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“FACILITADORA DE BIODANZA”

“EN CADA VIVENCIA NACEN BEBÉS”

BIODANZA AS A LIVING SYSTEM

An exploration how the Biodanza system mimics life’s organizing principles and how Biodanza facilitators can nurture a group’s living systems awareness and co-creative capacities

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Todo somos uno...

*La fuerza que nos conduce
Es la misma que enciende el sol
que anima los mares
y hace florecer los cerezos.
...La fuerza que nos mueve
Es la misma que agita las semillas
con su mensaje inmemorial de vida.
La danza genera el destino
bajo las mismas leyes que vinculan
la flor a la brisa.
...Bajo el girasol de armonía
Todos somos uno.*

Rolando Toro Araneda (Toro, 2014, p.175)

We are all one
The force that moves us
Is the same that ignites the sun
That animates the sea
And makes the cherries blossom
...The force that moves us
Is the same that awakens the seeds
With its infinite message of life
...The dance creates our journey
following the same patterns that connect
the flower and the breeze.
...under the sunflower of harmony
We are all one

Abstract

In this monograph, I describe how Biodanza, as a system of integration, mimics and embodies an ecological or living system. I illustrate how the design methodology for Biodanza vivencias stimulates an integrative experience of “living systems awareness” in participants. My framing is grounded in Capra’s (2002) principles of living systems, related contemporary systems literature, as well as Rolando Toro’s own foundation in systems theory and the biocentric principle (Toro, 2014).

I first offer a basic introduction to living systems and the principles of living systems and contextualize these concepts in Rolando Toro’s writings. I then map the principles of living systems across a broad selection of Biodanza exercises to highlight how the vivencial design process is a process of living systems design. As part of this mapping process, I offer some suggestions for consignas (enunciations for Biodanza exercises) that may help deepen living systems awareness in participants, individually, and as an emergent group experience. This mapping process does not replace the Biodanza methodology in any way. I am offering my suggestions and ideas to contribute to a shared exploration about Biodanza as a living system.

I propose that an intentional framing of a Biodanza vivencia as a living system can deepen participants’ lived experience of a Biodanza class and enhance their integration process of feeling more fully alive and vibrant as a living being. My hope is that when participants experience this heightened sense of vibrancy, individually, as a group, and in connection to the larger web of life, they, in turn, also become more inspired as change agents for a healthier world. According to Rolando Toro, the biocentric principle is a call to action (Toro, 2014). I am offering this monograph as a call to action toward unconditionally and uncompromisingly putting Life at the center and protecting Life with every fiber of our being.

1) Background and Motivation

Biodanza has been a truly life-changing practice for me. I was introduced to this beautiful system of integration during a summer trip to Austria in 2001 (where I am from), and immediately fell in love with it. Something in me recognized the deeper wisdom and ingenuity of this practice, and I began reading up on the underlying concepts (in selected literature available in German translation) and attending classes during trips, as I was able. When I began commuting to the San Francisco Bay Area for my doctoral program in Transformative Learning and Change at the California Institute of Integral Studies, I was delighted to learn that a school of Biodanza was opening there. I was truly thrilled to be able to begin my Biodanza facilitation training with the first cycle of the San Francisco School of Biodanza. As a fledgling scholar of ecology, living systems, and transformative change, I immediately recognized the deep ecological wisdom of this methodology. I was very intrigued that this practice that brought so much joy to my life was based on the principles of living systems.

Through my Biodanza practice and participation in training weekends, an important connection became increasingly clear to me on a felt, visceral level: *living systems are loving systems*. As I deepen my capacity to feel fully alive in this world, I simultaneously open my heart to the world and wish for its healing. I recognized “living systems as loving systems” as a key connection that needs nurturing in learners. My dissertation (Widhalm, 2011a) focused on developing a framework for educators to foster

living systems awareness congruently in learning content, process, and structure, to prepare change agents for a healthier world. As one of my case studies, I wrote about Biodanza in my dissertation research, to illustrate how a learning community can embody living systems principles and help learners feel more alive, vibrant, and loving AS a living system. I will draw on parts of my dissertation research here, as well.

Meanwhile, I was also raising a beautiful daughter as a single mom and still living in New Mexico, and so I couldn't finish with the first generation of Biodanza facilitators in 2007. I continued with the second cycle in 2008 and have now finally completed all my requirements with the Los Angeles School of Biodanza, 15 years later! I am most grateful to the Los Angeles School of Biodanza for guiding and mentoring me during the final stages of my training.

As I jokingly say, becoming a Biodanza facilitator has taken me more than twice as long as obtaining my Ph.D. (in 2011). I am now a college professor, teaching a wide variety of courses on systems thinking, living systems awareness, social and environmental justice, and transformative change, from the community college to the doctoral level. In addition, I am truly delighted to have begun my Biodanza facilitation practice in Fall of 2018. My process of integration and growth has deepened tremendously by being able to share this amazing practice with a group, and I am immensely grateful for this opportunity.

