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Leaning into life with somatic sensitivity: Lessons learned from world-class experts of partnered practices

ABSTRACT

Partnered practices reveal somatic insights into leaning-in and prompt us to consider how we can move responsively and interactively with others. Particular experiences of relational leaning are described through a motion-sensing phenomenological approach framed by the authors' Interactive Function2Flow model of somatic education. With sensitivity to movement function, form, feeling and flow, this relational leaning is explored through the slow and controlled balances of acroyoga, the gentle forward and backwards lunges of push hands tai chi, the fast paced, rhythmical walking of salsa dance, and the effervescent gait transitions of equestrian arts. We consider the act of leaning-in and the relational awareness of each partnered practice in terms of the life lessons of connecting with a partner, responding to conflict with composure, giving less or more of oneself in a given situation and, in so doing, moving with enhanced motion-sensitivity into a state of interactive flow.

KEYWORDS

postures
interactions
interactivity
kinaesthetic awareness
flow
relationality
phenomenology

What does it mean to lean with somatic sensitivity towards another person or even towards another animate being? What might the degree to which we fully shift our weight forward or lean back in tentative retreat prepare us for experiencing the NOW (Smith and Lloyd 2020) of the moment that lies before us? And what might it be like for our lean to be received by another? What interactive meanings are there to behold? In this article we orient to the phenomenon of relational leaning through questions that invite an attitude of wonder (van Manen 2016a, 2016b; van Manen and van Manen 2021; Sheets-Johnstone 2011). Opening ourselves up to experiencing a relational presence not only with what Husserl ([1913] 2013) described as 'fresh eyes' but also with motion sensitivity (Lloyd 2017; Lloyd and Smith 2015, 2021), we attend specifically to the movement functions, forms, feelings and flows within partnered dance and other relational practices where bodily leaning plays a significant role. We attune to the qualitative features of these relational leanings and wonder if there might there be something to learn not only in regard to the practices themselves but more broadly in terms of how we can better support, receive and give ourselves to the moment and to one another?

These questions are posed within the context of a five-year InterActive for Life (IA4L) funded research project that is conceptually framed by the Function2Flow (F2F) model (Lloyd 2015a, 2016, 2021) and directed towards the partnered practices of salsa dance, acroyoga, push hands tai chi, and the practice of liberty play with horses. We begin this motion-sensing inquiry (Lloyd and Smith 2021; Smith and Lloyd 2020) into partnered connection by first discussing the life that is there to experience in a generalized sense and then considering leaning dynamics in these four partnered practices. Conceptually organized by the Function, Form, Feeling and Flow dimensions of the F2F model, we explore the partner-supported and outstretched leans in acroyoga that emphasize a *functional* body awareness. We describe how, through push hands tai chi, partners experience a wave-like, back-and-forth, rotational and reciprocal lean that is indicated in bodily *form*. The *feelings*, from various degrees of pain to pleasure, that accompany subtle variation in reciprocal leans are articulated through the partnered practice of salsa dance. And finally, we describe the interactive *flows* (Lloyd and Smith 2006a, 2015a, 2021) as a building up of positive energy in the bodily leanings of equestrian arts.

ACTIONS AND INTERACTIONS OF LEANING INTO LIFE: A MOTION-SENSING ORIENTATION

Before turning to actions and interactions of relational leans within partnered practices, let us first consider, in a broad sense, what it means to 'lean into life'. Life, the 'what' and intended direction of our lean, focuses attention from the outset on the qualitative features of existence which are arguably central to any phenomenological inquiry (Campbell 2012; Heidegger 2010). Life is the overarching principle or the animating force of consciousness that is always oriented to the world. This 'intentionality', or interactive constitution of life, is lived materially, spatially, temporally and bodily. We are always 'in the midst of things' (van Manen 2016b: 62). Our sense of life is a distillation of how it is that what matters here and now is lived in a distinctive spatial, temporal and bodily manner. We emphasize, however, a further existential feature of intentionality to guide our phenomenological inquiry which is that of 'relationality' – the 'lived self-other' (van Manen 2016a, 2016b). Our emphasis becomes

how we experience connection with one another and what specific actions and interactions between 'self' and 'other' are felt to be life-enhancing.

There is, for instance, an individualistic act of leaning-in, which is a comportment that has come to be associated with 'being ambitious in any pursuit' (Sandberg and Scovell 2013: 19), and then there is the altruistic inclination of the responsive, attentive mother who, as Italian philosopher, Adriano Cavarero (2016) describes, expresses an inherently creative and relational power to the geometry of leaning-in. While such practical and figurative representations of leaning-in provide entry points for contemplative consideration, we are particularly interested in the insights to be gained by delving into the somaticity of an angled, postural presence. We wonder if experiences of leaning-in involve any particular function and form, or exude any characteristic feelings and flow? When engaged in a particular partnered practice, we wonder if there is an optimal and consistent angle of lean that is to be held no matter what the circumstance or if it is more of a swaying back-and-forth in a reciprocating, oscillating manner?

