

Body Awareness and Liturgical Reform

Experiences from a Collaborative Workshop

Held by a Dancer and a Visual Artist

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Abstract

The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2005 launched their foundational statement on culture and art. In this document the value of bringing body awareness through dance into ecclesial celebrations is highlighted.

The most recent event in this field is the workshop that took place 26-29 March 2009 at the Norwegian pilgrim place Granavollen. The event was organized as a meeting between professional performative, visual and auditive artists that invited ecclesial staff into a joint and relational artistic practice. The work took place in two medieval stone churches, ending in an experimental celebration on Sunday 29 March.

Three workshops were set up: body awareness and objects, movement and sound. The experiments undertaken were documented by video and photography. This paper focuses and reflects on the experience gained in the workshop of body awareness and objects arranged by a dancer/choreographer and a visual artist.

The objects used were stones and pebbles. The workshop consisted of three phases: 1. lying down while stones were laid upon the body, one by one; 2. standing upright and choosing your stones, balancing the weight; 3. handling a prayer loop of stones, individually and as a group.

This paper analyses, interprets and reflects on the event. The expected findings were confirmed; body sensitivity may be trained and triggered by simple methods, opening for a deepened personal and shared experience of being, which is fundamental in the liturgical life.

Introduction

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The most recent event in this field is the workshop that took place 26-29 March 2009 at the Norwegian pilgrim place Granavollen.³ The event was organized as a meeting between professional performative, visual and auditive artists that invited ecclesial staff into a joint and

¹ *Kunsten å være kirke; om kirke kunst og kultur* (red. Norske kirkeakademier, Kulturmelding for Den norske kirke. Oslo: Verbum, 2005). This document should be read in relation to the ongoing liturgical reform in the Norwegian Church.

² Dance in ecclesial contexts in Norway was first introduced by Ragni Kolle in 1963. Since then, several dancers have entered the liturgical space and used church rooms for performances. The history of ecclesial dance in Norway is currently being written by dancer and cantor Emma-Elze Bongers.

³ Verksted på Vollen – 2009. Liturgi=handling – perspektiver på kunst, kropp og gudstjenesteliv (online: <http://www.verkstedpavollen.no/>).

relational artistic practice. The work took place in two medieval stone churches and an emptied old shop,⁴ ending in an experimental celebration on Sunday 29 March 2009.

Three workshops were set up: 1. Body awareness and objects, 2. Movement, and 3. Sound. This paper only focuses and reflects on the experience gained in the workshop on body awareness and objects, arranged by a dancer/choreographer and a visual artist. It firstly, describes the conceptual basis and theoretical foundation of the workshop. Secondly, it analyses and accounts for the composition of the workshop and its actualization. Thirdly, it interprets the experiences and phenomena registered. In conclusion, parallels are drawn between body awareness and religious sensitivity and experience.

Conceptual and Theoretical Basis

Grete Refsum is a visual artist and artistic researcher, currently working on meditation and meditation objects. Ingunn Rimestad is an experienced dancer, pedagogue and choreographer, specialized in body awareness. Grete works in ecclesial contexts, while Ingunn has her basis in the secular world of performances. Their meeting arena has been in Oslo Academy of the Arts as colleagues. Ingunn introduced Grete to her former student Margrete Lühje Kvalbein six years ago, and Margrete soon invited Grete into collaboration in some of her ecclesial projects. When *Verksted på vollen* was launched as an experimental workshop directed to ecclesial staff, but run by performative artists, Margrete asked Grete if she would like to join in with her experiences from artistic ecclesial work in the visual art field. This became the opportunity to close the circle of acquaintances; now, Grete invited Ingunn to collaborate in setting up a workshop, and she responded positively.

As a start, Ingunn and Grete brought their recent work together that were: body awareness training and meditation/prayer ropes. Ingunn occasionally uses stones and pebbles in her classes on body awareness. Grete uses the same material for the production of meditation objects. Both of them pick stones that they occasionally find in nature; each keeps a collection of private treasures that they draw upon artistically. Thus the stones became their first connecting item.