It is my hope that some of the framing I am offering here will be helpful for Biodanza facilitators in understanding how the Biodanza system is designed as a living system, and how each vivencia embodies a living system. I strongly believe that the world needs change agents that put life at the center with every fiber of their being. I cannot think of a more appropriate and more beautiful modality than Biodanza to teach living systems awareness in an integrative way.

2) Framing: Biodanza as a Living System

I will now introduce key concepts that are useful in framing Biodanza as a living system. These concepts include:

- Definition of living systems and living systems awareness
- The six principles of living systems
- The inner (felt) dimension of living systems
- Autopoiesis and emergence – life's self-organizing dance
- Biodanza as a pattern dance – dancing the patterns that connect
- Contact, symbiogenesis, and the space in-between as key conditions for nurturing living systems awareness
- The membrane as a womb for life unfolding

I will then contextualize this framing in some of Rolando's own reflections on the biocentric principle and vital unconscious.

2.1) What is a Living System?

Nature's patterns and processes of relating and co-creating conditions conducive to life provide the foundation for my exploration of Biodanza as a living system. These patterns and processes have been

studied and summarized by living systems scholars. Sweeney (2008) provides a very accessible definition for living systems:

We use the phrase *living systems* as a metaphor, to represent an animate arrangement of parts and processes that continually affect one another over time. There are living systems on all scales, from the smallest plankton to the human body to the planet as a whole. When we understand what makes up a living system, we can see that a family, a business, and even a country also are living systems. (p. 3)

Systems scholars have found that all living systems follow the same basic organizing principles and patterns of relating. Systems scholar and deep ecology activist Macy stated: “They [scientists] found that these principles or system properties to be awesomely elegant in their simplicity and constancy throughout the observable universe, from suborganic to biological and ecological systems and mental and social systems, as well” (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 41).

Living systems characteristics have been broken down into anywhere from four (Macy & Brown, 1998), to six (Capra, 2002), to more than 12 (Sweeney, 2008) interrelated principles. In this monograph, I will utilize Capra’s principles as defined for the Center for Ecoliteracy (2019):

- **Nested Systems:** Nature is made up of systems that are nested within systems. Each individual system is an integrated whole and—at the same time—part of larger systems. Changes within a system can affect the sustainability of the systems that are nested within it as well as the larger systems in which it exists.
- **Network:** All living things in an ecosystem are interconnected through networks of relationship. They depend on this web of life to survive.
- **Dynamic Balance:** Ecological communities [*another term for living systems*] act as feedback loops, so that the community maintains a relatively steady state that also has continual fluctuations. This dynamic balance provides resiliency in the face of ecosystem change.
- **Cycles:** Members of an ecological community depend on the exchange of resources in continual cycles. Cycles within an ecosystem intersect with larger regional and global cycles.
- **Flows:** Each organism needs a continual flow of energy to stay alive. The constant flow of energy from the sun to Earth sustains life and drives most ecological cycles.
- **Development:** All life—from individual organisms to species to ecosystems—changes over time. Individuals develop and learn, species adapt and evolve, and organisms in ecosystems coevolve. (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2019)

Most importantly, Capra (2009) determined that the characteristics of living systems in nature all have to do with relationships in community. Nature continuously changes, unfolds, and develops through its dynamic relational patterns, structures, and processes. Contact and communication between system components and systems are at the heart of life continuing and unfolding, and aid in what is essential to any living system: its capacity to renew itself and develop new complexities, which is the capacity of autopoiesis. These life-giving relational dynamics are not unique to natural systems, they apply to social systems, as well (Sweeney, 2008; Capra, 2002; Macy & Brown, 1998). Social systems of any kind (families, organizations, learning communities, and a Biodanza vivencia and group) unfold and develop through dynamic interactions in continuous feedback with each other.

2.2) What is Living Systems Awareness?

Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.

— Chief Seattle (Mystic Alert Adventures, 2019)

Systems thinking is increasingly recognized as an important capacity in organizational development and as a skillset that should be taught in schools. For example, systems thinking has now become integrated into the Common Core standards of many state educational plans (Creative Learning Exchange, 2019). However, it is still mostly considered a cognitive-rational process. Systems thinking largely refers to a variety of modeling and analytical tools or group conversational practices to map out the complexities of the world, identify potential leverage points for change, and engage in various action-reflection cycles of collaborative planning.

