

## Moving Backwards into the Future – Embodying Social Practice through the Art of Eurythmy

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I have often sat in meetings where we are asked to brainstorm “*the way forwards*”, usually in times of crisis. But do we really move *forwards* into the future? Can we really see and know what lies ahead? This is what the (now global) Western, rational-scientific worldview, driven by its quest for conceptual knowledge, would have us believe. That with enough data and technical know-how we can predict with accuracy what is coming towards us from the future and thus manage and control it to most beneficial effect. Up to now this belief has held firm, even in the increasingly fraught arena of social change despite all evidence to the contrary, even in the unconscious bias of we who may question it.

But to move into a radically new and creative future requires breaking free from the “*hall of mirrors*”<sup>1</sup> that imprisons us in predictable cycles of “*everything changes but everything stays the same*”. To truly transform ourselves, our organisations and our society, we are being called to develop the courage, the will and the capacity to move into unseen territory and open ourselves to the unknown. As if to amplify this call we have suddenly been plunged into a time of deep unknowing.

This Covid time of world disruption is calling for an urgent and long overdue disruption in our worldview and way of thinking. We cannot do this by means of the same mechanistic worldview and abstract thinking that brought us here. If we are to awaken an alive, flexible and mobile thinking grounded in the particularity of the context in which it finds itself we need a return to, and through, the body. Not body as physical/chemical machine nor as expression of purely personal sentiment, but as journey of discovery into the ineffable wisdom of the living human form. Into the worlds that live in us and our innate connection to an infinitely creative formative field as we stand, move through and relate to each other in a dynamically alive, spatial world.

In the way we human beings are formed there is a marked difference between our front and our back. When it comes to the front of us, we are highly developed, dextrous, clear-sighted and open to the world. But what of our backs? We pay little attention to them because to us they are invisible and awkward to reach. No wonder then, as I often say in my eurythmy sessions, we move through the world using only a half of ourselves, that half which is exclusively orientated towards the visible, tangible world. Our sense of sight is a dominant sense, closely related to our thinking and conceptualising. When we see, name and explain something we can

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<sup>1</sup> McGilchrist, I. (2013) *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* New Haven and London, Yale University Press

store it away as a concept which we 'know' with a sense of comfortable certainty, even when it is no longer visible to our senses. In fact, even when it *is* still visible, we no longer see it because we 'know' it. The visible world is the world we 'know' and yet paradoxically, it is a world 'out there', separate from us, filled with discrete and bounded things, the formed products of all the invisible processes that go towards forming them.

But if we turn our attention to our bodies, (and I invite you to do so now) we discover that along the vertical plane that divides our front from our back there is a division between the visible and the invisible. Notice how your peripheral vision reaches just as far as that plane. Use your hands to discover where it is. Yes, we can turn around and see the other half of the world that was previously invisible, (take a moment to have a good look) but by so doing we are only accessing more of the visible world through the half of ourselves most suited to this task. Notice how as you move your head and body, the plane between what is visible and invisible moves too. So, not only do we stand *at* the interface between the visible and invisible worlds, but we *are* that interface.

Eurythmy takes seriously the qualitative aspect of space and how, in our human form, we are related to it. Nothing is arbitrary. So, if we are to bring the whole of ourselves to our social practice, and not just the half which is open to and influenced by the visible world of our front, what is the quality of the space we can access through our backs, that unappreciated resource and portal to the realm of the invisible?

### **What is Eurythmy?**

Eurythmy is an art which makes the invisible visible through human movement in space and time. As a performance art, by blending choreography, rhythm and gestures born of the elements and sounds of human speech and tone, it renders music and the poetic word visible in such a way that the experience of what we hear is brought alive to our other senses, feelings and meaning making faculties.

The starting point of eurythmy is the whole human being – body, soul and spirit. How we as thinking, feeling, active beings experience, learn from and penetrate (with growing awareness and agency) the remarkable wisdom that is the living human form in dynamic relationship to both finite and infinite space and time.