The next collaborative step, was to become informed about the actual working processes and professional thinking of the other. Ingunn invited Grete to take one of her classes, and Grete showed Ingunn her prayer ropes. During these meetings of actions with objects and reflection, a collaborative work was shaped.

The workshop to be held at Granavollen was focused on liturgy and titled *Liturgy=Action*. Grete suggested that the thinking of the late British philosopher of religion, John Macmurray (1891 – 1976), might be a possible theoretical point of departure. According to him, the religious mode of reflection arises from the problematic of personal relations. He writes:

It is the problematic of personal unity – that is to say, of community – which gives rise to religion; and it is to this central aspect of life that religion refers. Its function is to maintain and extend, to deepen and develop human community (Macmurray 1961: 60).⁵

Following Macmurray further, the primary act of religious reflection is the corporate performance of a ritual. In Christian contexts, such rituals are called liturgy. If we regard the liturgical acts as some in which our relations to ourselves, the community and thereby God, are to be restored, what can artists offer as a contribution?

⁴ A former cooperative store called S-laget.

⁵ See part III and IV, *The Religious Reference* (p. 45) and *Christianity for the Future* (p. 62).

The American Janet Adler PhD has developed and teaches the discipline called *Authentic Movement*,⁶ which concerns psychological healing, artistic impulse and experience of the numinous. She speaks about the inner witness in a person that reflects our genuine being, as opposed to the outer witnesses that most often do not see and accept us the way we are. She says: "There is a felt need, so profound in the West, to be seen as one is, doing what one is doing" (Adler 2002: 6). The challenge according to Adler, is the formation of the inner witness, letting it direct our behaviour and movements. She writes:

The inner witness learns to accompany the body into the shapes of the moving self, discovering one's truth. The inner witness learns to honor that which the body directly knows (Adler 2002: 6).

The American movement therapist Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen works on *Body-Mind Centering* by transformative experience through movement (Cohen 2008).⁷ She is concerned with body movements as one tool for insight. The concepts *collapse* and *yielding* are central in her thinking. Collapse is when you give up your weight to gravity, surrendering totally, while yielding involves release into gravity with rebound and resilience (Cohen 2009: 16). Without rest, our bodies hardly have energy for movement, standing up or dancing. Rather, they are likely to collapse, being pulled down by gravity. Thus, to enforce activity, the acceptance of our bodies' need for resting is vital.

Liturgy is action; it is the assembly of a congregation working out a sequence of acts directed to God. Instead of intervening directly into the liturgical ceremony, suggesting artistic breaks and embellishments, we decided that the body awareness and object group would start working with the most foundational basis in the individual. We set up a scale for our work, in which the polar ends were constituted by: a) lying passively on the floor, and b) standing in an assembly actively taking part in the liturgy. The intention of the workshop was to let the participants experience the whole scale: take them from lying passively on the floor to raising and yielding towards heaven.⁸ The possibility for succeeding in this action presupposes grounding so that the body can perceive support.

Liturgy may be regarded a shared, communal prayer. Basically, prayer affects the ones that pray, not God. We pray in order to change and dispose ourselves so as to receive properly – religiously speaking – what God offers us in life, secularly said: to cope with the ways things go (Brümmer 2008: 12-13). This intended attitude towards life induced by prayers, may be seen as parallel to the concept of yielding, as opposed to merely collapsing when faced with trouble.

Often when artists enter religious spaces, Christian in particular, they wish to profane the sacred by irony, ridicule or denial.⁹ Our attitude towards this workshop has been contrary: we wanted to contribute to the building of a body-rooted religious relationship and experience. Furthermore and in accordance with the American feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, we insist on bringing the aspect of bodily knowledge and sensation into the discourse of faith, theology and God. Johnson says:

What is the right way to speak about God? This is a question of unsurpassed importance, for speech to and about the mystery that surrounds human lives and the universe itself is a key activity of a community of faith" (Johnson 2002: 3-4).

