From Dys/Function to Flow: Inception, Perception and Dancing Beyond Life’s Constraints

Rebecca J. Lloyd

University of Ottawa

When the existential state of flow is experienced, the flesh of oneself perceptually intertwines with the Merleau-Pontian flesh of the world. Perceived constraints and worries disappear and, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 2000, 2008), longtime researcher of flow, all that exists is the merging of bodily action and awareness within the timeless nature of the present moment. Such a state is highly desirable and for those who experience flow often; the path toward its onset might become automatic, even predictable. But what might it be like to experience a dys-function, such as an injury that veers one from this automatic-pilot course? Could such a circumstance, if mindfully embraced with a Heideggerian sway, cultivate a different kind of flow? Influenced by Daniel Stern’s (2010) concept of vitality forms, an affective attunement towards movement that attends to the nuances of force, spatiality, and intentionality/directionality within motility, this inquiry delves into the motile experience of finding a new footing in life, of embracing emergence, and exploring the cultivation of flow in both fluid and em/bounded/bodied ways.

Joyful movement, effortless exertion, fluidity, expansion, connectedness to the cosmos...a few descriptors of meaningful moments one experiences in this thing called life. Such moments emerge when one’s action merges with one’s awareness. There is no hesitation, questioning, or doubt. There is no place one would rather be or longing to be doing something else as the consuming draw of the present moment unfolds an existence that affirms not only what it means to be human, but also divine. Time deviates from the hands of the ticking clock. Depending on the nature of the activity, be it reading a poem, washing a car, strumming a guitar, running in the park, swimming in the ocean, or pressing one’s lips into the mouth of a lover, hours could perceptually fly by as if they were minutes, or seconds could expand into small eternities. Such moments carry the essence of what Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 2000, 1990/2008) posits as flow. They also approach the kind of existence Heidegger (1927/1999) attributed to skillful action, one’s handicraft that, for the sake of argument as David Michael Kleinberg-Levin (2005) offers, could live within and beyond the scope of the hand and extend to any meaningful and masterful bodily gesture.

Both Csikszentmihalyi and Heidegger recognize that such moments do not fall into one’s lap in a happenstance manner. The cultivation of one’s craft, to the extent where the action becomes fluid, is an antecedent. That means if that one picks up a hammer, presses a key on a piano, kicks

Correspondence should be addressed to Rebecca J. Lloyd, PhD, Associate Professor, Interdisciplinary Education, University of Ottawa, Faculty of Education, 145 Jean-Jacques Lussier Street, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1N 6N5. E-mail: rllloyd@uottawa.ca
a ball, or twirls a hula-hoop for the first time, the nature of thinking as one finds one’s grip or footing is likely to be forced, jerky, clumsy, and potentially disconnected, i.e., not seamlessly living in and through the action itself. Thus, whether it is doubt, absorption in reproducing premeditated steps, or overexerted gusto, the existential state of flow, where a sense of heaven is lived on earth, is, for the most part, out of reach for a raw beginner. Once a certain level of skill is acquired, however, in an intrinsically motivated autotelic activity, which Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describes as “activities that people [do] for the sake of doing the activity, without experiencing any external rewards” (p. xv), and is matched with an appropriate level of challenge so that boredom or anxiety do not cloud the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008), the possibility of experiencing flow emerges. In such moments, the temporality of thinking lives in the unfolding of the movement itself.

But what if, on one particular day in one’s life, the onset of flow ceases? Imagine an injured dancer no longer able to dance in and through life, a carpenter with a broken finger wanting to continue his craft, or a lover without a partner desiring to make love. The automaticity in human motility that brings a flow experience forth, what might be conceived as a particular kind of “bodying forth” (Heidegger, 1959-69/2001, p. 97), fades. Shifts in mood are likely: from frustration and anger to sadness and despair . . . but if one embraces Heidegger’s (1924/2011) notion of “Da-sein,” a state of being that “exists in a state of possibility [Sein in der Möglichkeit]” (p. 13), in that humans have the potential to create new perceptual worlds, one might wonder, “Is flow possible?” Within life’s constraints, from injury to heartache, is there a possibility to create a new existence, a new kind of flow that is perhaps more purposeful, less automatic, and when experienced, one that brings a more profound sense of gratitude and joy? And if flow reemerges after experiencing dire circumstances, perhaps what was initially perceived as a dysfunction could be reframed from what etymology (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2014) alludes to as “bad, abnormal, difficult” to an essential part of attuning oneself more deeply toward a flowing existence. Exploring the functionality of dysfunction, what might be best construed as dys/function, a way of depicting the essential gap between an existence of immobilizing pain and motile pleasure, is a journey worth pursuing. Hence, much might be gleaned from inquiring into the reemergence of flow in ways that deviate from the automatic, taken-for-granted course.

