

Present and listening and curious and open to differences: A conversation between Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Olive Bieringa and Alys Longley

Auckland, April 2017

Introduction

Alys

This conversation reflects on an intensive masterclass with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen that occurred in April of this year. Bonnie originated the somatic practice of Body-Mind Centering® (BMC) in 1973. BMC's focus on the systems of embodiment (skeletal, fluid, organ, ligamentous, endocrine, nervous, muscular, senses, vocal mechanism, and reflexes) and its provision of tools for dropping into the tone, quality and awareness of the differentiated systems and developmental movement has had a profound influence on fields such as somatic practice, contemporary dance, improvisation and contact improvisation, dance therapy, yoga, many forms of bodywork and beyond. Bonnie's School for Body-Mind Centering® now has teacher training programmes in many parts of the world, with discussion currently buzzing around the possibility of BMC® certification being offered in Australasia. It was an honour to have Bonnie in NZ for a four day intensive masterclass, organized by Olive Bieringa (BodyCartography Project), a Certified BMC® Practitioner, Teacher and choreographer.

Introduction

Olive

It has been a long-time dream for me to bring Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen to Aotearoa and to build an official certification program in Aotearoa and/or Australia. I grew up in Wellington and left to travel and study in 1988. I began visiting regularly to teach and perform, and the first BodyCartography performances took place in Wellington as part of the NZ Fringe Festival in 1998. I have been a student of Body-Mind Centering® since the early 1990s as part my dance studies at the Center for New Dance Development, Arnhem, NL. I became a certified practitioner of Body-Mind Centering® in 2007 and a certified teacher in 2012. For past 16 years I have been living in Minneapolis, USA creating dance works and teaching internationally.

The support of Wilhemeena Monroe (Soul - Centre of the Body and Mind), Alys Longley, Karla Brodie, val smith, Otto Ramstad, Alice Cummings, and Kim Sargent-Wishart made Bonnie's visit possible. Bonnie led a four-day Embryology workshop for seventy people; dancers, bodyworkers, movement therapists, somatic movement educators, yoga practitioners and others including 16 students from Australia. With the development of the Dance Studies program at Auckland University and the success of these workshops in Australia and Aotearoa a new moment is unfolding for dance practice in Aotearoa, one that is open to deep somatic investigation by all kinds of bodies. I am excited to see what develops.

Workshop description

In the first 8 weeks after conception our body forms its basic structure. In this period of transformation from a group of cells to a highly differentiated human being, we go through developments, which deeply affect our movement, our mind and spirit. Some of the tissues and structures developing remain with us, some are transformed into other structures and some fade into the background, no longer existing or recognizable as the original structure. By embodying the process of embryological development, we discover the primal roots of our structure, perception, the ability to respond and to be present. This workshop will use movement and touch as the doorways into our embryological history.

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Olive Bieringa and Alys Longley in Conversation

Our interview took place in one of the cosy treatment rooms at SOUL, Centre for the Body and Mind, while rain poured outside. Bonnie had just completed four days of teaching embryology to a large bunch of movement practitioners from all over NZ and Australia. In the workshops we spent time exploring patterns of movement drawn from Bonnie's research in embryological development. This work challenged many assumptions embedded in the conventional teaching of dance, yoga, pilates and other fields, which often focus on the importance of core strength and alignment of the spine. Bonnie encouraged the group to practice using the pubic symphysis instead of the sacroiliac joint as the keystone for our vertical alignment, to instead consider the sacrum a limb and to let the spine be free. We worked less from the muscles, instead initiating movement from spaces, fluids, organs and natural form of the skeleton to open up new movement possibilities and relationships to space both inside and out.

Olive: The question is, you've had this experience in Australia and New Zealand and you've taught in so many places. What have you learnt? Or how has this experience been new or different?

Bonnie: If I make a suggestion, people just go and do it. It's not like "well I don't know what you mean." So I feel like there's something here, there's a receptivity to explore. For me it's a sense of place, that's very very strong. And then the European connection is so far away, that perhaps, you've had to be independent. I'm just kind of projecting that. But there has been a lot of independence. Like I go "I'm not going to say anything else," they go "OK, sure" "Now go on do, whatever!"