**Social Eurythmy** has been adapted for the workplace as a means of deepening understanding of intra- and interpersonal relationship and their formative impact on organisational life. Here eurythmy is the medium for making the world of social process and relationship visible through group movement so that we can surface its living lawfulness, and our place within it, not just with our heads but with our whole embodied being.

Whatever archetypal movement we start with, (e.g. contraction & expansion; straight & curved lines; giving & receiving; the 3 dimensions of space) the principle for developing each group exercise is based on that of organic processes of development. Once whatever starting movement or sequence is mastered and brought into rhythmical flow (e.g. stepping the 4 directions, forward, back, right, left), it is incorporated into what comes next. And similarly, each new step is included, integrated and transcended, organically enabling a complicated series of differentiated movements and dynamic relationships to arise in a short time, like a musical fugue made visible in space. A developmental way of working based on the laws of space, time and relationship that ensures everyone remains independently responsible for their own movements and no one is directing proceedings from outside. Throughout the session the use of all our senses is encouraged, so we are not only perceiving with our heads and eyes but through a felt sense of the entire body. Poetry often accompanies the movement bringing cohesive rhythm and helping to illuminate and deepen understanding of the particular theme we are working on. But very often we finish by moving in silence, relying not on any external prompt or aid but solely on our own heightened attentiveness and sensory awareness of both self and other, imparting an alive 'substance' to the space between.

## Artistry of the Invisible - Eurythmy in Social Practice

The real work of social transformation is engaging with and shifting the invisible. It is about attitude, habit and culture, power, bias and world view. It is also about creativity, relationship, process and pattern, and a host of other intangible qualities expressed by the human spirit which cannot be grasped and fixed in the way of something solid. Cannot be manipulated through a skill set and predicted by means of a model or formula. “Artists of the Invisible,” CDRA practitioners have called themselves. For if we are intentionally working with the whole human being as central to our practice, social practice must be seen as an art (with all the discipline that entails), rather than a mere technical, model-based methodology. And it is to the wide cross-section of the arts, including eurythmy, the art of the invisible, that CDRA has always looked to help access these intangibles. For it is through the arts that we can awaken imagination and an artist’s way of seeing, and help deepen understanding of how we human beings, in living social situations, work, change and develop.

So, what are some of the requirements for practising this artistry of social intervention? “*We have to learn to see,*” Nomvula Dlamini (then consultant and later director of CDRA) observed. “*When we see something, we can begin to work with it. Eurythmy helps us learn to see patterns and process.*” The ability to see pattern and process is a first step towards gaining an even deeper perception of the underlying movements which give rise to these patterns and the more visible (and often intractable) situations social practitioners are asked to work with. To see this formative movement requires both accuracy of outer perception and an activation of an inner ‘eye’, a sense for movement – the capacity for which we all have lying dormant within us and which, in eurythmy, we constantly strive to awaken.

Nomvula and I were reflecting together during a tea break at the week-long Organisational Development (OD) Event where a sizeable group of practitioners from across the globe had gathered to explore the theme of ‘Process’ – what is it really and what does it mean to be a process facilitator? This was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship with CDRA where I was employed to bring eurythmy to accompany a learning process on development practice. And it was here that I first realised the value of eurythmy as a means of enabling that ephemeral entity called ‘social process’ to become visible and to work with it consciously, by means of our moving together, in real time. As the organic architect, Keith Struthers, recently observed: “*Social eurythmy runs in tandem with social practice ... it is sourced from within us, our movement, our unconscious wisdom – and it makes visible processes that are normally invisible. It gives me a visceral sense of the reality of the invisible.*”

During the eurythmy sessions I was not only asking the group to try to discern the patterns, movements and relationships arising ‘out there’, between and around us as we were all moving together, but I was challenging them to turn a reflective eye inward to perceive how they were responding/reacting to each new movement, task and meeting of the other. Were they really observing and supporting the process (as they thought) or were they imposing how they thought it *should* be onto the

situation? In a similar group recently, a participant (who works as a Bridging Polarities through Art facilitator) noted, *"I saw a pattern of mine very quickly in the first session, ...trying to make everyone do it 'correctly'. This I let go of in the following sessions and it allowed me to be freer and in a flow..."* The eurythmy alerted her to a tendency she may unconsciously be bringing to her own facilitation and can now watch out for.