COGNITION, MENTAL ORDER, AND FLOW

Mind over matter. The body can achieve what the brain can conceive. These are snippets of well-intentioned advice one might hear when dealing with a difficult life circumstance; yet, advice that, nonetheless, suggests a Cartesian split between an unintelligent body that acts as a handmaiden to a glorified mind. Although the phenomenon of flow is best described as the merging of bodily action with awareness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008), a similar split between mind and body is evident in the way flow has been delineated within the context of motivational psychology. Such dualism can be traced to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990/2008) disclosure that his research and understandings of flow are very much influenced by information theory and notions of mental order. Experience as seen through this cognitive lens becomes objectified, e.g., Csikszentmihalyi (1990/2008) declared, “Events that constitute consciousness—the things we see, feel, think and desire—are information that we can manipulate and use” (p. 26). Furthermore he contended that “we might think of consciousness as intentionally ordered
information’’ (p. 26). The problem with relying on information theory to make sense of flow, particularly its reemergence, is that it rests upon the mind-as-computer metaphor, where knowledge is conceived of as an object, a thing, or a commodity that can be inputted, outputted, and organized. That means, when a challenge or problem is experienced that hinders the onset of flow, it will be addressed not only with preference given to the mind, but also in a way that objectifies the body and the workings of the mind.

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990/2008) research into flow thus outlines a decision-making approach to reexperiencing flow when faced with adversity, i.e., one should think one’s way back into flow, e.g., make a decision and have the resolve that everything will be okay. Victims of tragic accidents, for example, reported that they were able to see their misfortune as ‘‘both one of the most negative and one of the most positive events in their lives’’ due to perceiving their recovery with very clear goals—goals that reduced ‘‘contradictory and inessential choices’’ (p. 193, italics in original). Thus, flow research has shown that the ‘‘patients who learned to master the new challenges of their impaired situation felt a clarity of purpose they had lacked before…they were able to turn the accident from a source of entropy into an occasion of inner order’’ (p. 194).

Perhaps then, this inquiry into exploring the reemergence of flow when experiencing difficult life circumstances should stop here. Set a goal. Create mental order. Live a happy life. The end.

Heidegger (1936–1938/2012), however, challenges such simplicity in living one’s life through a decision making lens. He says, ‘‘When we hear talk of ‘de-cision’, we think of a human act, something carried out, a procedure. What is essential here, however, is neither the humanness of the act, nor the procedural quality’’ (p. 69). He continues by explaining that when ‘‘we think of ‘decision’ as a choice, resolution, the preferring of one thing and the setting aside of another, … we divert the question of decision…in the ‘existentiell’ sense’’ (p. 70). In other words, if one applies Heidegger’s philosophy to the context of thinking one’s way back into flow by controlling the content of one’s attention, one neglects to recognize how unflow like this intervention actually is. Thus, when Heidegger severs the word decision into two parts, ‘‘de-cision,’’ he wants to emphasize that when one engages in such a cognitive act, one separates oneself from what it means to be human. Heidegger (1936–1938/2012) explains, ‘‘De-cision [Ent-scheidung] refers to the sundering itself, which separates [scheidt] and in separating lets come into play, for the first time, the ap-propriation of precisely this sundered open realm as the clearing for the self-concealing’’ (p. 70).

When managing a difficult circumstance in life, a setback that prevents the automaticity of flow to flow forth, one might then, instead, attune to the ‘‘clearing in the [Heideggerian] double swaying: clearing as the dim glow of the attuning attunement out of the ab-ground of be-ing and as the simple brightness of the knowing-ingrasping [Inbegriff] for inabiding the ‘in-between’’ (Heidegger, 1938–1939/2006, p. 90). In contrast to assuming a linear, decision-oriented approach to directing one’s attention toward a desired outcome, as in there where there is brightness and possibility for once again assuming a joyful existence, Heidegger’s mindfulness invites one to consider attuning to the ‘‘swaying of the ‘t/hereness of the t/here’ [Daheit des Da] that holds unto the ab-ground, and the inabiding of Da-sein that as such grounds into beings’’ (Heidegger, 1938–1939/2006, p. 90). The distinction between the two points is thus blurred, as one never fully leaves the point of departure, here, when moving toward the point of arrival, there. Depicting such a concept by writing ‘‘t/here,’’ invites the darkness, the abyss of one’s existence to also enter one’s awareness as one moves toward the brightness. To embrace such a sway thus affords an existence that is more human, as it acknowledges the pain, moments that
are easier to avoid and turn away from, as one moves toward a possibility of desired pleasure. Such an orientation aligns with inscribing dys\(function\) in a similar way, emphasizing the space of in-between.

Heidegger’s (1938–1939/2006) mindful sway contrasts Csikszentmihalyi’s preference of creating a sense of mental order when making the best of a difficult situation. Csikszentmihalyi (1990/2008) suggests several steps to re-achieving flow when faced with diversity: (a) to believe destiny is in your hands, (b) to focus attention on processing information from your surroundings, and (c) to discover new solutions and alternative goals that take into account the entire situation. Yet, however helpful and applicable these goal-oriented steps might be, knowing something on a cognitive level differs dramatically from a somatic ebb and flow of knowing. Channeling the contents of one’s mind toward a desired outcome neglects a present-moment consciousness that takes into account the sway between the contractile and expanding nature of one’s flesh, blood, and bones (Conrad, 2007; Leder, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, 1964/1968). Perhaps then, in acknowledging the desire to move toward the possibility of a new existence in a way that does not sunder or sever oneself from being human, one might consider Heidegger’s (1936–1938/2012) notion of steadfastness, which may be summed up as follows:

1. Strength . . . the mastery of the free bestowal of the broadest fields of creative self-surpassing,
2. Decisiveness . . . the security of belonging to the event, the entry into the unprotected,
3. The generous waking of the concealed and retained, that which ever strangely binds all creating into what is essential to creating, [and]
4. Simplicity . . . the passion for the necessity of the single task of securing the inexhaustibility in the shelter of beings and not letting go of the strangeness of being. (p. 235–236)

