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Caught in the Net

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The late Gregory Bateson used to show his students a crab and ask, “How might someone from Mars, who had never seen such a thing before, know whether this was a living creature or an inanimate object?” We who may have seen crabs scuttling about, eating, fighting, and generally doing the same sorts of things that we ourselves do, can recognise the analogy: they behave like us, and we are alive, so they must be as well. But in the absence of behaviour, how could we tell? Pebbles washed by the sea can have parts as rounded and smooth, crystals may be as complexly symmetrical; we may find it very difficult to pin down the evidence of life.

The difference between living things and things that never lived is an essential but often subtle issue that, I believe, is of crucial importance to dancers and their training. This statement may still be too opaque, so I will go further: as dancers and as dance teachers, we constantly treat our bodies, and the bodies of our students, as objects separate from the life that we purport to believe they have. This is especially ironic since dance is the art form in which, more than any other, the movements of life reflect back on the meaning and substance of life.

This may still seem theoretical and of no practical importance, but the tragedy is that this confusion spoils our balance, ruins our joints, makes training a needless struggle, and robs the act of dancing of some of its deepest joy.

Consider the activity that occupies every dancer, from Degas’s ballerinas onward: stretching. What does a dancer stretch? The muscle? We generally think of muscle as a bundle of fibre, maybe like an old jumper that has shrunk in the wash: perhaps if I pull hard enough, it will get long again — and stay that way! Unfortunately, life is often doesn’t work like that. If I rub a stick against a stone for a few minutes every day, eventually the stick will be worn away, because the stone is harder. But if I rub my finger against the same stone for the same few minutes a day, the opposite thing happens — my finger will grow a layer of callous, thicker skin that protects against it from suffering the same fate as the stick. The finger, like the stick, is not so hard as stone; but the life in the finger can outwit the stone’s durability. Strain and stress wear away things that are merely things; things that live grow *in response* to strain and stress. Those of us who are parents of small children may be all too familiar with this outwitting. The child plays a game that annoys us, and we scold the child — who then incorporates the scolding into the game! Life has a way of outwitting everything that lies in its way.

When we stretch a muscle, part of its mechanism makes it resist the stretch, makes it actively work to preserve the limits to which it is accustomed. This is the ‘stretch reflex.’ When we exercise the reflex, we exercise the muscle, and it grows stronger, and correspondingly stronger in its limits as well. Of course, it is only a figure of speech to say that the muscle

is accustomed to certain limits; what *is accustomed* is the living creature as a whole, and the muscle acts both as an agent of this creature and also as an organ of its perception. The muscle reports what it feels and contracts when it is told; what needs stretching is the teller: the mind.

I know that this may seem to go against the experience of many, who will have stretched and so made themselves looser — at least up to a point. I suggest that what is happening is not that the muscle *as a thing* has got longer, but that we, the whole creature, have learned to allow the muscle more of its range. The more consciously we do this, the more we begin to realise that muscles, like so many of the parts of the body that either *do* or *sense*, are only intermittently and incompletely under our conscious control.

Most of the actions of the body are even less conscious: the secretion of hormones, the general internal chemistry of the organism, the muscular actions of heart and bowel, and so on. We cultivate the myth that the so-called 'voluntary muscles' are completely different, that they fall directly under conscious control, but the truth is much more ambiguous. Try moving your gaze smoothly from one side of the room to the other without letting the movement of the eyes be disturbed by the objects and spaces you perceive. Volition comes quickly into conflict with a vast system of habits and reflexes, a huge network that contains all our likes and dislikes, indeed, everything that defines our personality.

This web of interconnected parts is life, whether parts of the body or parts of our habits or parts of our aspirations. As soon as we stretch a single muscle, we are dealing directly with many close neighbours in the web, and indirectly with the whole web. How can we sort out what is important at any given time, how can we actually *do* anything?

The essential step of learning, in any situation, is the teasing out of relationships. It may be like a child learning how some mysterious device works: when I push this, that turns; when I pull this, that rattles. By playfully and patiently *noticing*, over and over, we allow consciousness to understand some part of the web.

Can we apply this to, for instance, stretching our hamstrings? What may be important to notice? We might notice more detail as we move toward the limit of the hamstring (or the hamstring as we know it). Is that limit like running into a brick wall, or more like a velvet curtain? Do we hold our breath? When, exactly? What do we do with the adjacent joints, the lower back and middle back, or the ankle and joints of the foot? Hamstrings have direct input into the hip joint and the knee, but in life we never use these joints without also moving the ankle and the spine, if only to maintain balance. Does lengthening the hamstring change in some way, depending on whether we flex the spine or extend it? On whether we flex the ankle or extend it? These questions are only a small beginning of an exploration of what may be related to the use of hamstrings.

Many styles of dance training and other physical training incorporate some of these strategies. All too often, however, we humans take the playfulness that could promote perception and therefore also learning, and reduce it to dry rituals, fossilised routines of inanimate things. The important thing is to wake up to the evidence of life, around us and in us.