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Collaborations

By Jae Gruenke

MAKING MOVMENT WITH THE HILL

It's a thrill to move through space under your own power and direction, at home in your body and master of your equipment, feeling strong, skilled, and in control. Within the constraints of your activity, you recognize yourself as you move and learn in familiar ways. It feels like what you do is a solitary accomplishment, like you are master of your universe.

However, if you look more closely at what you're doing, you'll see that your movement is not something you generate alone. Every move you make is a collaboration between you and your environment.

Take the example of rollerblading uphill around a curve. Did the movements that propelled you come from you? In a certain sense, yes, but would you have done them if you hadn't been on that hill? Absolutely not. If you tried to do exactly those movements while blading on a flat straightaway, you would have unbalanced yourself at the very least, if not injured yourself badly. When you skated that section of the road, you interacted with it; you saw and felt that there was a hill and a curve, so you placed each skate down slightly higher than the last one in a particular spatial and rhythmic sequence, and you shifted your body weight forward to generate the force you needed to ascend the grade. You probably didn't even calculate it consciously, but just responded step by step to what you felt was needed to get to the top. You and the hill generated this sequence of movements together.

Even in more homogeneous environments, such as a treadmill, you are in a constant state of interaction with your environment, with the boundary between you and it almost impossible to find.

Seen this way, it's really a very small step from moving apparently solo to collaborating with another being in movement. It can be an incredibly rich step to take, though, because of the potential not only to learn about yourself in exciting new ways, but also to learn about how you interact and communicate.

The first time I remember trying to move together with someone else was in the three-legged race at my fifth grade class picnic. As a learning experience it was a rip-off, because the three-legged race is really about how funny failure can be. The winners, who somehow get to the finish line while tied together by one leg, actually lose out because they attract the least attention. Everybody watches the mismatched, overeager pairs who trip over each other and collapse laughing to the ground.

That's the natural course of things for school picnics, when you're not technically supposed to be learning anything, but what a shame that my teachers didn't think that there might be something there very much worth learning. Still, it's never too late to learn.

HAVE YOUR RACE AND WIN IT TOO

If you have a willing partner near to you in height, try three-legged walking for yourselves. Find an open space free of any obstacles. A large, grassy space in a park would be an excellent place for this. Agree to move slowly and softly and to communicate well so you don't get hurt. Tie your right leg to your buddy's left (gently!) both above and below your knees with soft scarves or knee socks. Now try

a couple of steps together. Okay, now you realize that the communication has to start right away; if you don't verbally agree on whether you'll step with your tied-together legs or your other legs first, you'll stumble like we all did back in fifth grade.

Notice. What are you doing with your arms? Are they lifted up in the air, cocked tensely, or waving around for balance? Are you, in fact, leaning your entire upper bodies away from each other? Try walking around a little bit like this and see how it works. Probably at least one of you has to hop from time to time or frantically grab the other's shoulders to keep from falling over. It's probably pretty tiring and stressful too. Try putting your inside arms around each other's waists. Notice how this brings your hips into contact, letting them move forward and back with your legs more easily. Notice also that your torsos are now connected. As long as you like your partner okay (this was often difficult in grade school activities), you'll probably feel much more comfortable like this.

Now try balancing together on your bound-together leg. Can you do it? If one person stands on both legs, can the other person balance on the tied leg? Unwrap your arms from each other and try not to touch above the hip – now can you balance? Try the same thing on your outside legs.

Check your process. How are the two of you working together? Are you talking about the problems you're having and sharing solutions you find? Are you agreeing to try different things out together? When I tried this with a friend, it worked best when we shared all the information we could. It turned out that our being tied together didn't mean we were necessarily sharing the same experience; we kept walking each other into obstacles until we learned that we had to be in constant communication about what we were doing.

If you feel comfortable, try a few running steps. It's not very much like running by yourself, is it? In fact, if you're really honest about it, you probably don't feel exactly like yourself by now. Working together, you and your partner have adjusted your movements to integrate with each other's in more ways than you realize. Maybe in the process you've become aware of parts of yourself that you normally don't feel when you walk or run, though they're certainly there and moving when you do.

