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Grief Moves: An Embodied Artistic Inquiry Into Losing and Finding the Self

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GRIEF MOVES:
AN EMBODIED ARTISTIC INQUIRY INTO LOSING AND FINDING THE SELF

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Master of Arts
in Dance/Movement Therapy & Counseling

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Abstract

The purpose of this embodied artistic inquiry self-study was to investigate the role and felt-experience of grief during the process of professional identity loss. The use of this particular methodology offered the researcher an opportunity to use movement as the means towards both collecting and analyzing data so that the relationship between grief and identity transition could be sensed physically. Data was collected with a research consultant during six sessions of movement improvisations inspired by each of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief. The researcher and research consultant met six times as a result of their decision to include an additional session during which the fifth stage of grief could be more fully analyzed. The movement improvisations were discussed and journaled about, after which the data was analyzed through the creation of a movement sentence containing one short, repeatable movement extracted from each of the five improvisations.

As a result of the research themes of outward-ness, breath, modulation, ambiguity, vocalization, recuperation, faith and trust, a sense of purposelessness, an entire tapestry, and the image of an hourglass were found with regard to how the researcher connected feelings of grief with professional identity loss. The researcher ultimately recognized that the experience of professional identity loss can have even greater, more all-encompassing implications around identity loss as a whole. Through viscerally navigating Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief, the researcher was able to fully and intentionally grieve the loss of certain parts of herself while also discovering other, more hidden parts that she can integrate into her newer identities (professionally, and also personally) which are still developing.

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Chapter One: Introduction

I have been a dancer since I was five years old. My mom enrolled me in a jazz class with a few of my friends, and from that moment on dance played a leading role, if not *the* leading role, in my life. I began ballet at age six, and then added in modern classes a few years after. I performed with a youth dance ensemble throughout junior high and high school, and eventually was accepted into New York University's Tisch School of the Arts as a Dance Performance and Choreography major. I knew I had found my path—my purpose—much before I began this Bachelor of Fine Arts conservatory program, but it was while I was dancing at Tisch that I understood without a shadow of a doubt that I would graduate, audition for a dance company or a Broadway show, and live my life performing onstage. There was no question of this in my mind; it was a truth so engrained in me that never for one second did I entertain the idea of accomplishing anything else professionally. All I wanted and needed to do was dance.

Dancing, and even more specifically—performing, offered me an immeasurable amount of joy. I felt I was able to express myself when I danced, and for the fleeting moments between the start and end of a combination or performance piece, I could let go just a little bit. I could get lost in the music, in the movements of my body, and become just a bit more present. I even have a tattoo on my forearm that says “breathe like you’re dancing,” so that when I feel anxious I can remind myself of the deep sense of presence I felt when I danced while using that memory to ground and slow my breathing in order to re-regulate myself.

As I mentioned, however, those cathartic moments were often quite fleeting. When I wasn't experiencing the ephemerality of letting go while dancing, I was holding on with white knuckles to an image of myself that was neither natural nor healthy. I developed an eating disorder at 12 years old and immediately lost several pounds from the body I was born with, one

just beginning to develop womanly curves and an hourglass shape. For the next ten years—the years I was most deeply invested in my dancing pursuits—I drastically restricted my eating, engaged in bulimic behaviors, and was essentially never fully satisfied with how my body appeared in the mirrors I stared at every single day in dance studios. I was completely fixated on creating a pattern of eating (and more so a pattern of *not* eating) from which I never allowed myself to deviate.

My eating disorder consumed me; not a day went by without the experience of some form of stress around how I could eat a bit less or get away with not eating while in a public setting. Corning and Heibel (2016) wrote, “For the adolescent whose identity and sense of self is weak and ill-formed...maladaptive coping behaviors may overtake the developing self and eclipse normative identity development” (p. 106). My dancer identity hung over me like a tee-shirt on a skeleton; I wore it outwardly and was completely covered in it, but there was very little meat or substance beneath it to offer it any foundation or volume. That is, although my identity as *dancer* was palpable, my identity as Joanna was a bit flimsier. This flimsiness meant that “engagement in eating-disordered behaviors provide[d] short-term relief from intolerable inner experiences...” (Corning & Heibel, 2016). Because I had not fully developed the emotional muscle to withstand many forms of discomfort as Joanna the adolescent—rather than Joanna the dancer—my body/mind recruited disordered eating habits as a means towards (unhealthily) self-soothing.

It will come as no surprise to those who know even the slightest amount about the dance world, however, that although my eating disorder was totally self-destructive it launched me into some of the most successful moments of my dancing days. During one particularly low point in my relationship with my body when I was eating merely a banana for breakfast, a yogurt for

lunch, and a bowl of cereal for dinner, I was suddenly placed in the highest level of ballet at Tisch. When I again shed a few more pounds around my graduation from NYU one of my ballet professors remarked to me that because I had “lost all of my baby fat” I could get any dancing job that I wanted. The latter are just a few out of countless experiences of positive reinforcement I experienced as a result of my efforts to be skinny.

My carefully crafted, extremely slim body is one that became intrinsically interwoven with the identity I had established for myself as a dancer. Without this body I had meticulously molded from one that wanted to grow breasts and thighs, I was not truly a dancer. I had to take a minute after writing the previous sentence to reflect on just how ludicrous and dysfunctional that sentiment sounds, but yes, I do feel confident in maintaining that outside of the brief, euphoric moments I experienced onstage I believed that my identity as a dancer was defined by how tightly I could clench onto my skinniness.

After graduating from NYU I got a job waiting tables at a bar in the East Village of Manhattan. This job appealed to me because it left my mornings and afternoons open so I could take dance classes and attend auditions. Soon after starting this position, however, I recognized what a toll it was taking on me physically and even more so psychologically. My shifts often lasted until four o’ clock in the morning. On the brink of passing out due to the crowdedness of the bar and my typical lack of nourishment, I became desperate for food. At this job my only option was, of course, bar food—very much the opposite of what I allowed myself to eat typically. Nevertheless, the food became like a drug to me. I can honestly still taste the salty sweetness of the pulled pork nachos I devoured, after which I felt immediate shame.

Still, working at this bar offered me a kind of release, and a very different kind than did dancing. It offered me a sense of reckless abandon that allowed me to engage in every kind of

behavior that my perfectionistic, structured self had strayed from for the last ten years. As much guilty satisfaction that this bar provided me with I ultimately, and not at all shockingly, suffered a devastating consequence: I gained weight. With the mere addition of 10 to 15 pounds, an unraveling of sorts occurred. Like grains of sand, the image of myself I had spent the last several years of my life grasping onto began to slip through fingers which had become much too exhausted to hold on any longer. And with the loss of this body came the loss of dance. Because, as a reminder, I was not a dancer if I was not skinny. I felt like my entire life—everything I had constructed it to be—was falling to pieces. Corning and Heibel (2016) emphasized that, “...if all one’s identity eggs lay in one self-worth basket (e.g., body image as the primary source of esteem), when that aspect of the self is threatened, overall self-worth is jeopardized” (p. 110). And with that, I fell into a depression.

I spent the next six years as the aforementioned metaphorical skeleton, but with my metaphorical dancer tee-shirt having been stripped off of me. I felt lost, aimless, weak, and certainly without much sense of identity. I became certified to teach yoga and spent a few years working in that field, which did offer me some rich personal experiences resulting in the development of some literal and figurative muscle. It was not until I graduated from Columbia College Chicago with a master’s degree in Dance/Movement Therapy and Counseling, however, that I felt my identity as Joanna the human being was actually becoming a bit more tangible.

In this current chapter of my life I have largely moved on from the days of ballet class and auditions and was even recently hired at Gateway Foundation Alcohol and Drug Treatment Center as a counselor. My life’s path has shifted in the direction of pursuing therapy, and I can genuinely say that I am happy and grateful to have entered into this new phase. Nevertheless, beginning my journey as a dance/movement therapist and counselor inevitably thrust me back

into an environment where I was not only surrounded by other dancers, but also was invited to actually perform. Memories linked to what felt like another life on another planet came rushing back to me, and with that came the reopening of wounds associated with the person I was back then.

When prompted to write a thesis as a requirement for receiving my actual master's degree, I decided that the intense, remaining impact dance had made on my entire existence was enough for me to want to write about it. I hoped to understand more clearly why dance had become so fully eliminated from my life, and how I could truly accept and dive into my new career as a counselor. While writing the conclusion of my literature review, which had focused completely on the theme of professional identity development, I experienced one of the strongest surges of sadness I have ever felt. I realized in that moment that what I needed to write about was much bigger than simply developing a new professional identity; rather, I was being called to write about grief.

The emotion, curiosity, and stuck-ness I have often felt as I wrestled with self-identification without dance manifests as deep, heart-wrenching, pit-in-my-stomach sadness. I recognized in that moment as I sat with my literature review that I never truly had the opportunity to say goodbye to the Joanna who had spent her entire life in a dance studio and had made it to a professional, well-regarded level in New York City; rather, I simply slammed on the breaks and abandoned my dancing vehicle, and it seemed that the engine was still running somewhere inside of me. To be clear, I know much of why this halt had to occur, but what I did not know is how I could move through a thorough letting go process of what was in order to make spacious room for what is. As a result of this uncertainty, I developed the following

research question: How do I grieve the loss of my dancer-self that once was, in order to integrate what remains of her with my dance/movement therapist-self that is forming right now?

I have always been intrigued by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief, so I decided to make them the foundation of how I would explore this letting go process. As I was planning out how I would navigate these stages I saw myself not only incorporating movement, but actually unearthing my data *from* movement. I had spent so much of my life oppressing and silencing the authentic voice of my body that I was interested in how it would speak to me as I began to sense into my grief.

Through my work with both addiction and domestic violence as an emerging clinician, I have ascertained that my theoretical framework as a dance/movement therapist and counselor is relational, trauma-specific, and strengths-based. Unquestionably, this clinical theoretical framework became that of my research as well. The relationship I had with my research consultant was completely indispensable to my entire grieving process. Knowing I was not alone as I walked this path provided me with the necessary support and accountability to continue forward. Additionally, the trauma-informed components of safety and choice were essential to me as I explored my grief. My consultant held the container for my experience in a way that allowed me to feel my grief without becoming totally overwhelmed and consumed by it, and the improvisation structure of my data collection offered me the freedom to decide how and when I would move my body. Throughout the entirety of my research I remained open to how my grief might transform my career—and my life as a whole—for the better. Rather than giving too much weight to feelings of regret, shame, and fear (although those are sensations I did often experience during this process), I set my focus on remembering how much strength it took for me to even embark on this journey in the first place.

The chapters ahead will dive deeply into that journey and will express to readers how, where, and why my grief moved me to such an impactful degree. The chapter immediately following will include a review of the literature surrounding professional identity development for both counselors and dance/movement therapists. It will illustrate themes and struggles identified within both fields. The chapter will also cover literature on grief as it relates to professional identity loss, as well as the human experience of grief with regard to death and dying.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review will delve into the topic of professional identity development within the fields of counseling and dance/movement therapy, and it will also delve into the topic of grief. It will explore how the literature articulates the process of how professional therapists experience growth, meaning making, and the definitions of who they are in their role with access to both their personal and work-related lives. In short, I am at a loss for how to identify myself, for I feel that I have a few—quite different—selves. I am interested in how others in the fields of counseling have resolved similar identity confusions, as well as how the human experience of grief can, and even must, become an extremely integral part of one's professional identity development.

For the purpose of this literature review I will hone in on how individuals in the fields of both counseling and dance/movement therapy describe either their own or more universally discovered phases of professional identity development as therapists. Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003a) ask, “What are normal developmental markers of counselors and therapists?” (p. 2). Snow (2012) wonders, “How does my experience as a dancer inform my development as an emerging dance/movement therapist? (p. 23). In the body of this text I will document the findings of these research questions and others that are similar.

