

# EMBODIED LIVES

*Reflections on the Influence of  
Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement*



*Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve*

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Suprpto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement

**OPEN ACCESS**

***Chapter 18***

***Family***

**Una Nicholson**

Edited by:

Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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## A Balinese Saying

*Ilmu Padi* (a lesson from the rice plant)

*semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk*  
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)



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## 18. FAMILY

### The Field of Blossoming

Una Nicholson (UK)

“From you I receive, to you I give  
Together we share, by this we live”

Anon (cited in Kumar 2002)

Family is both easy and difficult to define. My immediate family consists of me, my partner Sean and our children Ollie and Vernon, who are 5 and 2. But our family is also much bigger and richer and less easily delineated. It has boundaries that change and that are porous. It includes our parents, siblings and their partners and children, the friends we see every day and friends who live far away but who feel close in heart. And there are times when colleagues and clients feel like family too.

Bronislaw Malinowski, the renowned British anthropologist, tells us that human beings, no matter what the cultural setting, form family groups and ties (1913). The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that “the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society”. In recent years, psychiatrist Susan McDaniel has defined family as “any group of people related either biologically, emotionally or legally. That is, the group of people that the patient defines as significant for his or her wellbeing”(2005).

Through Amerta Movement and Prapto’s teaching we discover that family is a dynamic and creative vessel. Prapto talks about the family as a dynamic generator, a source of regeneration and a place to practise the art of everyday living and being. Over time we have

discovered that adopting an ‘attitude of family’ can reveal a field in which we are deeply connected and where things get done easily and collaboratively. Without sacrificing anything, the individual and the whole family can flourish.

Sean (who describes his work with children with autism in chapter 21 of this book) introduced me to Prapto and his work at a workshop in London in 2006. Ollie was born in 2007, and Vernon three years later. We found working with Prapto so nourishing and supportive of our growing as a family and as individuals that we attended and organised as many workshops with Prapto as we could.

I would like to share some of what I have learnt. One of the gifts of Amerta Movement is that Prapto offers an idea or a practice and, through use and reflection, we make it our own. The practices always add something, never diminishing us or taking anything away. They broaden the context, offer a new perspective or way to understand ourselves better. Prapto has shared many, many ideas over the years and these are a small sample of those that took root and supported the blossoming of our family.

The first idea is about receiving, how embodying an attitude of family requires being able to receive oneself and the environment. The second idea is about being able to identify and move from a sense of ‘we’. The third idea is about the importance of the sense of place. Lastly, once established, ‘family sense’ is easily extended to include others in a common field of being a human family.

### **Receiving**

Sean and I both work with the art of listening and receiving. Sean works with children as a developmental specialist and I work as a group facilitator using listening, creativity and co-creation in work settings.

For me, receiving starts with stopping. If I stop ‘doing’, whether that’s thinking or sensing or attending to something, and let myself be quiet, I can begin to receive myself. I might notice a tension in my shoulders or behind my eyes or an emotion; but I settle, feel my feet touching the floor, and I wait. Gradually I find that I have a softer and quieter feeling of empty receptiveness and connection. My focus broadens and I am aware of other sounds such as the movement of trees in the wind outside, the quality of the light or the texture of the carpet. I become aware of what I am already receiving and am in

connection with. I am not alone, I am part of this place and it bears witness to me as I am its witness.

At a workshop in Balcombe, Sussex, in 2011, Prapto encouraged us to practise receiving being witnessed by the trees in the woodland near the hall where we were working. I like to practise this in the woods near Ollie's school. In the quiet of the morning the trees and foliage feel so benevolent as they witness me. There is a rich diversity of plant life each with its own shape and coloured leaf and they all have the space they need to be and to witness. Receiving nature is a beautiful way to practise receiving. It happens so gracefully and one can practise without the more challenging complexities of receiving another person.

In my second pregnancy, family and work life were full and I felt the need to take time and space to let in and receive the new being growing within. It was puzzlingly difficult and private. The new being was there, there was growth and movement and life but how could I really let it in and receive it?

At a gathering of teachers and workshop organisers in France, Prapto invited us to make a solo moving-dancing piece. I created a haven amongst some bushes, away from everyone else, and sang and danced and prayed for receiving this baby. My father had died when I was pregnant with Ollie and, as I moved, the grief resurfaced. There was a sense of an inextricable link between the love and connection I had enjoyed with my father and the arriving of this new person. Both were blessings and miracles. Both arrived from nowhere and would one day be gone. Life was so beautiful and so, so fragile. I was deeply touched by the beauty and wanted to cry and cry. Images of destruction, forest fire and loss consumed me and I held the beauty in one hand and the loss in the other. I wanted to defend and protect the beauty. But, in the first place, there was nothing to do but allow both to be at the same time.

Exploring receiving the baby in movement enabled the process to be amplified, filled out and embodied. More was brought into awareness. The baby became more present to me and dialogues were begun. I also wanted my new baby to be received by his community. My solo moving-dancing finished with me cutting a melon which Sean and Ollie helped to share with the Amerta Movement community. Before we left we gathered everyone's mobile numbers so that we could let them know when labour started and when baby had arrived. The baby's family had already extended to include friends from all over the world.

