

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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Chapter 19

The Infant's Language

Katya Bloom

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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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19. THE INFANT'S LANGUAGE

Katya Bloom (USA/UK)

“I try to receive the language of the baby. How can we touch this source?” (Prapto)

When I take an overview of the various strands of my involvement with movement over the years, I see that a consistent thread has been my interest in the residual effects of our earliest preverbal experiences on later development. As a therapist, a teacher, a writer and researcher, and even as a performer in years past, that thread has woven its way into all that I do.

The practice of movement, and of movement therapy, can automatically tap into the roots of these elemental bodily communications, which originate before language and verbal thought. In this chapter, I want to consider some relationships between the atmosphere and practice of Amerta Movement and its resonance, conscious and unconscious, with that period of earliest development.

There has been a profusion of research in neuroscience in recent years, through which we have come to recognize that preverbal experiences can have lifelong effects on patterns of perception, including our ways of responding to stress and our expectations of, and beliefs about, others. This early patterning forms the inner landscape of our lives, physical, emotional and mental, affecting the way we interact with the outer world.

Supporting people in recognizing these embedded patterns has been part of my work as a movement therapist with various populations and, more indirectly, as a teacher of movement in different settings. And of course, they also come to light in my own movement practice. The wish to recognize and unravel some

of the early patterns and assumptions we don't even know we have, is probably at the root of my enduring attraction to the field of movement, particularly to practices of free movement like Amerta. This unravelling happens, as Prapto often intones, "*slowly, slowly*" and "*layers by layers*".

Conferring with Infants

During the six-month period prior to writing this chapter, I found a way to study these earliest preverbal experiences firsthand, by 'conferring' with infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) of a local hospital one afternoon a week. There, I encountered infants, just hours, days or weeks old, who, through a variety of circumstances, started out in life with vulnerabilities that required close and specialized professional care.

As a volunteer, I was able to hold babies who were in need of soothing; I also observed them, and sang and spoke to them in response to what I sensed and imagined their experience to be. I learned to appreciate their emotional stresses, at times being deeply affected by their pain and fear, as I tried to resonate and share communication with them. They taught me much about my own being, stirring deeply unconscious memories.

Organism/Organization

This preverbal way of speaking and listening, this primary level of shared attention and intuitive responsiveness, seems to strongly echo something of the essence of the Amerta Movement practice. Prapto used the term *organism* to differentiate the realm of sensory-motoric experience, responsive to gravity, from what he calls *organization*, the term he uses to refer to the realm of 'planning', the province of the cognitive mind, well-known to Western cultures. He has explained that his own innate character, shaped by Javanese culture, was embedded in the way of the *organism*, which meant taking his understanding of the world from the materiality of nature, with its flora and fauna. This bodily-centered, instinctive and sensory realm, it seems to me, is dominant in the period of early infancy. It is this 'thread' from Prapto's work that I wish to weave through the material in this chapter.

Choreography in the NICU

Infants in the NICU, encased in their isolettes, whether the tops are open or closed, whether needing assistance with breathing or not, all seem like astronauts in reverse. Having emerged from a dark and weightless universe, they find themselves, often prematurely, in an alien environment with light and shade, shape and color, air, gravity, a cacophony of new sounds, and many other beings; and with their former lifelines abruptly terminated.

They have no names for anything, but their perceptions seem so keen. Though their new world is a complete unknown, research has shown that they will recognize sounds and smells from their previous realm of existence, including parental and sibling voices. Infants have also clearly been shown to recognize their mother's smell.

Like other living organisms they relate and respond to the world through movement. Movement provides the possibility to engage, discover, and express. It stimulates perception and sensation. Watching infants in the NICU, I sensed their movements and sounds were seeking relationship with their world, sometimes desperately – seeking safety, equilibrium, and contact.