Counselor Identity Development

Themes. After conducting a study wherein 100 counselor participants completed semi-structured interviews centered around the topic of professional identity development, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) compiled a list of twenty themes utilizing the qualitative data they had collected. These themes—within the categories of primary characteristic themes, process descriptor themes, source of influence themes, and secondary characteristic themes—offer

readers insight into the overarching phases and junctures that counselors move through as they mature in their roles (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Rather than stating and describing each of the twenty themes verbatim in the next four sections, I will aim to illustrate each category of themes more holistically to encompass the larger sense of how counselors develop.

Primary characteristic themes. Skovolt and Ronnestad (1992) identified six themes within this category. Using the qualitative data from their study they found that professional counselors experience individuation as they grow, a process during which their personal and professional selves integrate and become congruent while their theoretical orientation solidifies over time; essentially, counselors are ultimately able to define themselves uniquely in the field because they have acquired enough wisdom (personally and professionally) to choose the lens from which they work (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Within this process is a gradual transition from an “external and rigidity orientation in role” (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992, p. 507) to a much more flexible working dynamic that is not dictated by professors and textbooks but rather by one’s internal therapeutic expertise. This happens in the many years following graduation from a training program. In order for this loosening of counselors’ professional dynamics to occur, however, they must live in a continuous state of self-reflection as they progress (Skovholt & Jennings, 2005; Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Process descriptor themes. With the identification of four themes within this category, Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) went on to note that one’s identity as a counselor is impacted not just by clinical experiences, but also by one’s personal life, culture and societal norms, peers, continuing research, supervisors, one’s own therapy, etc., and that this gathering of influences happens extremely slowly and in a way that is not necessarily linear (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Much of this process occurs post-graduation as one digs into the complexity of life and

work as a professional. And though very many moments are sure to be trying, frustrating, and filled with uncertainty, anxiety has been found to diminish from its acuteness as a brand-new counselor as one grows and completes more and more hours and years in the field (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Further quantitative data is offered by Prosek and Hurt (2014), who conducted a study including both novice and advanced counselor trainees. The researchers found that there is “a statistically significant difference in professional development between novice and advanced counselor trainees. Specifically, advanced counselor trainees demonstrated more progression in the stages of professional development compared with novice counselors” (Prosek & Hurt, 2014, p. 289). It is clear that the inevitable progression of time is an essential component to the concretization of a counselor’s professional identity.

Source of influence themes. Seven themes within this category allude to the truth that all kinds of interpersonal encounters (clients proving to be the most powerful teachers, however) impact the development of counselors even more than theory and research, and it is through one’s personal life experiences—whether distressing or more routine—that many important pieces of professional identity are formed (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Professional elders are crucial players in the development of novice counselors, specifically, as these beginners reach out for external support not having the ability to provide their own internal affirmations yet; elders and mentors serve as important models for newer counselors to imitate (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

Secondary characteristic themes. With the final three themes Skovhold and Ronnestad (1992) learned that as counselors mature, professional boundaries become much easier to construct. That is, counselors find that they no longer feel a deep responsibility for the emotional

and physical safety of their clients when they are not in session (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992). Generally, at this stage of more accumulated wisdom, counselors are driven less from their ego and the desire to fix and cure all client ailments, and more from the realistic perspective of relinquishing much control and grounding themselves in the therapeutic relationship; it is often the counselor's own suffering in life that allows for this shift (Skovholt & Ronnestad, 1992).

It comes in threes.

Three legs. Skovholt and Starkey (2010) created the metaphor of a three-legged stool on which the counseling professional sits. Each leg of this stool represents an essential source of inspiration and nourishment for counselors as they grow in their roles (Skovholt & Starkey, 2010). The first leg mentioned is that of practice (Skovholt & Starkey, 2010). It is in the clinical environment with clients that counselors are challenged with the task of swimming into and amidst the ambiguity that is each individual's unique human experience. Here, academic learning can go only so far; professional counselors learn that there is no one way to facilitate healing and that the complexity of the therapeutic relationship cannot be understood solely in the classroom—it must be felt, navigated, and improvised through each ephemeral clinical moment (Skovholt & Starkey, 2010).

Skovholt and Starkey's (2010) second leg is academic research. This leg offers counselors road maps and guides for best practices with clients; an immersion into and commitment to research provides professionals with evidence-based bolsters with which to support their therapeutic inclinations (Skovholt & Starkey, 2010). The final leg mentioned is the leg of one's personal life. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) also emphasized the criticality of this aspect of counselors' lives, and Skovholt and Starkey (2010) build on this already recognized theme. Personal life experiences revolving around attachment, loss, oppression, and more can

both motivate individuals to pursue the field of counseling and also inform counselors on how to engage with clients who have dealt with similar universally existential struggles (Skovholt & Starkey, 2010). That being said, Skovholt and Starkey (2010) encourage all counselors to seek out their own psychotherapy so that their own emotional material does not interfere with their ability to be therapeutic for others.

Three domains. Similar to idea of legs, Skovholt and Jennings (1999) have identified three domains that have been found, through the qualitative research of semi-structured interviews, to be of crucial support in professional counselors achieving mastery in their work (Skovholt & Jennings, 1999). The first is the cognitive domain. Skovholt and Jennings noted that master counselors are “voracious learners” (p. 6) and continuously prioritize reading, attending workshops, and seeking out a diverse array of rich professional and personal experiences with which to fuel their cognitive inquiries (Skovholt & Jennings, 1999). The second domain described is the emotional domain (Skovholt & Jennings, 1999). Master counselors are “self-aware, reflective, non-defensive, and open to feedback” (p. 7) as well as choosing to attend to their emotional health in both their personal and clinical relationships (Skovholt & Jennings, 1999). The final factor found to contribute to counseling mastery is the relational domain, and this domain highlights counselors’ refined relationship skills and belief that it is the therapeutic alliance which provides clients with the most potent opportunities for change (Skovholt & Jennings, 1999).

The Cycle of Caring. Piggybacking off of the aforementioned relational domain is Skovholt’s (2005) formulation of The Cycle of Caring. Rooted in the ongoing chain of attachments and separations experienced by counselors, this model was created using data Skovholt acquired throughout his career (Skovholt, 2005). Skovholt believes that counselors

cycle through three phases during their journey with each client. Phase 1 is empathic attunement (Skovholt, 2005). The core of this phase is defined by the counselor's ability to enter the world of the client with non-judgment and understanding without allowing this world to merge with one's own (Skovholt, 2005).

Phase 2 is active involvement, during which the counselor and client "share a vision together and work toward that" (Skovholt, 2005, p. 88). Counselors must remain grounded in the goal of relating positively with the client while maintaining a great deal of care for the client's needs and wellbeing. In order to avoid compassion fatigue and boredom, counselors are advised to cultivate an openness to continuous exploration with the client (Skovholt, 2005). Lastly is Phase 3 of felt separation (Skovholt, 2005). Within this phase is the experience of grieving the loss of a client, and as such, a relationship. Counselors are encouraged in Phase 3 to honor this loss in one's own way and perhaps connect with the flow of the cycle with satisfaction that it will of course begin again (Skovholt, 2005).

Struggles. Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003b) listed several stressors novice counselors face during the beginning stages of their professional identity development. Some of these have been alluded to in previous paragraphs, but the following stressors feel useful enough to re-illustrate as many of these I am currently facing myself as a developing clinician. Fear and anxiety are listed first (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 2003b). New counselors often feel self-conscious and worried that they might fall speechless or without the knowledge of what to do next with a client, and some of this anxiety can be experienced as a result of the scrutiny of

professional gatekeepers. There is an intense need felt by these new counselors to attain positive and supportive supervisors and mentors (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 2003b).

Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003b) also found that the boundaries of novice counselors can be either too porous or too rigid, which can cause the counselor stress. Too porous a boundary opens the flood gates for the counselor's personal life to spill into the therapeutic relationship, as well as for the counselor to absorb too much of the client's material into his or her own being. Too rigid a boundary prevents counselors from fully empathically attuning with their clients (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 2003b). The beginner counselor's fragility of practitioner-self can also cause stress because reactions to countertransference and negative feedback, for instance, are magnified (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 2003b). Additionally, the realization that the field of counseling is not a glamorous one can be quite stressful. Novice counselors become aware that their fantasies of healing may not be as black and white—or even possible with every client—as they had imagined while seeking out the work (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 2003b).

Dance/Movement Therapist Identity Development

Movement as metaphor. Much of the literature available depicting the professional identity developments of dance/movement therapists cite the importance of movement as a means towards untangling identity confusions (Snow, 2012; Steinken, 2016; Stokes, 2013). As they embarked on their journeys as professionals and discovered how to integrate all parts of themselves in the process, dance/movement therapists seem to have gone about this in two ways: utilizing movement to illicit themes within their development, or recognizing themes first and

moving them afterwards in order to infuse them with more life (Snow, 2012; Steinken, 2016; Stokes, 2013). The following paragraphs will tease out these different approaches.

Movement yields themes. Through the use of Authentic Movement as a tool to engage in a creative process and a deeper understanding of how her dancer and dance/movement therapist selves could converse, Snow (2012) became aware of seven themes in her professional identity development. Within her own experience of moving and hearing what her witness had observed in her movements, Snow solidified the themes of aesthetics, purpose, intuition/trust, creative identity, opportunity, childlike/innocence, self/self-expression, and relationships (Snow, 2012). During these Authentic Movement sessions Snow gave meaning to her awareness of imagery, proxemics, her body's responses to other objects in her movement path, emotions felt, and other sensations that occurred in her body/mind and allowed these experiences to define who she was as both dancer and dance/movement therapist. It is clear that Snow deeply values the knowledge that lives in her body.

As Stokes (2013) explored the questions of who she was spiritually, as a teacher, and as a dance/movement therapist during her thesis-writing stage, she began by creating movement sequences aligning with each of her roles and allowed her experience of moving—and adding improvisation to—each sequence to further inform her of her specific developmental process. Through her movement experientials Stokes noted that her sense of core connected her to her spirituality, her recruitment of her head-tail connectivity connected her to her teacher-self, and her access to cross-lateral movements offered her the full body integration necessary to inhabit her dance/movement therapist and counselor-self. The body-part awareness yielded from her movements allowed Stokes to interpret her professional identity development process as one that can be summarized with the words receive, commit, and integrate. These rich words offered

Stokes vital information surrounding how she could weave together the many different facets of herself.

Themes yield movement. Conversely, Steinken (2016) discovered themes that were emerging in her roles as a new dance/movement therapist and counselor and as a dance teacher and improvised around them afterwards. Steinken identified the themes of patience and competence, responsibility, self-regulation, and authenticity. As she solidified these themes in her mind Steinken sought out to move with the intention of finding out how they were living in her body. She learned just how real each of these themes were for her, and how differently they manifested in her roles as seasoned dance teacher and novice dance/movement therapist and counselor (Steinken, 2016). With the knowledge revealed that authenticity might be her inroad to feeling more patient, competent, and self-regulated with clients and less fully responsible for their choices and wellbeing 24 hours a day, Steinken ultimately performed an improvised piece with the goal of “allowing all [her] identities in” (p. 49).