This process of looking out and looking in is a constant theme of all the eurythmy sessions I run, and of eurythmy itself. At first, we can only do it sequentially because we have to *think* it, to consciously remind ourselves to now look around - what am I noticing, who am I seeing and meeting, how are the different groups moving between each other, what patterns are arising? Then look in, what am I experiencing, how am I responding or reacting, what feelings and impulses are arising, are my hands actually doing what I think they are doing? But as a facilitator of social processes the aim is to develop the ability to do both simultaneously.

This is where eurythmy is particularly helpful as a modality for social practitioners because in eurythmy we are intentionally building the capacity to sense-while-doing, to reflect-while-doing. We are constantly expanding our awareness to the wider whole, looking from without in as it were, while simultaneously being extremely centred in our own body awareness. In eurythmy speak this is called 'centre-periphery' awareness. *"It's strange,"* noted the operational manager of an NGO, *"but the more centred I am in myself and what I am doing, the more aware I am of everyone else around me."* For it begins first and foremost with a deeply sensed and sensory self-awareness. *"The eurythmy helped bring me back to myself,"* a Mozambican development practitioner once noted. *"We are always out there, thinking and looking out there. It was good to come back into myself."*

With practice we can develop this faculty to become a true participant-observer, (even if only in moments) being out and being in at the same time, discovering that they are not divided but form a whole, where we are simultaneously deeply inside ourselves *and* inside the immediacy and flow of the situation, alert and responsive to its needs. This is perhaps what Aristotle means by 'phronesis' (inadequately translated from Greek as 'practical wisdom') – an ability to read and bring the appropriate response to a particular situation in the moment, in contrast to applying generalised theory. This faculty cannot be learnt through *logical thinking*, which by its nature is sequential and analytical. It has to involve the *body* with all its subtle sensing abilities and 3-dimensional non-linear awareness if we only pay attention to it. And as we pay more attention, sensing our own movements from within *as we are moving*, we start to access the rhythm and pulse of the living wisdom inherent in our human form and the perceptive possibilities of our (far more than five) senses. In other words, we start to open the true portals between ourselves and the world around us and make new discoveries about ourselves and this living world.

The more we practice this pouring of our awareness into our movements and our senses as we move together in space, the more we discover that our thinking begins to change, it becomes more mobile and flexible, more of a '*seeing-thinking*' than a

'figuring-out thinking'. "*I can see! I can see!*" a field worker of a community gardening organisation cried out joyfully in the middle of a eurythmy exercise as her consciousness suddenly shifted into this mode of thinking. A mode of thinking that can grasp wholes, a 'body thinking' that challenges our ideas and assumptions about 'what is'. A thinking able to understand paradox, to see relationships rather than just discrete things, and discern formative movement rather than just things moving. A mode of thinking which is attuned and responsive to the immediate needs of the moment. In short, a thinking suited to working with and in complex, living, social situations.

## Two Worlds Touching - Seeing Through the Finite, Holding Infinity

*...People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
Where the two worlds touch.*

*The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.*

*Rumi*

Imagine you are standing in a circle of about twenty people. I ask you all to briskly walk your very own straight line, forwards and backwards a few times, in and out of the circle. Now be exact, make sure it is straight and walk the same length (of your choice) from point A to point B every time. What does it feel like to walk this finite line? Where is it in relation to you and what is the quality of your movement?

But where does your straight line really begin?

This simple question draws our attention to the non-physical phenomenon of infinity. Because in eurythmy we are always working with the infinite. The 'centre-periphery' awareness I described earlier includes not just our immediate environment but opens to the infinite nature of space.

*"My line begins with me,"* a young student once answered in response to this question.