## The 'I in the We'

The most significant element of my work with Amerta Movement and family has been developing my understanding of the 'I in the we'. As we began our life as a family, I was very much identified with my 'I', my individual needs and wishes and I saw family as a vehicle for fulfilling those. Family was like a car, you put petrol in and it took you somewhere. I put time and energy in and I expected to receive warmth, nourishment and good familial feelings in return. It didn't quite happen like that. There was conflict. Sean and I bickered, competed for support, time off or lie-ins. I would keep a tally in my head of who was working harder, how much time Sean had off, who was doing the most and was due a break. I got angry and resentful if I wasn't getting enough mileage out of my 'car'.

Our culture places great importance on the individual. Since the Enlightenment and Descartes' separation of mind and matter we have a tendency to view the world and its people as objects that can be classified, analysed, compartmentalised and controlled. Darwinism tells us that these people, plants or animal species will compete and the strongest and fittest will thrive and others will not. My view of family was rooted in this culture. I felt I could view relationships objectively and calculate how well they were working for me at any given moment. I would make myself as 'special' and 'important' as possible so others were motivated to do things for me, maximise my return and make sure that 'I' got what 'I' needed.

Prapto's teaching offered an alternative view: we are not alone and nothing is separate. We exist because of other people, because the sky does and trees, grass and the sun do. We can't exist without each other. We are always in relationship. Even an island is only an island because of the water that surrounds it. Seeing something as separate is just choosing to ignore the context and all the relationships and connections it is part of. Gradually and gently practising working in nature and reconnecting, I remembered how we are so much more than our individual selves. I learnt that the 'I' is important but sits within a greater 'we', the 'we' of family, human beings or the natural world. I came to understand through my body that, as Thomas Berry says, "The world is not a collection of objects but a communion of subjects" (2000).

In 2010 in the countryside in Sussex, Prapto asked us to pick a long piece of grass and move with it in a field where the grass was growing. He asked us to watch the way the grass moved in the

wind and to move with the grass. This practice really inspired me. Focusing on the grass and its beauty softens and releases my need to stand out and be special. Without taking anything away it offers another way of being. One where my needs aren't distinct and I am one of many, all of which are blessed. As a family we are deeply connected and interdependent. We affect each other and impact on each other. We are one entity and I give for the simple pleasure of giving and being together and I receive because I am here.

One of my first experiences of understanding the 'I' in the 'we' was in a workshop with Prapto in 2008 when Ollie was about 9 months old. Ollie, Sean and I were working as a group and Prapto observed that Sean and I were taking it in turns to be with Ollie and that our three was often a two with one apart. We worked through the week and gradually found ways to be a 'we' rather than individuals taking turns to be with Ollie. We were helped considerably when we practised with a focus on creating lines with movement and a sense of architecture in space. We created the feeling of an external space that contained the three of us. By the end of the week we found a way to be together that was playful, inclusive and allowed all of us space. This was a step towards being the 'I in the we' and of understanding the support that can come from building a sense of place.

## Developing a Sense of Place

For Malinowski, family was defined by having a clear sense of who was in and who wasn't, by bonds of love and also by identification with a place (1913). In 2007, when Prapto was teaching a workshop at the Toynbee Studios in London, he said to Sean and me, "*When you have a kitchen you can cook*". It was some time before we understood that he was saying that to create something you need a place designated and organised for doing it. The act of creation is really supported by having a clear sense of place and a frame.

My experience of having my own family was shaped and framed by the family I grew up in. My mother was a successful costume designer doing work that involved lots of travel whilst my father was our main carer with a family business based near home. At the beginning of our life as a family, when Sean earned the money and I took care of Ollie and the house, I experienced a state of discontent. Just the act of vacuuming or loading the dishwasher could make me angry. I was quietly resentful of Sean's career and needed my own work and time and space away from family. My sense of home was of being trapped.

Around this time in 2009, we went to Prapto's 10-day movement workshop in the stone circle and sites around Avebury. It was beautiful but I had no idea how to move in this place. The stones and the space were so big and overwhelming and I felt lost. I floundered through the week, wafting around the stones. Then we went to work in the Sanctuary, the site of the first circular wooden henge that predates Avebury. The Sanctuary is on top of a tall hill and has 360° views of the countryside all around including Silbury Hill. As we moved there, I felt the enormous solidity of the ground beneath us. The hill was a huge, ancient and timeless mass of earth below us and the sky was an immense, timeless expanse above. I was there but I felt as thin, delicate and translucent as a damselfly's wing. People had built this wooden henge 5,000 years ago and now they were gone. I was here to dance for a moment in time and I too would be gone and the hill and the sky would remain. It was beautiful, humbling and liberating.