It takes time. The literature revolving around counselor identity development certainly expressed that this process is one that does not happen overnight, and the dance/movement therapy and counselor literature whistles the very same tune. Parmacek (2017) wrote of three different cases as a new dance/movement therapy and counseling intern. These cases illustrated her path of initial co-actualization and satisfying clinical growth, to feelings of incompetence and a questioning of her own ethical standards, to a general sense of greater professional integration. Just as Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) wrote that “professional development is a long, slow, erratic process” (p. 511), Parmacek’s (2017) journey captures the ups and downs of the process and that she experienced “moments where [she] questioned whether or not [she] was meant to be in this field. These moments often happened after [she] had a long day, felt ashamed about a

mistake, or was harshly criticized” (p. 99). Parmacek emphasized that the development of her professional identity did not happen quickly, and that she still has several phases to move through as she continues on her path. Likewise, as Stokes (2013) improvised around themes she had concretized in her process, she became very aware of her affinity towards graduality in her movement. Her tendency to move her body in a slow, repetitive, drawn-out manner allowed her space to recognize that she was going about her professional identity development process in the very same gradual way (Stokes, 2013).

Verbal versus physical expression. Similar to how Pistole and Roberts (2002) aimed to distinguish mental health counseling as a field that is unique from all other forms of counseling, advocates for the field of dance/movement therapy and counseling hope for its maintenance as a profession independent from other styles of counseling and psychotherapy. Levy (2005) described dance/movement therapy as separate from traditional psychotherapy because dance/movement therapists maintain that physical expression is the most impactful intervention through which an individual can experience change.

Vulcan (2013) wrote that the “somatic and kinesthetic therapist’s self-awareness enables him/her to connect empathically to the body/movement of the client, to find the balance between spontaneity and control, and to avoid the unconscious responses” (p. 10). Nevertheless, in her research with professional dance/movement therapists, Vulcan found that 45% of participants were interested in pursuing verbal therapy training and only 19% were interested in deepening their body-based therapy training. Additionally, she discovered that 66% of participants processed their clinical sessions through writing while just 3% used movement to process (Vulcan, 2013). Finally, 65% of participants engaged in verbal personal therapy, compared to the

35% of dance/movement therapist and counselor participants who engaged in a body-based personal therapy (Vulcan, 2013).

Vulcan (2013) drew readers' awareness to the fact that many professional dance/movement therapists do not access and utilize the most crucial tool within the work: their bodies. She stressed that if practitioners can begin to externalize "the somatic-semiotic hierarchy" (Vulcan, 2013, p. 12) that may be living inside them and thereby causing them to question the validity of the work, we can more fully and distinctly identify ourselves as counselors who employ not just the mind and words, but also the body and movement.

Grief

Work-related grief. Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) described a concept known as work-related identity, or WRI (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). WRI refers to how individuals define themselves with regard to their roles and responsibilities in their job or profession (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) asserted that one's WRI can hold quite a bit of meaning and importance within one's overall identity, and that when a job loss or transition occurs individuals will often experience a sense of grief. Depending on one's particular relationship with his or her job, an individual might feel a variety of different emotions associated with both the loss of one WRI and the need to potentially develop a brand new one (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Often during this period of time individuals experience identity instability, during which they struggle with fully letting go of their former WRI and the growth of a new WRI becomes inhibited (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). On the other hand, individuals may experience a different phenomenon known as identity development, which

implies that those in a job transition gain the strength and empowerment necessary during said transition to create a more authentic and fulfilling WRI (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010).

Opposing emotions. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014) referenced Higgins’ (1987) concept of self-discrepancy theory with regard to WRI, which asserts that individuals believe themselves to have two actual selves: an ideal self, which contains the beliefs about qualities one would like to ultimately possess, and an ought self, which contains the beliefs about qualities one thinks he or she should ultimately possess. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly also associated two kinds of emotions with these two selves: dejection emotions, like sadness or embarrassment, and agitation emotions, like anger or guilt. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly went on to propose that when individuals experience a WRI loss that increases the distance from their ideal self they will likely feel dejection emotions, and when they experience a WRI loss that increases the distance from their ought self they are more likely to feel agitation emotions.

Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014) also mentioned Higgins’ (2001) promotion focus versus prevention focus concepts with regard to new WRI development, and also associate these with the aforementioned WRI loss emotions. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly proposed that dejection emotions, though often incredibly uncomfortable, can lead to the promotion focus of setting one’s sights on creating a new, more meaningful WRI. In contrast then, Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly proposed that agitation emotions are likely to lead individuals towards a prevention focus, which is based in the fear that another WRI loss is looming so the individual should instead avoid developing another WRI altogether.

Uncomplicated progression versus progression with emotion residue. Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014) validated that individuals who have experienced a WRI loss often are able to cathartically process and heal the emotions related to this loss in order to transition into their

new WRI with stability and satisfaction; this kind of transition is called an uncomplicated progression. Progression with emotion residue, on the other hand, occurs when an individual who has suffered a WRI loss has been unable to regulate and work through his or her grief-related emotions before entering into a new WRI (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Hence, Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly illustrated the grief-specific concept of oscillation, which is a practice that allows grieving individuals to both initiate the development of a new identity while also giving themselves permission to revisit an old one in order to continue processing the loss (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005; Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly asserted that ultimately it is possible for individuals who have grieved the loss of a former WRI to make full meaning of the loss and transition into a new WRI feeling as though they have discovered a more gratified, aware, and authentic version of themselves.

Grief related to death and dying: Five stages. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) wrote specifically about grief and loss as related to actual human death. She describes five concrete stages through which she witnessed dying individuals cycle during her career as a psychiatrist. Kübler-Ross maintained that her findings are not a completely exhaustive summary of how all human beings experience grief from a psychological standpoint, but rather simply express the thoughts, words, emotions, and behaviors of the particular patients that she, herself, spent time with as they approached their deaths. For the purpose of this literature review I will illustrate each of Kübler-Ross’ five stages of grief from the lens of literal death and dying, but I do believe that these stages can be relevant for individuals like myself experiencing grief related to more figurative losses, such as that of one’s identity.

Denial. The first stage of grief Kübler-Ross (1969) observed dying individuals experience is that of denial. Kübler-Ross explained that this stage acts as a very functional—and

even quite healthy—defense mechanism that humans often establish as they near their deaths. Certainly, the reality that a person’s final days are fast approaching is a harsh one with which to come to terms. In order to delay the inevitable unpleasant feelings that accompany the finality and intensity of such a loss, grieving humans have developed the impulse to simply not fully accept and not fully believe that they will soon die (Kübler-Ross, 1969). This can manifest as patients maintaining that they have received the wrong test results, individuals going about their lives as if they never even received such news, and patients even refusing treatment completely (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Inevitably, however, reality does begin to set in, and Kübler-Ross describes four more stages that arise as more time passes.

Anger. Kübler-Ross (1969) described this second stage of grief as one during which individuals have finally begun to accept their fate but cannot fathom why they have been given such a devastating fate in the first place. With the knowledge and understanding that soon their lives will come to an end, Kübler-Ross found that dying patients feel incredible rage and resentment towards their diagnosis. They begin to wonder why they were chosen to have to undergo something so difficult rather than other, healthier individuals (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross also wrote about a dying woman who, when reflecting back on her life and relationships before becoming sick, begins to feel anger about the fact that she had spent most of her days trying to please other people and never really was able to be fully herself. It is clear that Kübler-Ross noted anger in dying individuals directed towards not only their actual prognosis, but also towards elements of their lives that result in regret.

Bargaining. Similar to the denial stage, the bargaining stage of grief acts as an attempt to delay one’s final moments (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross wrote the least about this stage, and that may be because she also writes that dying individuals experience this stage of grief the

most briefly. Kübler-Ross presented the bargaining stage as one final act of hope that death may not come as soon as initially predicted, and that hope manifests as a sort of trade-off initiated by those who are nearing death. Dying individuals often acknowledge that their previously felt anger was perhaps not well-received by God, or whichever higher power they may believe in, so they instead ask for more time on Earth if they commit to practicing more gratitude, kindness, calmness, etc. (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Just as the denial and anger stages came and went, however, the bargaining stage is equally—if not more—fleeting, and eventually gives way to the depression stage of grief.

Depression. Kübler-Ross (1969) stated that the depression stage of grief is one during which dying individuals truly begin to feel the impact of inevitable losses. Of course, these individuals are approaching an overall loss of life as a whole. In addition to that however, dying patients are also grieving the other losses associated with whatever diagnosis they may have received, such as the loss of a particular body part, the loss of the ability to speak or see, the loss of missing a family or career milestone, and more (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross advised clinicians, family members, friends, and others who are offering support to dying individuals experiencing the depression stage of grief to avoid attempting to cheer them up. Rather, Kübler-Ross emphasized that the support system should validate patients' sadness because it will allow these individuals to more fully accept that death is near while giving them the necessary opportunity to truly feel every bit of sadness associated with that loss.

Acceptance. During the final stage of grief dying individuals' previously felt numbness, rage, fear, and sadness is gone (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Kübler-Ross pointed out that the acceptance stage of grief is certainly not a happy stage, but individuals are finally able to surrender their fight against their inevitable fate and simply rest. Kübler-Ross went on to mention that the

acceptance stage in many ways completes the entire cycle of life by offering those who are dying the infant-like position of being completely cared for. Because they have already experienced great suffering associated with the anger and depression stages they are left with just their very pure and raw selves, having already expressed all the emotion that needed to be expressed (Kübler-Ross, 1969). In this state, Kübler-Ross maintained, all that becomes vital is that dying individuals are provided with comfort, compassion, and companionship as they experience their final days.

Conclusion

The literature specific to professional identity development informs me that much research has been done in the name of understanding how counselors navigate the process of identifying themselves professionally. I was able to track down quite a bit of information surrounding phases, themes, and stages that counselors will encounter as they develop, and some information stating similar material for dance/movement therapists. It is clear to me that within both fields this process is continuous and lengthy and can consist of much anxiety and self-doubt. Hence, I was pleased to discover that research has been done with regard to the existence of grief-related emotions as one both develops and transitions through professional roles.

Certainly, Kübler-Ross (1969) spent much time researching and writing about grief as a more all-encompassing human experience, but the fact that writers acknowledged the fact that identity development can include intense emotion and loss very much validated my feelings of grief as I, too, began to develop a new identity. This validation fueled an inner fire which had been ignited by my curiosities related to the loss of one of my identities and the emergence of a new one. As a result, I developed the following research question: How do I grieve the loss of

my dancer-self that once was, in order to integrate what remains of her with my dance/movement therapist-self that is forming right now?

The following chapter will discuss the methods of my research. I will explain my choice to utilize the embodied artistic inquiry self-study methodology as the foundation of and container for my process. I will also illustrate the participant and setting, procedure, data collection, data analysis, and validation strategies that were used in this study.

Chapter Three: Methods

Methodology

I used the methodology of Embodied Artistic Inquiry Self-Study. Hervey (2000) wrote that this particular methodology, “offers a compelling research alternative for dance/movement (and other creative arts) therapists who recognize how valuable artistic ways of knowing are to the theory and practice of their profession” (p. xiii). Furthermore, to both gather and analyze my data I used the qualitative method of dance making. Cruz and Berrol (2012) asserted that because dance/movement therapists are intrinsically movers and endlessly interested in movement, it makes perfect sense that dance would be the medium with which we hope to collect and analyze data. As a clinician and as a researcher I am fascinated by the creative process of allowing thematic material to emerge organically and without force. Movement improvisations afforded me the opportunity to experience exactly that, so that when I did create more structured choreography, my movement had developed from a deeply authentic, raw, and present-moment place.

I chose this methodology because I have spent most of my life trying to avoid listening to what my body is actually saying; by fixating on controlling what I eat and how I look, I have sadly numbed my insides for years. I recognize that the time has come (and that I am more than ready) to open the floodgates of my body so it can share the sensations, memories, emotions, and, of course, grief that I have not yet allowed it to fully express.