Olive: The sort of adventurousness, or inventiveness, or the individual... the curiosity, the casualness... there's a massive curiosity here, people are always reaching out to understand what's happening, in film and fashion and everything all over the world. But then they really want to do it their own way!

Bonnie: That's what I feel. That's what I feel. There was total invitation for whatever I wanted to share and... improvise with it... but being true to it... in the mind of the room.

Alys: I've really appreciated the genealogies of practice present.

In terms of dance and somatic practice, we have very few certified practitioners who are working here. And so, it's an opportunity that people take very seriously, to have that depth of knowledge and that closeness to the source of a new form of thinking.

For myself, Olive being one of the most inspirational teachers for my dance practice, and then learning about your work through Olive's teaching and then to be in the room with you and Olive and Otto and Alice Cummings who I studied with in Australia, and dancers who I am currently working with on research projects, so there were many genealogies of practice, lineages of practice together and I think that was something really special about this workshop. To have that critical mass of people working seriously and with depth, I think will have a real impact on the dance community.

Bonnie: I was just going to say, that sense of lineage I felt very strongly. There's a respect for it. An acknowledgement of it. Respect of lineage, respect of place.

Alys: It just makes me think of the practice of creating containers for people's knowledge to grow. And that seems to be a big part of BMC is creating that space for the exploration, for the knowledge to move.

Bonnie: Also I was really challenging a lot of basic beliefs. Nancy Stark-Smith and I just created a new article, it will be in the next *Contact Quarterly* and part of it was about suspending your belief system. Anyway, so what I feel often is that certainly I am asking people... I am challenging their belief systems, all of this 'core' business and muscle stuff.

Alys: Can you explain that a little, just in a couple of sentences. That we're suspending our belief about the *core*, that we need to strengthen it?

Olive: Or just, how to be able to put preconceived ideas to the side and find a different set of relationships inside your body and with others and in relationship to space? I think about the story of the anaesthesiologist who gave older people, who are all crumpled-up in their bodies, a local anaesthetic and under the drugs their whole body just came open and was lying flat on the table. And then the moment the drugs wore off they would go back into their pattern of being. And there's something very simple about that as a metaphor that makes me think about, how do we build our body? How do we build who we are, as dancers, as beings in the world?

Alys: I just want to note that, Olive, you reflected that really beautifully in your movement. That when you described the people going under your body is open, it's soft, it's wide, the cells seem really receptive and open and then when the person wakes up they go back into these constricted-looking, much more tense habits.

Olive: Do you want to add anything to that? Or say anything?

Bonnie: Well, the belief system was fluid.

Alys: In the workshop?

Bonnie: Just in the room, saying that you can experience these patterns, that they're you. That's a belief system. First of all people (attending the workshop) had been practising a long time and therefore the issues show up, because of that practice. But people didn't seem attached to their belief system. There was a willingness, so they didn't have to suspend the belief, there's just a willingness to accept another one. You don't have to give up one. You just accept another. It was a very open environment of accepting what people had never heard of before that may have been an opposite.

Alys: But I think that came from the rigour of the practice of listening that we could gather from the anatomy and kinesiology work. So it wasn't that we were suspending our sense of belief or disbelief out of some kind of flight of fancy. The reason that we can do that is because you can really feel the shift in your own physical structure if you're opening your imagination to it. So the material practice of tuning in to this structure of embodiment that BMC offers, created that ability to be able go into new understandings of how our bodies function in a way that you might not usually be able to. It was enabled by the clear intention and the very clear differentiated kinds of listening-in that we were doing.

Bonnie: And there was a history of open curiosity and practice (with the practitioners attending the workshop). There was a discipline underneath it. A strong discipline... It was a very intelligent group. An intelligent, embodied group... not intelligent of just the brain, but intelligent of the body, it was already there.