Phenomenologically exploring dys\(function\) to flow with a Heideggerian steadfastness thus affords one to sense more fully a journey that departs from the linear and what is preconceived or known, into a place of darkness as one moves with both strength and decisiveness toward the dim glow of self-surpassing. Adopting such an attitude as one attunes to the nuances of simple taken-for-granted acts, such as walking with sensitivity directed toward the sway of im/mobility, dys\(function\), hence the here\(ness\) of \(t\)/\(here\), might then shift what Csikszentmihalyi (1990/2008) describes as “a rare gift” or “exceptional” in relation to those who are able to “transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge” (p. 200) to a lived existence that is within one’s reach.

Exploring the reemergence of flow in this sensing, somatic way stands in contrast to how flow has been researched in the past. Thousands of interviews conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and his research team since 1975 (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 1990/2008) have been essential in defining the universal characteristics of flow that permeate any disciplinary boundary. From rock climbing, painting, and swimming, to mathematicians solving problems, when flow is experienced there is a balance between challenge and skill, a sensation of action merging with awareness, a set of clear goals, immediate feedback to one’s actions, the feeling of distraction being excluded from consciousness, no worry of failure, a loss of self-consciousness, and a distorted sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1997a, 2000). He has found that such characteristics are consistent, regardless of “culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender [as] respondents described enjoyment in very much the same way” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990/2008, p. 48). There is a usefulness in discovering and communicating universal characteristics of flow, as it provides a structure for identifying flow in one’s own life or the lives of others, yet
it might also be wise to trouble such a bounded universal characterization of flow, for if one continues to see a phenomenon through the same lens and established theory, even one that has been generated from experience sampling\(^1\) surveys and interviews, it becomes stagnant in that further studies serve to simply reproduce what is already known, i.e., the inherent biases associated with the researcher and the research process prevail.

Janet Banfield and Mark Burgess (2013) conducted phenomenological research on flow with a focus on embodied knowing. As such, their research sought to disrupt the assumption that flow results from bringing order to the mind. By honing in on the nuances of the “embodied physicality of activity” (p. 60) between and within two different art making modes, e.g., 2D painting versus 3D sculpture, they discovered that “flow and the meanings generated in activity differ between activities that differ in their haptic or performative nature but are similar among haptically similar activities” (p. 60). Hence, 2D artists are more likely to attribute artistic control to their artwork while 3D artists are not. A painter, who would qualify as a 2D artist, for example, would likely experience a type of flow premised on mental order, such as following preset goals, etc. Someone forming a sculpture out of clay, on the other hand, would be more inclined to experience an emergent sort of flow. Such an inquiry thus challenges the universality of flow in terms of how it is characterized. It also supports further research into challenging the information processing theoretical underpinnings of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory. Such a study gives weight for other researchers to study differences between activities that cultivate flow, as well as conceptual underpinnings that align with embodied ways of knowing and being.

**ORIENTING TOWARD AN EMERGENT, SOMATIC FLOW**

I, like Banfield and Burgess (2013), often think about how the nuances of flow that are particular to certain modes of activities differ not only in art-making experiences, but also in the activities that are part of everyday life. I am particularly drawn to explore the differences between flow activities that exude a sense of order, in that they are predictable to the extent where automaticity sets in, and flow activities that embrace emergence. Of particular interest are the bodily postures, gestures, and motions of the activity itself, a notable alternative to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990/2008) cognitive attention on the sense of order experienced in one’s mind. To give an inkling of what I mean, consider the difference that lives in the moments of performing a piece of music from a musical score versus improvising with a jazz band. The universal characteristics of flow are present, yet the degree to which the goals are clear in a moment-to-moment way differs. The musical score provides a predictable, well-travelled path with predetermined goals; the jazz band, in comparison, affords a sense of emergence as an infinite number of pathways may be

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\(^1\)The Experience Sampling Method, which Csikszentmihalyi began to explore in the mid-70s, was designed to “capture the experience as it occurred, when it was fresh in the mind” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. xix; italics added). At random intervals during the day, participants were paged with an electronic beeper and were asked to fill out several forms in a self-report booklet. The questions ranged from: Where were you? What you were doing? How do you feel on a 7-point scale where 1 is sad and 7 is happy? Through replicating this Experience Sampling Method over the past 20 years with more than 8,000 self-report experiences of flow from many cultures such as, “Japan, Korea, India, as well as Europe” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997b, p. 9), trends, characteristics, activities related to flow, and frequency of flow experience have been tracked, organized and summarized through statistical methods.
explored between the beginning and end of a performance. Methodologically speaking, the musical score may be comparable to positivistic studies that follow set procedures with a goal to reproduce or refine an understanding of a fixed knowledge, versus research that is phenomenological in nature where paths are cleared, but as Heidegger noted, are not “determined by fixed signposts. They need to, [as van Manen explains], be discovered or invented as a response to the question [or landscape] at hand” (van Manen, 1997, p. 29).