Participant and Setting

I took on the roles of both researcher and participant in this embodied artistic inquiry. I identify as a 29 year old white, cisgender female currently living in Chicago, Illinois. I utilized a research consultant, Kris Larsen, as I both collected and analyzed data. Kris was my professor at Columbia College Chicago and is also a licensed dance/movement therapist and counselor with

much experience working with grieving clients. All data collection and data analysis took place at my research consultant's home, which has a designated therapy space with plenty of room for movement.

Procedure

My research consultant and I met six times, during which I improvised my embodiment of one of Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief (one stage per session) as it relates to the loss of my professional dancer self. Before each session I journaled about my experience with the stage I was about to explore. While improvising the first three stages my consultant spoke words and/or phrases from my journal entries that he considered to be especially meaningful to my process. He chose not to speak at all, however, during the final two improvisations. His decision to not speak was not mutually decided upon and was a decision that I asked him to clarify after I finished improvising. He expressed that he wanted my movement to come only from my own body rather than from anything external, even if the external stimuli were words that I, myself, had written previously.

I improvised denial, anger, bargaining, and depression during the first four sessions, and throughout sessions five and six my research consultant and I discovered how I could transition into the final stage of acceptance. We discussed each improvisation after it happened; he offered me his impressions, kinesthetic responses, reflections (both verbal and physical), and also asked me questions about my experience. As my research is about grief, I occasionally shed tears both as I moved and before and after improvisations. He held safe, compassionate space for my emotion and invited me to stay with what I felt rather than back away from it.

My initial data analysis plan was to return home after each session and choreograph a video-recorded movement phrase based on thematic movements from my improvisations. I did

that after my first two sessions, but it wasn't until my consultant invited me to try something out at the end of our third session that I decided to shift my data analysis procedure a bit. Rather than continue to choreograph lengthy phrases at home, I ultimately selected one or two repeatable movements from each of my improvisations and pieced them together, one transitioning into the next. The final movement sentence served as my data analysis. I will elaborate on this in the data collection and data analysis sections of this chapter. Ultimately, I will utilize this movement sentence as material for a final dance piece I will choreograph and perform in front of an audience.

Data Collection

I collected data by improvising movement for 15 minutes during each session with my research consultant. He acted as my witness as I improvised, and during sessions one through three—the grief stages of denial, anger, and bargaining—he spoke words and/or phrases to me from the corresponding journal entry I had written prior to meeting with him. During the following two sessions of the depression and acceptance stages I noticed, while improvising, that my consultant was not speaking any words. As the two of us discussed my movement he explained that he thought the words from my journal entries would bring me up into my thinking brain, and he wanted me to stay connected to my sensing body.

My consultant reflected to me that he occasionally got the impression that I was dancing the stereotypical dance of denial, anger, and bargaining. In other words, he simply had a visceral feeling that I was acting out these stages rather than truly allowing them to move me from the inside out. As such, he made the decision to stay quiet during my depression and acceptance improvisations so I could listen only to myself. It is unclear to me on a concrete level how and/or

why he had this particular impression during our first three sessions, but I acknowledge and trust that he followed his intuition as a consultant and expert in working with grief.

I did not use any music as I improvised. I set a timer on my cell phone for 15 minutes, entered the open movement space of my research consultant's therapy room, and then improvised my experience of each of the five stages of grief, focusing on one stage per session. After the timer marked the end of my improvisation the two of us reflected upon what had just occurred in my movement. I made notes in my journal of anything particularly intriguing to me that had surfaced in the process. I utilized Laban Movement Analysis language (Moore, 2014) while journaling to more clearly illustrate my movement experiences. I will describe Laban Movement Analysis in more detail in the Validation Strategies section of this chapter.

This data collection procedure which had unfolded the exact same way during sessions one through four shifted a bit during sessions five and six. Upon our fifth session I reported to my research consultant that I did not feel I had yet arrived at the acceptance stage of my grief, so he suggested that we split my improvisation into two seven-minute sections, with the first section being: what my body already knows about acceptance (for example, could I remember a time I *had* accepted something in my life, and if so, what did that feel like?), and the second section being: how do I *want* my embodied experience of acceptance of the loss of my professional dancer self to ultimately feel? My consultant's invitation to improvise my relationship with acceptance in this way allowed me to remain authentic to where I was at that time in my grieving process, rather than needing to force my way into that final stage.

Data Analysis

My data analysis procedure shifted during the course of my data collection as well. As previously mentioned I began this process by returning home to my apartment after my first two

data collection sessions and choreographing and video-recording two- to three-minute movement phrases based on thematic movement from my improvisations. Although something felt slightly off to me about this process—and I was not able to identify what that was until I implemented an alternative—I assumed I would continue on in that way.

At the end of my third session, the bargaining stage, my consultant asked me if I would like to physically move through each of the three stages we had explored thus far (denial, anger, and bargaining), capturing the essence of each stage in movement as I went. What developed from there was my creation of three short, repeatable movements—one per stage—that could be strung together, one after the other. As I moved through this brief movement sentence I understood more than ever before what my experience of each of those three stages was. It was as if a light had been turned on and I had previously been dancing in the dark.

I believe that the conciseness of extracting one movement from each improvisation allowed me to truly clarify my journey through each of the first three stages of grief. Compared to the lengthiness and more all-encompassing feel of my choreographed phrases, this new data analysis process alleviated my sense of overwhelm and offered me the opportunity to really hone in on something much more concrete. I believe that my initial data analysis procedure was almost metaphoric for my relationship to the loss of my professional dancer self before I began my research; I had been swimming in sadness, unable to truly unearth and dust off each individual piece to this grief puzzle. My long, choreographed movement phrases echoed that experience with my difficulty narrowing each stage down to something manageable, tangible, and hold-able enough for me to ultimately loosen my grip in order to let go. Transitioning my process so that I could move through my grief, literally one movement at a time, allowed me to actually grasp the heart of each stage in a more simplified way.

This modified data analysis procedure continued through my sixth session. After my improvisation of the depression stage I again extracted a meaningful movement and added it to the previous three. Because my experience of improvising the acceptance stage was somewhat different than the others, and because I did not yet feel that I had arrived at a state of acceptance around my grief, my consultant invited me to return the following week and we would determine how to uncover my final movement of acceptance. Ultimately, I chose to move through my incomplete movement sentence (that of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression), and at the end of my fourth movement allow my body to decide how it wanted to transition into acceptance. This in-the-moment embodied decision became my final movement, and the conclusion of my data analysis.

Validation Strategies

I utilized a research consultant (serving as an external auditor) who witnessed my movement improvisations and dialogued with me about each of them, offering me his impressions, kinesthetic responses, and reflections. Creswell and Poth (2018) wrote, “In assessing the product, the auditor examines whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data” (p. 262). My consultant validated my thoughts and feelings towards my data when he believed them to be authentic and clear, yet he also challenged these thoughts and feelings when he sensed they were becoming too manufactured or influenced by outside voices. I met with my consultant six times to receive his input.

I also employed the validation strategy of “generating a thick, rich description” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263) of my movement experiences. Because I collected and analyzed my data using physical movement, readers must be supported in visualizing these movements as distinctly as possible in order to better understand how and why I arrived at the results of my

research. I hoped to provide readers with the opportunity to imagine that they were actually present for my data collection and data analysis sessions.

Laban Movement Analysis. As I aimed to imbue my movement descriptions with even greater richness, I employed the use of Laban Movement Analysis language (Moore, 2014). Laban Movement Analysis is a taxonomy created by Rudolf Laban that offers four distinct categories to describe human movement: Body, Effort, Shape, and Space (Moore, 2014). The Body category was largely cultivated by Irmgard Bartenieff, who noted that humans developmentally progress through six Patterns of Total Body Connectivity: Breath, Core-Distal, Head-Tail, Upper-Lower, Body-Half, and Cross-Lateral (Hackney, 2002). The Effort category aims to describe how humans move energetically through the lens of four motion factors (Space, Weight, Time, and Flow), while the Space category offers language for dimensional, planar, and diagonal movements, among other spatial descriptors (Moore, 2014). Finally, the Shape category aims to illustrate the actual shaping of one's body as it moves through space (Moore, 2014). In this written thesis I have included vivid details of my experience collecting and analyzing my movement-based data to provide readers with as much clarity and information as possible, utilizing Laban Movement Analysis terms mostly from the Effort and Space category, but also incorporating a few Body and Shape descriptors as well.

The following chapter will discuss the results of this embodied artistic inquiry self-study. I will describe in detail my experience of improvising each of Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief. I will also explain how I utilized thematic movement from each of these improvisations to create my data analysis movement sentence.

Chapter Four: Results

This chapter will describe in detail what emerged for me as I improvised my relationship with each of Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief. I entered into each data collection session with my research consultant, Kris, hoping that my body would provide me with the healing experience of fully moving through and sensing into denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The research question that guided this process is as follows: How do I grieve the loss of my dancer-self that once was, in order to integrate what remains of her with my dance/movement therapist-self that is forming right now? In this section I will illustrate how my improvisations unfolded, my own responses as well as my consultant's responses to my movement, and the ways in which I utilized this movement to create my data analysis movement sentence.

Denial

I knelt on the floor with my hips seated on my heels and my spine lengthening up as my cell phone's timer began to count down from 15 minutes. I silently repeated the word *denial* over and over in my head, believing that its repetition would somehow alert my body that it was time to improvise the dance of denial. When nothing happened, my body not knowing what to do, I decided to do what I have done since I started dancing: a ballet port-de-bras, which translates in English from French to "carriage of the arms." I floated my rounded arms in front of my chest, and then opened them up to the sides of my body in the horizontal dimension, finally lifting my palms towards the ceiling with decreasing pressure and allowing my chest and chin to rise with my arms. I was aware in that moment that my ballet dancing was a façade; my body was

executing movements it knew rather than actually allowing itself to be moved by my experience of denial.

Kübler-Ross (1969) described a woman diagnosed with terminal cancer who, as her death became nearer and nearer, caked on more and more makeup each day. Kübler-Ross writes, “During the last few days she avoided looking in the mirror, but continued to apply the masquerade in an attempt to cover up her increasing depression and her rapidly deteriorating looks” (p. 39). My port-de-bras was my masquerade, and thus, it was also my denial. Although I harshly judged myself after the 15 minutes concluded because I believed I did not ever exit the structuring and planning of my head to actually sense my body’s experience of denial, my consultant validated for me that I *had*, in fact, found my denial. Because my story is not only about a body that danced, but also, and perhaps more so about a body that I oppressed, starved, and criticized, it is no surprise that a port-de-bras immediately emerged. That port-de-bras allowed me to deny the suffering of my insides and keep me very external. That port-de-bras’ main objective was to continue the performance—to continue the denial.

Ultimately my port-de-bras modulated into a pushing of my arms; with wrists flexed, palms flat, and fingers spreading wide, my elbows became straight and I pushed at the air around me with increasing pressure and directness. As I pushed I averted my gaze away from the space I pushed against, as if not wanting to actually see what was there. This aversion to whatever my hands seemed to be touching became so intense that my entire torso twisted away from it. My consultant described these moments of twisting and wringing as appearing “agonizing” (K. Larsen, personal communication, June 22, 2018). Though my movements were becoming less pretty and perfectly placed than my port-de-bras, they still illuminated the denial of my grief—I

could not bear to look at it, just as the woman Kübler-Ross (1969) wrote about could not look at herself in the mirror. Perhaps what I was pushing away from myself was, in fact, myself.