Olive: I think it has something to do with land. I also wonder if it's about this relationship to nature and to the elements and to the water. That there's some level of trust, that people have in their own physical, listening capacity to be engaged with their feeling self, because of this extraordinary place.

Alys: For me, having travelled a lot, just the *sponginess*. That's one thing that I miss in a lot of places that I go overseas. The sponginess, the sense that the earth has give and moisture in it and then the ocean is near and you can tune with the tide and... it definitely organises my thinking and I definitely miss it when I'm not here.

Olive: And there's no scary animals like there are in other places which creates a certain kind of holding in the nervous system, if I know there's ticks and I know there's chiggers and I know there's bears. There's nothing here.

Alys: No snakes.

Olive: So maybe that's part of it too.

Bonnie: Yeah, then there's a recognition of a natural state. Maybe that is to say that I felt that there was no (need of) convincing, there was no questioning, there was a recognition of the natural state. And I think that is stronger here, from what you're saying, this sense of place.

Alys: I had another thought, about politics. It's to do with the first day of our workshop ... Bonnie you ran an exercise that enabled us to see the different backgrounds we were coming from. We stood up in groups to acknowledge our training and practice. So the dancers stood up, we recognised the dancers and we had to yoga people stand up, recognised them. And that went deeper and deeper into various practices and fields – physiotherapy, massage, Feldenkrais, art and design practice and so on, and then somebody said something about 'community outreach' and Bonnie said "everybody should be standing up, it's political. It's important that we feel that this work can be shared." So I just wanted to ask - What is the politics that needs to be opened up, what is it that somatics creates space for that needs to be shared with communities?

Bonnie: That's a very big one. My teachers had to fight their way against the culture, and therefore if you studied with one you didn't study with anyone else, because there was this sense they had to pull out of the culture. That was true for almost all of my teachers in the beginning.

One of the first things, when I started offering the training, that people had to study other approaches. In order to get a certificate in BMC you had to have a background, let's say, in other things, whether it was Feldenkrais, Alexander, other kinds of dance, martial art, body work... Now that's not required because people have it already, people are already blending.

So I went from my teachers being isolated, to now this generation on the other side of me. So now, instead of withdrawing from community, now we're blending everything and now we have to step into community, we have to be *in* a community, not just, invisible, or visible, we have to actually be active. Because the world needs our voices, our movement, our presence, whatever way we do it.

Alys: What do you think is enabled by the somatic practice that the world needs?

Bonnie: People being present and listening and curious and open to differences.

Olive: And something you said in Melbourne or Sydney was also not apologising for taking up space. If you're going to say something, if you're going to *be* somewhere. To *take* space and not apologise for who you are.

Bonnie: Or even the young woman today who made a comment, (I see her but I don't remember the comment) about words that would fit the environment and she made a word, but she did it with a question "is this an OK word?" Even if the rest of us said "No we don't feel that" To say it, "that's my experience." Because the one who differs from everyone else, maybe has the clue. That's happened so often in history, that the culture's one way, the new something comes in and its rejected but that's the one that's going to lead into the next round.

Alys: I do think that in somatic practice there is so much listening and so much careful tuning that it's a real skill to know when it's time to stand out and lead and make that political point about the importance of having practices that are about listening and responding rather than kind of dogmatically embodying a pre-set technique.

Olive: How for you does the embryology fit into that conversation?

Bonnie: That we were present when we came into body. We actually have our history as a current practice. Isn't that extraordinary? It is extraordinary.

Olive: And that we're creating space and that the space has consciousness – is extraordinary to feel when I touch people's bodies or to feel inside my own body. That's amazing I think, as a dancer and as a mover, really understanding that completely transformed my quality of presence...the way in which I am present in the space. And I feel that as a body worker it's been very interesting, because we're time travelling (in embryology work) when we touch our tissue or we touch our partner, the person we're working with, when we touch their tissue, that we're moving between these body systems of the bones, and then we're moving back to mesenchyme, (the undifferentiated embryological material that becomes bone, joints, blood tissue, and so on in the womb) or then we're hanging out with the yolk-sack, or then we're in the organs, that it almost allows me to have a really simple way-in and then actually I begin to surf in terms of tissue and time to wherever I need to be. And so that's been really fascinating having the tool or having just that very simple way to come into a relationship with the complexity of somebody's life story through their tissue. It's almost like it's given a very tangible approach to me to how to work with somebody... And that's been fascinating.