In the same week I was working with that feeling of being lost and finding my place; a place from which I could be present. If I was lost, I would stop, look around and then move until I had found 'my place'. This was a place that felt comfortable, that felt good in relationship to others and what they were doing. It was a practice of choosing and being awake and active in being here.

I brought the practice home and in time it helped me to anchor and wake up in my daily life. I needed a sense of myself in the present in my place so that I could really inhabit myself and the choices I was making. I actively stepped into my choice and my love of mothering. It was joyous, creative work and the most important I had ever done. Gradually the habit of living in the frame of tightness and resentment that I had brought with me from the past eased and I found more ease and pleasure being at home.

Since the beginning of our movement practice in Sussex we have been working with a theme of 'home'. We have made homes by moving and creating installations inside and around trees in the woodland. We've explored making our own homes and our sense of home, leaving our home and also going to visit others' homes.

During Prapto's first Sussex workshop, when I was pregnant with Ollie, Sean began practising building 'home' in the woods, in part as preparation to become a father. Intricate installation structures would emerge with branches balanced as boundaries and for decoration.

This practice continues with each trip to the woods. It is about building something whilst maintaining flexibility, movement and artistry using the materials of the environment. In these structures Sean is looking for balance, with a sense of home that resonates within, and which is also functional and beautiful. His exploration of balance and aesthetics helps him cultivate an internal feeling of space and balance whilst being connected to the environment.

As time goes on the structures have developed in their stability and scale and are no longer restricted to woods. They have become more connected to our family life, both being more functional and involving the children as they help out. These 'Living Homes' have been created on Greek beaches and French campsites to shade us from the sun and rain and have become hide-aways for the boys and their friends. The children love to play in them and also to make their own, complete with blankets for snuggling and places for snacks.

Sean's 'homes' have parts that move and balance and through this he explores how he can fulfil his male roles of father and provider in an artful way, not getting stuck or weighed down by the responsibility. How can he be a father with firm boundaries, who can also be flexible and see all the different perspectives?

## **Extended Family**

On the last day of the 2011 Family Workshop, we invited friends, family and colleagues to come and see and share in what we had been doing. We shared some movement in the hall and then we all went to the woods and moved together amongst the trees. There was silence and then song and play. Children played, a father sang loud and strong, the trees witnessed and a community formed for a timeless moment. There was a sense of wonder, possibility and tears as we came together in one circle.

It seems that with the right kind of invitation we can find a sense of being one family quite easily. I see this in my work as a facilitator all the time. When there is space for embodied listening and receiving, differences dissolve and our common humanity reveals itself. This is family sense. When we are aware of the 'we' and how we are connected and interdependent, our 'I' with its unique offerings and needs can live quietly or noisily within our 'we'.

Sean and I have noticed that often, on leaving a workshop, we behold people outside the workshop in a new way. When ‘family sense’ is embodied we carry it with us so that we feel we’re more able to share a joke with a shop-keeper, more able to smile and connect with a child on the street. Spaces we enter feel more friendly and welcoming.

We went to meet Sean at the airport one evening last week and Vernon and Ollie loved the big spaces of the arrival lounge. It was 7pm and there weren’t a lot of people around and they ran about the space making big elliptical shapes and then coming together on a spot. They wove around the columns and sailed half-way up and then back down the escalator. Their presence was light and playful. They live in family sense, have little self-consciousness but instead an attitude of open connection with the people they meet. They also really occupy the space they’re in. It is contagious, people see them and they smile. Their joyful presence and embodiment of family sense invites people to re-member, that is, to reconnect with being part of an extended human family.

When we experience the world as a “communion of subjects” (Berry 2000), we experience ourselves in the world as part of a living system and not separate from it. We feel ourselves within a web of interconnections. My own experience is that, once in this place, I feel less fear and more joy. It is nourishing, satisfying and light. Awareness is effortless. Rather than feeling onerous or overwhelming it feels full of open possibilities, some, all or none of which could be taken up.

### **Blossoming**

Amerta Movement gives us ways to practise in everyday life so that we can live our lives with greater awareness and more love, creativity and happiness. Applying Amerta Movement to family involves the study of bringing awareness and art to everyday life.

One of the things I have noticed is that I often understand a comment Prapto makes or a practice he suggests long after he has given it. There are some things, such as “*family as a generator*” that I still do not fully understand. I can understand it cognitively but I haven’t yet inhabited it and made it my own. I have shared here the things I have used and experienced and lived. They are the importance of receiving, of finding ways to live from the ‘we’ and to unpeel habits and cultural views that aren’t useful anymore. And

there is also the importance of place and re-membering ourselves. Amerta Movement offers simple ways that we can practise as we go about our daily life. I still struggle with most of these most days. But I do get better with practice. I have learnt to slow down, listen and give others time and space. I have become quieter within and grown in love and enjoyment of the richness of everyday life. Our family ties and the knowledge that we are together for the long haul provide a kitchen where we can cook each other's souls. Prapto talks about the polishing that happens as we rub up against each other. As we live and share together we can rub old habits away and make each other shine.

~ ~ ~

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