Orienting toward an exploration of emergent flow with a focus on bodily action and interaction is not something that I simply find interesting, it is a phenomenon that I am living and have been living for quite some time, particularly in the past 2 years of my life when all sense of predictability has left. Hence, this questioning, like any good phenomenological inquiry, comes from “the heart of [my] existence, from the center of [my] being” (van Manen, 1997, p. 43).

To provide historical context, my interest in exploring gestural action and interaction in flow began as a doctoral student. Back then, I was a fulltime fitness educator and, to some extent, a flow junkie. Feelings of elation, connectedness, and electrifying energy would naturally surge through me when I spoke at international conferences, performed on stage, or led a fitness class to a room full of hyped-up, glistening participants hooked on my every move. As I left my stage and also experienced personal training with a wide population of clients, from high performance athletes to elders who wished to improve their daily function, I also quite naturally became deeply immersed in their movement experiences. This led me to question the relational dynamic between peak flow experience and deep flow experience, particularly in regards to movements and gestures that created, sustained, and deepened pedagogical interaction (Lloyd, 2004; Lloyd & Smith, 2006a, 2006b).

Flow, although no longer a state that takes hold of me with predicted automaticity in that it is no longer within reach for reasons that will soon be disclosed, is a phenomena that continues to shape my research in teacher education (Lloyd, 2012b), physical education (Lloyd 2011a, 2011d), and my everyday life as a tenured professor, breastfeeding mother (Lloyd, 2012d), dog walker (Lloyd, 2011c), and beginning salsa dancer. Flow, experienced as an emergent phenomenon, thus has recently grabbed my attention, as I wish to explore what it is like to experience flow when it is no longer readily available, when what used to be automatic, e.g., experiencing flow in running, yoga, teaching, and mothering, becomes out of reach. This leads me to the purpose of this inquiry, to engage in the creative process of reexperiencing flow given the kind of constraints where one might think it to be impossible.

Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy as being inverted Platonism influenced Rorty’s (1989) thinking about “self-overcoming” when faced with adversity and the possibilities for “giving birth to oneself” (p. 29). The particular path Rorty suggested was to become a strong poet with respect to changing the metaphors by which one lives. Metaphors, in this sense, represent descriptors that pick up one’s idiosyncratic tendencies, and are words that capture an essence of who one is and what one intends to be. Although, certainly, one might choose to focus on the metaphors in the purposeful act in rewriting one’s lived existence, it might also be worthwhile, especially considering the intention of desiring the reemergence of flow within the bounds of life’s constraints, to attend to one’s verbs and adjectives, action-oriented words that attend to how one moves through life. Metaphors describe things, nouns, a fixed knowledge. Verbs and adjectives, on the other hand, carry the phrases, intonations, temporality, projections, and tensions, hence the pulse of life that swells, surges, rises, crests, or fades. Phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999), who was very much influenced by psychologist Daniel Stern
(2004, 2010) described such verbs and adjectives as vitality affects and contend that such affects live within all movement forms, from simple walks down the street to the most intricate of dance sequences.

It might be meaningful, then, to explore what it might be like to experience the rehabilitation of dysfunction in daily motility, such as the transition from not being able to do simple acts like walk down the street, sit in a chair, or take the stairs, to experiencing a reemergence of flow through detailing the nuances of motility. Thus, this inquiry aims to pay attention to the sense of possibility, tension, stability, and fluidity that gradually enters, surges, and emerges in one’s limbs, torso, hips, knees, and feet as one finds a new footing in life.

FUNCTIONING WITHIN BOUNDED CONSTRAINTS

When a run becomes a C3PO limp, a bounce in a hallway stroll becomes a wall-supported hobble, and a prolonged sitting position results in radiating nerve pain, a fluid torso stiffens, a marital embrace releases, the Merleau-Pontian (1964/1968) sense of I can fades. The abyss of one’s existence becomes visible, palpable. Car accidents and other debilitating injuries have a way of doing that, veering a taken-for-granted life off course... but perhaps, if viewed without a focus on seeking mental order, such circumstances might invigorate emergence, a new way of moving in and through life.

A stream of flowing water has the potential to move in the presence of obstacles, natural or otherwise, that attempt to block its path. Unless ceased by the finality of a dam, water circulates, deviates, gravitates, and mediates as it creatively adapts and finds a new course around, through, underneath, or overtop of rocks, roots, or even human debris. More than a metaphor, Emilie Conrad (2007) reminded readers that the tenacity of such fluid movement resonates within one’s very being. She suggests that, although “we may never fully know the profundity of water” (p. xxii), opening oneself up to moving in fluid, resonate ways, ways that, according to Conrad, are people’s birthright, has the potential to enhance “health and wellbeing and has far-reaching benefits beyond our capacity to name” (p. xxii).

Today, as I enjoy intermittent transitions between light running and walking on a forest path that has become familiar, to the extent where the chiasmic union between my feet and this undulating terrain feels like home, the sound of a nearby stream veers me from my recently taken-for-granted course. My feet, responding to what my ears have heard, leave the well-travelled path ahead of me, the path that has a tendency, as Ingold (2000) notes, to “impose a habitual pattern on the movement of people” (p. 204) and awaken the possibility of what Antonio Machado’s (1912/2014) poetry infers, that a wanderer’s “footsteps are the road,” or in this case, the beginnings of a new path created by my feet. My soles thus find their way around trees, over branches and twigs, and delve into the softness of mud, happy to receive and envelope their curious pause. My eyes witness what seems to be still water in the not-so-distant-distance and I gather momentum as the bounded tributary narrows and gushes between and over a narrow shelf of rocks just inches away from my feet. Thus, I was awoken by a moment of eruption flowing from a seemingly stagnant pool and drawn into the reality that the flow of water varies given its constraints, its container; in this case a narrow opening between a rock and a hard place.