Alys: Having come into this work and being a real beginner in it... the practice of at the same time, working with the body that I am now and the body that I was as an embryo, the embryological body within the current body and having that conversation is a profound practice. I'm still finding it and there's a lot of parts that I'm really unclear about but again it's this suspension... this just going with it and seeing what you can discover and there's so much more than you expected when you began the exploration. And I think the mind of the room helps so much. Learning to experience movement from two different bodies that are both your body, that are both your cellular experience really helped me to open new possibilities of alignment and movement, and has been an amazing experience.

Olive: Can I ask, because it's about the movement also between those two places, I'm just curious for you as a mover, what it's doing to your movement?

Alys: I think the word I would use is unfolding, that sense of my structure, that Bonnie, you so clearly taught embryologically, the unfolding that occurred in order for my organs and my skeletal structure to become human, or become...

Olive: An embryo?

Alys: Yeah, a baby! So those structures, that really clear sensing of that unfolding of limb from the cellular, the cellular development allowed me a sense of unfolding in the containers and the spaces and the structures of embodiment, finding the fluidity in the bones. It really shifted, it really was a beautiful experience and it will be a gift for life, that sense of how we unfold as beings creates a way to understand possibilities for re-development and growth.

Bonnie: One woman, as she was leaving said - I think she does some kind of body work but I'm not sure, she teaches whatever, and she's an older person, a lot of experience, clearly, that intelligence of embodiment - and she said "I don't know what I'm going to do tomorrow with my clients."

All of a sudden there's this new information and then how do you feed it... how do you weave it with what you already know that's very successful? You don't have to throw away anything. You reminded me when you said "unfolding" how do you go underneath the folding of the unfolding of what you do that does help people? And when I put my hands on someone I don't know what I'm going to do. So there's also that trust in not-knowing. We don't have to be anxious about not-knowing. That's actually the starting place. Someone will say "well you know what you're doing and I don't" I say "Well just keep not-knowing!" No matter how much experience, just keep not-knowing because we don't know. But be present and talk to each other, whether non-verbally or verbally. But she was ok with not-knowing. That's the other thing there's a trust, I felt a trust here. I felt a trust.

Alys: Many of us have worked with Body Mind Centering for a long time before this workshop and it had already made forms of thinking and practice possible, so the trust has been earned through the value of the work.

Olive: I also think about this idea of the calibration, like you said, this thing of letting the bones be the bones, letting the muscles be the muscles, like when are we holding ourselves up with our muscles when we could be letting the bones do that job. the different tissue. I just think about that in terms of the dance community and thinking about injury and futures and on-going movement possibility and how by coming back into this early developmental material, or this earlier embryological moment that we can really find our whole arm back... But maybe you want to re-articulate that piece around calibration, I don't know if you'd like to say something about that because it was so beautiful.

Bonnie: One way we explained how space calibrates structure was by reaching our arm into space. The first thing that many people do is to move their scapula, the base of the arm. But you can't lengthen your arm if you begin by moving the base. You can only lengthen your arm if you first calibrate the space between your scapula and fingertips. You need to reach with your fingertips to calibrate the length of your arm before you move your scapula through space. Then the scapula can move against the ribs, the ribs along the spine and sternum. There's a calibrating and separation that the space offers.

Another example we explored was the space between the front body and the back body. It's not the mesoderm; it's the space. The mesoderm then fills the space, but the space is first. If there's not the space, and I see that with people who hold the front body and back body together without perceiving the space between them, there is a stiff hardness in the spine, even if it's flexible.