Up until this point in my improvisation my consultant had been offering me words and phrases from the journal entry I had written about denial, but none had elicited much of a visceral response from me until the following two words: skinny and fat. As he said the word “skinny” (K. Larsen, personal communication, June 22, 2018) I pushed my hands into my stomach and forcefully hollowed it into a concave position; I remember not being able to breathe as I did so because my breath was stuck in the depths of an exhale. When he said the word “fat” (K. Larsen, personal communication, June 22, 2018) I inhaled and puffed up my cheeks like a chipmunk carrying its dinner and I actually intentionally held my breath. As Kris again said the word “skinny” (K. Larsen, personal communication, June 22, 2018) the dinner I had been holding in my cheeks vomited out of me as a desperate exhale and again I hollowed my stomach with my hands. Kris began verbally alternating these two words, pulling me into a cyclical, seemingly unending repetition of sucking in air and puffing up my cheeks and then spewing it back out to hollow my belly. I remember my exhales becoming so strenuous that spit started flying out of my mouth, followed by tears that streamed down my face.

It was in this moment that I truly recognized how many more layers to my grief actually exist. I was not merely grieving the loss of a career in professional dance, I was grieving the loss of a particular relationship with my body that I had known for most of my life. Though undeniably unhealthy, my eating disorder kept me in control of something, and that offered more clarity to my life. The loss of that control and clarity means I am giving way to some chaos and some question marks. So, of course I decided to perform a pretty, perfectly placed port-de-bras. I wanted to deny all that would come from this loss of the control that I knew so well.

My improvisation ended with me laying face up on the floor, with arms and legs spreading out wide. Much too exposed, my arms reached up and away from my face in order to push at the air around me, again with increasing pressure and directness. It wasn't long before I became physically exhausted and my arms finally dropped to the ground with passive weight, feeling the fatigue of too much denial.

My data analysis movement sentence captures a woman in extreme discomfort during the denial stage of her grief. In this movement that I chose to represent the essence of my denial, I begin kneeling, exactly as I did when my improvisation actually started. My hands push down, out, and away from me with palms facing away from each other, tracing my inner thighs until my forearms begin to press together creating a tight shape that appears almost contorted. My hands then begin to retrace my inner thighs with lightness, moving closer to my stomach that becomes concave as my fingertips graze it. My forearms begin to unfold, again with elbows squeezing into each other. As I extend my elbows and tightly bound arms my chin lifts and chest struggles to open, pushing against the straight jacket of my pinned forearms. My palms delicately open and face up towards the ceiling, offering a presentation of perfectly placed arms which mask the discomfort and distortion they endured to create such a pretty picture.

Anger

While I had a difficult time connecting with my experience of denial as I met with my research consultant for our first session, I was already deeply immersed in feelings of anger as we began our second meeting. The anger I felt was not, however, directly correlated with my grieving process, or so I initially thought. What I was angry about was simply having to write this thesis. I did not want to dedicate the time, energy, and focus to actually doing it. I wanted instead to begin my work as a professional clinician and end the chapter of my life devoted to

graduate school. I felt totally finished with academia and resented the fact that although I had completed all of my dance/movement therapy and counseling coursework, I would not actually receive my degree or be eligible to receive a counseling license until I had written and turned in a thesis.

My consultant encouraged me to use this particular manifestation of anger to fuel my 15-minute improvisation for the day. Doing so was not a challenge as the emotion was right at the surface of my skin, mouth, and eyes, and I could sense that the emotion wanted to be expressed. The floor became my physical outlet. The pushing my body had executed during my denial improvisation gained even more force and strength as I pushed again, but this time against the wooden floor. For some reason, I never wanted my full body to be in contact with it; I continuously pushed certain body parts into its resistance so that other body parts could hover just above it, as if escaping hot lava. Much of the beginning of my improvisation consisted of holding myself up in a plank position. My hands and feet pushed into the floor with the increasing pressure of my muscles; they wanted to exert themselves to avoid allowing my torso, legs, and head from sinking—any kind of recuperation or yielding was not an option for me.

During a later section of my improvisation I stood on my knees, pressing them into the ground as my shins and feet floated above it. I aimed to balance in that completely unstable position, teetering on the edge of plummeting forwards and falling backwards. Much like in my denial improvisation my hands were drawn to my stomach, pushing into it and causing it to hollow, yet this time much more vigorously and quickly as if burying a secret in the dark depths of my gut. Finally, unable to continue hovering so awkwardly and unnaturally above the earth, my shins clunked down and my hips collapsed onto them. At this moment I inhabited a posture that no longer pushed any body part away from the floor, and with a slightly slumped spine my

mouth suddenly stretched open to let out a silent scream. Immediately afterwards my fingertips found my jawline to offer it a massage.

These previous three moments—the jaw massage, scream, and stomach burial—became concretely linked together in my creation of the anger portion of my data analysis movement sentence. My body had left off with my forearms extended in front of me and my elbows glued together just above my chest, with my palms open and facing up towards the ceiling during my denial movement. From there, I guide the pointer and middle fingers of both hands to my jawline where they begin a circular massaging rhythm—undoubtedly an attempt to soothe the mouth that not only unleashes but also clenches tightly to swallow my screams.

As my jaw receives its massage in my data analysis movement sentence, I begin to stand up. Once I arrive on my feet with my spine lengthening up in the vertical dimension, I again silently scream. My hands cup my face beneath my chin and trace an arced pathway towards the floor in front of me, as if following the imaginary stream of energy initiated by activated vocal chords yearning to be heard. As my hands move and my silent scream intensifies, my spine rounds forward and my knees bend, bringing my body back to the seated position in which it began. Finally, my hands press into my low belly, first simply to squish it into a flatter position, and then ultimately to continuously press my hands downward as my use of time accelerates. During this moment I again imagine a burial of sorts—I use the increasing pressure of my arm and hand muscles to push something further and further away from the surface of my body.

Bargaining

Kübler-Ross (1969) described the bargaining stage of grief as one during which dying individuals wish to stay alive for just a little bit longer. Perhaps, they think, if they can be on their best behavior despite their inevitable death that is quickly approaching, they can enjoy the

beauty and happiness of life for even just a few more days. This particular sentiment illustrates my body's experience of bargaining perfectly—I was aware on the day that I explored the bargaining stage of grief that my own death, so to speak, would soon occur. I would eventually reach the point in my grieving process wherein a fuller expression of letting go would become my only option, and I understood that this kind of letting go would mark the death of a very specific way I had been living my life for so long.

It is no surprise that those who are dying—whether in the literal or more figurative sense—hope to hold on for a bit longer. Loss of any kind brings with it transformation of the body, mind, soul, or perhaps even all three; and transformation often implies a sort of breaking down in order for a complete rebuilding to occur. I believe that it is always one's hope that what is rebuilt can yield a new beginning full of invigoration and inspiration, but it is during the breakdown that some of the most painful, tumultuous, and ugly moments begin to unfold.

So, in order to postpone my own experience of pain, tumult, and ugliness, I indulged in only the movements that felt good in my body as I executed my 15-minute bargaining improvisation. I wanted so badly to feel only physical satisfaction and ease that I often paused completely in moments of pure bodily deliciousness. My muscles and bones hung with passive weight, suspended from invisible strings attached to the ceiling, totally held and cradled by the space around me; it was as if I did not have to do any work at all to shift myself in and out of different shapes. During one such moment I sat cross-legged on the floor with my arms stretched towards either side of my body, reaching out in the horizontal dimension. With my elbows still placed in line with my shoulders, my forearms suddenly dropped as my wrists pointed down towards the ground. My upper arms remained parallel to the earth and my chin sank down

towards my chest. In that moment I was a puppet in the most luxurious of ways—my entire body went limp except for my elbows that were supported and lifted by the room’s imaginary strings.

My bargaining improvisation was pure recuperation for me. Whereas my body’s explorations of the denial and anger stages of grief included much physical—and mental and emotional—exertion, my body’s sense of bargaining offered me the ability to soften into the space around me and simply enjoy myself. When I wasn’t paused in a state of complete comfort and relaxation, I was often inhabiting various forms of the body-half pattern of total body connectivity (Hackney, 2002). During one moment I lay on the floor with my feet planted and my knees pointing up towards the sky. From there both of my knees dropped towards one side of the room as my upper body responded to the motion by gently curving in the same direction. My knees then dropped to the other side of the room and my upper body responded in the same way. This homologous windshield-wiper pattern continued on until it developed into a full body swaying rhythm. Whereas I looked forward to the dinging of my alarm signaling 15 minutes during my denial and anger improvisations, I wanted to stay in this one for much longer.

The piece of my improvisation that was most intriguing to me—and ultimately became the bargaining section of my data analysis movement sentence—was one during which I stood with my hands interlaced behind my head and with my elbows pointed directly out to either side of me. I then bent my knees a bit and leaned my head back into the support of my hands, giving way to an arch of my thoracic and cervical spine and a lift of my sternum. With this posture as my home base I began to lift the ball-mound of my right foot. As I shifted my weight into my right heel I opened my right elbow more towards the side of the room and allowed my right shoulder, hip, and knee to follow suit. I then pulled my joints back towards the midline of my body and executed the same motion on my entire left side.

This sequence continued several times until it, again, became a sort of swaying rhythm that provided me with the sensation of being cradled by a hammock that was swinging peacefully and slowly back and forth. While creating my data analysis movement sentence, this body-half experience was, as I mentioned, the movement that to me felt the most representative of my bargaining. As my hands completed their anger stage stomach burial I stood up for the second time in this movement sentence and began my swaying, hammock phrase.

Depression

Similar to my experience with anger, I met with my research consultant on the day of our depression exploration feeling exactly that: depressed. The night before I had a very strange experience that I could not rationally explain then, and still frankly cannot rationally explain now. I awoke in the middle of the night hearing my iPhone playing a song. I had not been listening to music before going to sleep, nor had my Spotify music app even been open on my phone's screen that night. Surprised and confused, I looked at the title of the song playing and could not believe my eyes. The song "Madonna" (CocoRosie, 2004, track 10) is one that I listened to often during my last year living in New York City. Though beautiful, it has an eerie, almost dark feel to it that matched the depression I was deeply immersed in as I transitioned away from professional dance in New York City to a new life of uncertainty in Chicago. I had not listened to, seen, or even searched for that song since that period about seven years ago. Seeing that song appear on my phone and hearing its words was like witnessing a ghost from my past; there was absolutely no logical reason it should have so suddenly started to play at three o'clock in the morning.

Shaken by that experience and abruptly thrown back into the depression I had felt the first time I considered leaving my dancer-self behind, it was not a challenge for me to access the

depression stage of grief during my improvisation that day. Two themes revealed themselves as I moved: my hands pressing together in front of my chest in a prayer position, and my thumb and pointer fingertips pressing together as if holding an imaginary thread between them.

I remained at a low level for the duration of this improvisation, and for much of it I either kneeled or lay on my stomach or back. I almost never opened my eyes and ultimately fell into a trance-like state as I moved; when the 15-minutes were complete and my timer jolted me from my remote state, I opened my eyes expecting to be in one part of the room and was shocked to find I was in a totally different place—that is how deeply submerged I was in my exploration. There was a sense of timelessness that both my consultant and I experienced. I continuously moved at an extremely slow pace that never once shifted and that my consultant described as “hypnotic” (K. Larsen, personal communication, July 20, 2018). I also moved with lightness, which is not at all my preference. I tend to access strong weight in almost everything I do, and I also prefer accelerating time; moving with timelessness and lightness is incredibly unusual for me.

My hands and fingers were very active during this improvisation. My research consultant remarked that he was drawn to a moment towards the beginning of my improvisation during which I simply traced my neck with my fingertips with lightness and indirectness. After I finished moving he reflected to me that from that moment on he felt that I was allowing the particular stage of grief to move *me*, rather than vice-versa. He witnessed me truly allowing my brain to quiet and my body to speak. And speak, it did—as I moved I sensed the words “faith” and “trust” emerge from somewhere within me. In general, this improvisation took on quite a spiritual feel. I do not identify as religious and rarely even identify as spiritual, but those two words that my body/mind offered me, plus my hands being perpetually pulled into a prayer

position—not to mention the fact that I had just had an unexplainable experience with a song titled “Madonna” (CocoRosie, 2004, track 10)—heightened my awareness around the fact that spirituality is mostly absent from my life. Moreover, when my consultant and I verbally processed my improvisation afterwards he stated that he felt like he was “watching a prayer” (K. Larsen, personal communication, July 20, 2018).