Newborn infants' movement is traditionally thought of as a response to random neurological impulses. Though the movements I witnessed may have been in response to raw experience, and not necessarily conscious, they seemed particular, and meaningful. For some babies, movement seemed like a sensory delight. For others it felt like an expression of pain, a plea for help. Like the Amerta practice, I would say, the infants' movement wasn't random; but rather, in response to inner sensations, and also at times, outer stimuli – visual, aural, tactile or motor. Watching the babies move, I sensed the emotional communication embedded in each movement and gesture, and I felt an emotional response.

I notice the exquisite sensitivity of each finger, even each joint of each finger as they slowly and so sensitively touch the air. Also each toe explores independently. The little finger and the pointer on the right extend slowly and deliberately toward the torso. They touch the belly and rest, poised there...

The second toe extends, leading the foot to twist a little at the ankle joint; the toe touches the rolled blanket. There is a registering of this.

Then the third finger moves and encounters a thin wire; there is a pause as if registering this...

I am aware of the many possible articulations of fingers, hand and wrist as the infant makes small, mindful movements. I imagine that when gravity is new, air is a new medium, sensation of skin and body are heightened.

When I observe, I wonder if the infant senses that someone is there, being attentive and receptive. Did the atmosphere really change, or was it my imagination? I saw infants who definitely seemed to respond when I, or a nurse, was near, as if they are tuned to respond to movement... as if their body-minds naturally resonate with other body-minds. This was especially clear when I tried to soothe infants with sounds – even though I couldn't be sure they heard outside sounds when completely enclosed in a covered isolette.

I watch the 3-day-old preemie in his covered isolette. Does he orient toward me? When he cries out, I try to soothe him with sound. He seems to settle, as though he hears and feels my presence.

Often, I asked myself, “Did I really see that?” “Did that really happen?”

On another occasion:

I'm asked to hold a fussy baby. She is hiccupping when I am given her to hold. She has her hands to her ears and seems distressed. As I hold her in the rocking chair, she slowly relaxes, her body literally getting heavier; she reaches out toward me. She squeezes my finger, which I sense as her wish to let me know she recognizes my presence. I am amazed, hardly believing my eyes, when her hands both make mudras of thumbs touching forefingers. As if something has resolved, and she has been put back together emotionally... she has settled. She soon falls asleep, making a deep dreaming (it seems to me) 'mmmm' on each exhale.

I came to realize that there was a mutuality to my engagement with the infants, even without touch. Meeting them with an open heart, I allowed something of my own infant self to be reflected back. I could empathize, and we were both changed by the encounter.

I can say that, like the Amerta practice, the NICU taught me to see things freshly, to slow my mind and step back from what is known or expected. In this setting, as in an Amerta workshop, I could appreciate embodied communication and resonance, and savor the moment-to-moment nuances of change, even as the moments of

fear, pain or terror of the unknown arose and subsided... arose and subsided...

Organism to Organism

I was often guided by the infants into the realm of preverbal silence – dropping into this silent space brought an experience of gravity and spaciousness at the same time.

I feel my three-dimensional bodily form clearly, and my mind is expansive. Settling together in a rocking chair, sensing the rise and fall of my breathing belly against her body, and her rapid breathing against mine, I wonder if this might recapitulate her experience inside her mother's body. We are both weighty organisms, just being together, with no agenda, partaking in an open-hearted, nonverbal, dialogue.

Measuring in the Unknown

Infants seem capable of self-regulation up to a point, using movement, stillness or sleep to control discomfort, disorientation, fear or pain. I was reminded of Prapto's idea and practice of *living measurement*, in order to keep ourselves within a manageable physical, psychological, and emotional range. Keeping ourselves present, by *measuring* our pace, position, direction, form, would seem to combine the attitudes of *organism* and *organization* described earlier.