Such a sight has me drift back in time to the life I was living over a year and a half ago, for I was that seemingly stagnant stream, unaware of the gushing possibilities that lay ahead. Ice
packs cradled my recently repaired knees and words from the doctor who examined me 6 weeks after my surgery informed me that I would likely never run again. His palpation detected bone-on-bone friction, and his advice was to accept this new reality. He explained in a rational manner that injured professional football players adjust to leaving their beloved sport, and like them, I must also accept this new reality. I recall responding with outward silence yet inward questioning, “Doesn’t he know that I’ve been limping for 14 months waiting for surgery so that I could bound around again and assume the lightness of my former exuberant existence—the way I lived my life before my knee injuries and subsequent car accident, disc injuries, and divorce?” No. This doctor just saw my physiological body and felt friction in my joints, not the friction in living a disjointed life where fluid movement and the various flow experiences that such motility brings forth were no longer available. Unable to storm off, I limped out of his office with not a good leg to stand on as my right and left knee both went under the knife. Yet, I held my head up high, that is, after I rose up from fastening grips to my winter boots. I left the hospital and faced the surface of the ice-covered sidewalk—a glistening hardness.

In the privacy of my car, the ice melted. Tears streamed down my face. My brother was not picking up his cell phone and I felt very much alone, as I no longer had a husband to hug me and tell me that everything was going to be all right. I left the parking lot and drove with no clear direction of where I was going. Blurred vision from tears clouding my eyes had me pull over to the side of the road. I thought to call Susi, my dear friend and physiotherapist. She answered, listened to my news, and said, “Whenever someone tells me that I can’t do something, I take on the attitude of ‘watch me’ and prove them wrong.” A feeling of hope trickled into my consciousness, and after further consultation, I formed a resolution to buy an indoor stand for my road bike so that I could begin my journey of rehabilitation.

SPINNING WHEELS: FROM INCEPTION TO PERCEPTION

The feeling of sweat trickling from my brow, down between my breasts and onto the floor, is a welcome change to the stagnant lifestyle as of late. The only pants that fit me are my stretchable ones, as I refused to purchase a new wardrobe to accommodate my growing size since I first injured my knees. Although stairs continue to be a struggle, as does any downward descent in terrain such as my ski-pole-supported dog-walk, which sends radiating pain into the front of my knee caps, fluid movement afforded by the support of my stationary bike, reemerges into my consciousness like a long lost friend. My disc injuries from my car accident have finally healed enough to permit me to sit in a saddle, a position that is verging on comfort. Sitting, a taken-for-granted position not only for cycling but for many activities in life, has been absent from my daily routine. Until recently, the tightness in my paraspinal muscles, exacerbated while sitting, was too much to bear, so much of my waking hours over the past year were spent standing in knee discomfort or lying prone, as in face-down on my stomach, while doing work. Thanks to the help of the daily completion of my prescribed internal core exercises, as well as the righting touch of my physiotherapist, I am able to sit long enough to cycle. My heart now beats faster, my inhales become strident and an energizing rhythm from my blaring radio enters my feet.

A feeling of life that was absent resurges through my pores, yet there is something unfamiliar to me in this mechanical form of exercise. My feet are pedaling, but I seem to be travelling nowhere, contained by this circumstance. I have made the decision to rehabilitate my knees,
to engage in an activity that will increase the flow of blood and thus stimulate healing, yet I feel a Heideggerian (1936–1938/2012) sundering of myself in this movement form. Unlike my former out-of-bounds snowboarding (Lloyd, 2011a), trail running (Lloyd, 2011c), dancing with hula-hoops (Lloyd, 2012a), and fitness training with various proprioceptive modalities such as exercise balls (e.g., Lloyd, 2008, 2011c), I am bound by the repetitive pedaling. Much like Heidegger’s preference for handwriting, as opposed to the conforming and bounded nature of producing words with a typewriter, experiencing motility through the spinning of wheels, however lively in comparison to my former sitting with ice packs on my knees, approaches that of a mechanistic existence. My personal motile signature evoked in my former ability to sense a chiasmic union with the ground beneath my feet is not readily available. Heidegger’s (1982/1992) thoughts on mechanical writing speak to this feeling of moving in a conformed way.

Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides this ‘advantage,’ that it conceals the handwriting, and therefore the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same. (Heidegger, 1982/1992, pp. 80–87)

In the same vein, cycling on an indoor exercise bike can similarly become a means to an end; it can conceal one’s idiosyncratic way of moving-in-the-world. Yet, it needs not to, as David Michael Kleinberg-Levin (2005) explains: “Surrender to the alienations and reifications of technology [and] slowly forget that the destiny of being is still very much in our hands” (p. 211), or in this case, our feet. I thus begin to engage in what Heidegger (1936–1938/2012) describes as “inceptive” thinking, a “more original repetition of the first beginning” (p. 46) yet in a way that I might describe as perceptual as I attune to the somatic possibilities within each repetition. Each pedal stroke thus becomes a new beginning.