The depression phase of my data analysis movement sentence weaves itself in as I complete my body-half bargaining sway. I then draw my hands together in a prayer position in front of my chest, and with my palms touching I drop my chin and close my eyes. I maintain that gesture while standing completely motionless for several seconds. Finally, my hands detach as I press the index finger and thumb of both of my hands together with directness and gently drift them away from each other with deceleration, as if pulling a very delicate thread taut. I peer down at the thread I am holding, and then bend my knees and lay it on the ground. As my torso hovers over the thread I simply gaze at it, as if unconsciously knowing that I will never see it again. After a moment or two I slowly begin to straighten my knees and stand back up, yet my eyes remain fixed on what I have placed on the floor in front of me.

Acceptance

Part one. Reading Kübler-Ross’ (1969) words that “Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage” (p. 110) offered me a great deal of relief, especially because I felt mostly frustrated, discouraged, confused, and simply sad as I explored the acceptance stage with my research consultant over the course of two data collection sessions. Entering into our fifth—and what I initially thought to be our final—session, I informed my consultant that I was not sure I had actually achieved any kind of acceptance around the loss of my professional dancer-self. So rather than forcing an improvisation about having reached this particular stage, my consultant

invited me to instead break my 15-minute improvisation structure up into two seven-minute improvisations. First, he encouraged me to move my embodied knowledge of how acceptance has felt for me in the past; he hoped I could remember accepting other transitions I have experienced in my life so that I could let those memories guide me. For the second improvisation my consultant invited me to move how I would ultimately like my future experience of acceptance to feel—if and when I do reach that stage of grief—and allow my body to move those sensations and images.

Imagery did, in fact, emerge in a big way as I moved for the first seven minutes. The image of an hourglass presented itself to me in such a clear, vivid way that I could barely remember the movements of my body after completing my improvisation. I do remember being very drawn to my shoulders, and the thematic movement of scooping my elbows and forearms down and out at the sides of my waist and then arcing them up and around towards my shoulders repeated itself several times. My fingertips would land on my shoulder heads with my elbows pointing out, and although my fingers very lightly rested there my body's felt sense was of heaviness, as if my shoulders were carrying something rather weighty. With the repetition of this movement the hourglass image continued to imprint itself in my mind, and other than that image and the scooping-shoulder movement, the rest of my experience during those initial seven minutes was a complete blur. My research consultant verbally reflected back to me that he saw me moving in the sagittal plane quite a bit, and also that I finally stood up after spending most of my time during the last four improvisations on the floor, but otherwise neither of us recalled significant movement moments.

Quite annoyingly to me at the time, my second improvisation was even more of a blur. I found myself back at a low level, mostly seated on the floor, and I spent much of the time

stroking my arms and legs with my hands. I was not aware of any imagery that time, and the only distinct awareness I had was how incredibly lazy I felt. I remember not even wanting to move my body, and when I could finally muster up some energy to do something physical all of my body parts felt disconnected. On an even larger—and somewhat frightening—scale, I felt completely disconnected from my body as a whole. I was not exactly experiencing numbness, but rather my limbs were alien to me; I did not recognize or understand them.

The seven minutes dragged by, and when my alarm finally rang I hastily exited my improvisation and sat back down on my research consultant's couch, slumped over and ashamed. I felt totally exposed. I knew in that moment that my consultant was aware of how dissatisfied I was with my exploration of acceptance and I told him that my movement had felt purposeless. He asked me the simple question, “What are you grieving?” (K. Larsen, personal communication, July 27, 2018). I had sought out on this thesis journey to grieve the loss of my professional dancer identity, and that concretely defined process was the very foundation of the work I was doing with my consultant. Yet in that moment my mind was a complete blank. Not only did I not have an answer for him, but I had no idea what I was actually grieving anymore. I had lost any and all sense of direction and was able to reply with only, “It was clear to me at the beginning what I was grieving, but now it's not at all.” Without missing a beat, my consultant stated, “Just like your life. Your research process is now mirroring your life” (K. Larsen, personal communication, July 27, 2018).

It took me a moment to grasp the point he was trying to make as my mind/body continued to feel foggy, but suddenly I started to cry. It all began to make sense to me: my life had been completely planned out and written in stone from the moment I decided I wanted to do nothing but dance. I gave myself no room for uncertainty because there was just one option—

joining a professional dance company and devoting my existence to that single endeavor. Now, having veered off that path and beginning to navigate the field of dance/movement therapy and counseling—a profession that I have explored for less than three years—the plan has been ripped to shreds, the stone has melted, and what is left over feels like a murky mess.

Similarly, I began my thesis process with a clear understanding of its structure. I anticipated making it to the end of my data collection and analysis having experienced all five stages of grief and feeling as though I had been able to release all of the pieces of my past I was clutching onto so tightly. I recognize now that that was my brain doing the talking, the planning, and the controlling—just as it did when I danced. My body, on the other hand, told me a different story. My body let me know that, just like in my life as a whole, reaching a specified destination will not always happen. I might be left throwing my hands up in the air shouting the words I then spoke to my research consultant: “I am afraid of not having a purpose.”

Too overwhelmed by the gravity of the previous statement, I began wiping my tears and searching for other words to say. My consultant would not let me off the hook, however, and encouraged me to stay with the emotion I was experiencing. He encouraged me to let myself cry. He then invited me to sense into what was happening in my body, and I noticed that it was becoming hard for me to swallow and that I had a headache. The most difficult directive he gave me was to repeat my statement out loud, over and over. Sensing my trepidation and the difficulty I was having with the task, my consultant asked me what the statement needed in order to continue its repetition. I took a deep breath, and that allowed for more ease in my speech.

With the addition of breath Kris asked me if anything about my overall present-moment experience had shifted, and I told him that the colors in the room were beginning to look brighter. With that he invited me to tell the vibrant colors I saw that I was afraid of not having a

purpose. Immediately, feeling much too vulnerable, I remarked that I did not want them to know! This statement provided us with a moment of lightness, and together we laughed about my very sincere fear of not being judged by the colors in the room. As the intensity of previous moments dissolved just a bit, my consultant looked me in the eye and stated, “Now, tell me” (K. Larsen, personal communication, July 27, 2018). So, I did. I told him again that I was afraid of not having a purpose, and with that he said simply, “*That*, Joanna, is acceptance” (K. Larsen, personal communication, July 27, 2018).

Part two. Because the movements of my acceptance improvisations were so blurry and unclear to me, I did not feel prepared to add to my data analysis movement sentence on that particular day. My research consultant asked me to return for a sixth session the following week so we could not only unearth the movement I was searching for, but also so that we could wrap up our experience together. Allowing myself to remember what did resonate with me post-acceptance improvisations, my consultant invited me to execute what I had established of my data analysis movement sentence thus far, and then to simply allow my body to shift into the acceptance stage however it wanted to in the moment.

I moved my denial, my anger, my bargaining, and my depression, and as I stood with my eyes locked on the imaginary thread I had placed on the ground in front of me I decided to turn around and walk away from it. After about five or six steps I paused and hesitantly reached my right hand behind me with deceleration towards the imaginary thread. I allowed the reach of my hand to ultimately turn me back around so that I faced the thread again, and then I looked at it one more time. The latter movements solidified the acceptance stage of my data analysis, as it finally felt complete in that moment, but I stood in that final position for an additional minute with tears in my eyes. I sensed the words “thank you” emerge from somewhere within me and

silently said them to the imaginary thread, and whatever that thread truly represented for me. When I sat back down on the couch across from my research consultant one last time there wasn't much more we needed to say, other than our own thank you's to each other.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this embodied artistic inquiry was to allow myself the experience of consciously and cathartically grieving the loss of my professional dancer-self in order to not only understand the impact of that loss on my life, but also to recognize if and how I can healthily carry some pieces of that self with me as I begin working in the field of dance/movement therapy and counseling. This chapter will answer specifically the second part of my research question: How do I grieve the loss of my dancer-self that once was, in order to integrate what remains of her with my dance/movement therapist-self that is forming right now?

As I discovered how I could grieve this loss by physically moving through Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief, I began to recognize that it was not exactly pieces of my actual external dancer-self that I would be integrating with my dance/movement therapist and counselor-self. Rather, it was what lay beneath the external expression of my dancer-self—the authentic voice and sensations of my body which I had muted, numbed, and buried for so many years—that would truly inform who I will become as a professional clinician. Throughout the following pages I will describe meaningful themes that were exposed through my movement as I improvised each stage of grief, and also how all of these themes represent very important parts of myself which are not only yearning to be embraced, but also will act as significant tools for me to embody as I embark in this new career.

Denial

Outward-ness

Kübler-Ross (1969) regards the denial stage of grief as a coping mechanism, and a healthy one at that. She recognizes that the anguish dying individuals experience as they await the inevitable may very well become much too overwhelming, so the respite of distracting

themselves with other, less painful topics can be quite recuperative and necessary. I am aware that during my denial improvisation my impulse to perform a ballet port-de-bras, and also to use my hands and arms to physically push away from and not actually see reality closing in on me was just that: a coping mechanism. In truth, on that day with my research consultant I was aiming to delay the unavoidable loss I knew would eventually occur, but perhaps that's not such a terrible thing. I had identified as a dancer with a very controlled way of not only eating but also simply navigating the world for over one third of my life. The quest towards releasing all of that was a scary one filled with completely uncharted territory. My body's response to spend some time postponing the next steps allowed me a few moments to feel safe, comfortable, and familiar before diving into my grief.

My ability to choose a more external focus can serve me as a dance/movement therapist and counselor as a body-based resourcing technique. Skovholt and Ronnestad (2003) wrote that the cultivation of boundaries is a crucial part of becoming a skilled and emotionally regulated clinician. During moments with clients wherein I feel triggered and my own material threatens to surge towards the surface, I can remember my experience with the denial stage of grief. Whether inviting my client to execute very outwardly-based movements with me in session to keep us both grounded, or performing a port-de-bras or a push on my own after a session, I can trust that my body has the skillset to distract itself from acute discomfort. Of course, I recognize that this distraction technique was the one and *only* technique I employed while maintaining my skinny dancer façade (in order to not feel any kind of chaos or uncertainty). With my embodiment of each of the other themes I will discuss next, however, I believe that I can begin sensing when some denial is healthy, and when it becomes more of a numbing mechanism.

Breath

Another coping technique I discovered during my denial improvisation is breath. The two most triggering words my consultant stated as I moved proved to be “skinny” and “fat” (K. Larsen, personal communication, June 22, 2018), and my immediate response to the extreme emotional and physiological dysregulation these words caused me was to exaggerate my breathing. Truthfully during that phase of my improvisation my breath became perhaps too exaggerated—to the point of spitting as I exhaled—but my body knew that I was holding my breath too tightly while attempting to create concavity in my stomach as a result of trying to make myself thinner. Thus, my body offered me distinct and full inhales and exhales to create some free flow in place of the intense binding I felt as a result of hearing words that reminded me of my eating disorder.

Breath strikes me as a rich way of stabilizing myself if and when I become activated by a client’s material, because in addition to grounding me in the present, external moment it can also allow me a bit of an internal experience as well. In short, I can sense the best of both worlds while tuning into my breath: I can orient myself to space and time within the four walls of the therapy room to satisfy the part of me that craves an external focus, while also acknowledging the existence and value of what is happening in my body.

