

# I think I'm able to listen and tend to her body

Erin Poole & Johnny Mrym Spence



*This conversation took place in June 2020 while driving in Scarborough, Ontario.*

**Erin**

I was just thinking about—you know when people talk about choreography being everywhere and not just about movement in a dance piece? Obviously that's basic, but also it's not. I've been thinking about the movement I'm doing with my grandma right now and the movement that she has.

Yesterday, in order to help my grandma lie down, I changed the system of how I've been helping her. I don't know why I've been so timid about using this kind of careful...careful care that I have to give to her body. I'm trying to figure out what movement I have to offer her.

I was thinking about *that* choreography and how it's really so intricate and complex and tender. In a lot of ways it feels opposite to how I experience choreography in a dance piece, or at least lately. Like, performing Vena Cava, or dancing at TDT, feels a lot more violent. More harsh. Like, it's just really harsh.

**Johnny**

You mean it feels violent in comparison to the choreography of you and your grandmother doing the task of living?

**Erin**

Yeah, living and helping someone be comfortable living, be comfortable dying. And how that is a form of choreography—I hate to keep saying that.

**Johnny**

You hate calling it a choreography?

**Erin**

Yeah, it just sounds a bit pretentious. Oh well. I'm having a hard time joining the two. But it started with thinking about the things that we value so much in dance, the choreography and the aesthetic, wondering: "What is the aesthetic of this choreography happening between me and my grandma?"

I started considering all the textures of her life right now. For instance, her soft cream-coloured blanket is so important to her. And the position of a pillow and how that affects her body. How the brilliance of a yellow flower lifts her spirits. How all these moments keep getting more condensed.

**Johnny**

The way her body is kind of shutting down and becoming less and less functional...is that making her more heightened, or perhaps, more aware of her body and its surroundings? Perhaps she's more aware because she needs her surroundings to support her, whereas people who are more so-called "able bodied" can function in more varied surroundings.

*[A huge truck carrying four giant cement cylinders drives by]*

**Both**

Woah...

**Erin**

Those are cool.

**Johnny**

Those are very cool.

**Erin**

Where do you think those are going?

**Johnny**

I have no idea.

*[Pause]*

**Erin**

I guess it's like, as her body is shutting down, or as she becomes less able, her way of moving is becoming more complex as it gets more concentrated. I have so much range, ability, and strength, but I regret that I haven't spent very much time thinking about it as an offering of care. In the way that movement can be and is caring. I've spent so much time thinking about movement in relation to the way my own body feels or looks in dance choreography. Which is linked, often, to the way someone else may see it.



**Johnny**

Oh, so you mean often when you're in a performance setting you don't think about the movement as care in the same way? And this time with your grandma is making you think about movement as not only functionality or beauty, but also as care? Making you challenge the way that it's perceived? Who is perceiving it?



**Erin**

Yes, all those things. [*Laughs*]

It's not that I haven't moved with care before. There is something I do for a piece of choreography which is caring. The big difference I'm feeling right now is that I'm not moving performatively but purely for the sake of care. And I really feel how the way I've been trained and the way I move in some ways contributes to a colonial/settler way of being. Reinforces that I'm dancing for someone else, for capital or consumption. And my body feels less like mine and more like the instrument of someone else. I've thought a lot about this before ...

Right now I'm thinking about the real purpose of moving, of my body's movement, and how there are so many different ways to move. It can be expanded out in many directions, but right now the way I'm moving is in relation to death. To my grandma and my grandma's death (and life) in particular.

And I've also realized that I'm usually always performing. Not being at TDT right now, not being in a rehearsal process or performing due to the pandemic, is making me realize how I'm pretty much always using my body to perform in some way. I suppose in some ways I'm performing for my grandmother to offer ease or grace, but it's all coming from a place of comfort. Care. Tenderness. It's meant for feeling, not seeing.

[*Pause*]

'Cause I often think about grief and performing grief. How performative it is in a lot of ways. Often how we externalize our grief can feel like a performance, and



that's necessary at times. I've definitely got really wrapped up in my head thinking, "Am I performing an anger or a sadness?"

And I'm already thinking about setting up an end of life ritual or ceremony for my grandma. How is that going to look and feel? What do I want there? What will other people want there? What place does aesthetic beauty, beautiful flowers or spacing, have in this performance of saying goodbye? I don't mean just performing, but it is a spectacle. So I don't know, I'm trying to link all of that somehow.

### Johnny

It just struck me that with this future burial or commemorative moment you're choreographing stillness. Whereas the care between you and your grandma right now is a lot of choreographing movement. I guess now has more movement because it's life, right?

### Erin

Mmm, yeah. Well, *she* will be still ... eventually.

### Johnny

But you're also making room for people to pause. Often at a burial it's moments of stillness with actions happening around that. And right now it's a lot of... well, I suppose there's a lot of your grandma sleeping, but when you're interacting with her it's always a movement.

### Erin

Yeah, even when she's sleeping I'm still watching her chest, her breath, watching for the smallest of movements. And any small movement still means *Life*. Her life doesn't feel like a flame slowly going out.

