

Community dance artist and practitioner **Michelle Wilkinson** talks about the value that members of her dance community have discovered for themselves by moving outdoors

Imagine a gentle retreating tide revealing an outcrop of sandstone rocks. Here, human forms move in bird-like responses. Dance participant Pat Barker, aged 78, reflects: "This was a beautiful experience, a chance to dance somewhere so lovely with such a theme. Everything was breathtaking, from the expanse of the sea, to the structure of the rocks and the colour of the earth. One could not help but dance."

Coming inland to a dementia care home garden, seagull cries can be heard. Resident Freddie Smith makes a spontaneous bird-like sound with wing flaps across the lawn; a call from one wild self to another. Freddie, a great lover of nature, spent many of his twice-weekly individual movement sessions, for the final three years of his life, outdoors in the care home grounds. Here, as I followed his lead, he was seen to waltz on the patio, execute ballet exercises using the garden fence as a barre and move through strong emotional feelings.

Sarah Scoble, his friend, observed a session one day and said, "I was greatly moved by the quality, commitment and concentration in his practice. He clearly enjoyed and looked forward to the sessions and would talk about them with enthusiasm."

As a child of the 60s, I grew up with the joy of spending hours playing freely outdoors in the countryside, feeling a strong connection to my soul. This relationship with the outdoors is integral to my Devon-based community dance and movement work called Moving Naturally. It is supported by continued non-stylised and environmental movement training and mentorship with independent movement artist Helen Poynor.

Moving Naturally half and full-day outdoor workshops throughout the year give people the opportunity to immerse themselves more deeply in land and seascapes. Through simple movement scores they can dialogue between themselves and the ever-changing terrain around them. Time on the beach often produces spontaneous play in movers, like jumping waves and clambering over rocks. It can awaken the sense of touch to the textures of sand, stone and rock underfoot and can capture creative imagination. Participant Lizzie Goulding describes an Expressive Estuary workshop as "one of the best days in a long time... fruitful, peaceful, relaxing and inspiring. It brought to the fore creativity and capabilities I did not think I had."

Woods show the passage of the seasons through leaf growth and decline, and provide a place to crawl, climb, swing and rest. Here there are opportunities to make dens and find hidden places to feel safe and nurtured. There may also be a sense of mystery and magic in the woods. Helen Goodman-Payne says of her movement in Oak Woodland, "I found support and security in the trees after a somewhat challenging descent... saw what my imagination described as a temple in the horizon... a sanctuary of rest."

Whether Moving Naturally sessions are held indoors or outside, the earth has become an invaluable element in the work. It provides safety, support and grounding for whatever needs to emerge. Outdoors people have been known to lie in earth crevices, while indoors people with fibromyalgia, lack of mobility, high anxiety or experiencing bereavement find moving close to the floor/earth comforting and supporting. Participant Lesley Davies has found a change in the way she relates

Dancing outdoors

to the earth that has extended beyond the sessions into her daily life. "My relationship with the garden, the way I move whilst tending it, is shifting and deepening. I'm realising the possibility of learning to dance with it to be more open to the earth's support as I work and focus less on results."

Participation in dance and movement outdoors can take unexpected forms, like the observations of ten year old Tabitha Somerfield who witnessed my solo performance of Sea, Sand and Sari during the Exmouth Festival. With a dancer's eye Tabitha took a series of stunning photographs (one of which found its way to this publication!).

There seems to be a rippling effect, like a stone dropped into a still pool. Dance and movement are able to reach beyond the session, workshop or performance. Imagine a movement session in a hotel garden. Here a four year old moves with her mother and grandmother. Look up and see other guests finding their movement responses on their balconies. Travel a few miles to the city hospital to witness a regular Moving Naturally participant moving in a garden area during a break in her husband's chemotherapy treatment.

Wherever possible I have looked for opportunities to extend my work to include nearby outdoor environments and, hopefully, some of the stories here may inspire others to explore movement outdoors.

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Pat Barker, Bird-Call, World Dance Day Performance. Photo: Arts Council England/ Kevin Clifford

Below: Freddie Smith, individual movement session. Photo: Michelle Wilkinson

Below left: Michelle Wilkinson, Sea, Sand and Sari solo performance, Exmouth Festival. Photo: Tabitha Somerfield (aged 10)