While there has been extensive inquiry into the Function2Flows of relational connection in salsa dance (Lloyd 2015b, 2017, 2021) and in mobilizing our motion-sensing knowledge of salsa, tai chi, equestrian and acroyoga for physical educators (Lloyd and Smith 2022; Nyentap et al. 2020), here we would like to draw attention to a particular part of the of the IA4L project which features in-depth, motion-sensing (Lloyd and Smith 2015, 2021) interpretations of *leaning into life* through key examples taken from acroyoga, tai chi, salsa dance and equestrian arts.

The InterActive for Life project: A motion-sensing inquiry

The overarching aims of the IA4L multiphase project were to first research the 'felt sense' (Gendlin 1962) of world-class experts as they moved in response to their partners and then to mobilize such relational knowledge through a series of generalizable activities. Stage one was premised on a motion-sensing phenomenological analysis of data gathered from interviewing, observing and filming experts in their partnered disciplines of equestrian arts, salsa dance, martial arts and acroyoga. Data consisting of postures, positions, gestures and expressions were discerned and analysed in addition to somatic features of these partnered practices such as the motional sense of requisite functions and forms and relational feelings and flows. The purpose of Phase 2 of the IA4Lproject was to take the knowledge gleaned from these partnered activities and apply it to the teaching of games, sports and fitness pursuits (Nyentap et al. 2020).

The Function2Flow (F2F) model (Lloyd 2015a, 2016) provided a conceptual frame for the IA4L project and a means of understanding how any movement from, say, simply walking down the street to a complicated and choreographed series of steps in a formalized dance or game, could be analysed in relation to movement function, form, feeling and flow. Research questions framed by the F2F model included: what *functional* fitness attributes having to do with cardiovascular capacity, muscular strength and endurance, agility and flexibility provide a foundation and physical capacity to engage in partnered practices? Is there a visibly identifiable 'correct' *form* in partnered practices? How does this form vary from one partnership to another? How does it help one connect to a partner? What inner sensations of breath, balance, muscular tension, extension and alignment manifest in partnered practices? How does

this internal awareness affect these practices? And is the feeling of *flow* something that is simply there or not, or does it build and fade with various intensities, energies, rhythms and frequencies in partnered practices?

Both the principal investigator and the collaborating investigator were actively engaged in developing the IA4L project design, collecting and analysing the data, and translating lessons learned from the experts into a resource for physical educators. The study data were also provided to the experts as prompts for further teaching and coaching reflection on the desirable functions, forms, feelings and flows of their partnered practices.

Participants

Five expert-level participants were invited to help us better understand the lived/living experiences of becoming *InterActive for Life.* Inclusion criteria for these participants were individuals who: engaged in a partnered activity – what we refer to as an interactivity – on a regular basis (three to seven times per week); have accrued a minimum of ten years of experience in the movement form and are recognized globally as expert practitioners in their fields; and have shared their knowledge about this interactivity in formal/informal teaching contexts. The participants included Eugene Poku and Jessica Goldberg from AcroYoga Montreal, tai chi master Sam Masich, two-time world salsa dance champion and international judge and coach, Anya Katsveman, and equestrian artist and master horse trainer, Paul Dufresne (as featured on https://function2flow.ca/phase-1-learning-from-experts/).

A motion-sensing methodology

First coined in 2006, our motion-sensing approach to phenomenological research (Lloyd and Smith 2006b) emerged as an adaption of van Manen's guidelines for doing phenomenology (van Manen 1984, 1997) that prioritizes the felt sense of movement. Motion-sensing phenomenology (MSP) enables us to orient kinetically, aesthetically, kinaesthetically and energetically to the extrinsically evident and intrinsically felt meanings of a wide range of physical activities. Our most recent methodological paper (Lloyd and Smith 2021) described the practicalities of doing MSP and provided pathways for researchers to engage in this first-person, participatory mode of motional sense-making.

Over the course of two years, qualitative data was gathered from the experts in acroyoga, push hands tai chi, salsa dance and equestrian arts. This data consisted of observations and interviews, and we also worked with a professional videographer who filmed the disciplinary experts engaging in partnered practices and teaching them to others (Studio 7 MultiMédia 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020). Not only did this data exemplify the relational insights of the disciplinary experts, it also provided experiential instances suggesting how physical educators and their students can be enlivened by the functions, forms, feelings and flows of what we refer to as leaning into life. We ourselves also attended workshops offered by each expert and this in turn enhanced our somatic sensitivities for engaging in participatory motion-sensing inquiry (Lloyd and Smith 2015, 2021; Smith and Lloyd 2020).