Anger

Modulation

As I mentioned, I entered into my anger improvisation feeling genuinely angry, but not explicitly related to my grief. I presented this particular emotion to my research consultant as anger resulting from the fact that I had to write a thesis; I simply did not want to do it and I resented the fact that I had to engage in this entire process. My consultant completely and

without any questioning accepted my report of this and allowed me to use my thesis-driven feelings to guide my movement. What manifested during my improvisation, however, proved to be much more complex than merely having to write a paper. The initial sense of the anger I felt was basically another form of denial. It was not so much that I did not want to write a thesis. Rather, I was angry at the fact that I was beginning to feel real, volatile emotion that had been hidden for so long and I just wanted to shut it all down. Still, my consultant did not push me towards an in-depth analysis of the roots of my anger. He allowed me to stay with my surface-level understanding of it so that my body could discover the rest as I moved. The gradual unfolding of my anger allowed me to feel it physically, but in a way that did not shock or traumatize me. My anger around having to grieve exposed itself slowly and gave me permission to sense the more in-between moments of anger rather than an immediate rush from zero to 60 on the intensity scale.

Essentially, my consultant invited me to embody a modulation of my anger. He did not force me to feel it all right away, nor did he encourage more denial by limiting my experience of anger related supposedly only to paper-writing. As a dance/movement therapist and counselor who is encouraging clients to feel not just black and white versions of their emotions, but all of the shades of grey they contain, I am now aware that my body has the capability of emoting on a continuum as well. My dancing mindset was one that had room only for black and white options for myself—I was either dancing well or dancing poorly, feeling skinny or feeling fat, getting praised by choreographers or being rejected by them. The more I am able to perceive grey area in how I process emotions and life situations, the more competent I will be in holding various intensity levels of the emotions of my clients.

Ambiguity

Skovholt and Jennings (2005) asserted that counselors must be willing to meet clients where they are at in their process of healing and decision-making. Often, this endeavor is one that is filled with ambiguity. This ambiguity is the material that often resides in the grey area of a client's material and is just as important to spend time with as the goal at which the client is ultimately seeking to arrive. My body often informed me of its own need to explore this ambiguous place as I improvised my relationship with the anger stage of grief. While balanced on my knee joints with my shins hovering off the floor, fearful of catapulting forward or spilling backwards, I noticed that I needed to stay in that position fully—regardless of how awkward it felt—before choosing where to go next. Never before have I really allowed myself to remain in a state of discomfort. I am used to making some form of decision and exiting the ambiguous, uncertain place as quickly as possible. But my body voiced to me on that day that it needed to experience and be validated in some form of tight-rope walk, no matter how frightening it felt. I'll remember that sensation as I aim to empathize with my clients in their own needs to have their ambiguous words and movements validated.

Vocalization

One of the more cathartic moments of my anger improvisation was my silent scream. The word I use to describe how I felt during the years immediately following my transition away from dance is shame. I was ashamed that I had worked so hard for so much of my life to achieve a very specific dream, and I had failed (or so I told myself). As a result of that shame, I simply did not talk about it. I did not verbally express the incredible sadness, frustration, and infuriation I felt that an eating disorder had been powerful enough to ultimately rip my dancing pursuits

from my tight grip, and that I had never received any kind of productive help for my dysfunctional relationship with food.

Although my eating disorder allowed me to feel in control of my life and thus in a state of mastery over my body, I was completely alone in it. I did not want anyone to interfere with the rigid regimen I had created so I would not dare speak my secret to family, friends, or dance teachers. But while I continued to not eat, my secret ate away at me. Every day was a struggle to maintain the structure I needed to stay skinny and dancing at a technical level with which I was satisfied. There was never a moment where I stopped exerting—forcing—myself into a state of perceived perfection. I experienced several moments during which I came very close to blacking out from malnourishment, and the fear that always washed over me once I regained fuller consciousness manifested as an urgent need to tell someone what had happened. But the desire to stay skinny, and thereby stay successful, kept the secret alive in the empty pit of my stomach, and I continued to push it further and further down the closer and closer I got to accomplishing what I set out to do.

My body was no longer able to keep this secret, and it came—although silently—screaming out of me the day I improvised the anger stage of grief. It is too painful for me to imagine the healing that might have occurred much earlier in my life had I shared my experience with someone, but I am able to imagine the healing that will occur for me in the future if I dedicate myself to speaking up. As a clinician, I hope to be the listening ears for someone who hides a secret of their own. And the more permission I give myself to vocalize my own struggles, the more I can provide a safe container for my clients to do the same.

Bargaining

Recuperation

It was quite clear to me the day that I explored the bargaining stage of grief that my body yearned to soften, slow down, and completely soak up movements that simply felt physically satisfying. During my previous improvisations of both denial and anger I had experienced a great deal of exertion. I increased the pressure of my muscles while pushing, balancing, reaching, and twisting, and frankly when it came time to improvise again I was exhausted. Hence, rather than continuing to exert myself while feeling acute, somewhat dysregulating emotion, I chose to luxuriate in my movements and discover how I could indulge in moments of suspension, stretching, and swaying.

Swaying. Developmentally, the bodily swaying rhythm emerges for children around the age of three (Kestenberg Amighi, Loman, Lewis, & Sossin, 1999). Kestenberg Amighi et al. wrote, “One of the tasks facing the child aged two-and-a-half to four is the transition from being a baby/toddler to becoming a big girl or boy... The [swaying] rhythm encourages no urgency about completion, competition, or exhibition” (p. 45-47). It is no wonder then that I enjoyed swaying during my bargaining improvisation as that particular stage of grief is placed smack dab in the middle of the five stages. During the bargaining stage individuals have moved closer to their impending death of sorts, but still have two more stages ahead of them through which to journey. In essence, growth and forward movement have occurred, yet there is still more work to be done. It makes sense that toddlers embody the swaying rhythm as the years ahead of them contain much change and possible growing pains. Toddlers, like me on the day I navigated through my experience of bargaining, are torn between regressing back into their baby years and

making the leap into further childhood (Kestenberg Amighi et al., 1999). So, to soothe this internal tug-of-war, toddlers (and I) allow for some time to pause and sway.

Reinvigoration. As mentioned, my swaying rhythms physically manifested quite differently than had my exerting movements of denial and anger, which cue me even more specifically to the fact that the bargaining stage of grief allowed me some recuperation. Moore (2012) described the concept of recuperation as she illustrated the observation process. Moore emphasized that recuperation allows individuals the opportunity to move in a different way for a bit of time so that when they return to their task at hand they feel re-energized and reinvigorated. As the observer of my own body/mind while I experience each stage of grief, I was aware that the bargaining stage provided me with permission to momentarily avert my gaze from the endpoint of my process so that I could move with some decreasing pressure and deceleration. This period of rest allowed me to ultimately transition into the final two stages of grief with a greater sense of strength and focus.

Body-half. Many of my bargaining movements utilized the body-half pattern of total body connectivity (Hackney, 2002). Hackney identified that this developmental movement pattern often has psychological implications within the realm of decision-making as individuals are exploring and solidifying one side of their body (or, one side of an idea/question/issue) versus the other. The body-half moments in which I was able to indulge allowed me space and time to hold both my past and my future: my dancer-self and my dance/movement therapist-self. I was able to not only choose whether to regress back into old habits or continue traveling forward towards newness, but also to simply witness and be with both versions of myself. It is obvious to me that as I do develop more fully into the professional clinician I am now becoming, I am able to find recuperative sensations through my embodiment of swaying rhythms and body-

half patterns. As I, myself, continue to transition, and also as my clients experience their own growth and change, I acknowledge the power of pausing to move back and forth gently between where we have been and where we are going.

Depression

Faith and Trust

My dancer-self did not have very much faith or trust. I became totally accustomed to existing in a state of constant fear that I was not enough and needed to work harder and faster to be seen as a professional, technically advanced, extremely successful dancer. Hence, I felt the need to be in control of every piece of my dancing world, and the biggest piece of that was my body. I had zero faith or trust that I would be hired as a dancer with the body I was naturally born with, so I strived to mold it into one that I thought would be more marketable. I had planned out everything in my routine: the dance classes I would take, the food I would eat, the companies I would audition for. I had perfected my dancing routine down to a science in order to eliminate any question marks from my life; I wanted to control everything.

Among all of the question marks that ultimately did rear their ugly heads as I transitioned away from professional dance and into other fields (yoga, and then dance/movement therapy and counseling), I was certainly met with one very large question mark on the morning of my depression improvisation with my research consultant. I had no way of making sense of the fact that my cell phone suddenly began playing such an old, forgotten, memory-laden song the night before, and my body/mind was tormented by its inability to come up with an explanation for it all. Nevertheless, once I began moving my experience of the depression stage of grief, my body provided me with two very concrete (and yet not at all concrete) answers: the words “faith” and “trust.” These two words imply all that is uncontrollable and undefinable, and yet they emerged

clear and bold as day from somewhere deep inside me. With the emergence of these words came the impulse of my hands to place themselves in a prayer position in front of my chest and my consultant's reflection that he felt like he had been watching a prayer as I improvised.

My body's response to the chaos of not only that unexplainable experience, but also the chaos of being immersed in the depression of moving further and further away from my dancer-self was to become very peaceful. My body's response was not to make itself appear much thinner or to search desperately for something to control amidst so much uncertainty. Rather, my body offered me literal words of wisdom and the physical sensation of surrendering to something greater than myself, trusting and having faith in the fact that my grief process will guide me to the exact place that I need to be. I was essentially unaware until that day that I had the capacity to truly cast my fate to the wind. Again, as a mostly not spiritual and definitely not religious person, when I sink into moments of any kind of depression I rely on myself and myself alone to get through. My body brought it to my attention, however, that perhaps other resources are available to me when the acceptance of an inevitable *death* leads me into a period of hopelessness and sadness. Perhaps I can embrace the question marks of transition, and rather than fighting to answer them, I can allow what comes next to gradually unfold as it will without my own force, doubt, or control.

I have noticed that I often lack trust and faith in myself and the outcome of a session as a dance/movement therapist and counselor. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) remind new clinicians that this kind of desire to rigidly control the results of therapy for one's clients, as well as one's own facilitation of sessions, is quite normal as clinical skills are still developing. Nevertheless, I feel a sense of relief knowing that when confronted with the chaos and uncertainty of a session and my own countertransference to it, I am able to access a part of me that can simply surrender

to the process and welcome whatever surfaces. I feel as though I have planted a seed of spirituality within me, and the possibilities for how it will grow offer me new, completely different eyes with which to view not only my body, but also my whole professional (and personal) trajectory. In truth, this is still a very new part of me and I will not be surprised if my sense of ease becomes hijacked by the deeply engrained neuro pathways of my brain that still aim to exert all kinds of control, but the fact that a peaceful, trusting part of me even exists is quite liberating.

It is my hope that this sense of faith and trust can transcend my own therapeutic facilitation and exist within the interpersonal realm between myself and my clients. Yalom (2005) maintained, “Research evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that successful therapy...is mediated by a relationship between therapist and client that is characterized by trust...” (p. 54). Perhaps the more I develop faith and trust in myself as a clinician, the more my clients will feel invited to trust me as an individual who can provide guidance towards healing.

An Entire Tapestry

Another question mark presented to me during my depression improvisation was the meaning behind my body’s thread-holding gesture. In that moment and for several weeks after the fact I could not quite comprehend what that movement symbolized, if anything. I have mostly arrived at the conclusion that the *thread* could represent literally anything and that I have the freedom to make of it what I will, but there is one possible meaning that I have been gravitating towards. During my improvisation my fingertips lightly grasped both ends of this imaginary thread. In my data analysis movement sentence I place the imaginary thread down and gaze at it, ultimately walking away from it, turning back towards it, and saying an internal thank you to it. It is my current understanding of this *thread* that it represents just a single part of me,

just like another part of me is learning how to become more faithful and trusting. My dancer identity became larger than life. Dancing, and the habits I developed in order to continue on my dancing path, defined me—or so I thought—in such a way that left no room for any other definitions to develop, and I believe that this fact is much of the reason why letting this identity go often feels so devastating. What will remain of me when my professional dancer-self is completely gone, if that is all there was?