*"Where do you begin?"* I found myself asking. At which her face softened into an expression of curious wonder as she contemplated this deeply existential question, not in a dry, abstract, philosophical nor purely biological way, but through an embodied sensing and feeling which left her (and the group) with a shared sense of the mystery of our very existence. A mystery we so easily forget as we interact with people in our everyday lives and practice.

Returning to your infinite line, become aware of how, in order to walk it, you need to activate your imagination and sense, through your back, the line coming from infinity behind you - a movement into which you now step, as into a flowing river. Notice how you simultaneously move and are moved by it as it moves through, taking you with it as far as is physically possible until you let it go to travel on to infinity in front. And again, as it returns, from front to back and back to front, in a pulsing rhythm.

What does it feel like to move this infinite line? Where is it in relation to you and what is the quality of your movement? How does all this compare to walking your finite line?

Would you agree that the fixed and finite line gives rise to the sense that the line is 'out there, a 'thing' apart, which you can accurately measure through your stepping of it, you can lengthen and shorten and manipulate it at your will in an arbitrary way? There is, perhaps, a comforting sense of clarity and control. But with the infinite line do you notice how we are *inside* it, sensing rather than seeing its pulsing, infinite flow, which we briefly make visible through our own movement as it flows through us? We cannot manipulate or measure it or grasp it with our thinking in the same way as the finite line we see 'out there'. On the contrary it stretches us and our thinking beyond what we can think. And rather than a 'thing' it becomes a movement without end.

Outwardly, these two different lines - finite and infinite - may be exactly the same length both in space and time as we move them, but *qualitatively*, they are two completely different worlds created by how, inwardly, we view them. "*That is what we do in life, we create the boundaries, the divisions, in the way we see things,*" a community health worker reflected during this simple exercise. We feel this difference deeply in our bodies. In fact, it shifts our way of acting in or on the world.

This has relevance for the social practitioner. Seeing an organisation or community as a bounded 'thing', separate and 'out there' will encourage an approach that works *on* that situation, that tries to change and manipulate from the outside with perhaps a sense of certitude and control. Whereas approaching the same organisation or community and sensing its movements, whose histories and trajectories we cannot fully know, encourages an approach that will step into that movement, to work from the inside, to move and be moved by it. The qualitative difference in these two approaches will radically affect the quality and even substance of their outcomes. As McGilchrist says, "The way in which we attend to the world, changes the nature of the world we attend to."<sup>2</sup>

This simple start to a eurhythm session opens us to the eternal dance of the two worlds - the infinite and the finite, the invisible and the visible, the forming and the formed. Two worlds which we embody spatially through the singular difference between our backs and our fronts, and experience rhythmically in time through our sleeping and our waking, our unconscious and our conscious states of being. Two worlds which, through their intrinsic wholeness, form the coming into being, the growing and developing, and the dying away of all life: natural, individual and social.

This then is the practice - to become an active participant in this dance, to hold both worlds lightly and, at the same time, to be danced.

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<sup>2</sup> McGilchrist, I. (2013) *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* New Haven and London, Yale University Press p28

The inner attitude this requires is one of open and wakeful anticipation, an expanded sensing of what is arising, (in the manner of the infinite line) coupled with a readiness to bring oneself fully and responsibly to make it visible and work with it (with the clarity and energy of the finite line) while engaging with its flow. Both are necessary if we are not to fall into one of two extremes; a complete surrender to the underlying forming movement on the one hand (that overused phrase of 'just going with the flow'), and a goal directed, self-willed drive to move the situation on the other. In the social realm a strong underlying forming movement does not necessarily mean it is beneficial. Anyone who has worked with trying to shift a problematic organisational culture knows that no matter how many outer changes (of staff, structure, procedure etc.) are made the culture seems stubbornly to persist. It is only by making visible and engaging with this below-conscious movement that lasting transformation (perhaps leading to outer change) has the possibility of being sustained.

This is an intentional practice that holds the intention, not of an outcome, but of a way. To open to the invisible, forming world requires a conscious shift in our way of being. And here we can learn a lot from our backs.

