought together 100 people living with HIV and AIDS in the 1980s, people who were infected were shunned. Anna offered a particular kind of dance process so people could live again with hope and dignity. She shed light on an imperative to learn about exploration, discovery, making things up, the nature of the creative process, and taking risks. In her work, you enter into the unknown, and each time it is different. And that is the point. Those courageous people who joined *Circle the Earth* trusted Anna and the creative process, and because of this, tolerated unimaginable fear.

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As body psychotherapists, Winnicott’s phrase “keeping on keeping on,” is relevant here. This inherent curiosity in the child which we try to restore in our adult patients through engaging with the body is lifesaving. In *Circle the Earth* and in all of Anna’s work, the dance is the container. This is why she made sure each of us understood our role as witnesses. Our relationships with our patients provides the container, ultimately allowing them to take over and enter their creative process. Perhaps we are cultivating with our patients what Anna might have called an artistically-inclined observing ego when we work in a psychotherapeutic way with the body.

When I trained at Tamalpa Institute with Anna’s daughter and co-founder, Daria Halprin, I danced my overactive dorsal vagal system through the work Daria developed, a more psychotherapeutic process informed by Fritz Perls (among others) who worked with Anna in the 1950s. During one exercise, I remember feeling like a dusty burlap bag of potatoes. But what also came out was a quick-moving, light-on-its-feet, Puck-like character, smiling and stirring a cauldron of soup, preparing to nourish this entrenched part of me who decided it was better to be quiet and disappear in order to survive. I still remember the excitement when I discovered this part of myself not through words but in an embodied way. In classes with Jamie McHugh, a focus on pure movement explorations allowed this part of me to feel as if I were in flight.

Anna’s work as an artist was radical, and her constant experimentations led her to create *Circle the Earth*. For example, in the 1950s she began to use words, gestures, and tasks in performance, which deepened the emotional content of her work. In the 1960s, she joined her all-white dance company with an all-Black dance company in response to the racial uprisings in the Watts area of Los Angeles, and formed the first interracial dance company where issues around race became raw material for the dancers to explore between themselves. In the 1970s she created *City Dance*, where she first used dance as a form of protest, and staged a performance including nudity, in *Parades and Changes*. And in the 1980s she took on the AIDS crisis.

Anna’s achievements included five honorary doctoral degrees, one from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She was awarded the esteemed Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Dance Festival, up there with the likes of Martha Graham. She was honored by museum exhibitions and performance venues around the world. She was finally credited by the dance establishment for her primary West Coast role in changing dance from modernism postmodernism in the United States and around the world.

Anna spent decades developing her dance work in nature. Having left the East Coast, she was free to explore in this way, and dance in nature was one of her most beloved ways to experience dance. Here she emphasized universal movement to include forces of weight, momentum, and inertia. The same forces that impact a crashing wave can be mirrored in the body. No doubt, when a line of a hundred or so performers in *Circle the Earth*, arm in arm, created warrior-like movements to protect the community from the virus, the force of these movements seen in the bodies of the dancers in part comes from her experiences dancing with these forces found in nature.



After I had witnessed *Circle the Earth*, and after Brian died, Anna invited me to join a group of dancers focusing on dance and nature as healing. It was here that I was able to process some of my grief and loss, using the same approach of universal movement, and moving, drawing, and writing. I remember her reaction as she witnessed my performance; she was very focused when she would witness. Afterwards she recalled it with wonderment as we all sat in the backyard of her home and had dinner. “You drew yourself as a cat! You flung yourself into the air!” she exclaimed, with both compassion and delight. She also couldn’t get over a drawing I made of Brian one afternoon, his face embedded within the bark of a redwood tree.

Anna was asked often why she danced, and after everything she had accomplished, she included, amongst many responses, “For the fun of it!” On a walk during one of her dance workshops in nature, she slowed down as we made our way to the beach to do dance explorations for the day, and said to me, as if coming up with the idea for the first time, “You know, sometimes when I walk down this path, I slow down so I can feel all the little rocks and grass through my feet and how this changes my movement.” What impressed me so much about Anna was the endless amount of curiosity she had to be in her body in a creative way, and to make as much out of this as she possibly could.

Anna Halprin’s work continues to develop worldwide through Tamalpa Institute, under the creative direction of Daria Halprin. The training program focuses on personal and community transformation through dance, somatic movement, and the expressive arts.



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