This study had relevance for us in our own partnered practices of salsa dance and equestrian arts because it helped us acquire an inner feel for each practice that gave us new opportunities to experience what we saw, heard and felt. By using the MSP approach, we were able to unpack the somatic nuances

of up-close, flesh-on-flesh connections within these different movement disciplines and discern the differences between the slower paced practices of acroyoga and push hands tai chi and the faster paced practices of salsa dance and equestrian arts. We made sense of the postural, positional, gestural and expressive means of partnered connectivity and considered how this somatic sensibility could inform relational practices in other physical activity disciplines (Lloyd and Smith 2022).

THE FUNCTIONAL LEAN IN ACROYOGA

Normally when we think of yoga, we imagine a person going through a series of lying, sitting and standing positions on a mat. Acroyoga, by contrast, is a practice involving two people – a flyer and a base. The latter is the 'living mat' upon whom the 'flyer' can lean on and into. The flyer and the base connect through eye contact, synchronous inhalation, and tactile and proprioceptive connection. Just as in solo yoga practice where attention is directed to the inner sensations of breath and body, in acroyoga the breath and movement take on new significance because this movement practice involves another body in space and partnered connectivity.

Leaning-in during acroyoga happens by way of the flyer pressing their body into various places involving the base's feet, knees, shoulders and/or hands in order to move in and out of what seems an endless combination of supine, prone, side-lying and inverted poses. This sequencing of poses is featured in the following documentary made for the InterActive for Life Project titled 'Episode 5 – AcroYoga' with Eugene Poku and Jessica Goldberg (Studio 7 MultiMédia 2020). The success of balancing in this ever-changing, dynamically partnered practice relies on reciprocated and continuous contact from one moment to the next. Compared to statically standing on a mat or walking on the floor where it is only gravity that ultimately holds sway, in acroyoga it is the partnership that is in flux in response to the forces of gravity. Eugene, an expert flyer, describes the life and energy he senses as his base, Jessie, supports him.

> When I'm with Jessie, it's like I'm on the ground, which is what you want as a base […] she is soft, she is a cushion […] [like a] sidewalk which has a little give. So that's the first thing. The second thing is how I react to the ground. What are the things I do in my body to be able to receive the energy that's been given to me and also give energy back? That's the reciprocity.
>
> (Poku, personal communication, December 2019)

Balancing interactively requires us to depart from the security of a flat, arguably predictable, ground surface experienced in an individual balance to the relational multi-directional tensions of an oscillating sway. Eugene's statement exemplifies the latter in that 'there is always movement [in every single pose and posture] but it's minimized' (Poku, personal communication, December 2019). More pronounced movement occurs in the acroyogis' transitions from one balanced position to the next. Jessie describes what it is like to be a supportive base as the flyer moves from one angular lean into the next.

> For me it's all about reciprocity. So I wait. I feel. I wait. I breathe. I look. I feel where the weight is, and I go into the opposite direction. If Eugene

> is coming in to do a twist to the right side, I know that I have to over-compensate to the left because he's going to be dragging that way. If I want to stay in a stack, then we take that breath, we make that eye contact, and Eugene can start to twist, and I start to modify my position to reciprocate his position. He senses me doing that through his body awareness.
>
> (Goldberg, personal communication, January 2020)

Balance as experienced in acroyoga consists of a functional counter-lean. Jessie summarizes the way she subtly supports the various shapes into which the flyer moves in and out: 'Basically I'm trying not to shove my partner over. So, whatever Eugene does, I'm going to lean back in this way [she gestures a counter-balanced position] to make sure that we keep breathing together' (Goldberg, personal communication, January 2020). When asked to describe the experience of a successful counter-lean, Jessie speaks of extraneous tensions melting away and of breath becoming smoother and slower.

Once the functionality of counter-leaning is established, irrespective of the relational position, the flyer is sustained not only by partner responsiveness and reciprocal core engagement, but also through a bodily awareness that stretches out to the extremities. As Eugene explains: 'the more the flyers can integrate the core, the lighter they are, and the easier it is for them to manipulate their bodies with the bases, or the bases to manipulate their bodies with the flyers' (Poku, personal communication, January 2020). Bodily extremities are vital for the flyer. As Eugene states: 'Even though it is a simple thing, for me, as a flyer, the engagement of my feet and my legs matter' (Poku, personal communication, December 2019).

The functional dimension of leaning in acroyoga teaches us that in order to sustain a balance in any position we must also meet with motile counter-balance. We can experience this ourselves by standing on one leg and experimenting with leaning to one side. As we shift our weight we should begin to feel the counter-balance of our free leg (which is extended in the opposite direction); in this instance the counter-balance prevents us from falling over. Through acroyoga we might ask: what part of us leans away and what part of us leans forward into the point of contact? What muscular engagement does contact require and what parts of the body are we aware of whether in core engagement or attention to our head, hands and feet? In the quest for stillness, how might we welcome moments of oscillation where we do not hold any extraneous tension and come to appreciate how '[o]scillatory movement, rather than fixed positions facilitate a sense of balance and equanimity' (Caldwell 2018: 5)? How might this sense of leaning into a balance enliven us to possible sensations in any posture or position? Such sensibilities encourage us to become open to the back-and-forth sways experienced when balancing under, on and with others. They yield a practical feel for 'structural equilibrium' (Cavarero 2016) and might well extend to us 'finding the right balance' in our relations with others beyond the acroyoga studio (cf. Bergdahl and Langmann 2018: 324).