Here is a description of measurement in action, as this baby begins to discover her body and her new environment:

She moves with gusto inside the covered isolette. Limbs each explore, separately and independently of the others, so many permutations occur, extensions across the body, one side stretching long as an arm reaches up and a leg reaches down, also the same in a cross-lateral fashion. Both arms reach up, a heel reaches up and out into space then twists the torso as it reaches across. Eyes are open and looking. I think she sees me. I show my fingers. She extends a hand toward me. There are lots of yawns in between. She finds her mouth and face with her fingers. Her head rotates, almost seems to lift. Expression in being alive in the world is what I feel. This baby is loving exploring through movement... exploring movement itself. I am following, not only with my eyes but with my whole body; I'm feeling joy and wonder.

Of course every human organism is unique; each has its own threshold for sustaining homeostasis, and its own strategies for self-regulation. Some infants are more easily overwhelmed than others, and especially if they have had a traumatic birth or other trauma, like one who was born with a substance addiction.

She goes through waves of intense terror, loud crying, arching her back, shaking her head, squeezing her eyes shut. As I held her I felt she was having hallucinations, as well as pain... and in between there were lulls of comparative calm, before the next wave. I rocked her and sang her painful song... and settled deeply into being with her. She was able to gradually settle and get some much needed sleep. I still feel the painful ripples of this encounter.

A less traumatized fellow, two days old, is also working through some distress:

As we rock, there are moments of slowly sinking into despair, one moment of crying. It subsides, and his eyes close. As if a memory came and went. Terror and relaxation... I am aware of sensing him through my third eye area, and imagine he's unconsciously remembering his birth. I feel he knows I'm reassuring him with my holding and singing.

The needs of the babies seem to come and go, in between which they are able to settle and relax, weighty three-dimensional human organisms. Observing them one senses the transience of experience; the present moment is all there is, and it is always changing.

Singing in the NICU

Singing softly to infants in the NICU was something that arose naturally, but unexpectedly: an organic response to another organism. This too was reminiscent of the Amerta practice, in which the play of vocal expression can spontaneously arise out of engagement in movement. In the NICU I would usually find myself creating a 4-8 note chant-like phrase, which arose from my experience of the baby's mood, and would be repeated over and over with variations.

At other times, actual songs sprang to mind – I found myself singing *Here Comes the Sun* and *You'll Never Walk Alone*. Sometimes I was moved to take a cue from the baby's own sounds, to pick up the pitch of a cry, and improvise a melody from that. Sometimes slow, plaintive singing returned us to the realm of silent communication.

I noticed the baby was whimpering. I sang to her, a repeating somber phrase. She stopped crying. I thought maybe she slept. I was concentrating on holding her mind with my singing, to help her not feel so alone in her nightmare.

Sometimes we both emitted sighs of settling, of relief as the rocking chair's soothing motion helped both of us relax. As Prapto proffered, "remember that the chair is holding you."

I settle into gratitude for the chair, holding me as I hold the baby.

Time Outs

Over time, I found that I if could take a few minutes of 'time out' between the deeply involving meetings with infants, to sit alone, in a comfortable chair, I could realize the depth of affect I was holding. In the time out, I sensed the full force of the infants' helplessness, the ripples of fear and terror. I started making brief time outs a regular part of my routine. It was then that I fully experienced my inner organism, which called forth something of the infant level of me.

I sit rocking my baby self. Sensing much holding... What an opportunity to examine the rigidities, the self-protections of the infant part of myself, I rock and breathe, "receiving my condition," as Prapto often put it.

Moving in the Studio after being in the NICU

When I moved in the studio after being in the NICU, something of the experience of being with the infants was still tangible. I could sense them with/in my own body. I allowed a deepening into the unknown. Letting go of another layer. Remembering gravity.

I start lying down, as the infant does, at least today I do. The movement takes its own time, there are many stops along the way to digest the sensory, affective, visual interrelationships, to sense the whole of me, and then, reengaging with the part that leads me on into the unknown. Organism led. What a relief. To trust this. "Not too deep," I remember Prapto saying. I keep myself open to the outside world, the light, the floor, the color, the textures... to all that is changing in an ongoing process of being.