⁶ See online: <<http://store.innertraditions.com/Contributor.jmdx?action=displayDetail&id=259>>.

⁷ See online:<<http://www.bodymindcentering.com/Bonnie/>>.

⁸ The latter expression is from Cohen (2009: 16).

⁹ See, for instance, *100 Artists See God*, edited by J. Baldessari and M. Cranston (London: ICA, 2004).

Considering language, meaning is essential for all, secular or religious alike.¹⁰ In contemporary Western cultures, the majority of people have difficulties in perceiving liturgical and theological language as meaningful. In a secular society, the former opposition towards ecclesial authorities seems to shift into to mere indifference. Theological language, Christian symbols and the meaning of liturgy no longer communicates in itself. As artists working in relation to sensuous understanding and knowledge¹¹ and in response to Johnson, we allege that meaning (and truth) arises when you get into contact with yourself through your bodily feelings (Halprin 1995; Hartley 1995; Brooks 1986). This is a premise of our collaborative work on the workshop.

The Workshop

Conditions

The workshop took place in the former store ca. 120 m², now stripped of everything but its architectural elements, only coated with a new spread of white paint. We wished to work within a profane space to be free to experiment with what might come.

Two groups were established, one in the beginning of the overall seminar and the other two days later. The first group counted six persons in all, the other 13, only females. Each group was planned with a similar structure, comprising three basic phases within a maximum of three hours:

- Phase 1: Lying down, receiving objects
- Phase 2: Standing up, balancing objects
- Phase 3: Relational movements, handling art objects

In between the phases, there were breaks for individual reflection by drawing or writing on paper.

The objects to work with were a) natural stones and b) an art object. All stones were brought by the organizers of the group. They were rather small, mostly less than 10 cm². The art object chosen was a big *pater noster*, prayer rope of 100 units, made by pebbles. The stone rope is ca. 3 m long and fairly heavy. Constructively it is constructed by galvanized iron wire ca 0.9 mm/diameter, bound together by hand.

Phase 1: Lying down, receiving objects

The initial phase of the workshop was led by Ingunn. After welcoming the participants and without any further information, she asked everyone to equip themselves with the necessary mats and blankets and find a spot in the room where they wished to situate themselves.

When the participants had settled in their chosen places, Ingunn asked them to lie down comfortably on the back or the stomach as they preferred. Positioned as they wished, she explained what was going to happen: Ingunn and Grete would put stones, one by one, onto each body that would receive their weights.

Without speaking, stones were placed on the individual, figure 1.

¹⁰ This aspect of the concept development is inspired by the thinking of the late Austrian psychologist Viktor E. Frankl (Frankl 2000).

¹¹ See Søren Kjærup, *Another Way of Knowing: Baumgarten, Aesthetics, and the Concept of Sensuous Cognition* (Bergen: Bergen Academy of the Arts, 2006).



Figure 1. Phase 1: Lying down receiving stones.

Stones and placement positions were chosen arbitrary on intuition. However, we tried to vary the character of the stones given. Parameters to consider were: size, shape, surface texture. Since the room was a bit cold, the stones were warmed on the radiators,



figure 2. Warming the stones

The placement positions became related to: the lying position of the individual and the landscape of the bodies as the receiving surface. Some had wrapped themselves in blankets and this would influence the place stones effectively could be places.

Each stone was allowed to stay in place for a few minutes, before being removed and another set on the body at a different place. In between every shift of taking away and putting on there was a small break of a few seconds in which the body had nothing placed upon it. After five shifts of stones, the participants were asked to turn their bodily position. Then, another session of five stones was worked out in silence. The two sessions lasted for 45 minutes.

In between phase: drawing

Ending the sessions of receiving stones, Ingunn instructed the participants to start recollecting themselves, inviting them to use paper and colour pens to reflect on their experiences, figure 3.



