

How Does a Movement Begin?

Excerpt from a biography of Charlotte Selver, a work in progress by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt, in loving memory of Charlotte Selver on the 10th anniversary of her death on August 22, 2003.

“In a moment I will ask you to come up to standing.” Charlotte’s inquisitive voice seems to reach some of her students as from afar. They have drifted away a bit in the past minutes of resting quietly on the floor. “And I wonder if you can notice what happens just before the first movement . . . and where it begins . . . when it begins.” By then, things will already have begun to stir in most of us. Charlotte’s voice has called us back from our resting places and her questions – dropped into us just like those pebbles Charlotte had earlier dropped into a large bowl filled with water to demonstrate how a small incident in one place affects the whole – have begun to create ripples throughout.

A new student may now look for the right answer, trying to figure out just how a movement begins. He may, in his mind, flip through the pages of an anatomy book, he may “scan his body” for those firing nerve cells and twitching muscles that are supposed to bring the whole person into motion. He will want to give the right answer, not knowing that Charlotte is less interested in the “right” result than she is in the student’s willingness to give himself to the task.

Immediately noticeable are the rings on the surface rippling outward, thoughts that will later result in questions to Charlotte: “When you say, ‘Where does a movement begin?’ and ‘Where does it end?’, what are you referring to? Is it like the little thoughts before, or the little jerks?”¹ That thinking mind, groping for answers before the questions have chance to sink in, gets in the way of experiencing. Charlotte will brush that inquiry off with a laugh and a short: “I ask what I ask. When does a movement begin? And how does it proceed and where does it end?”

It is not what we think about it, but what is the experience? What is the first thing we notice after the question has been asked? What do we feel in the moments before the first stirring of a muscle? And then: where does the movement begin? The answer can only be felt and it may – indeed it will – be different for each student, it will vary, if just slightly, each time we approach that same task.

Memories of such questions from Charlotte surface as I attempt to tackle this one: Where did the movement begin that resulted in the work she eventually called Sensory Awareness? The more I look into this question, the more I read and try to get a handle on it, the more I feel humbled by the intricate web of influences and circumstances.

In the context of a Sensory Awareness class we might expect a defined place for a movement to begin and because of such expectations, we might indeed be able to report later that, yes, standing up began in the lower back. But what about all the other stirrings we did not notice because our attention was narrowed by preconceived notions? Does a movement really begin in one place?

¹ Green Gulch Farm Zen Center; workshop; February 27, 2000

“It is not first this, then this, then this, then that. But the whole person comes into motion. There is nowhere where it stays as is, when I begin to allow movement. There's nowhere, when you have to laugh, where you don't laugh – or you are only partly involved with laughing. Nowhere, when you are crying, where it isn't crying in you. Does that make sense? So, in other words, to give myself to something means not to go point by point. There is no technique about it, to take care of this, to take care of that. It's the total person who is involved.”

What if we, in a similar way, inquire into the history of Sensory Awareness? Rather than going point by point in a futile attempt to be objective, we let the question sink into Charlotte's life, as it were, and follow its path just as we would have in a class with Charlotte. Staying close to the protagonists, letting them speak when possible rather than taking a birds eye view.

Charlotte seemed to be largely satisfied with what I would call the mythical history of Sensory Awareness. Myths are not concerned with historical accuracy but they are meant to inspire us and to help us understand the present. Myths are powerful because their imagery goes under our skin and touches us on levels older than the intellect. There's beauty and danger in that. Charlotte was a great storyteller and she skillfully wove stories into the fabric of her classes alongside strands of precise directions and admonishments for accurate perception.

As Charlotte told the story, the birthplace of her work was a humble attic chamber in a Berlin apartment building:

[... members can read Charlotte's account of Gindler's illness here]

We may never know much about Elsa Gindler's tuberculosis but whatever health issues she faced, she seemed to have responded to with a uniquely inquisitive attitude that came to be the hallmark of her work and that of her pupils. That she found to this way of working not just by herself but within the context of a movement does not diminish her accomplishments but puts them in perspective.