I believe that the imaginary thread I held during my depression improvisation emerged as a reminder that, although extremely important to me, my dancer-self was but one thread woven amidst others to create the entire tapestry that is Joanna. And because it is just one thread, and because there are millions of others strung together to bring color and texture to the person I have been and am becoming, I am very much capable of laying it down. Visualizing my dancer-self as something tangible allowed me in my moments of depression to hold that identity in my hands while choosing how I would like to shift my relationship with it: I was able to place it on the floor, walk away from it, and then ultimately turn back around to gaze at it with gratitude and the knowledge that I was about to say goodbye.

I am more than just a single thread. I am an entire tapestry, just like each of my clients. My dancer-self often saw other individuals as just one thing. Because I could not give myself any wiggle room I often immediately and linearly defined others with the exact same limitations. With the recognition that I am not only a former professional dancer, but also a therapist, a certified movement analyst, a yoga teacher, a yoga practitioner, a writer, a singer, a friend, a daughter, a sister, a partner, a food-lover, a mistake-maker, an over-achiever, a learner, an explorer, etc., I can hopefully witness and make room for all of the threads that make up the lives and stories of my clients.

Acceptance

Purposelessness

Although incredibly frustrating to notice at the time of my acceptance improvisation, the laziness I felt as I attempted to move provides me with rich information regarding how my body is processing that fifth and final stage of grief. The words I spoke to my research consultant immediately after finishing my improvisation were, “I am afraid of not having a purpose.” My movements guided by the acceptance stage of grief felt entirely purposeless. Not only did I feel extremely disconnected to my body as a whole, but also I had no idea what to do with it. Every movement I made struck me as forced and inorganic, and I was exhausted by the mere idea of having to improvise for 15 full minutes. The possibilities of how, where, and even why to move my body seemed totally endless, so rather than engaging with these possibilities and navigating through them a bit, my body essentially shut down. I believe that my limbs took on an alien-like quality because I was so overwhelmed by my inability to move with any kind of intention that I felt as though I had gained a completely new body—one that had not yet learned what to do with itself.

For over 15 years I knew exactly what I was doing with myself. Now facing the task of working towards letting those years go, and the very direct, clear path that came with them, I am left with an open road ahead—a road that most likely has an indefinite number of twists, turns, forks, and dead ends. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) emphasized, “What is left is a new you, a different you, one who will never be the same again or see the world as you once did” (p. 76). As I gaze out at the expansiveness and uncertainty of this new road ahead I am aware that I feel fear; I feel afraid to enter into this exploration that does not have a detailed map or destination that goes with it. To be fair, I am currently working as a counselor and have goals related to this

endeavor, so I do recognize that I am not completely without a plan or structure. Nevertheless, without my dancer-identity I no longer have the tunnel vision or disordered eating coping mechanisms to control every piece of myself and my environment.

Hourglass. The hourglass image that became quite vivid as I improvised my experience of acceptance has been largely a mystery to me throughout this process. I have not been able to comprehend its meaning or even understand why such an image would manifest in the first place. I truly rarely see actual hourglasses in my life, so it surprised me when very recently I actually held one in my hands. While holding the hourglass it did momentarily occur to me that the object was the same as the image I experienced weeks before as I improvised, but I still was not able to make any sense of it.

The following day I forgot my laptop on an airplane, which left me completely panicked and overcome by the emotion I know all too well: shame. I was ashamed of myself for lacking the awareness to remember something so valuable when the plane landed. I was ashamed of myself for making what I considered to be such a giant, detrimental error. Thus, similar to the moment during which I hesitated to tell the vibrant colors in my consultant's therapy room that I was afraid of not having a purpose, I hesitated to tell anyone in my life that I had lost my laptop. The admission of such a mistake felt far too vulnerable and far too exposing of what I considered to be an actual character flaw.

I convinced myself that my laptop was gone forever and that I would have to purchase a new one immediately. I racked my brain for how I would even afford such a huge expense, which led me to the realization that I simply cannot sit with discomfort. Rather than allowing myself time to pause and problem-solve this dilemma, my knee-jerk reaction was to immediately replace the computer so that my unpleasant emotions could be quelled. Without my eating

disorder coping mechanism for moments of chaos, I am left with uncomfortable sensations that cannot be numbed by controlling my intake of food. As a result, I jump to the next quick fix to avoid any feelings of unease.

Eventually, through tears of shame, I told my therapist that I had lost my laptop. I expressed to her my fear that I may be totally incapable of sitting with any kind discomfort. Just as my research consultant had done when I expressed an equally vulnerable fear to him, my therapist smiled, looked me right in the eye, and said, “Yes, that’s exactly right” (Personal Therapist, personal communication, September 5, 2018). She did not try to solve anything or offer me any advice, but rather she simply validated for me that just as I am afraid of not having a purpose, I am also afraid of not knowing how to cope with discomfort. As the session concluded my therapist said one more thing: “This is the shifting of the sands, Joanna” (Personal Therapist, personal communication, September 5, 2018).

The hourglass image, although initially elusive, represents all that my grieving process encompasses. The sands of my life had been forced literally into a thin, linear, constricting vessel (that is, the middle part of an hourglass) and now they are free falling into a much wider, more open, and more spacious container with room for each grain of sand—each thread in my tapestry. The sands of my professional identity, my personal identity, and the relationship I have with my body are all shifting, and with that comes lots of uncertainty, lots of possibility, and lots of discomfort.

My clients and I can meet one another here. As they, too, sit with feelings of shame, purposelessness, and overall discomfort without the use of any form of maladaptive coping mechanism, I can invite them into their own imagery. My hourglass and tapestry can meet the images that arise for each of them as they experiment with allowing their bodies to speak. And

just as I was able to experience some acceptance by embracing my imagery and giving it the opportunity to offer me a bit of comfort, clarity, and containment amidst the chaos of grief, I will encourage my clients to lean on and learn from their images. My clients and I may begin a session by feeling only the ache of loss. Eventually, however, we will find something: we will find the texture of sand, we will find the colors in a tapestry, and we will find that we are not alone.

So today, in this moment, I sit. I sit writing about my experience of grieving the loss of who I once was, and I sit feeling the discomfort of not knowing—not knowing if or when I might see my laptop again, and not knowing the destination towards which I am headed in my career, and also in my life. As I sit I feel full, but I do not try to push the fullness down, hollow the fullness out, or throw the fullness up. Instead, I feel it. I feel some fear. I feel some regret. I feel some shame. But I also feel gratitude. I feel gratitude for my hourglass and my tapestry, and for the opportunity to see and appreciate every single thread, and every single grain of sand. Today, in this moment, I sit. And today, in this moment, I feel.

Limitations

One major limitation to this embodied artistic inquiry self-study is exactly what the name of the methodology describes: it was a study which included only myself. As I was the sole participant, the implications of such a limitation is that the study fell short of providing findings into how humans on a larger and more generalized scale experience grief as it relates to professional identity loss. This study was able to only detail my own process. Thus, I am not able

to make any kind of statement regarding what other individuals may find if they, themselves, move through Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief.

On that note, my utilization of these particular stages is another limitation of this study. Not only did it confine me to studying the concepts of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance without the examination of any other potential stages identified by other experts (or myself), but also I made the decision to explore those stages in that exact order. As a result, I had no room to attempt any other variation of cycling through Kübler-Ross' (1969) stages. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) claimed, “[The five stages] are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or goes in a prescribed order” (p.7).

One final limitation to this study is the time with which I had to complete it. Grief is an emotion that transcends the beginnings and endings of research. It is a human experience that evolves, changes, and re-cycles itself perhaps several times over. It is possible that in weeks, months, and even years I will find myself back at square one (or two, or three) with regard to grieving my dancer identity. My research of course will not be minimized or squandered, but I may discover even more to be added to the data I have collected and analyzed to date.

Areas of Future Research

I would be interested in adapting this embodied artistic inquiry into a longitudinal study during which myself, or perhaps myself and other participants, are followed in their processes of grieving the loss of a particular professional identity. I completed my data collection and analysis over the course of just six weeks, which pressured me into navigating each stage of grief in an artificial amount of time. In the future this study could take place over the course of several

years, offering participants the opportunity to remove limiting timelines so that they can truly luxuriate and decelerate through their experience of grief.

Future studies might also follow participants as they explore not only Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief, but also other stages as well. Blevins (2008) describes Kübler-Ross' model, as well as Virginia Satir's stages of change and J. William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning within the overall topic of grief. Research participants could have the option to experience each of these models while processing their own professional identity loss in order to discover which model is most helpful and cathartic and why.

Summary

The purpose of this embodied artistic inquiry self-study was to engage in an intentional and immersive grieving process around the loss of my professional dancer-self—an identity I allowed to define me for a great deal of my life. The research question I developed for the purpose of this process is as follows: How do I grieve the loss of my dancer-self that once was, in order to integrate what remains of her with my dance/movement therapist-self that is forming right now? As I began to explore and fully feel my grief I also began to recognize that losing this identity did not only mean I would have to say goodbye to a professional dance career, but also, and almost even more overwhelmingly, meant I would have to say goodbye to a very particular relationship I had with my body.

As I both physically and psychologically moved through Kübler-Ross' (1969) five stages of grief, I became acutely aware of the fact that my body was yearning to express sensations, emotions, words, memories, and images that I had suppressed for many years as a result of my need to feel completely in control of my entire state of being. Thus, I did not follow the explicit guidance of my initial research question which asked me to integrate pieces of my dancer-self

with my dance/movement therapist-self. Instead, I realized that it is actually all that has been buried beneath the exterior of my dancer-self (the sensations, emotions, words, memories, and images) to which I must give voice and embodiment as a developing clinician.

As I analyzed the data unearthed while improvising my experience of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, I discovered that I have within me: outward-ness, breath, modulation, ambiguity, vocalization, recuperation, faith and trust, a sense of purposelessness, an entire tapestry, and the image of an hourglass. Each of the previous themes has very specific implications with regard to both where I have been in my life and where I have yet to go. It is because I took the—often very painful, frustrating, and exhausting—time to truly feel through this identity transition that I can make some meaning out of the loss I grieved. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) wrote, “The truth about loss is that the resurgence of old pain and grief has an important purpose. As the pain emerges, we find new ways of healing ourselves that may not have existed before” (p. 76). Although my very specific dream of having a career as a professional dancer is no longer, I have opened myself up to so many more options of how I can go about living my life, both professionally and personally.

Identity transition is not an experience unique to me; it is a universal experience through which most human beings are invited to navigate in one way or another. My hope is that others who are overcome with the same deep, heart-wrenching, pit-in-your-stomach sadness with which I was overcome at the start of this journey will allow themselves space and time to feel their grief fully: to listen to it, be witnessed and supported in it, to move through it, and to soften their tight, middle-of-the-hourglass-grip, so that the many sands of their own lives can begin to shift.

My research consultant did not pry the fingers of my grasping hand away from my metaphorical hourglass. Rather, he held my other hand in his and gave me permission to let go.

As I continue working with clients therapeutically, and also as I continue to walk through everyday life with other human beings undoubtedly grieving their own losses, I will hold out one stabilizing hand. For me, grief was mobilizing; it moved me. As I witness others move through their own stages—whatever they may be—my eyes, ears, heart, and hands will be available to hold on, so that they, too, can let go.

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