THE FORM OF THE LEAN IN PUSH HANDS TAI CHI

To orient to the reciprocated interaction of push hands tai chi, imagine two people facing each other with an evenly weighted, slightly bent-leg stance with one foot positioned forward and one foot angled backwards. Each

partner gently lifts their hands upwards and forwards to establish a connection. Wrists roll over wrists, forearms create a circular movement outward and inward, and hips rotate in a slightly lunged position that supports the torsos as they lean towards and away from one another. Occasionally one of partners takes a step forward or backward while the other person maintains the distance with matching motions as depicted in the documentary video filmed for the IA4L project (Studio 7 MultiMédia 2019).

Such a relational hand-rolling-over-wrist connection stands in contrast to how tai chi is imagined by many of us who may think of it as a solo meditative movement practice comprised of a flowing sequence of choreographed forms. Yet, like many martial arts, tai chi's roots are premised on combative interaction. There are, however, consistent features between the solo and partnered versions. As Master Sam Masich describes, the solo practice of tai chi relates to the push hands practice where participants move with one another in oscillating and, to some extent, reciprocating interactions.

> We are usually familiar with Tai Chi as a kind of solo movement for groups of people practicing in the parks in Shanghai, and this is a big part of the training. At the same time, it is designed to work with partner practice. What solo movement allows me to do is start to learn how the waist and hips work so when I set into my stance, I'm standing in such a way that I'm not going to lose my balance. I'm not twisted. I'm not out of structure. When I perform the written or improvised gestures, I'm always doing it from the base, from the legs and the waist.
>
> (Masich, personal communication, October 2018)

Similar to the core awareness and engagement that is required to counter-balance or counter-lean in acroyoga, tai chi illustrates a similar level of engagement. The core is foundational to the form which translates directly to moving with a partner. For example, if one partner were to 'stop' in the midst of the push hands interactions, each partner (depending on level of experience and skill) should be capable of pausing in a recognizable tai chi form that exemplifies the core energetic dynamics. Master Sam Masich describes these actions as having combative functions of warding off (*peng*), rolling back (*lu*), pressing in (*ji*) and pushing out (*an*). When experienced in push hands tai chi, each of these actions is given and received through internal forces that move outwards from one person and are received by the other in such a way that they are neutralized in a dynamically balanced albeit oppositional yin and yang fashion.

Our participatory motion-sensing approach (Lloyd and Smith 2021) to learning about push hands tai chi involved both observation and participation in push hands workshops with master Sam Masich. Working with a partner, he explains the dynamics of this partnered form: 'I receive the point of contact. Right here. I do not resist the pressure my partner is offering. I say "yes" to this contact and get underneath it and support it' (Masich, personal communication, October 2018). As he says this, Master Sam rotates his wrist. He bends his knees a little more and sinks his weight into his rear hip. In saying 'yes' to his partner, Master Sam ensures a rootedness to the ground such that his alignment and balance remain undisturbed. In doing so Master Sam holds himself within the classically defined postures of tai chi. He continues to shift his position in relation to his partner's presses and releases, all the while holding a confident bearing.

Master Sam teaches push hands as a practice of maintaining optimal form in the actions of leaning in. There are nuances to this 'lived self-other' intentionality (van Manen 2016a, 2016b) or, in other words, progressive degrees of 'intrapersonal attunement' (Siegel 2007) attained through this inwardly focussed attitude to one's body and outwardly facing connection to another's body. To simplify how we might orient to this intrapersonal attunement, Master Sam describes the bodily responses to the incoming unexpected force through a yes/no binary. The YES response is one that is more cultivated and practised. It is not the more automatic knee-jerk response of saying NO by trying to fight an opposing force.