I sense how the forward pushing action of my heels awakens my quadriceps and how the pointing action of my toes as my feet reach back recruits my hamstrings, an invitational gesture that lets them know that they, too, can become part of this journey. Waves of oscillating contractile fluidity emerge beneath the monotony of spinning wheels. Such an awakening into the depth and various articulations of each pedal stroke can be compared to what Heidegger (1936–1938/2012) described as,

the most intimate event [that] can still save us from lostness in the bustle of mere incidents and machinations. What must eventuate is what opens being to us and places us back into being and in that way brings us to ourselves and face to face with work and sacrifice. (p. 46)

Thus, in orienting to all that lives within the stroke of a pedal, from stomping, pulling, lifting, and circling variations to name a few, minutes of completing a rehabilitation task become an opening to experiencing a new existence. Five min of drudgery transforms into 40 min of fluid inquiry and a sense of flow reemerges, a bound sort of flow, but an experience of flow nonetheless.

BEYOND THE MECHANICAL DANCE

Indoor cycling, which is now part of my morning routine, has thus become more than a means to increase flexibility and blood flow in my knee joints; it has become an opportunity to experience
machination with more humanness. However enticing and intimate this new human–pedal stroke relation is becoming though, my sense of being together with others (Heidegger, 1924/2011) is cut off, as is any sense of unpredictability and emergence, for it is I who varies the force, rhythm, pressures, and quality of my breath as I pedal. Unlike the experience of biking on a forest path where the variations of movement are formed from a chiasmic union between my wheels and terrain, such variations result from a unidirectional intentionality. A longing for a sense of interactive playfulness beyond what I am already experiencing within the possibilities spinning of my wheels is birthing into my awareness. Although my stationary bike faces the window in my pseudo dining room—a purposive positioning as I like to peer out and see sunlight illuminating the forest and the wind waving between the leaves—I long to feel and move in response to the animate world outside my window. Although I am not switching off and watching a television screen as I bike, or tuning out and thumping pedals to music, I sense more and more the limitations of my stationary bike, for steel, however well crafted in enabling motility, lacks warmth and the ability to cultivate a proprioceptive Merleau-Pontian (1964/1968) touching-touch. I long, once again, to experience the motility of interactive flow, not in pedagogy as I previously researched (Lloyd & Smith, 2006a, 2006b), but in the way I dance in and through life.

Two months of experiencing a human–bike merge has passed and I continue to do my prescribed exercise, yet this longing within me amplifies. I wish more than anything to release my feet from the constrained linearity of my pedals. Enough of this! My inner diva awakens. Hair that has been repeatedly tied back into a ponytail is showered clean and coiffed and I search for something bright to wear for an evening of salsa dancing. I think to myself, “I can pretty much walk without a visible limp. I can handle this.” I tried salsa a few times before my knee surgeries and had a blast. Compared to fitness classes, the movements are less intense and less repetitive. A certain repertoire of movements exist, such as cross-body leads and travelling turns, yet a woman can never know the upcoming order of the steps, similar to how jazz musicians play off of each other and create a multitude of melodies within a certain key. Thus, salsa affords an emergent sort of flow, and with that an opportunity for inceptual thinking, as each moment is a new beginning. Unlike my solitary explorations of force, rhythm, and pressure in my pedal stroke, in salsa such variations emerge in response to a living, breathing partner, not a contraption of steel.

I tell a fellow fitness instructor friend that I am heading out to join him on the dance floor. Yet, I am met with concern, not celebration. He is worried about my knees and asks me to try the following moves on my own, before I am guided my the hands of another: the basic step that travels forward and back, as well as a lateral one that flows from one side to the other. Although I have the look and accompanying attitude of someone ready to salsa dance—coiffed hair, a red silk top, black pants and black-heeled boots—when I try out the suggested moves, pain emanating from the sway of my hips shouts in the lateral parts of both kneecaps. I pause... I accept and fully sense the reality of this moment. I reach down, unzip my boots and gradually peel off my diva guise. Tears roll down my cheek as I sit alone on my living room chair. My head falls into my hands...

Four more weeks go by and I decide, instead of going to the social dance floor, a place of true emergence, to learn to salsa dance in a more contained way. I find a teacher who can help me with my walking technique so that I may lighten and free up my basic forward, sideways, and backward steps and, in so doing, lessen the pain. One might wonder why I would choose, in my path of rehabilitation, to leave the safety, linearity, and predictability of my stationary bike and
want to walk like a salsa dancer, not just like a regular person walking down the sidewalk without pain. On the other hand, one might ask, “why not?” as the salsa walk is possibly one of the most fluid, wave-like motions imaginable that is performed on dry land. One only has to observe a professional salsa dancer for less than a minute to see the rippling sway of motility than stems from the propulsion of feet and travels up through hips and torso. Bones palpably disappear and the rigidity of a confined existence dissipates. Thus, the salsa walk carries a distinct sense of life, of vitality—it is the physical manifestation of an elemental flow (Conrad, 2007; Mazis, 2002).

To contextualize this flow, just imagine the difference in observing someone simply walking with a mere proficiency in fluid movement function versus someone who walks with a sense of the sensual. Furthermore, the walk is not done alone, as the caressing motions of high-heeled shoes gracefully stroking the floor emerge from an intertwining. Waves of visible and palpable flowing movement have the potential to connect both dancers not only to each other, but to the primordial, cosmic sense of fluid resonance that Conrad (2007) describes, a sense of intertwining that is hedged upon in Merleau-Ponty’s (1964/1968) realm of the invisible.