Even though her movement is becoming restricted it isn't any less movement or less meaningful. And this is something that is talked about in dance practice, how we're never actually still. You're always in motion even when you're standing seemingly still. And some of those dancing ideas, I'm really thinking of them and experiencing them now in relation to death. Which I know lots of folks do in dance.

### Johnny

Do you think being someone who works in movement makes you a better caregiver? Maybe "better" isn't the right word—but how does dance change the kind of care you can give? You've talked in the past about feeling grateful that you've looked after your body and made it flexible and strong. So that now you're able to lift your grandma and do these things that other people in your family can't do. Are there other ways which your movement practice has influenced the kind of care you offer?

### Erin

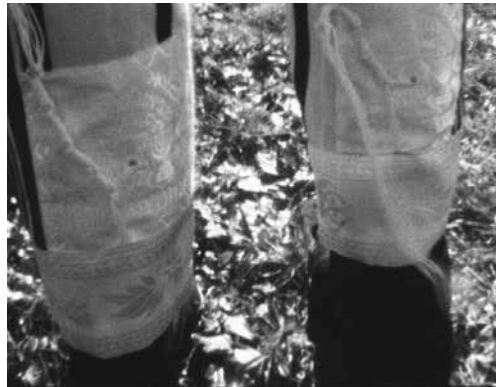
I think I'm able to listen and tend to her body in a certain way and without needing words. I can support her physically in the right places, which means that she has energy left over for something else to happen. I think that improves my grandma's experience because it means that she is in less pain. If I can help her do something with ease then possibly she'll have energy to eat something or drink something or have a conversation or think or feel.

It also has a profound effect on me because I notice what's going on in her body and it reminds me to be in my own. I don't know... it's empathy and listening. I also make mistakes. I don't really know what I'm trying to say, but it feels important.



אל מלא רחמים. שוכן במרומים. המצא מנוחה  
 נכונה תחת כנפי השכינה.  
 עם קדושים וטהורים כוזה הרקיע מזהירים.  
 לנשמות קירנו שהלכו לעולמם.  
 בעל הרחמים יסתירם בסתר כנפיו לעולמים.  
 ויצרר בצרור החיים את-נשמתם.  
 יהיה הוא נחלתם.  
 וינוחו בשלום על-משכבם.  
 ונאמר אמן :

God, filled with compassion  
 Grant complete repose to the souls  
 Of all those we are remembering today  
 Sheltered by Your divine wings  
 May they join the company  
 Of the holy and pure  
 Who shine as bright as heaven  
 Bring their souls  
 Into the bond of life that  
 With You as their portion  
 They may rest in peace  
 Amen




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El Male Rachamim is a Jewish prayer for the soul of a person who has died, often recited during burial and memorial services. The images accompanying this conversation are stills from the video work *El Male Rachamim / All Our Departed*. The video was choreographed by Erin Poole, directed/edited by Johnny Spence, and filmed by Caitlin Woelfe-O'Brien in collaboration with LA-based composer/cantor Daniela Gesundheit. The video premiered in December 2020 in the cultural and political journal *PROTOCOLS*.

# *It's Enough (for a rooftop)*

## Image Descriptions

### All Bodies Dance Project



**Page 29:** A photograph taken on top of an empty rooftop parkade. Downtown Vancouver highrises span the background of the image and the sky is grey and cloudy behind three dancers. They are moving near the corner of the parkade, each of them wearing different colours and types of warm clothing. The standing dancer on the left has their arms raised to the sides, the right arm bent upwards and the left arm bent downwards. They seem to be mid-step, dancing towards the centre of the frame. The middle dancer is seated in a manual wheelchair, their right arm outstretched as if passing or reaching towards the third dancer to the right. The third dancer is sitting on a railing that runs along the edge of the parkade with their left arm stretched upwards towards the sky. Their right arm seems loose, hanging by the side of their body.



**Page 29:** A photograph taken on top of an empty rooftop parkade surrounded by the glass and concrete buildings of Vancouver's downtown. The sky is grey and cloudy behind three dancers who are wearing different types, colours, and styles of warm clothing. The image foreground on the right is blurry, as if the image was taken from afar and a wall is blocking the view. The first and closest dancer is seated in a motorized wheelchair facing the other two dancers near the image centre. The second dancer is standing with their legs straight, their torso bent downwards, and their arms hanging towards the ground. The third dancer is draped across the second, holding on by the second dancer's waist with their feet off the ground. A puddle near the centre of the frame reflects the two entangled dancers.



**Page 30-31:** A bright image of an empty Vancouver rooftop parkade with seven dancers spread across the scene. It is a sunny day and the coastal mountain range runs along the horizon with the Vancouver skyline in front. A telephone wire decorated with lanterns runs horizontally along the centre of the image, nearly parallel to the mountains visible in the background. Many of the dancers, each wearing different colours and types of clothing, are in various extended poses. Two dancers are seated in manual wheelchairs and doing wheelies with their front wheels in the air. Another dancer is seated in a motorized wheelchair, leaning back with both arms reaching to the right. There is a dancer balancing on a solid office chair, both arms stretched out to the side, toes touching the ground. Another dancer is tipped to one side, balancing on one foot while the other leg hovers above a short stool. Two other dancers stand beside a railing at the back, one seeming to be jumping mid-air, and the other's arms spread wide.