Furthermore, you haven't been able to solve the problem of how to do these movements the way you usually solve problems, because you've been tied, literally, to someone else, and you've had to develop a collaborative method. Meanwhile, your senses are full of your partner's presence – his or her smell, the feel of their clothing, the temperature and texture of their skin.

When you move together with another being like this, together you become a third creature, different from the sum of the two of you. It's impossible not to be changed by the experience. It gives you the opportunity to feel yourself in a way you never could alone. You get invaluable feedback on the ways that you move and communicate. You experience new possibilities you couldn't have invented.

There are many more sophisticated ways to collaborate in movement. Push Hands and horseback riding are less embarrassing than three-legged running, and may take a good deal longer to master. However, with patience and appropriate instruction, the results can enrich your interactions with others and expand your sense of who you can be.

A DANCE OF GREATER AND GREATER AWARENESS

Push Hands is a partner discipline that can be studied as an aspect of T'ai Chi Chuan. Two people stand face to face and shift their weight back and forth, contacting each other lightly with their hands and forearms over and over in an intricate pattern of movements. Each tries to stay relaxed, alert, and

connected in body and mind so they will be able to feel a disbalance or tension in their partner's movement. When one person feels this lack of harmony, she can magnify it through her movement so her partner loses his stance and falls away. "It's the study of nonaggressive self-defense," explains Margaret Matsumoto, a senior teacher at the New York School of T'ai Chi Chuan. "Any self-defense response must be infused with a sense of relaxation, so that it becomes a dance of greater and greater awareness. When it is truly practiced without aggression, it's a playful, mutual, cooperative exploration."

If you're interested in learning Push Hands, you begin by studying the sequence of solo movements of one of the forms of T'ai Chi. (The New York School of T'ai Chi Chuan teaches the Yang Style Short Form.) Matsumoto describes this as "a context in which to start to move and become aware of our own tensions and balance. It can reveal to you your outlook on life and what limitations you put on life."

The movements of the form are performed at a serene pace, and look quite comfortable and nonstrenuous. They're fluid and rich and round, and after watching them for a while I see swirls and eddies of water when I close my eyes. I have the urge to be reverentially silent as I observe the class, but I'm certain that if I suddenly dropped a book or shouted, no one would be much disturbed. Everyone seems thoroughly grounded, body and mind, in what they're doing.

The rigor of the form only becomes clear when you begin to study it; the relationships of your feet and legs, spine, head, and hands are fully defined, and achieving them with ease requires a great deal of attention and exploration. Nonetheless, there are satisfactions even for a beginning student. When I practice, I feel sometimes like the wind, coursing and curling through the wilderness, and at other times like a primeval force I cannot name.

The movement principles become a source of tremendous calm, balance, and stability once you understand them; keeping your head, eyes, shoulders, and hips always lined up requires you to generate all the movements from your pelvis, the power center of your body. This is the home of the tan tien, a point located about three finger widths below your navel and one inch inside your abdomen; in the truly centered practitioner all movement and awareness originate from this place. After a period of silent Push Hands practice, Matsumoto reminds her class, "You create your response from the center. When you're up here [in your head], you're in a reactive mode. When you're down here [in the tan tien] you're in the driver's seat."

Once you understand the basic form, Push Hands shows you how the movements in the form relate to human interactions. You get a deeper understanding of balance when someone is trying to unbalance you than when you are moving by yourself. You also learn how to sense aggression and fear, feeling them in your tan tien. One of the many complications of the practice comes when, after struggling to deal with tension that you thought you felt in your partner, you realize that those feelings weren't his, they were your own.

By taking you beyond yourself into interaction with another, Push Hands helps you refine, understand, and more fully experience who you really are.

To take classes at the New York School of T'ai Chi Chuan, call (212) 502-4112. Their website is www.taichichuan.org. Their national not-for-profit coordinating body sponsors summer residential trainings within a day's travel of NYC. For more information about these programs, call (301) 953-3413 or email them at taichifoundation@aol.com.