It is essential to note that any walk, not just the salsa walk, carries a projection of vitality. A walk that drags or is heavy is very much different than one that bounces or springs, or as with the case of a salsa dancer, one that exudes a serpentine, wave-like sway. Stern (2010) describes the vitality forms of such walks through five dynamic events: “movement, time, force, space, and intention/directionality” (p. 4). To give a sense of how these dynamic events can be understood, Stern contextualizes these variations in vitality through the example of a strutting cat. He explains that typical research into sensory motor systems (e.g., Gallese & Lakoff, 2005) hones in on the parameters of force, e.g., what frequencies distinguish a cat’s strut from a trot to a gallop (in human terms, categories that distinguish a light jog, a run, a sprint, and a walk.) Stern’s research, in contrast, attends to the vitality forms within each range of frequency and asks that one imagine the possibilities within a cat’s range of strutting, for example, as in how it may accelerate (only up to a certain point without trotting), decelerate, or burst from a stand still into a trot (Stern, 2010). Such attention to the nuances of force within a gait affords an affective attunement of living (as opposed to lived) experience. Stern (2010) recognizes that such an affective attunement is rarely understood and postulates that:

Vitality forms are hard to grasp because we experience them in almost all waking activities. They are obscured by the felt quality of emotions as it accompanies them. They are absorbed into the explicit meaning as the vitality form accompanies a train of thought, so we do not pay attention to the feel of emergence of the thought, but only its contents. It slips through our fingers. It is strange that even when it comes to motor acts, dynamic experiences are most often taken for granted as part of means-ends operations to accomplish a goal, and thus receive little additional attention. (p. 10)

The point that Stern is making very much coincides with taking a perceptual approach to understanding Heidegger’s notion of inceptual thinking. If one experiences bodily movement, such as the riding of one’s bike or the walking from here to there beyond a means–ends operation, the sway of what lives in between opens up. Thoughts that emerge as one bikes or walks do not pop into one’s head like a mechanical light blub that illuminates from the flip of a switch. A dimmer switch, by contrast, would be a more suitable metaphor, as it affords many variations such as gradual increases, sudden blasts or intervals of wavelike brightening and dimming. Thus, the thoughts one has as one spins one’s wheels or walks down the street
are very much part of the bodily movement itself, even ideas that endure and have a longer gestation period might birth long after one has left the sidewalk or bike. Conceptualizing inceptual thinking as an organic movement exudes what Heidegger (1936–1938/2012) describes, that it is ‘‘the original carrying out of resonating, interplay, leap, and grounding in their unit . . .[that] are taken up and borne only in the human way’’ (p. 51).

Note that thinking about thinking with such motion-sensitivity is not a common conceptualization. Attention is usually directed to the content of one’s thoughts, as Stern (2010) points out, a notion of nounifying the nature of thought as if ideas could be planted as they were in the feature movie Inception. Similarly, when exploring the essence or is-ness of emotion, like thought, it is usually understood as a fixed or contained state—one is happy, sad, angry, etc.—hence the nouns of existence take hold, not the omnipresent verbs and adjectives that live within the temporal dynamics of each moment.

Stern (2010) turns toward the arts, specifically the notations of music and dance, to further articulate the nuances and meaning in motile ‘‘variations of effort and shape that allow one to speak of force, speed, deceleration, acceleration, power, strength, flexibility etc.’’ (p. 88). Sheet music, for example, carries a clear system of dynamic markers that speak to the composer’s intentions of force, e.g., pianissimo (pp) to fortissimo (ff), contours of intensity, e.g., crescendos and decrescendos, stress, e.g., a staccato note, and tempo, e.g., allegro or andante. To contextualize such vitality forms within dance, Stern (2010) provides an example of a ballerina walking on the stage from the wings to greet her lover-partner.

[At first], she enters on beat with the music. It looks banal. The choreographer [then] says to her, ‘‘Wait a half beat before entering, then run to catch up [with] the beat by the time you reach him.’’ All of a sudden you feel her burst, her effort, her desire to get to her partner. The entrance is now dramatic. She has a pressing immediate goal. (p. 88)

I can viscerally feel this ballerina’s walk. Initiated by a suspended breath that both extends the torso and gradually lifts the arms from one’s side, outstretched toes silently patter forward giving the illusion of a phrase-like, floating glide. Such a walk reveals the level of maturity and mastery of a dancer in an instant, for it is not the number of pirouettes turned in succession or the height of a jump that sets a professional ballerina apart from a novice, it is the subtle nuances in bodily placement and articulation communicated through vitality forms, e.g., space, timing, force, and intention, that have the potential to take one’s breath away.

I know the ballet walk well. From age four to 19, I was disciplined through exercises designed to cultivate awareness in specific parts of my feet thus I, over time, developed the motion-sensitivity to articulate an infinite number of variations in the way a foot could leave the ground, e.g., from caressing the floor to striking it as one would when lighting a match. Many variations in force, tempo, and intensity exist for a ballerina, though there is something that distinguishes ballet dance from other genres. The upright posture prevails and with that a tendency to become, at times, uptight.