The world in front of us is a given. We cannot *not* see the world out there with our everyday consciousness. It just is. But to enter the world of our backs needs intentional awareness because, being inaccessible to our sense of sight, the only way to do so is from within. It is not just to move backwards, because it is entirely possible to do so in the same way as walking forwards; "*on autopilot*" as a student once said. "*We need to go beyond what the eye sees and what the mind tells us to see. It is a very tricky thing to do though,*" noted one participant, because it is impossible to make this shift by means of the very mindset we are trying to change. We have to *do* it, with the intentional help of our sensing bodies.

### Moving Backwards into the Future

At the beginning of a eurythmy session that I bring to explore finding our way through the unknown, I am often struck by the level of focused concentration on people's faces as they try, in the usual way, to figure out their way forward. They look ahead to see who they will meet next even before they have left the person they are currently with, cutting corners with a sense of urgency to get there, not hearing or even listening to the accompanying poem's rhythmical timing and falling into a sense of panic when, as a result, their own timing is out and there is suddenly no one to meet. This is often followed by someone trying to stop the whole group in order to fix the problem by bringing their own ideas and adding to the confusion. So, when after a few attempts in this vein I suggest that we do the whole exercise backwards they look at me in horrified disbelief. Many are genuinely afraid of bumping into each other and worried about how and to whom to give the wooden balls we are exchanging. They cannot fathom the way to do it in their mind's eye. There is no inner picture or concept with which to direct their subsequent action and the inability to know what is going to happen before they begin, the inability to have

a meaningful plan, becomes stressful. The forward-thinking mind is at a loss as it is ill-suited for this type of unprecedented situation.

To help shift this mind-set I prepare the group to move backwards through a process of paying attention to and sensing the backs of their heads, necks, shoulders, arms and all the way down to their heels. Once we have awoken this neglected part of ourselves, we allow it to lead us backwards while remembering the simple guidelines I had already given while moving forward (but which many had ignored.) The results are astonishing, as indicated by this medley of responses from participants of a Goethean Observation course I ran:

*Feeling the space through my back, I was instantly relaxed which was unexpected ...I found I was more open minded.*  
*I really experienced the shift of my awareness from the busy, abstract internal dialogue to the reality of the work we were doing.*  
*I felt centred, awake and had a deepened awareness of myself and the world around me.*  
*I was struck by how much easier it was to move backwards... I noticed how [it] brought more order and how much attention I paid to my own movement, not just to others, as it was not as automatic as moving forwards.*  
*I was able to sink deeper into my senses and my awareness seemed to be much more expansive... There was a deepening of presence and I was able to more fully and clearly see what and who came before my eyes.*  
*I felt a sense of excitement and anticipation to see who I would meet. It was as if I was meeting people for the first time, there was a freshness in how I saw them.*

This form of relaxed, open and highly attentive sensory awareness of self and world, this state of 'active receptivity' as it has been called, is exactly the mode of consciousness we need if we are to find our bearings in an unknown world. And it seems that the way there is through our backs.

So, I invite you now to (literally) step backwards into that unknown world, allowing your awake and sensitised back to lead you there. Notice what you see (without turning your head) and how the world presents itself to you. What is the quality of your attention, the quality of the space? Now, in addition, pay careful attention to *how* you are stepping. How you lift your foot, how you carry it backwards and how you place it, which part of your foot touches the earth first. Notice the quality of this way of stepping. Now take a few steps forwards as you normally do. Which part of your foot do you place on the ground first? Notice the quality of this habitual way of walking. Do you see how moving backwards we naturally lead with our toes, the most sensitive part of our feet, to tentatively find a safe foothold? Whereas moving forwards we lead with our heels, bringing a certain forcefulness with us into the space.

