

“Singing the Steps”: Remembering Anita Zahn’s Duncan Pedagogy for Children

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Abstract

Dicki Johnson Macy, a student (1960-1975) of Anita Zahn, the legacy holder of Elizabeth Duncan’s pedagogy for children, presents her adaptation of Zahn’s teaching style: “Singing the Steps” , an experiential workshop which is supported by slide, lecture and film demonstration illustrated the merits of Anita’s pedagogical pension for integrating song with dance. The process of integrating the two enhances dance literacy, has neurological implication for attachment and trauma recovery, and assists young children in developing self esteem . Dicki has developed a lyrical curriculum of inclusion (elemental in Duncan tradition) for able and disabled children of all ages.

Keywords: [Anita Zahn; integration; song; attachment; trauma; Rainbowdance]

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Format: [Workshop; Experiential; Film and Slide presentation]

Supplements: [D. Macy’s Handouts of Duncan related writings and workshops]

“When I was small I remember Anita’s question, “How do birds keep from crashing into each other when in flight?” As we fluttered around, limbs transformed to wings by her suggestion and by the music’s flying song, we somehow figured it out. Did she ever actually say that “harmony comes from internal stillness and external awareness”, or did that lesson evolve after numerous trials at group flight? What is important is that we experienced the joy of relationship and harmony which comes from stillness and awareness; we were not simply told about it. It felt better to move together than to crash into each other. Maybe that was the first of Anita’s great lessons for me. Somehow even then, I know that the lesson was connected with another suggestion, “Listen to the music, it will tell you what to do”. We grew to love and respect the music as our dancing partner and as our inspiration. We know that the music was as important as was the dance. Mary Shambaugh, our pianist was to be revered as much as was Anita. Anita showed this to us by continually acknowledging her partner. We learned to respect relationship and to strive, always, for harmony. In swelling and withdrawing like the sea, in feeling the support of the wind’s force as we flew across the room, we acknowledged our connection with a greater life force. And yet, we also knew with Anita, that there was something beautiful and special about our individual differences. I remember how she loved to have us dance the dances of different birds; I remember how fond she was of the sparrow, how soft her eyes became when she spoke of it.

As little girls we watched the big girls with awe...The big girls wore two elastics with their tunics, one around their waists, like ours, and one added, around the time of puberty, under their breasts. We looked forward to growing fuller with enthusiasm, not fear. In Anita’s mystical haven we learned that females had marvelous secrets which we

would grow to know, by participating in life, not by rushing through it....that one had to live each step, that we could not live life as a race whose tempo could be altered by jumping ahead or lingering too long at a time gone by. From time to time Anita would sit us down in a circle around her, like a grandmother with her mystical pictures and ancestral stories. Sharing photographs of Isadora transported us all, and always made us feel a part of some larger, greater, beautifully mysterious world. We delighted in being Duncan dancers, in being female, which were interchangeable beings. We never know how old Anita was, but looked forward to being like her, full of the secrets and miracles acquired in moving through a rich life. Helping us to own this attitude toward aging was another of Anita's gifts to her girls. It gave us a joyful reverence for our elders in a society which honors only the young. She helped us to see that the beauty inherent in women at all life stages, and to honor our connection with them.

I can still hear Anita singing the steps for the dances, like lyrics to a song (singing to Bach): "Step and stop and run, run, run, and turn around..left and right and turn on your left foot.....". Did she know then about the connection between learning and rhythm? I remembered those dances twenty years later, remembering Anita's lyrics. There we were imagining ourselves as individual pipes in a magnificent organ, big girls finally, in long white tunics with two elastics, dancing with our sisters, the "Little Fugue" of Bach: the music which Anita told us was to be played at her funeral. This proclamation made us feel proud and honored, not morbid. We experienced our beauty as we moved in relationship to each other, not by referring to the mirror or by wondering how we looked. We were humbled and honored to know of our part in a greater whole. Anita taught us that real

beauty and truth come from the experience of life not from the superficial display of it....and from mother to daughter the lesson continues to be passed on.”¹



(STUDENTS OF ANITA ZAHN 1938)

This prelude to my workshop was an acceptance speech; I was honored by the IDII as a recipient of the “Anita Zahn Education of the Child” award in 1995. My childhood memories speak clearly of that which, coming from the heart, has been sustained, and, that which becomes deeper and richer with time, has been amplified. My intention in presenting this workshop has been two fold:

- 1) to bring to Duncan attention, one of the heritage’s unsung and devoted heroes: Anita Zahn (who established the American branch of the Elizabeth Duncan School in New York in 1924 and who, for fifty years devoted her life to children and the Duncan legacy) and
- 2) to illustrate my application of her teaching style as I have adapted it for children wounded by neglect, natural disaster, and violence.