Figure 3. Ingunn brings colour pens.

The participants started to draw and write with no further instruction, figures 4 a-c.



Figure 4a. Reflecting on paper, stone assembly.



Figure 4b and c. Reflecting on paper, situation.

Phase 2: Standing up, balancing objects

The first group was so concentrated in their reflections that we decided to let people work until the majority was finished. In this phase, the participants firstly were asked to pick one stone and to experiment with balancing their body in relation to the weight of the stone they had chosen. Afterwards, they might pick more stones and continue their experimentation further. The challenge was to shift positions and start moving, while addressing the weight of the stones in relation to themselves. Afterwards there was a break for reflective drawing.

Phase 3: Relational movements, handling art objects

After phase 2, Grete took command, asking the group to sit in a circle. Then, she introduced the chain of stones, inviting the group to handle it, figure 5.



Figure 5. Handling the stone chain.

The group started carefully, sensitive and exploring. After a while, the participants raised and in standing position began to move. The movements expanded and grew towards an expressive mood of pulling and dragging that the chain could not withstand. It broke, and Grete had to intervene and repair it on the spot, figure 6.



Figure 6. Grete repairing the broken chain.

This development was unforeseen. Grete and Ingunn both started to talk about the object, its strength and fragility, encouraging the participants to meet the object they handled. This was a (wo)man made object. The task was to explore it as such, to understand it structurally and relate to it individually and as a group. This chain was not as strong as the separate stones. Bound together by hand it has breaking points, borders that cannot be passed without harming it. How could the group relate to its limits and at the same time do something with it? The group was challenged to concentrate in multiple ways: on their own body, the chain and the others holding the chain, figure 7 a-c.



7 a. Ingunn intervening in the group.





Figure 7 b and c. Grete supervising the group.

Closing the workshop

After having found a mutual relationship within the group of moving together with the pebble chain, the energy moved towards stillness, and the session ended. Grete then explained what the pebble chain was conceptually: a *pater noster* cord. Her idea was to let the group experiment with this prayer object in order to see what happened to it. Can a meditative prayer be a dance? Was the group's handling of this prayer object a prayer in itself? Did the artistic concept bring something more into the experience than dancing with it without knowing? Grete closed the workshop by starting to pray the Lord's prayer slowly, and the participants joined in.

Interpretation

Phase 1

The act of lying down comprises both collapsing and yielding. The body is passive, supported by the underlay. The more you give in to gravity and let your body sink, the deeper the rest. This was the starting point of the workshop. Most participants gladly sank down into their mats, with only a few tensed skeptics.

In this phase, the challenge for the participants was to receive the stones given to the body surface. Stones laid upon your body become sensational encounters that the body will react to in various ways. The stones represent weights, sizes, shapes, structures, warmth or cold. These qualities the body has to meet and relate to. Additionally, there is a non verbal communication between the one that sets the stones and the one receiving them.¹² The sensuous work executed by giver and receiver is interactive, each bodily presence influencing the other.

The act of placing the stones can be done attentively or distractedly. We focused on being present in the moment, attentive and sensitive to the weights of the stones and the bodies we related to. When taking off and setting a new stone onto a body, we considered the breathing

¹² In the beginning, the group was explicitly told that if anyone felt uncomfortable, they should let us know.

of this very body, trying to melt into its movements of inhaling and expiration. We also were concerned about variation in the placement of the stones. Sometimes, we deliberately wished to surprise a body by placing for instance small pebbles into an open hand after having put some load onto the back. A tensed forehead might receive a cold little bead of a stone, while a voluminous part might be met by some weight.

The experience of this session is one of attention, registering the sensations and feelings within the body as it receives and accepts the stones arriving. The stones may induce a difference, offering a spot from where a new awareness can arise. As you feel the qualities of the stone, the body adapts to its presence. After a while, a new bodily equilibrium will be set. You may even feel the stone after it has gone. Each stone offers a new challenge of reception and balancing. This activity represents an opportunity to experience the reality of the moment, accepting what is given to you.