What if you were to step forwards in the manner of stepping backwards, awake to your back and leading with your toes, allowing them to reach out to what lies ahead



- to the unknown, unseen future - enfolding and unfolding it as you bring it towards you with each sensitive step? This is the eurythmical way of walking. Notice the changes in your consciousness as you contrast this eurythmy stepping with your usual heel-first walk a few times. Try to characterise this difference in consciousness. Which way of stepping would be most suited to moving into the unknown? And is not each social situation we enter an unknown?

To embody social practice, then, is to constantly be aware from which part of ourselves we are perceiving, stepping into and engaging with the world around us. It is to move forward into the forming world of the future while maintaining an awareness of our backs and in the manner of stepping backwards. And by so doing, to bring the whole of ourselves, and the way of being this engenders, to participate in any given situation. It is to actively use our bodily senses and way of moving to help us do so, for as one participant wrote: *“The sensing body is experienced not merely as a physical thing but a finely tuned living instrument of perception, the door to both the world around us and to our innermost being.”*

And this finely constituted sensing body is itself not finished, not finite, but grows and develops the more we pay attention, listen to and partner with it in our interaction with the world around us. For as Goethe discovered, *“Every object, well contemplated, creates an organ for its perception.”* So, to develop our *finely tuned instrument of perception* is not to create another ‘tool’ for our ‘toolbox’, to be ‘used’ in an instrumental way, as our old way of thinking would have it. Rather, it is itself a radical disruption in our habitual way of seeing and thinking, potentially opening a way to a new, participatory perception of a world unceasingly coming into being.

But we humans don’t often take kindly to disruption, sometimes having to be pushed, and it is perhaps not surprising that my own journey into this new Covid world of the unknown has taken the embodied form it has. In the small hours of a March morning, before South Africa had entered lockdown and before I was fully aware of its presence in Cape Town, the virus struck, without warning and with a force that literally took my breath away. Reflecting back on that initial period I recognise both sides of myself – the forward-thinking, ‘knowing’ part of myself that confidently approached the illness in the same way I would any other flu. After a week or so I was ‘fine’ and self-assuredly shared my successful approach with friends and family on WhatsApp. But, simultaneously, I was aware of a subtle movement rising resolutely from that invisible, forming part of my being. A quiet voice telling me that I was embarking on a journey that would take me to the edge, challenge me to the core, with the possibility of real transformation, but with no guarantees of how it will end. True to this promise, the shape-shifting illness returned again, and again, at first with increasing intensity, over the following days, weeks, and now ongoing months. At the height of its onslaught I learned that facing the ultimate unknown, real or perceived, is to be asked to relinquish all illusion of control (the source of enormous fear). The only choice was to surrender with an absolute inner quietude achieved by opening to the backspace through my sensing body (the source of a surprising strength). While now much less dramatic, my journey has no predictable end date and facing the unknown is a daily occurrence where the fine

line between acceptance and acquiescence is an abyss of shattered hopes and disappointment to self and others. Equally the line between appropriate assertiveness and over-optimistic denial of my condition is a precipice at the bottom of which lies complete physical collapse. Finding the right way of working between my forward-thinking self, with its underlying desire to 'go back to normal', and my sensing backspace, with its potential for ushering in a new way of being, is a constant exercise in wakeful discernment. But in this I have developed an intimate and deeply respectful relationship with my body. Body as compass and guide, neither succumbing to it nor overriding it, but staying close to it, listening and sensing. Affirming that far from being the solid substance it appears to be, the body is a fluid and responsive being whose sudden flood of wellness and wellbeing at each correct, sensitive step is the light that shines the way through.

And there is no other way but through.

Acknowledgements:

It is with much gratitude and warmth that I acknowledge my teacher, Annemarie Ehrlich, the pioneer and founder of the Institute for Eurythmy in Working Life, whose eurythmy approach and forms are a source of ongoing discovery and learning for me.

<https://www.ewl-institute.com/>

I would also like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the CDRA practitioners and fellow associates alongside whom I have travelled this wonderful, exploratory and evolving journey of practice. Thank you to the CDRA Board for recognising the need and providing the resources to articulate the essence of this practice in a publication for which this piece has been written.