

95 Rituals

for Anna Halprin

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Bounty of a Blunder

by Dana Iova-Koga

“Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing there is a field. “

I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about. Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other' doesn't make any sense.”

This poem, perhaps one of Rumi's best known, has been running through my mind constantly of late, bringing me solace and helping to turn an experience that was nightmarish into a rare gift.

I can see Rumi's field. But there is no grass; instead in its place is the creaking of old boats, and a web of empty masts.

I can feel my feet walking there, their soles awake to the rough concrete surface underneath them. I can summon with absolute clarity the bend of my knee as I walk, and the wind against my skin, all of my pores lifted in attention. Because I was in that field, very briefly, on July 10th. And I was naked.

It was the penultimate performance of 95 Rituals, a piece that took several years in the organizing with partner Dancers' Group, several months of making with a huge team of creative collaborators: 10 core performers, 5 musicians, 3 designers, 3 videographers, a photographer, 20 something volunteers, 9 guest performers, 5 venues, and countless, countless hours of my husband's time (Director, Shinichi.) It was the largest piece by far that inkBoat has ever undertaken, the first big work we've made since having our second child, and as if all that weren't weighty enough, it was an homage to our dearly beloved teacher/mentor Anna Halprin, in honor of her 95th birthday. The entire process of making the work up to that point, the evening of July 10th, had already been dense with learning, intensity, beauty and challenge.

That night was the 4th performance at Hyde Street Pier, part of the historic Maritime museum and National park in Fisherman's Wharf.

I stepped into Rumi's field (in the form of a pier) near the end of the performance. That night we had as guests We Players and Rova Saxophone Quartet, two groups of stellar artists with whom we've collaborated in the past and hope to work with in the future. Rova was playing a piece composed by their own Larry Ochs and inkBoat was

improvising to their score. During the improvisation I got to be audience, as I had to soon leave the boat to prepare for the next scene, which took place on the pier. Improvisation is a slippery art, its sense of danger and uncertainty add to the magic of those times when it works well. And that night as the performers interacted with each other, the music, and the audience it was at its magical best. It was, to me, a profoundly beautiful improv, nearly perfect in its timing and execution. I didn't want to leave. But as I stepped off of the boat and hurried into my place I felt such feelings of elation and pride in my fellow performers, in all of us, for having stuck with the sometimes painful and difficult process through to its conclusion, and for staying so alive and vibrant within it. The feeling continued as I took my place with three other dancers at the end of the pier. We each had two buckets of water, ready to perform "Water Print," a simple, task-based score of dipping our feet into our buckets, one at a time, and walking on the pier, leaving footprints behind us. elated, caught in the improvisational moment I suggested that we take our clothes off, and two of the other dancers agreed. The fourth dancer decided not to, and ruefully wished he had rubber gloves and a face mask to don in order to create a more fully contrasting body to three nude ones. The three of us made quick piles of clothes and began the score. For the first few minutes of the walk down the pier I felt utterly alive and complete and in sync with the other dancers and the place of which we were a part. The scene had previously been done while wearing big coveralls, and the lack of clothing gave my body a whole new collection of sensations to absorb and attend to. The wind on my skin, the lack of borders between body and air. A more acute awareness of the shape of my moving body. Being there and performing the simple and repetitive action was suddenly all there was, and it was enough.

But very soon after that time of pure experience I came back to an awareness of others, the remembrance that I was being watched. I glanced up and saw at the other end of the pier our stage manager and though I couldn't see her face I could read the shape and quality of her body and there was tightness. She was not caught in the poetry of nude bodies making footprints; she was feeling anxious. And that was when I yanked myself out of Rumi's field and realized with a sickening smack what a stupid thing I had done.

The day before I had asked if I could dance without a top on the beach in the beginning of the show. Permission had been asked of the Park. They said no. I was absolutely not surprised nor upset by this ruling. I was so unfazed by it that I (apparently) forgot about it. When I did remember, I was halfway down the pier, buck-naked with my clothes way behind me and half of the scene yet to go. So there was no choice but to go on. But while the first half of "Water Print" was dreamlike in its vivid details and sensations, the second half was like a nightmare.

What followed for me in the hours after finding myself naked outside of the field, very clearly (at that point in my mind anyway) on the side of wrongdoing was a messy jumble of shame and fear. The next morning we were informed that our final performance of 95 Rituals was cancelled due to the blatant rule breaking. I curled up in a ball and was visited by some of the deepest hues of dark feelings I've perhaps ever experienced.

But also what came immediately was love and support from others, a whole lot of it. What I was met with, when faced with a very primal fear of being hated or shunned or isolated, was the total opposite. The love came from my fellow performers and from Shinichi. It came from members of our whole extended 95 Rituals team, from my family, my friends, fellow artists, audience who had seen the show or who were planning to attend the last performance. It even came from the Park rangers, who, when we came to strike our props, were kind and understanding and expressed a commitment to continue to support art happening in their park.

