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**The Dance of Life**

**Book Review**

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**Embodied Lives: Reflections on the Influence of Suprapto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement**

edited by Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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Two books that recently chanced to come into my hands resonate strongly for me with Constellation Work, although neither even mentions it. One, which I will discuss here, reflects on the practice of Amerta, a form of movement that has been developing in Java (Indonesia) since the 1980s and is now quite wide-spread, if not widely known, in Europe. In the other, *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde, an American polymath, delves into culture and creativity in relationship to commerce – I plan to write about this in the next issue of The Knowing Field. I feel that the insights and experience contained in both these books could contribute substantially to our work.

*Embodied Lives* is a collection of thirty articles written by people from many countries and various disciplines, reflecting on their own experiences of practising Amerta movement and its effect on their lives and work. Amerta, which roughly translates as ‘nectar of life’, was initiated by the Javanese Suprapto Suryodarmo (Prapto) and other Indonesian movement artists. Unlike most other traditional and contemporary forms of movement, nothing is prescribed: all movements arise from attention to the body's impulses, which in their turn are responses to both inner and outer conditions. By tuning into their sensations, perceptions, feelings and memories, practitioners use their bodies to relate to and express what they experience in the world around them – in the broadest, most inclusive sense, ranging from the elements of the physical world to plants, animals and people. Through this process, practitioners excavate, in Prapto’s words “skin by skin, layer by layer, to discover what is the story, the motive, the source”. What emerges may “crystallize” into a performance through which this awareness is transmitted to other members of a work group or to an audience.

Already, I hope, you are picking up a familiar scent! I see Amerta as encouraging the development and refinement of just those skills we need when facilitating constellations. I have to declare an interest here: in the mid-90s, before I'd even heard of Constellation Work, I was practicing this form of movement and once even had the opportunity to move with Prapto, an unforgettable experience! Although changing circumstances led me in other directions, what I learned in those years has stayed with me and continues to inform my healing and constellation work.

One thing that stands out for me is the practice that Amerta shares with Constellation Work of bowing. When I first encountered bowing in this movement work, I resisted it – it felt unnatural, even demeaning – but slowly I came to understand it as an expression of gratitude and acceptance, of being part of something greater than myself. So when I first attended constellation workshops, seeing clients being asked to bow to their families made complete sense and encouraged me to bring other elements of my movement experience into my work with constellations.

Amerta has its roots in Buddhist practice, in the movements of children and of the natural world, in the Javanese meditation practice of letting go or surrender (Sumarah) and in Javanese mysticism. These traditional aspects marry with contemporary movement practices coming from Prapto’s interactions with Western movement practitioners, both through their visits to Java and his to Europe, which have contributed to a rich cultural mix. Amerta is a dynamic practice, expressing the Buddhist principle that the only constant in life is change: “from the Buddha walking, rather than from the Buddha sitting”, as Prapto puts it. Movement is seen as a tool for investigation and discovery, each person developing their own approach through dialogue with their own traditions and sharing experience with colleagues. The work is transmitted not through conventional teacher–student training but by ‘dialoguers’, whom Prapto encourages to be ‘gardeners’, tending to what each individual needs to grow and blossom, as gardeners do with their plants – a concept that I feel could fit well with how we learn to facilitate constellations.

By no means all the contributors to *Embodied Lives* are performers. Several explore the ways in which the work helps them as therapists, while others discuss its application to their work as film-maker, musician and visual artist. Keith Miller, an archaeologist, describes using Amerta to enhance his scientific work at ancient sites such as Avebury[[1]](#endnote-1); and a lawyer who is an administrator in the Royal Courts of Justice in London looks at how his movement practice has deepened his understanding of the law. Two write about how their Amerta practice strengthens their relationships with disturbed children, Katya Bloom on working with sick babies, and Sean Williams with older children on the autistic spectrum. Applying Prapto’s understanding of family as a dynamic system, a source of regeneration and a place to practise “the art of everyday living and being” to her own young family, Una Nicholson discovers “a field in which we are deeply connected and where things get done easily and collaboratively. Without sacrificing anything, the individual and the family can flourish”.

But the richness of the book for me lies not so much in the individual chapters, inspiring though these are, as in the themes that recur, running like bright flavours through a meal. One is the way that the lives of many of the authors have been influenced not only by working with Prapto, but also by their exposure to the very different culture in Java: the experience and the challenge of living with people who have another relationship to time and space and a very refined sense of atmospheres. Christina Stelzer highlights three aspects, which she names waiting, hearing the world and respect. Several authors comment on the contrast between Westerners, who are mostly in such a hurry to get somewhere that they have mentally arrived even before they set out, with the Javanese, who surrender to the moment, opening them to receiving their environment and each other, so that things happen when all that is needed is ready.

Let me tempt you with a few more flavours. One of the strongest, mentioned by several contributors, is how, wordlessly, Prapto senses what each person needs and then creates the appropriate space for them to explore this need. This ability, refined through years of practice, chimes for me with how we aspire to enable rather than direct or instruct when facilitating constellations. Then, permeating many chapters, is the way the Amerta practice is embedded in the environment, expanding individual consciousness and strengthening awareness of the field in which we are all embedded. Inevitably this leads to the development of *presence*: deepening the experience of how we are in a particular environment. Margit Galanter discovered that this is a dynamic process of presencing: rather than something to have or achieve, presence subtly shifts as we respond to changes within and around us. Over years of practice, Amerta has refined her awareness that presencing has a range of qualities. Staying *in relation* is another important facet of the work: to ourselves, to each other, to constants in the landscape. Amerta practice also promotes *allowing*, leading to the recognition that *acceptance* is a process, a happening, something that cannot be ‘done’ but can be prepared for.

One contributor describes Amerta as “amazing yet simple”; another writes “its coherence is astounding, pervasive, and elusive, like mist or the movement of *qi* … to express a simple practice was to open into a mosaic of possibilities”. Even if I haven’t persuaded you to jump on the next plane to Java and seek out Prapto (I must say I’m tempted!), do read this book: it will enrich your life and, I hope, your work with constellations.

1. Avebury is a prehistoric stone circle in Wiltshire, UK [↑](#endnote-ref-1)