> If [my partner] is pushing towards me, my tendency is to shirk away from it. If he pushes and I resist, I'm saying NO. If I try to get away from it, I'm saying No. Tai Chi is fundamentally a YES art. When [my partner] pushes me, I want to say YES to the point of connection first, and that's where we really have a connection. I want to feel the point of connection, how I support it and, in supporting it, how I can support it with my own structure […]. I actually have more power if his force is coming, and I've learned to accept force in this way. So, if he's pushing along my arm and I say NO, he can come and take advantage of my resistance. But if I say YES, it's like somebody gives you a gift, hands you an object. I say, that's fine, I support that, but I'm going to put it over there on the shelf. If I say No to it and force it around, it gives him fuel for his fire. But if I say YES, I accept your force and now that I've accepted it, this force is mine to do with it as I want and some of the things I want to do may be quite nasty.
>
> (Masich, personal communication, October 2018)

This last comment gives pause for thought. It was exemplified in our push hands workshop when a 70-year-old woman destabilized a man in his forties. She had a twinkle in her eye when she shared her words of wisdom: 'The harder they try to push you over, the harder they fall'. Such is the seemingly miraculous feat of a tai chi master who, by maintaining form, is able to redirect energy. Beyond asserting one's advantage in a combative or competitive context, however, push hands presents a relational way of leaning into the difficult moments in life with composure.

> When I'm practicing push hands with a partner, I'm not only trying to learn how to attack and defend or deal with force and stress, I am also trying to refine my energy. I am also trying to help the partner to refine their energy. We can see with the example of the partner being very aggressive that if I act aggressively, my energy is not becoming more refined, it is actually becoming crass. I'm training myself in the instinct of animalistic responses, whereas what I want to achieve through push hands is that when force comes my way I learn to accept it. I learn to support it. What I'm learning to do is, through my connection with the other person, work from my natural instincts toward my more cultivated responses. When I interact with a partner, what I'm trying to do is take those first layer instincts that cause me to make the errors and escalate everything out of proportion and convert this layer into a kind of practice so that my connection with a partner takes me to a place where I am responding better. I am responding within my structure, with

> connection. I am responding by saying YES rather than by saying NO, all the time not in a fear-based response but a connection-based response. This is true self-cultivation. It is not easy to get there in anything we do in life. Push hands practices and the rules that support push hands practice are designed to take us in this direction and ultimately make us better people.
>
> (Masich, personal communication, October 2018)

The tai chi YES may come across initially as a bit more manipulative than receiving and supporting weight in, say, contact improvisation (Smith 2014) because of its combative nature. Yet when Master Sam Masich says that 'I am trying to refine my energy so that when force comes my way, I can accept it and trust it', there is a sense of some vital power that transcends any individual motivations to over-power one another. George Leonard (1999) has written in this regard of his practice of Aikido in terms of also saying YES to life. He asks: 'Do you really *want* to say yes to life, not merely for the extrinsic rewards it might bring but basically for its own sake?' (1999: 158). This YES response is about living fully in the NOW no matter what unexpected forces, problems or conflicts come our way. What is confronting us, especially at this particularly challenging time, need not crush, freeze or debilitate us. Push hands tai chi teaches us to maintain composure and, as we get better at moving into and with the pressures of life, to find dynamic balance and tactical grace.

THE FEELING OF THE LEAN IN SALSA DANCE

The forward leaning posture one assumes in salsa dance affords a sense of connection and communication with one's partner. While it might not be as obvious as the slightly A-framed, chest-to-chest connection in Tango, the forward lean is always there to some extent. Two-time world champion and judge Anya Katsevman, as featured in the documentary made for the IA4L project (Studio 7 MultiMédia 2019a), describes the salsa posture as a neutral anatomical stacking of joints with the caveat that the hips are more forward in that they are placed over the front part of the foot instead of the midline. This alignment affords a forward lean in one's walk as well as a sense of compression between the interconnected palms and arms. If a follower leans too far back in their stance and onto their heels, she will feel heavy and hesitant to the lead. Anya explains in more detail:

> Because we are communicating with each other it is important to give each other weight. Connection happens through body weight, therefore as part of our normal posture we have to take the entire bone structure of the body and put it towards the balls of the feet as opposed to the middle or the back so that my weight could be closer to my partner. And when both of us maintain that we can always feel connected without creating any extra force or pressure.
>
> (Katsevman, personal communication, March 2018)

What is important to communicate to salsa dancers who are in the midst of refining their practice is that the forward lean is neither constant nor fixed. Yet an awareness of one's sense of motile agency (Sheets-Johnstone 2017) within the salsa lean takes time to develop. Rebecca, the first author of this inquiry, recalls the lean she used to adopt each time she danced salsa (Lloyd 2015b):

> When I walk with the intention of falling into the present moment, I open myself up to my partner so that I am both grounded and light at the same time. The momentum generated from my feet ripples up into our connected palms. If my postural frame is supported yet soft, without excessive tension, he can guide me. A turn or a shift in direction, a step into the unknown, can blossom into fullness when I abandon myself to the moment with *complete trust, when I give my arms to my partner to move*, as if I were that leaf in the wind.
>
> (Lloyd 2015b: 130, emphasis added)

The longer one dances and commits to progressing, the more one develops a sense of discernment for leaning in with complete trust. If a follower leans fully into the dance and receives a cue from a leader with excessive and unanticipated force, pain in the neck and shoulder region may result, which may turn into a chronic condition if not addressed. With a desire to reduce such pain, Rebecca asked Anya to describe how she would respond to such moments of interaction. Anya related that 'if someone is pushing too hard, I have two options. I can accept that and push back or completely loosen up so they feel their own pushing' (Katsevman, personal communication, March 2019). She elaborated further when asked what that felt like for the lead. She said, 'It feels weird for them. I become a noodle'. Anya purposely pulls back and softens so that 'he feels himself and hopefully relaxes' (Katsevman, personal communication, March 2019).