¹ Johnson (1995)



(DUNCAN STUDENTS 1990)

In adapting and making applicable to the needs of our time, I have adhered to a basic Duncan (and Classical tradition) teaching: maintaining the core archetype, reflecting upon beauty and truth as values, and in making it contemporary, allowing for accessibility to “every man” not exclusively, to the elite. As I recall the wonder and innocence of my childhood spent in the Duncan school I am reminded of what Charles Nodier speaks of in *In the Ever After*: “The kindest privilege that nature grants the aging man is that of reclaiming the impressions of childhood with extraordinary ease “. He further states that the symbolic goal of elders is to restore the innocence and wonder to a world that has forgotten them.² I think about what our children will remember from their childhoods: what they will recall as elders and later, passé on to their children. Children who are violated and betrayed by hands that should nurture and environments that should shelter rather than trap, are the children I know today. Premature exposure to sex and violence is

² Chinen, Allan B. (1994)

the norm, as our media dictates and sells products. Conflict and competition are the relationship styles that our children mimic and attune to. We have forsaken original community healing and expression of collective joy. Plato speaks, in *The Laws*, of combined song and dance being the highest form of human play: “Dance along with song originates in the leaping and wailing of infants.”

I sense, from my experience that, we have truncated our children’s development by interfering with the natural developmental progression of this wailing and leaping: integrated song and dance. We are raising children who are like little pressure cookers, needing the missing outlets for expression and healthy interaction , they explode ,periodically, in fits of aggression or violence.

Isadora spoke of the integration of song and dance in her reflections on the children of Russia in *The Art of Dance* : “and when song was added to the dancing, it seemed that their entire being was lifted up in exaltation of the complete and joyous rhythms of youth.”³ I was pleased to find this passage, feeling validation for the framework for healing I have developed, which , again, evolved from Anita’s lyric woven pedagogy. I have always, as a teacher of Duncan art and technique, “sung the steps”. I recently asked my mentor and colleague, Jeanne Bresciani, also a student of Anita Zahn: “Was the style of integrating lyrics with dance motifs an Isadora thing or an Anita thing?” Jeanne felt, as did I, that it was an “Anita thing.” I discovered over time that the singing of the dance seemed to make the learning of the movements more accessible to the very young and also to the emotionally and physically handicapped. I deduced that the act of singing minimized the potential

³ Duncan (1927)

threat of failing (to learn dance sequences): Song engaged the child in immersion, bringing them into the present moment experience of being in “the story,” rather than anticipating with anxiety, the unknown, the future. This deduction actually has validity, and lends itself nicely to the creation of safety for children. We must understand that children who do not feel safe can’t indulge in the wonder and innocence that is their birthright. So in a world which does not provide safety, we Duncans can offer it. Winnicott speaks of how important song is to the infant as she evolves as an attached and competent being: “The infant uses singing as a Transitional Object. In mother’s absence, the baby emulate her vocal patterns to hold onto her calm presence”.⁴ Children are listening and searching for the songs of soothing, safety, and joy. Rainbowdance©, my program which integrates rhythmic song and dance, structured with ritual circles for children and their caregivers, enhances the experience of attachment, trust and safety. Children experience collective joy, mirroring beautiful gestures that speak of affiliation and movements initiated from the physical and emotional heart. These ritual circles provide the repetition and safety necessary for children to begin to explore, take risks, and develop healthy relationships. These children today, I believe will recall with wonder and innocence, this time spent together. Rainbowdance, a granddaughter of Isadora’s dances, provides a nest wherein the wonder and innocence can thrive.

When I started working with emotionally disabled children, I soon understood that they would become my teachers; Working with groups of varied needs and abilities, I developed a ritual sequence that proved to be grounding and energizing : “Place your

⁴ Winnicott (1991)

hands upon your heart feeling this life inside you and around you; Open to the Sky filling with light; bring light back to your heart; open your arms and gather your friends to your heart; offer your hands forward in friendship; and turn your palms downward like rain watering the earth.”⁵ Last year I found this parallel in *The Art of Dance*, as Isadora described her initial experience, moving and singing with Russian children:

“Children, place your hands here, as I do, on your breast, feel the life within you; this movement means MAN- and the children answered in chorus ‘Chelovek’; and now raise the arms slowly upwards and outwards towards the heavens, this movement means UNIVERSE; - the children chorused, ‘Vselennay’. Let your hands fall slowly downwards to the EARTH- and the chorus responded ‘Zemlia’. Now stretch your hands toward me in love, this means COMRADE.-chorus ‘Tovarisch’.”⁶

... and from mother to daughter to daughter the lesson continues to be passed on.”⁷

⁵ Johnson (2007)

⁶ Duncan (1927)

⁷ Johnson (1995)

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