It was the first of many unexpected gifts that came about because of my blunder. I was in an extremely vulnerable state, and I was being held there with compassion by those around me. I will always, always remember that feeling, a mixture of pain and awe, with deep gratitude.

In those first hours and days, some people, while comforting me, also urged me to stand behind the choice I made with conviction. I understood the wisdom of that urging, and yet I couldn't do it honestly then, I was too stuck in feeling of wrongness. But now after some time, and some reflecting upon Rumi's field, I am thinking about what the greater story is, the part that is not mine at all, the part I can stand behind and the part I can take with me. I realize that in order for the incident, which included both the ecstatic walk through Rumi's field and the nauseatingly horrible error of it, to acquire meaning and import beyond my relatively little feelings I personally need to connect it to dance – my dance, our dance, and Dance. Failing to do so would render it a mistake and only a mistake. And that would be a disservice, no, a disrespect to any of us involved in any way, and in a way, a disrespect for the happening itself.

If I had to pinpoint a single intention behind why I dance it would be to embody beings that are not me. Why? Because I hope that in dancing beings that are not me I can somehow open myself to the audience and allow them to feel things that belong to none of us, that are universal and flow through all of us and ultimately connect us to each other and to life itself. Of course, the only tool I have for this lofty goal is my own body, so it's a challenging and paradoxical intention by design, and if I am lucky enough to reach 95 like Anna I may just start to get there.

Immediately after finding out that our last show was cancelled (when I was curled up and wondering if it would be better to move to Vermont or somewhere in Europe) I had another brief journey through the field. This time it arose suddenly, and clearly not from a euphoric state as it had at Hyde Street, but from its polar opposite. I was feeling completely wrapped in my sadness and remorse when suddenly it was as if I were surrounded by space and in that spaciousness I felt connected to everyone else on the planet who was feeling or had felt those particular feelings. For that brief moment, the feelings were no longer mine, but rather part of all humanity. It was a brief release and a wide perspective that I can still taste, amidst all the other memories of that day. In Tibetan Buddhism this is part of Tonglen, the practice of finding connection and spaciousness, rather than isolation and suffocation, within the palette of human emotions that we all share. And it is a major component of cultivating compassion.

There is a link there to making performance work too, and to my desire to dance an anonymous body. As a performer, I wish that my spirit could meet the spirit of my audience somewhere in between ourselves. I want to go with the audience to the place that Rumi speaks of – where “the phrase ‘each other’ doesn’t make any sense.” But how can we get there? I want to find the way, through these parallel practices of connecting to universal humanity and performing, and I suspect that the spaciousness I felt in the midst of my suffering, and the suffering itself, have something to teach me in that regard.

I received a memo at Hyde Street from my Inner Punk. She’s of the opinion that if I am going to grow as a dancer I need to let go of fears of what other people think about me and about not being good enough. And she’s apparently willing to kick me out beyond the ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing if necessary. She definitely got my attention, and now I’m willing to converse, or mud-wrestle if necessary, with her in order to strike a balance between risk-taking and care.

I have long known that one of my weaknesses as an artist is my hesitancy to take risks. Not uniquely, the reluctance comes from not wanting to appear stupid, to make a mistake or to fail. For more than 20 years I have been encouraged by many gifted and inspiring teachers to take more risks. One of the funny things about this whole incident (and I am at the point now of enjoying collecting the humorous bits) is that in getting naked in 95 Rituals I finally took a big risk and in many ways my worst fears were affirmed, it was a really stupid mistake. And I’m not even sure if it should count as taking a risk since in the moment I wasn’t really conscious about breaking a rule. But nevertheless, I think it can go on my resume as a risk taken, and I plan on doing it more, even though and maybe especially because in many ways it was a failure, and I not only didn’t die, I have become more alive.

My greatest dance influence, with whom I lived and farmed for several years, is Min Tanaka. I would call him my teacher except that he refuses the title. (Incidentally Min’s work was influenced by Anna. Though very different in many ways, they have a history of mutual personal and creative respect and the first time I met Anna was while touring through the us with him.) He used to speak to us of the state he reached when he was dancing at his best. He described it as a kind of mental speed. He said that it didn’t matter how fast or slowly he was moving, it was as if he could see what would happen next, right before it happened. Other times he would coach us to be “cool.” Again, this was regardless of the quality of movement we were executing; it was more about being able to be fully aware while dancing rather than getting swept away or wrapped by one’s own movement. When I had the thought to take off my costume for “Water Print,” I was very present in a certain way, in a purely physical way, and also in an emotionally pure state. I was also very unconscious in a certain way. I was unaware of the consequences or effects of my actions. So I was halfway very there and halfway not there at all. As a dancer, I want to be able to have the widest range of awareness when I am performing, one that can feel impulses and choose to follow them or not with lightning speed. This awareness includes the sensation of a knuckle, the audience members in the back row, the distant call of an unseen bird. I feel a renewed commitment to practicing that wide,

cool awareness that has plenty of space for details, energy, passion, risk and above all sensitivity.