Imagine that you are doing a back-to-back cooperative activity where your goal is to move from a seated to standing position so as to orient to this sensation. Successful connection between partners is based on both individuals pushing into each other equally. If one person pushes into the other with excessive force and the other person relaxes and chooses not to reciprocate the force, the consequence of an imbalanced and excessive force becomes palpably obvious to the one initiating the push. Within the context of a salsa dance, Anya describes what it feels like to suddenly soften the degree of leaning into her partner and become what she describes as a noodle.

> I relax my arms physically to such an extent that I give nothing and take nothing. I use my legs to get the job done because there is still a significant amount of lead I feel because we are holding hands, but I don't give my body to that person so that the direct point of contact isn't hurt. If they are rough it doesn't affect the rest of me and all that person is feeling is themselves.
>
> (Katsevman, personal communication, March 2019)

With a desire to sense what Anya described, that very same evening Rebecca accepted a dance from someone she usually avoids because he tends to be too forceful in his physical cues. The following vignette describes the manner in which a motion-sensing interaction took place.

> Amir (pseudonym), a man who is slightly shorter than me with a somewhat athletic build, walks toward me with a smile of recognition. Instead of averting my eyes, I look into his. He offers me an open hand. I accept by placing mine in his as we walk to the middle of the dance floor. He begins to lead me into a few warmup patterns that are easy to follow (i.e. right-turn, cross-body lead, etc.). And then it happens. He sharpens

> his gestures and begins to cue directional changes when I am halfway into a turn. More torque is generated from this windup action. I follow the unanticipated change of direction. He smiles. The dance continues. Yet, I am determined not to give of myself as I usually do to this dance, and to the likelihood of pain that may come with each twist and torque as have happened in the past. I hear Anya's words in my mind, '*I remove myself from the situation. I noodle. I relax my arms physically to such an extent that I give nothing and take nothing*'. I begin to soften my arms more than I have ever done before. The torque immediately diminishes. The edge is taken off. I begin to feel better. I feel light. I feel free. I continue to walk in the directions he cues, yet I lean less. I give less. His smile fades. […] Slowly my lips begin to curl upward.
>
> (Lloyd, March 2019, motion-sensing inquiry journal)

Rebecca was not previously aware that she could lean into a dance with variable degrees of receptivity. Such new-found motion-sensing awareness prepared her to not only avoid moments of unanticipated pain by pulling back, but also intuit when it was time to give more. When Anya described giving her body to the person, she was referring to how much she gives of herself to the dance, not just physically but also emotionally and energetically. As one can imagine in other contexts such as the forward angling pressure in an offensive basketball dribble, 'your posture projects a certain type of energy' (Katsevman, personal communication, March 2016). The ideal scenario is that both partners give of themselves to the same degree in the dance; however, such an exchange is rarely experienced, even with medal-winning dancers. Anya recalls her interactions with the person with whom she won two world titles, and the moments when she would lean in more than her partner.

> I remember crossing his boundaries of comfort. I remember always being in his personal space because I had to create intimate moments. I remember creating explosive moments of stillness. I remember giving those things to him in the dance. I remember him executing the work but I never felt this exchange of powers. Even at the end of our partnership we never got to a place where it was a mutual exchange, or at least I never felt it.
>
> (Katsevman, personal communication March 2016)

Anya was asked if she experienced moments when she received more than what she gave with other dance partners. She replied,

> [it is] unusual because I'm usually the person filling it up. [But if it happens] that's nice because then I get to experience instead of create. It is more exciting for me to react than it is to create so if I set the mood it's fine but if he sets the mood then it excites me more and I'll probably even end up giving more.
>
> (Katsevman, personal communication, March 2016)

Attuning to such acts of giving oneself to a dance, to a moment, through becoming aware of one's motile agency in the way one leans into a dance, affords positive feelings and refined awareness of when it is time to give more or hold back a little and give less. When we feel the dynamic qualities of a lean, we are developing the affective repertoire that is otherwise cast more

generally as the 'kinetic-kinaesthetic-affective dynamics' of 'thinking in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone 1981, 1999, 2011, 2017).

What might these somatic features of the lean teach us in terms of our supposed natural tendencies, inclinations and dispositions to move through life? Do we tend to lean more and give more? Do we sense when it is time to noddle or soften? Before this motion-sensing inquiry began, Rebecca not only had a tendency to lean into her salsa dances with too much abandonment at times that led to a shoulder injury, she also became aware of her tendency to lean in a little too much or push herself too hard in life. The more she danced salsa with such somatic awareness, however, the more her angle of lean adjusted to her context and unnecessary tensions faded away.

