



# Body as Crucial Connector in the Sustainability Movement: A Call for the Role of Dance in Sustainability

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*This article advocates for the use of dance as a crucial resource in the sustainability movement. The power of dance to communicate addresses the need for the sustainability movement to bring its messages home to human beings through the body, rather than focusing on abstract data. Remembering our human-embodied knowledge as an important way of knowing, dance is poised to connect people across the globe and to create change. The author shares her experience developing and performing a solo relating to water use at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education annual conference in October 2012.*

Ecological impacts are often experienced most directly and pertinently as effects on human bodies.<sup>1</sup>

You may be asking yourself, what is an article about dance doing in a sustainability journal? What does dance have to do with sustainability? As a dance artist with a passion for stewarding this Earth and its people into a healthy future, I advocate that dance cultivates body knowledge, connection, and communication, and in these ways it is a crucial resource in the struggle for sustainability.

The sustainability movement is taking the world by storm. The solutions so far have focused primarily on addressing specific components of the climate change problem—green products, extensive recycling programs, and carbon unit exchange. While these are all good starts, in reality, climate change, and its solution of sustainability, encompasses and affects not only the external Earthly environment, but also the internal environment of the body and the interstitial environment of culture.

We know that climate change is upon us through both scientific proof and indigenous knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

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How widely is it accepted that climate change is a result of a fundamental separation between the human body and the Earth? Joanna Macy, scholar of Buddhism, systems theory, and deep ecology writes, “The bulldozing of nature and the abuse of our own bodies reveal this separation in the psyche that cuts us off from the physical world.”<sup>3</sup> She says we must adopt a worldview of the “world as self,” where one sees oneself as “a part of this world, you contain the whole of it.”<sup>3</sup> The “whole of it” is contained in the entire body, not merely in concept. It is contained in the webs of connective tissue, arteries, veins, and bones, in the pumping, flowing, and spiraling of fluids, and in the energetic circuits that move us.

In all the progress of environmental awareness, sustainability messages have emphasized measurable scientific data as the reason we need to change. By focusing only on external data, we disconnect from the impacts this data has on our lives, and more specifically, our bodies. When we disconnect from data, we forget the reality of the relationship between the changes the data represent and our lives.

Dave Newport, director of sustainability at the University of Colorado, Boulder, articulates another problem with the way we currently relate to sustainability. He writes that as much as campus sustainability claims to focus on the three legs of sustainability (people, planet, and profit), it is seen as an “environment-only movement.” To him, this equates sustainability with failure. “For campus sustainability to escape a death sentence, we must put people first.”<sup>4</sup>

Dance has the power to communicate people’s stories and emotions and its power can be traced across time, whether banned or celebrated. Slaveholders banned drums and dancing among slaves, fearing the power it generated. Dance has historically been reinvented in China and India for purposes of building nationalism. The moving body is a force that creates “a sense of community or shared perspective ... (it) embodies memories



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Caption

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in a tangible medium, sustains and communicates cultural values that are held dear to a group, and expresses deeply felt emotions, including the agony of loss and the exuberance of life.”<sup>5</sup> Sustainability is the lifesaving, politically charged, local and global issue of our time. Let’s use the power of dance as a resource for the change we need.

## Dance as Knowledge

Not only is dance a valuable communication medium, it engages embodied knowing, or kinesthetic intelligence. Education scholar Howard Gardner names “bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (using your whole body or parts of your body to solve problems or to make things)” as one of the primary human intelligences, though less valued than linguistic or logical-mathematical knowledge in western culture.<sup>6</sup> Dancers train to increase their capacity for embodied knowing. Dance performances communicate through the body, and Earth, society, nature, and culture are all wrapped up in our DNA. So what better way to communicate about a global, life-threatening issue than through a dancing body?

In October 2012, I had the opportunity to present the very first dance performance at the annual conference of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). My process in crafting and performing this particular work is an example of involving arts in the sustainability conversation.

In August 2012, I started concrete, creative work in preparation for the mid-October conference in Los Angeles. The previous spring, I had researched scholarship on dance, knowledge systems, and sustainability, laying the scholarly groundwork for my choreography.

There were two primary influences on my decision to focus on water. One was my enrollment in a month-long Permaculture Design Course in summer 2012 at the Finger Lakes Permaculture Institute. Through that course, my perspective of water expanded, and when I looked at landscapes, all I could see was water’s pathway through that landscape. I learned how to see water and landscapes in new ways. The second influence was the recognition that we, as humans, are bodies of water. The fluids in the body mirror and reflect the Earth’s fluids: both Earth and the human body are approximately 70 percent water. The salinity in our fluid systems matches that of the ocean.<sup>7</sup> Water is a simple, direct way to invite people to see and feel the connection between body and Earth.

The preparation for my performance was, at times, arduous and at other times thrilling, as

creative processes tend to be. The bulk of my process involved deepening and studying my relationship with water. I danced outside in a creek, I sat outside in the rain, and I played with water in my bathtub like a curious child. I drank water mindfully, feeling the fluid move down my throat, following it with sensation until it disappeared. How did the water feel on my body? How did I move when I interacted with it? Interacting with water is a human experience, something that we all know, so I gave it all my detailed attention and observed my responses in order to effectively use my body as a communication medium.

The preparation process also involved learning about the fluid systems in the human body, such as arterial and venous blood, cerebrospinal fluid, and synovial fluid. Every fluid system in the body has a different rhythm, just as the various fluid systems in the Earth ebb and flow with different timing.<sup>7</sup> I built my movement around some of the ways water moves on the Earth and inside me, trying to embody the qualities. For example, how does my body move when it’s floating? If I am made of water and communicating about how water is drying up, what happens if I literally wring myself out? If water spirals when traveling quickly, how can I exaggerate that and demonstrate it with my whole being?

My performance experience at AASHE was thrilling—a groundbreaking experience in which I premiered a new dance work and AASHE welcomed it to the sustainability conversation. The response was overwhelmingly positive. People noted it as a highlight of their conference experience. Many stayed and talked with me afterward, asking questions and contributing their own creative ideas as to how I could rework the piece. I subsequently performed the same piece at the Colorado Bioneers Conference in November 2012, and an installation version at Boston University premiered in January 2013.

As a sustainability movement, it is crucial that we open all channels of communicating our passion for the protection of Mother Earth and her diverse peoples. The sustainability movement can call on the body’s wisdom, especially through movement and dance, as a resource. Learning from the body through a deep relationship with nature connects scientific facts with the bodies climate change ultimately affects. Learning from the body through movement and dance builds awareness, connectedness, and generosity in community. Whether we connect to the body through nature, or we connect to our oneness through dance, the body stands at the crossroads of nature, culture, and the ways of knowing we need for survival on planet Earth.

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