

20/10/06

Dear LUTSF

Please find enclosed the report on my trip, co-funded by the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund to engage in a five day workshop in the somatic breathwork of Ilse Middendorf. It was an extraordinary and very nurturing experience and I am very grateful to LUTSF for the support that enabled me to go. I sincerely hope the report gives some small insight into the special nature of this work and my experience and I am now looking forward to a process of deep reflection and assimilation that I feel sure will help me to extend on and enrich my practice.

Beyond the workshop itself I found just being away from home and my known working environments a welcome change, especially as the responses I encountered in San Francisco were so open and inspiring. It is a diverse city with a rich history of integration, personal struggle and acceptance and I had a tangible sense of this throughout my time there.

I enjoyed the chance to join in a T'ai Chi session in the Chinese square one morning, take breakfast at a small Italian cafe and then wander up the wooden steps of Telegraph Hill listening to the wild parrots squawking overhead. These, and many other wonderful experiences, left my senses awakened and energies renewed. I feel reminded of the importance of new experience and how this invites and nurtures a fresh perspective. I will certainly encourage others to invest in their own ongoing enquiries similarly and inform them of the generous and committed support the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund offers. Many thanks to all of you at LUTSF.  
Yours sincerely

Sean Feldman

**Report:  
Breath experience in California**

**A workshop taken at the Middendorf Breath Institute, September 2006**

by Sean Feldman

A few years ago whilst teaching a dance workshop in Philadelphia, one of the participants told me about the breathwork of Ilse Middendorf. I've always valued the sensation and support of my breath when I dance and consequently it has become an important part of my practice. Wanting to further understand the processes of breath awareness in dance, I enquired further into the Middendorf work and this September a Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship, together with a training grant from the Arts Council of Wales, enabled me to take part in a workshop at the Middendorf Breath Institute in California.

The workshop involved five days of intensive and focused study into the "breath experience" work developed by Professor Middendorf over many years. The days were split into three sessions of one and a half hours each and throughout each session several breath and movement exercises were explored. Throughout each session we worked in silence with gentle direction and guidance from the teachers

and the time given for each task remained fluid, allowing the experience to take it's own pace. Each exercise was followed by a period of reflection and this led into discussion amongst the group. Throughout the five days, we had three different teachers all working intimately with the Middendorf methods but each offering a very different energy and perspective.

The sessions began by inviting us (the participants) to quietly connect with the experience of our breath. Without judgement of any sort we were encouraged to just notice what was happening and the "breath experience" then developed from there, often leading into gentle movement based journeys and always with the intention to "stay" with the experience of the breath throughout. During the five days we touched on various aspects of this work including breath awareness through different parts of the body, breath in relationship to others and breath connection with the voice.

The first couple of days focused mainly on breath in relation to the physical experience. This was mostly through a process of 'allowing' the breath to simply come and go, responding through movement as and when it felt natural and appropriate to do so. First noticing the movement of the breath and then gently extending on this.

The idea is simple but I found it an interesting challenge, keeping my focus with the task of just "allowing" the breath to be there. Doing these exercises I realised how often in movement I control my breath. My training has for the most part been based on developing a command of the body and developing skills to initiate movement in response to very clear instruction either from myself or from some other source. What's interesting about the Middendorf work, in light of this understanding, is that my experiences through the workshop seemed to suggest that there were other useful ways of experiencing breath in relation to movement.

At times, when I felt I could successfully engage with the intention within a task, the movements I did seemed to emerge effortlessly from within. During such moments, I became more aware of myself as a dancer and observer at the same time. Maintaining a genuine sense of mindful enquiry, though, was a challenge. Sinking into the "experience" of my breath and staying with what was happening, I'd willingly let go of the experience just moments before.

Being truly present and awake to what was happening and holding onto a memory of the experience that had just gone became an interesting dilemma; one that invited many questions within me about the nature of dance and authentic movement from a 'breath' perspective. How true are my responses, when what I'm doing is reproducing an experience of movement I've been taught or previously chosen to do? I found the questions that emerged each day provocative and they helped me to stay open to whatever may or may not transpire.

In summary, the breath work was subtle and the experience of it profound. Through the five days my understanding moved from a place where I felt I knew what my breath processes were into a realisation of the fact that with each breath the experience is unique. Just listening to and experiencing my breath as it is, with no preconceptions offers me a more intimate experience. This way of experiencing brings me right into the present moment and this alone demonstrates the value it might have as a study for dancers, especially those dealing with the rigours of extensive movement that is complex and heavily prescribed.

The week following the course I stayed on and joined in some of the on-going practitioner classes. This extra time also gave me an opportunity to talk with the director and founder of the Berkeley Institute, Juerg Roffler. Juerg has worked closely with Professor Middendorf for many years and played a central role in the

development of the work. This was clearly evident in his responses throughout the course and through the depth of insight and clarity with which he was able to answer my questions.

He explained to me the importance of “allowing” the breath as opposed to “imposing” on the breath, which has often been my primary tendency and intention when dancing. In essence the Middendorf work encourages an experience of the breath in its natural state, allowing the movement of the breath to come and go to its own. I was fascinated to note how the breath invites and supports movement almost without instruction and that a conscious experience of this was always the starting point, whatever aspect of breath awareness we were exploring.

This workshop offered me a wonderful and unusual experience and I’m left feeling inspired to explore ways in which this approach could usefully influence my own dance practice. Though I feel this may take some time, the workshop helps me focus on certain aspects of my work and already I notice specific patterns and habits that could be usefully broken down and re-examined in the light of my experiences at the Institute. The workshop also helped validate my previous experience and understanding and I feel the importance of this too.

Throughout the workshop I felt the teachers held and directed the group energy very well. Though we were a small group (just five of us), I was also impressed and inspired by the breadth of personal and professional experience in the room. This offered up some rich and at times surprising insight through the discussions and also encouraged an intimacy between us that supported the level of enquiry that took place. One participant had a keen interest in breath awareness in relation to death and mortality, another was interested in breath awareness in relation to her work inspiring art and personal expression in others. This breadth of interest and personal investment revealed itself as one of the most significant gifts of the course.



During the later stages of organising my trip I decided to self-fund an extension to my stay allowing me time to explore the dance scene in San Francisco. Many years back, I met SF based choreographer Janice Garrett and so contacted her to find out what was currently happening there. Consequently, I spent two engaging days at the new studios of Oberlin Dance Collective observing different dance disciplines and enjoying the infectious energy and enthusiasm of dancers of all ages and abilities. I discovered through conversation that Janice’s partner had also spent time studying the Middendorf work. Together we discussed our personal experiences and I felt that this extra time offered me even more opportunity to connect with and assimilate the “breath experience” work.

In summary of my time in California, I am left with a new perspective and understanding of the ways in which awareness and observance of my breath might inspire and support my work in dance and life in general. By its very nature, breath inspires movement and this is fundamentally how

we experience our breath, through the sensation of movement that it creates. This was an extraordinary trip and I am very grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship Fund and the Arts Council of Wales for supporting me in this venture. I've uncovered fresh insight into the possibilities for enriching my dance practice and my intention is to explore ways of integrating this work deeper into my life and to continue to make this study an active part of my learning, both as a dancer and teacher.

Sean Feldman