What might inspire us to feel our way into a salsa lean is that we can ripple and soften our bodily comportment just enough to respond to the other but not overstay, overextend or over-lean into the moment. This inspirational feeling is not distinctive of salsa but can be felt in other partnered practices such a contact improvisation. The point to be taken from our study of salsa is that feelings of receptively to leaning in and leaning away on the dance floor contain lessons for handling life off the dance floor. This was highlighted in a recent conversation with a bodywork colleague who complained about being over-stressed and over-extended in her professional practice. In this scenario it was a matter of her learning that sitting back and enjoying life is a necessary corrective to the stresses of continually leaning into life. This perhaps illustrates how, in the emotional stresses we face in our daily work as teachers, professors, chiropractors, physiotherapists or massage therapists, there are ways to lean receptively and responsively into the work we do that need not be tension adding.

THE FLOW OF THE LEAN IN EQUESTRIAN ARTS

The motions of leaning in, away from, and with a partner in acroyoga, push hands tai chi and salsa dance take on particular significance in equestrian arts. The effects of postural and positional changes can be quite dramatic in the discipline of liberty training where the trainer and the horse interact on the ground and where forms and patterns, gait transitions, and modulations of energy expenditure are cued through bodily postures, positions, gestures and motional expressivity. Paul Dufresne, as featured in the documentary made for the IA4L project (Studio 7 MultiMédia 2019b) discusses how he cultivates this interaction with the horse through an energetic connection across space. He leans towards the horse as it arcs around him. The act of leaning in for Paul drives the horse forward in a continuous circle. He turns his shoulders almost square to the line of the horse's travel and puts particular focus on the horse's 'drive-line' which is the muscular coupling of the horse's back and hindquarters where the motional power derives. Were the focus of his attention a little further forward towards the shoulders, he might well turn the horse to the outside and away from him. But by leaning into the drive line, he holds the horse in a dynamic tension of 'drive and draw' (Field 2014).

Paul explains what he does while working with a young mare at liberty: 'What I am asking myself is that, when I get the horse to move, can I put pressure on her ribcage to have her soften and bend around me?' He explains how he might then focus his attention on the horse's hind end so that 'if I need forward motion, my pressure will be there. And when I put pressure there,

see how she bends around me? I'm riding her right now from the ground' (Dufresne, personal communication, August 2018). The training process for Paul is very much about using pressure and release to create bend. He discusses dynamics of leaning in to exert pressure and leaning away to release in relation to working with the young mare:

> You can see now that when I create pressure, she is bending from the poll to the tail to get around. The reason why I do that is because I don't want the horse to counter-flex and lean in. She is not to invert. That pressure, when I ask this horse to bend there, is going to cause a physical response in this horse to actually start releasing endorphins in her body. Then she can't help it; she just starts to relax.
>
> (Dufresne, personal communication, August 2018)

Later on, Paul brings two more horses into the round pen. These geldings circle in tandem around him, seeming at first more interested initially in one another than in Paul who stands in the centre of the pen. He leans in, pressing again as before, with his attention on the hindquarters of the horse circling closest to him. Both the inside and outside horses transition almost instantaneously from a trot to a canter. Paul holds this lean and taps the ground with the cue stick he holds just for added emphasis. An even greater energy of motion is evident as the horses reach into a gallop. Paul then draws back, standing straighter, while the horses slow the tempo and settle into a rhythmic and synchronously cadenced trot. Paul softens his shoulders, lowers his arms to his sides, and drops his energetic force into his pelvis. He focuses now on the horses' flanks as if his gaze can feel right where a rider would place her inside leg to have her horse bend softly around this cueing contact. The horses continue to circle around Paul, coming closer and closer to the centre of the round pen where he stands.

Paul leans slightly back as if opening up an invitational space for the horses. He hollows his chest a little, draws in his stomach and, in so doing, brings back the energy to his core that had moments ago been pressing the horses into propulsive motion. He offers the horse an inviting receptive posture that has them turning towards him. Instead of just the inside eyes, both their eyes are now on him. Their bodies soften even more. They transition to a collected trot. The circle becomes smaller and smaller until the inside horse almost brushes past Paul. He takes a step or two back and the horses slow to a walk and come to a standstill beside him, side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder.

The quality of the lean in liberty training is reflected in these horses' bodily signs of attuning to Paul. When the interaction is flowing there is a sense of 'bringing up life' in the horses (Smith 2018). Yet here, in watching Paul actually lean into, with and back from their motions, we gain more specific understanding of just how this upsurge of life feeling is created kinetically, kinaesthetically, aesthetically and synergistically. Paul says we need to keep asking ourselves: 'How little energy do we need, or how little pressure do we need to get it done?' He compares this ground work with horse riding, saying that just as with the pressure he exerts when directing his attention through postural leaning while standing on the ground: 'If there is just the touch of the rein when riding, the horse should be moving over'. Impart just 'a little bit of energy and then give the horse a chance to pick it up' (Dufresne, personal communication, August 2018).