Other teachers of the Yang Style Short Form are:
William Chen, who teaches on W. 23rd St. (212) 675-2816

Maggie Newman, who teaches in the Soho area. (212) 929-7921

George and Angela Chen, who teach in Bronxville. (914) 779-2892

Wolfe Lowenthal, who teaches on the Upper West Side. Contact his senior student, Lenny Friedland, at (212) 316-3163.

YOU CAN'T MAKE HIM DO ANYTHING

We were well past Machate Circle and into Prospect Park before I felt a sudden change in my seat, and then the peace that comes from no longer doing work that I hadn't realized I was doing. Crossing a busy traffic circle in Brooklyn on horseback is not a relaxing task, particularly if it's been a while since you were last on a horse. Bingo, my lovely mount, was much more mellow about the whole thing than I was. Once we were safely walking along a dirt track in the quiet weekday park and my pelvis finally settled down into the saddle, I felt the movement more clearly and marvelled that I could move along with it.

When she heard that I would also be writing about horseback riding, Margaret Matsumoto said, "Ah, just like in push hands, you don't ride just your point of contact – you ride the whole horse." I relayed this to my guide, Fran Levy, and she agreed about the similarity, citing a former dancer who sat rigidly in the saddle rather than moving with the horse. When the dancer started studying T'ai Chi she was much more able to feel how the horse moved.

As we rode, Fran told me how her horse loves to pick up speed and wheel off into an open field to play. She asked me to keep well behind her there so he wouldn't be encouraged to take off. "When you really think about it," she said, "a horse is 1100 lbs. and your reins are two pieces of string tied to nothing. You can't make him do anything." Nonetheless, in some sense we do ride our horses, choosing our route through the park and not cavorting in the field.

Rather than relying on our pieces of rope to communicate, we ride with our whole bodies. Signals to the horse to change gait from a walk to a trot to a canter are also ways of moving your body to facilitate that change; by moving your weight forward or back in the saddle, rising with the trot or sitting down into it, you both signal your intentions and make it possible or comfortable or downright awkward for the horse to move.

The few times I've ridden in adulthood, I've been chagrined to discover that all of me really does communicate with the horse. The part of me that's afraid to canter comes across as clearly as the part that's eager - the result is nothing more than a halfhearted trot. Or the part of me that tries to ensure my safety by always agreeing with my partner comes across to the horse more clearly than the part of me that knows what I want – so he keeps breaking into a fast trot or canter and surging ahead to pass the guide. Sure enough, the reins are not much use.

As in three-legged running and Push Hands, there is collaboration, an agreement, a pact that leaves you not quite the same. With an animal, that agreement is especially exhilarating. While I don't understand why an 1100 lb. animal would make a pact to cooperate with a rider, the rich interaction it yields obviates my questions. I feel not exclusively human when I ride.

To ride in Prospect Park, contact **Kensington Stables** at (718) 972-4588. They offer instruction, which starts at \$35/hour, and trail rides for \$20/hour. Western or English style. For more information and a full listing of other services, go to their website at www.kensingtonstables.com.

The Black Rodeo provides riding classes in both English and Western styles at the **Randall's Island Sports Foundation**, on Randall's Island (in the East River below the Triborough Bridge). For more information call (212) 660-2986.

The **Riverdale Equestrian Center** is the equestrian riding and instruction stable in Van Cortlandt Park. For more information call (718) 548-4848.

The **BRONX EQUESTRIAN CENTER** is the equestrian instruction and riding stable in Pelham Bay Park. For more information call (718) 885-0551.

The **Claremont Riding Academy** rents horses to experienced riders only, for unguided rides on the Central Park bridle paths. They do not offer guided trail rides. As their name suggests, they also offer instruction (English style only) and a range of other services. Call (212) 799-3568.

There are a number of other stables in the New York area. The GORP website ("Great Outdoor Recreation Pages") has extensive descriptions of stables in Staten Island, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. Go to www.gorp.com/gorp/location/ny/fiveboro_horse.htm.

To read more about humans' interaction with the world around us, I highly recommend David Abram's brilliant book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*.

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