As I write this I am far away from the parched Bay Area. I am in Oregon, on a river, in a small cabin that once belonged to my great-grandparents. Here, though also in a drought, it is lush by comparison. The curtains of greenery and the remote location afford us the luxury of extreme privacy. We spend hours of each day on the bank of the river, moving around sand, throwing stones, swimming and hopping across rocks. And mostly we are unclothed. This has never seemed noteworthy until this year, and I pay a new attention to our nudity. In particular I observe my children while they are absorbed in their absorption of the life around them. Granted, they are safe here, and free in a way they could never be in a public or urban setting, but their comfort in their own skin is astounding. They are utterly at home in their bodies. I believe that during my short walk through Rumi's field on the pier I was also at home. And I want to return there much more often, both in dance and in life. And I do not mean to say that I plan to strip down in public on a regular basis. I crave a belonging in and to my own body to a degree that goes much deeper than my skin or what covers it. I want to find home in my bones and connective tissues. I want that level of belonging to myself so that when I dance, I can forget myself and become indistinguishable from the space I occupy.

This reminds me of something Anna said when she talked on the phone to Shinichi during an early rehearsal at Hyde Street Pier. We were all feeling daunted by the complexity of the space, and how to find a greater meaning of our dance there. She just happened to call at a moment when we were sitting on the beach and feeling stumped and so Shinichi asked her for advice. She said something like: "Just being there in the space with the audience is enough. In today's day and age it is a political act." We thought and talked much about that comment afterwards and what we interpreted is that in bringing our attentive, performing bodies to an outdoor site we are asking the audience to pay attention to it, we are drawing their attention to sky, the wind, the birds. Asking the audience to be aware of the landscape is asking them to connect to it. And because we live in a time when this kind of connection is rare, asking the audience to be aware, through our physical presence and their own is a political and creative act.

If there is a single thread of Anna's multi-layered legacy that I hope to carry on, it is this. To find home in the body to the extent that it is not separate from its surroundings, to inspire others to feel that belonging both to themselves and to the earth. Because if this kind of belonging can be experienced, we will have no choice but to respect and care for our individual bodies and our collective earth body. This line of thinking is a stretch for me, and I wonder how I could possibly effect that kind of change through dancing. But when I watch my kids playing in their naked, comfortable skin and I see that there really isn't a difference between them and their environment, that they are absolutely indistinguishable from it, it doesn't seem like such a stretch at all. We all came from that place of belonging; most of us have simply forgotten that it is our birthright. Maybe my dance, our dance, can help nudge the remembering.

In the days after our last show was cancelled and I was deep in the rawness of emotion, everything suddenly had more meaning and vibrancy. Every encounter I had with anyone, regardless of content, seemed more connected, more real. And art seemed like the most important thing in the world. I don't even know exactly why. But whereas in the past I have had doubts and questions about the legitimacy or importance of making art in a time when there is so much injustice and suffering in the world, it suddenly seemed like an absolutely essential practice. During that time, Dance proved to be a safe and permissible place to be vulnerable. Similar to the way in which a couple who has gone through a challenging time together can grow closer, I feel a renewed commitment to Dance after the whole experience. I want to settle in more to what inkBoat does as a company, to what I do as a dancer. And I want to go about it with more conviction of its value, and more intention behind why we share it. Why this blunder of mine opened that up to me and perhaps others is still a mystery. And that is a mystery I don't need to solve.

As I ponder Rumi's field I wonder – is it a place whose only permanent occupants are young children, enlightened beings and geniuses? A place where those of us who don't fit into any of those categories only get to visit time to time? Or is it instead the place where we all naturally abide, all the time, and in that case only our realization of being there that is periodic? Another profound gift of this experience came in the opportunity to consciously step away from ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing. Taking off my clothes at Hyde Street Pier could be called an error, it could be called an inspiration. It could be called a big event, it could be called inconsequential. Stupid/brave, comical/profound, good move/bad move, etc. But actually, it simply was, it simply happened, and it wasn't until I could get beyond the polarized way of thinking and give it permission to be meaning- less that I could experience the alchemical change from mistake to blessing.

Moving forward, as for the desire to be in Rumi's field when we perform, perhaps it is as simple as setting the intention to be there, and removing a layer of self-judgment to allow the dance to be neither good nor bad. I suspect, though, that it will more likely require trial and error, more failure, lightening up, accidental moments of brilliance, an occasional kick in the butt from Inner Punk, and some luck. Meanwhile, I will continue to practice catching the moments when I find myself in the field. While playing with my children, while watching a river flow by, while sitting in traffic, while dancing, while watching others dance, while listening, while lying down in the grass.

I'll meet you there.