> The signs of relational flow are that the horse is going to be much more responsive, much softer. The horse is going to allow you to make changes to how she moves, or where she goes, with no apprehension. She is going to think 'Oh, this way over here'. And you are going to use a minimum of energy to create it. All the cues become softer and softer. It becomes just like a dance.
>
> (Dufresne, personal communication, August 2018)

To make his point, Paul refers to the rhythmicity of the interaction. We feel for this rhythmicity just by watching how horses move. They walk, trot and canter from four-beat, to two-beat, to three-beat rhythms. They transition upwards and downwards through these gaits with fluidity in a consistently held rhythm. The trainer attunes to the horse's motions, cues them, and modulates these motions by taking up their rhythmicity. As Paul says, 'any time you lead with rhythm you are going to be much easier for your horse to understand. It means that you are going to have flow. And when you have flow, you are not imposing. There is life in it' (Dufresne, personal communication, August 2018). This 'relational flow' (Smith and Lloyd 2020) is held within the very 'expressivity' of the postural alignments of the human trainer and the horses (2020: 5). It is an energetic dynamic that is increasingly being recognized as the necessary rhythmicity to our responsiveness to one another. Interacting with another kind of animal through moment-to-moment, postural reciprocity is an equestrian art of energetic attunement and relational flow which surely applies to the practices of everyday life with those of our own kind. Walking with another person, for example, can contribute to feelings of empathic connection and even become a means of conflict resolution (e.g. Valdesolo and DeSteno 2011; Webb et al. 2017).

CONCLUSION

From acroyoga, to push hands tai chi, to salsa dance, and to equestrian arts, our study indicates that a lean within a relational practice is never stiff, still or static. There is a functional, formal, felt and flowing dynamism to leaning-in. The significance of attuning to the contextualized, discipline-specific nuances of leaning-in is that we can better sense life interactively. We can come to appreciate the different functions that a lean provides, the multitude of forms in which it becomes efficacious, the diverse range of feelings that it evokes, and the omnipresent possibility of flow within actions and responses that leaning into and away from a partner offers.

Acroyoga teaches us how we might experience balance as a relational phenomenon and move in a counter-balanced response with both strength and softness. push hands tai chi teaches us how we might embrace the back-and-forth nature of conflict in a way that is supportive, grounded and maintains structure and comportment to enable our best selves to emerge when the limits of comfort are tested. Salsa dance teaches us kinaesthetically to better sense moments of a fully weighted lean into another body versus moments of protective physical retreat. And equestrian arts magnifies the positive sensations of flow when the functions, forms, feelings and flows of relational connection align energetically and synergistically.

This motion-sensing inquiry into the various ways a simple posture may be experienced inspires us to pay attention to where we are carrying our weight and what capabilities such awareness affords. Are we able to relax into

a playful sway if we are experiencing a moment of challenge, or when we feel that we are becoming unbalanced, both literally and metaphorically? Are we aware of the forms we assume when we are engaged not only in a physical pursuit but also in the subtleties of leaning in to create connection with another person in conversation? Are we aware of the feelings that modulate in intensity with the variable angles of a lean and the pleasures and pains that ensue when sustaining a lean for an extended period of time? Can we open ourselves up to leaning into moments that are greater than ourselves and receive as much as, or more than, we give?

Never did we imagine that this inquiry into relational connection would have such relevance and take place during a global pandemic and at a time of government-imposed isolation where the withdrawal of physical contact has had measurably ill effects (e.g. Ghebreyesus 2020; Waddell et al. 2020). As we engage in this process of writing up and sharing the tenets of what we learned from world-class experts in acroyoga, push hands tai chi, salsa dance and equestrian arts, the key somatic insights for moving in response to, as well as living well with others are more timely than ever.

We conclude that at this time of so much physical distancing and social isolation it is especially necessary to cultivate practices of 'leaning into life'. In becoming aware of our tendencies and our inclinations to live life slightly pulled back or perhaps stretched too far forward, we can learn new ways of leaning into life and responding vitally to others. We suggest that our need to connect with one another can be inspired by the lessons we have learned from world-class experts of partnered practices to improve our everyday life encounters with one another. We hope that as you think about this motion-sensing inquiry and contemplate your own relational encounters you take note of the postural, positional, gestural and expressive ways of leaning and, in doing so, ask yourself how you can better experience the joys of being moved by, and moving with, others. Attending to the functions, forms, feelings and flows of responding somatically to one another in partnered practices can become the very means of leaning more vibrantly into life at large.

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