I had seen in the NICU that each infant is different from the others, each a unique being. But in the studio, I could more fully sense it.

Also each nurse. I never knew who would come to my body/mind as I moved or lay or sat still – I re-membered and sensed them, not by thinking about them, but by resonating with them, organism to organism. It was a surprising and integrating process, which could open me to new experience, new perceptions and ways of moving. It was a kind of play, in the unknown, following my own curiosity, much like an infant seems to do.

Depth Movement

As a teacher/facilitator and as a movement therapist, I try to develop my capacity to be rooted in my body-self, and from that starting place, to be open to shared experience; that is, the sharing of another's physical, mental and emotional fields, and the co-arising field of our mutual interrelating. This calls forth the same qualities of intuitive attention and 'being with' that were described in my encounters in the NICU. I am interested in supporting people in finding the psychophysical form to tap into their own moving reality, to participate more fully in the process of change and to navigate the unknown with minimal anxiety. I call my work 'Depth Movement'.

Through sharing the development of his practice, Prapto has been an important role model and teacher for me. His ability to engage consciously with others in a process of unconscious-to-unconscious communication, playfully, and without becoming enmeshed, is an invaluable inspiration.

In the following examples, I describe my movement therapy work with two women. With both of them I wondered whether patterns of interaction with me may have reflected expectations and beliefs about others that could be traced, in part, to the interactive qualities of their earliest relationships.

Two Clinical Examples

Molly was a young woman who seemed to have an underdeveloped sense of having her own boundaried body. She liked to sit uncomfortably close to me in the beginning of our work, and to grip me with her eyes. She found it hard to speak or move spontaneously. I imagined she felt like the caretaker to a vulnerable, unpredictable mother/therapist. I felt challenged to maintain a sense of my own three-dimensionality, so both of us could have space for mental as well as physical movement.

A key point of change happened in a session in which Molly picked up the larger of two big balls in the therapy studio and handed me the smaller one. She bounced her ball increasingly forcefully and loudly on the ground, over and over, erupting in tears. I supported this by bouncing my ball, tossing it in the air or strongly stepping on the floor, in a syncopated rhythm to Molly's. I felt that through her action, Molly was standing up for herself, and also finding an outlet for hostile and rivalrous feelings. And as she established her own vertical axis and relationship with gravity, I became a more robust and trustworthy figure in her eyes.

Another young woman, Ann, had an inherently strong vertical axis and connection to gravity. She was the eldest of several siblings, and very self-reliant. But she struggled to know how to make use of therapy. In her movement she liked to explore going up and down, in a rather monotone and symmetrical fashion; her movement had the quality of a self-contained ritual. She had little relationship to the outside world, making it difficult for her to know how to interact with people, including me.

After some time together, as Ann moved in the middle of the space, I started to move on the sidelines. As I 'listened' to her move, I found myself introducing diagonal movement, creating many angles. Sensing new possibilities, Ann's space began to open up, as she was able to appropriate different points of view in her own movement. Gradually, I began to exist for her, no longer as a remote, judgmental and threatening figure, but as someone available for verbal and nonverbal dialogue. She became more playful and imaginative, sometimes spontaneously and sweetly accompanying her movement with songs from her childhood.

Summary

I've come to recognize that our infant needs are never fully overcome – they reside at the core of our beings. However, we can strengthen our capacities to transform them. Like infants, we can practice receiving the sensation of our bodies and experiencing the space and the others, all on what Prapto once called the *carpet of time*, while using our organizational skills, to make *in-formed* decisions that keep us present and safe.

Prapto's work greatly supported my understanding that although our earliest relationships may set certain patterns in motion, we can alter their course through movement practice. We can become more

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‘organic organizers’ / more ‘organized organisms’ – bringing the instinctive and infant qualities together with our more awakened and developed adult choices and plans. In this way, we can develop greater empathy and common ground with others, and more fully recognize ourselves as part of the ‘garden’ of all life.

~ ~ ~

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