The in between phase of reflection on paper was eagerly welcomed. Several spent quite some time on this work. Those who needed less time were free to relax.

Phase 2

Phase 2 demanded personal initiative. Here, the two groups reacted differently. Group one had reached a level of stillness. From this state, they carefully selected one stone that appealed to them and stayed with it. The other group, however, helped themselves more generously and quickly moved into a playful exploration of balancing and moving.

Phase 3

Phase 3 became amazing. The energy building up through the movements with the chain, escalated suddenly. The playful dancing unexpectedly turned into an outburst of wild energy that resulted in breaking the construction of the chain. The group individuals lost their awareness and critical thinking, behaving destructively. However, the participants seemed happy to let go of polite barriers of behaviour. The workshop was not intended to be any kind of therapeutic or catharsis event. However, this incidence, showed how a group may stir up energies that get out of control. The same thing happened in both groups, but the second time we were better prepared to tackle it when the participants at a certain moment lost contact with the object and started to pull and treat it recklessly. The lack of attentiveness towards the relationships between themselves moving and the object to be handled within the group was interesting to witness. This evidence demonstrates how senseless – as opposed to sensible conduct may erupt. When the chain fell apart and the pebbles bounded, the fierce dance came to a halt. While Grete repaired the chain, the group members recollected themselves. They recaptured their awareness, attentively considering the robustness and fragility of what they were handling in relation to their body movements and each other. This interplay is complicated and challenging, but ended successfully in short sequences of beautiful dancing.

Closing

The end of the workshop was planned as a closing of the secular event and an opening towards the liturgy. The group had played with a chain of pebbles without knowing what it was, but for being stones chained by wire. Grete's leap into Lord's prayer, made the change. The documenting photographer was instantly shocked by this shift. She told us about her reactions afterwards. As a contemporary artist without a personal relation to the church, she regarded this step unethical according to the setting. However, the natural response within the group became for her a revelatory moment that changed her mind. She had forgotten that the workshop was directed to ecclesial staff. Grete knew that within both groups there were several theologians and priests. The prayer naturally closed one session, opening for the next step of entering the church room.

The second group was twice as big as the first and held at the end of the seminar when people were tired of impressions. Here, the individual needs were so deviant that it was impossible to keep a shared concentration within the group. As organizers we learnt that laying flat down was an activity of hard work of sensing. At the end of the day, metaphorically speaking, people recognized their need for rest and no one seemed eager to rise up and yield into heaven.

Conclusion

The workshop aimed at strengthening the body awareness of the participants. By simple methods the body's ability to sense, meet and balance outer impulses was challenged. The stone objects demanded handling, holding, lifting, carrying and moving in a human interplay. Several relations were explored:

- me supported by the floor
- me as the underlay of stones
- me in relation to a made object
- me in relation to a group
- me in relation to a made object and a group

The acceptance of presence and reality was central throughout the workshop. We witnessed how personal ambitions sometimes took over, disturbing the group interaction with the shared chain. Then presence and renewed attention had to be regenerated.

The experiences gained in this workshop, may be seen as a metaphor of liturgy in which the individual has to let go, yielding without collapsing into the assembly, being sensitive to the presence of the ritual. If not, the ritual itself gradually may be undermined, ending in collapse. The liturgy can best be carried out by the *Ecclesia* if the people of God are sensitively attending.

Some weeks after the workshop, one of the participants contacted Grete. She wanted to tell her something. Being unacquainted with art, she had been somewhat anxious about signing up for the workshop. Her conception of the adventure proved less than realistic. However, after the session of lying flat, receiving the stones, when she was drawing the pattern of the stones on her body onto a paper to express her experience, she suddenly felt the floor supporting her. Instantly she knew that this feeling was God upholding her. She felt safe and tranquil. Is not this phenomenon what theologically may be denoted an experience of salvation?

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