Tension in keeping everything pulled in and up is a vitality affect and form that can leave the ballet studio and can seep into one’s bodily way of being, long after the professional years of training have come to a close. Suck it in or suck it up is a way of being that endures, particularly as one experiences a difficult time in one’s life. If one applies Stern’s (1993, 2004, 2010) notion of vitality forms and affects, however, to even acts of sucking everything in as one might in that
of a core exercise, one might consider that exploring the balance between stability and mobility in such actions is a worthwhile adventure. If one understands Stern’s (2010) assertion that all movement forms, from walks down the street to struts performed by cats, carry a certain amount of tension, if one attunes to the possibilities available within such a motion, something as seemingly linear and uniform as the spinning of one’s wheels or the placing of one foot in front of the other may be experienced in wave-like ebbs and flows of activation. Hence, even within the most seemingly solid forming actions, a possibility to move beyond an embounded/bodied way of being exists.

And so, the quality of my walk has thus transformed from that of a contained limp to a freeing motion led by the propulsion of my feet and rippling wave of my hips and torso as I assume the attitude of not only a motion-sensitive phenomenologist (Lloyd & Smith, 2006b), but also an emerging salsa dancer. Although I in no way have mastered the basic steps of salsa dance as a professional might, I am able to sense and attune toward the vitality forms of the movements that are gradually becoming within my reach. When I first learned to salsa dance, similar to how I first approached the exercise of spinning mechanical wheels on my stationary bike, I was caught up in the overall, outer rhythm of the steps, pivots, and turns. I was oblivious to the vitality forms within the articulation of my movements, such as the excessive bounce, length of my stride and rigid torso position. A professional or competitive salsa dancer, in contrast to my awkward beginnings, articulates a walk with the same care and pronunciation as that of a ballet dancer. From toe to heel rolling actions where more weight is placed on the inside edge to figure-eight-like oscillations of the hips and a lateral torso sway, there is a wave-like, undulating presence in each step. Once one approaches the beginnings of this fluid sway, it stays with one. A walk down the street simply feels different; formerly stable hips and rigid, pulled-in torsos soften, and in so doing, become enlivened.

DANCING IN LIFE

Learning to walk like a salsa dancer is thus affording the possibility for the stiffness I’ve endured over the past 2 years, in not only my knees but in my entire torso, to soften. I have yet to master the wave-like motion even though, like a musician would practice his daily scales, I have exercises that enhance my developing somatic awareness and emerging vitality forms. Such a practice of detailed walks, pivots, and turns appeals to me because once one is able to properly articulate a certain repertoire of steps, the variations and possibilities for putting these basic movements together within the life experience of a partnered dance is infinite. Much like how a jazz musician might prepare for his or her part in an ensemble, taking the time to learn to walk like a salsa dancer prepares one to experience flow in an interactive and emergent way. Thus, the Heideggerian principle of that “‘nothing is ‘im-possible’ [exists]…that is to say everything is humanly possible, as long as everything is calculated in every respect and in advance the conditions are provided’” (Heidegger, 1936–1938/2012, p. 107).

A life of the possible thus emerges when an attitude of steadfastness is assumed while delving into the Heideggerian sway of dis/function, a grounding sense that one can apply to finding a new footing in life, and the feeling of flow once more. Of particular importance is Heidegger’s gravitation toward simplicity, the passion for the necessity of the single task of securing the inexhaustibility in the shelter of beings while not letting go of the strangeness of being...
(Heidegger, 1936–1938/2012). Thus, in delving into the nuances of simple motile acts, such as the spinning of one’s wheels or walking by making the familiar strange with a multitude of vitality forms and affects, people “familiarize[ing] ourselves anew with the familiar” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, pp. 142–143). And in awakening motion sensitivity in what might be considered banal acts with what Heidegger attributes to steadfastness, particularly with regard to creative acts of self-surpassing and entering into the realm of the unprotected, what might be considered an unpredictable and emergent existence, one has the potential to, once again dance, not only metaphorically, but palpably, and experience the vitality forms and flows available to each and everyone of us in this thing we call life. And, what one might discover in following this incipient and perceptual path toward the reemergence of flow in rehabilitative activities such as riding a bike and walking with a particular attitude and affect, is that whatever challenging circumstance veers one off course, no matter how difficult, might be the perfect opportunity to rewrite the verbs and adjectives of one’s existence. Hence, in shifting one’s focus from a cognitive, decision-oriented approach to living a better life to sensing, instead, the fluid nuances that live within every little movement, a somatic orientation toward finding a new footing in life opens up—an existence that embraces emergence and the cultivation of flow in both fluid and em/bounded/bodied ways.

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AUTHOR NOTE

Dr. Rebecca J. Lloyd is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa. Her interdisciplinary research intertwines curriculum theory, phenomenology, pedagogy, motivational psychology, movement consciousness, and exercise physiology. Her SSHRC-funded research explores this interdisciplinary integration through the function2flow (www.function2flow.ca) model, a framework that facilitates curricular and pedagogical understandings of becoming physically educated in alternative and mainstream activities. Dr. Lloyd is the co-director of the Comprehensive School Health cohort (www.uottawa-comprehensive-school-health.ca). She has also assumed the position of conference chair with Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada as well as the Physical Education Teacher Education (PHETE) SIG within CSSE. Her international affiliations include the International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA) and the International Human Science Research Conference (IHSRC).