[members can read much more here on Elsa Gindler]

Inspiring as Mazdaznan teachings may have been, they were, for the most part, a personal affair. Gindler's dedication was to *Harmonische Gymnastik*, which had been developed by Hedwig Kallmeyer based on her training with Genevieve Stebbins in New York. Stebbins student Bess Mensendieck, who was, like Kallmeyer, in the first generation of women to introduce this new approach to physical education in Germany, writes enthusiastically: “It is thanks to Mrs. Genevieve Stebbins that the teaching of Delsarte, in sensible combination with the Swedish healing gymnastics (at its best!), has been made available for common use. This woman tested Delsarte's constellation with most admirable perseverance. She practiced daily, up to six hours, for years. She exercised every muscle group, without the help of any apparatus (which the Greeks also never used) and she achieved remarkable results of bodily perfection regarding health and esthetics. After years of dedicated effort she was able to demonstrate, by way of special exercises, the diverse beauty of form every woman could achieve on her own. She proved that poise is not simply nature given but a feat of which every woman is capable, because poise depends on methodical use of muscles. In other words: graceful beauty can be achieved by

learning how to subjugate one muscle group rhythmically to another, so that only that muscle group will be used for a certain sequence of a movement which is anatomically and according the physical laws of the organism meant for it. [...] The results of this beauty-training produced by Genevieve Stebbins and her students were so convincing that it took America by storm. Women of all ages took lessons and, once the adults were convinced of the value of this body discipline, the mothers demanded that lessons in 'physical culture' become a regular subject at girls schools. It has since been integrated the curriculum of top girls schools as 'Esthetic Gymnastics'. It is largely thanks to this training that the modern American woman displays such skill and poise in her appearance."²

[..... members can read much more here on Stebbins, MacKaye and Delsarte]

Of the many notable elaborations in Stebbins' books we will pick out one more because it, too, shows how many notions Charlotte's students may have ascribed to her or Gindler, were already clearly laid out decades before. Relaxation was one of Charlotte's pet peeves and one of the terms, usually uttered by new and unsuspecting student, to which she often reacted with a devious smile, asking: "Have you ever seen a relaxed bouquet of flowers?", followed by a theatrical enacting of such a bouquet, head hanging, arms drooping. The term relax, in her view, described a state of lifeless surrender to the force of gravity, draining a person of energy. "Resting" on the other hand, was a term Charlotte used to describe a reenergizing state of repose, where the muscles are at ease but still responsive to gravity.

Following but one strand in a web of influences that led to Sensory Awareness, we have gone back in time from Charlotte Selver to Elsa Gindler, from Gindler to her teacher Hedwig Kallmeyer in Germany. We crossed the ocean to find Kallmeyer's teacher Geneviève Stebbins in New York who had developed her system based on her studies with Steele MacKaye who, in turn, had found his calling studying with Françoise Delsarte in Paris. We have heard of other influences, European and "Oriental". When we return to Germany now, it is with the understanding that another attempt to trace back the beginning of a movement – just like feeling out where a step begins in Charlotte's class, – might lead us down a different path. "This was your experience", Charlotte would often comment a student's findings. "Now forget it." This was not said to diminish what the student had found. It was understood that such experiences would not be lost by 'forgetting' but that this would free the student to explore the same question again, unburdened by expectations based on previous experiences, thus deepening her understanding of the subject matter.

When and where the 'movement' began in Charlotte Selver's life we cannot be sure. It is likely that she would have been exposed to the ideas of the German 'reform movement' even as she grew up in the protected middle class environment of her Ruhrort home. This movement, which encompassed all aspects of life, from nutrition to education, from clothing to medicine, the arts and physical education, challenged the foundations of a German bourgeoisie, stuck – quite literally – in the tight corset of nineteenth century conventions. That alone would have made it very interesting to a rebellious teenager like Charlotte, much as similar ideas would later appeal

² Bess M. Mensendieck Körperkultur der Frau, originally published in 1906 / Translation by SLC

to a new generation in the 1960s, leading a great many to take classes with Charlotte Selver and her husband Charles Brooks.

Charlotte had a story about the beginning which she loved to share. Here is what she told a group of greatly entertained students in her very own dramatic way during a workshop at San Francisco Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm in December of 1999: "[I did nothing] besides sitting at the piano and eating. I became fatter and fatter. And no movement, no movement! I had a cousin who was a dancer. She looked at me and said: 'But how do you look? You can not go out like that, you must do something for yourself.' 'You must move!' Move? You know, when we had our dancing lessons as children no boy wanted to engage me. He simply couldn't get me around. I was so stiff. I was nailed to the ground. So I looked around, what could I do to move? I hate movement! But then, at last, I found something I could study where music and movement would be connected. Dr. Rudolph Bode. He had a system in which one played the piano and the students would move according to the piano. A certain movement was shown and then one would swing or lift or turn or whatever movement. So I went, enrolled, in order to study this movement."

This sequence of events is somewhat unlikely.

[..... members can read more here on Charlotte and her early teacher, Rudolf Bode]

I hope you enjoyed the read. The chapter will conclude with a deeper look at Bode's work and that of Émile Jacques-Dalcroce in Hellerau, where Charlotte also met Heinrich Jacoby for the first time.