We also explored the space between our midline (notochord and paraxial columns on both sides). When that space is closed, spinal asymmetries can occur, such as scoliosis.

Another major calibration is the intermediate column of space between our central axis (notochord and paraxial columns) and the lateral plates that give rise to our limbs, our periphery. The kidneys and gonads grow out of the intermediate column. This space is where we express our fluidity.

- To feel this, raise one of your hands and close the space between your spine (central axis) and your arm (lateral plate). Explore moving your hand freely through space.
- Now open the space between your spine and arm and move your hand freely through space.

When that space is closed we can do a wave-like movement but we won't have the same kind of fluidity. Space calibrates. It's not the structure calibrating the space. It's the space calibrating the length of whatever it is we're looking at.

I don't want to forget, how we also explored the space between the two pelvic halves. Their primary connection is through the two joints at the pubic symphysis. That is the space that calibrates our weight shifting from one leg to the other. The pubic disk is the keystone of the arch of the two legs through the pelvic halves. The pubic disk also arises from the lateral plate.

When we look at a skeletal model, the top of the pelvis is always tilting forward, creating an exaggerated arch in the low back. This is due to the idea that the primary joints of the pelvis are the two sacroiliac joints between the pelvic halves and the sacrum, and that the sacrum is the keystone of the arch between the two legs. The sacrum arises from the central axis not the periphery (lateral plate). This concept and practice, I feel, is one of the major causes of hip, leg and back problems.

When the legs through the two pelvic halves articulate with other in the spaces of the two pubic symphysis joints, the spine via the sacrum is suspended between the spaces of the two sacroiliac joints. This allows our spine to be free, and every time we move our legs, we don't have to stress our back.

At the same time we look at the legs, how they work now, we are looking at the space and the embryo.

Alys: It was pretty amazing, watching the shifts in perception that were enabled in the workshop by the people who were really tight in their core, who were struggling at releasing, struggling to enable that space around the hip joint. And then, when people found it, it was such a breakthrough... because suddenly we don't need to work so hard... that realisation that over-developed core strength can prevent the organs from finding the space needed for the body to be in its healthiest alignment.

Bonnie: We can guide somebody but they have to remember it. You can't teach it, you can only guide, to help them remember at the cellular level, not the head level, and then the head level after that.

Olive: And to remember it, because they did it earlier in their development.

Bonnie: They've already done it.

Alys: I'm thinking of people who read this who have no experience of BMC, and the need to communicate the somatic principle of first person experience. So in the workshops each participant needed to independently make sense of the material, to experience that tangibly their own singular way. The workshops develop movement research with help from qualified BMC practitioners and teachers (present at the Auckland workshop we had Olive Bieringa and Otto Ramstad from the US, and Kim Sargent-Wishart and Alice Cummins from Australia) who are very experienced with anatomy and kinesiology, movement and hands-on partner work, so that in the workshop everyone travels their own road to find a sensation. We work in the assumption that everybody's body will be unique. I know it's a really simple thing to say.

Olive: What happens too is that we're learning this embryology material but we're also learning how we learn. So there is all kinds of different things happening in the room as people are trying to figure out how they want to be present and how it is best for them to listen. Is it best for them to watch? Is it best for them to look at pictures? Is it best for them to just receive hands-on? Or to move? So all of those things are happening in the room... also sleep ... People track their process and figure out how they can best stay present with the material. As a result of that you learn what works for you. It is an act of being present to yourself, and to the room. Then you also come to the material in a way that you're ready to. That can be very different for different people.

Bonnie: And that there's room for that.

Olive: I always love that from the first day to the last day of a workshop, watching people... The first day they always come up to the assistants and talk about how they're not getting things and then by the end they're in a different place where they realise... they're unlearning the cortical kind of attachment of their nervous system to get all of the information...

Bonnie: From the teacher

Olive: And that they're realising there's multiple ways in the room that they can access the information and maybe it's best if they just spend the whole time dancing on their own in the corner, just letting come in what comes in.