At the same time, systemic wisdom is very ancient and involves multiple intelligences and ways of knowing. It is an integral aspect of indigenous wisdom and has been shared from generation to generation through stories, ritual, dance, and an embodied awareness of the radical interconnectedness of all of life. While there is some curriculum on how to teach systems thinking through stories (Sweeney, 2008) and games (Sweeney & Meadows, 2010), I see a need to involve multiple intelligences and ways of knowing in a much more integrated way. As an educator, I strongly believe that we need to develop capacities to feel, sense, understand, and embody living systems with our whole being. This is what I have come to name “living systems awareness.”

What is living systems awareness? Here is my latest definition: *a deep awareness of being fully alive in this world: sensing, embodying, feeling, and, with our whole being, intentionally co-weaving the web of radical interconnectedness with self, others, community, and all of life; a desire to fall in love with life every day, and celebrate life to the fullest.*

Living systems awareness, thus, goes beyond grasping the meaning of systemic interconnections with our minds. It involves experiencing these principles with our whole being: our bodies, hearts, souls, and spirits. Only then, I propose, will we develop capacities for becoming change agents in a rapidly changing world that requires all the adaptability, agility, and co-creativity we can muster.

Biodanza is an integrative process of nurturing living systems awareness: Biodanza vivencias are designed to help us integrate our three centers: our center of thinking, of feeling, and our instincts. At the same time, Biodanza vivencias are inherently designed as living systems, as I will demonstrate below. The biocentric principle, as described by Rolando Toro (2014), is the very foundation for experiencing and expressing living systems awareness. I therefore consider the Biodanza process a unique and much needed opportunity to develop living systems awareness.

While participants will likely develop deeper living systems awareness simply by participating in a group for a period of time, I postulate that Biodanza facilitators can strengthen and deepen this process via their choice of consignas and by making some design choices of a Biodanza vivencia that specifically heighten this awareness. I offer some preliminary suggestions in Section 4 of this monograph.

2.3) The Inner/Felt Dimension of Living Systems



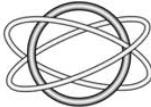
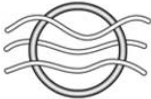
Living systems awareness is a deeply felt and sensed experience. It is an experience that stirs our heart and that is perceived with our whole being, on a cellular level. It is an expression of the *vital unconscious* and the *biocentric principle* (Toro, 2014). I will contextualize these concepts within my proposal further below, in Section 3.



In my dissertation (Widhalm, 2011a), I related each of Capra’s living systems principles to a felt dimension of perceiving living systems awareness. I will illustrate this connection here, as well, in Table 1.

Biodanza, through its use of music, contact, and careful structuring along the organic curve, stimulates this inner dimension of living systems throughout a vivencia. Being in vivencia evokes a direct experiencing of living systems as alive, vibrant, loving, soulful, and sacred living entities.

I will demonstrate further below in Section 4, Table 2, how each of these living systems principles is part of a Biodanza class and what kind of consigna language may help evoke this felt sensation of radical interconnectedness with all of life.

Table 1: Living Systems Principles and Corresponding Felt Sensations (Widhalm, 2011a)

Living Systems Principle	Definition	Felt Sensation and State of Awareness
	Nature is made up of systems that are nested within systems. Each individual system is an integrated whole and—at the same time—part of larger systems. Changes within a system can affect the sustainability of the systems that are nested within it as well as the larger systems in which it exists.	Belonging; feeling part of a larger whole; feeling co-responsible for that which is smaller and larger than us; feeling carried and held; sense of we; trusting and reverence; feeling of intrinsic safety
	All living things in an ecosystem are interconnected through networks of relationship. They depend on this web of life to survive.	Feeling part of the web of life; feeling connected to community; connecting across difference
	Ecological communities act as feedback loops, so that the community maintains a relatively steady state that also has continual fluctuations. This dynamic balance provides resiliency in the face of ecosystem change	Feeling seen & heard; compassion; empathy; honesty; transparency
	Flows: Each organism needs a continual flow of energy to stay alive. The constant flow of energy from the sun to Earth sustains life and drives most ecological cycles.	Feeling open and vulnerable to change and being changed; feeling present with the flow of life; surrendering to change; feeling open to new influences and ideas; letting go what is no longer needed

Living Systems Principle	Definition	Felt Sensation and State of Awareness
<p>Cycles</p> 	<p>Members of an ecological community depend on the exchange of resources in continual cycles. Cycles within an ecosystem intersect with larger regional and global cycles.</p>	<p>Feeling part of the universe and a continuum of time; feeling attuned to the cycles of life: active (expressing–creating); resting (letting be - integrating)</p>
<p>Development</p> 	<p>All life — from individual organisms to species to ecosystems — changes over time. Individuals develop and learn, species adapt and evolve, and organisms in ecosystems coevolve.</p>	<p>Feeling open to new developments unfolding; appreciation, awe, curiosity and wonder for new things that were not there before; celebrating a new stage of life; feeling of aliveness and vitality generated from having grown out of an old structure and adapted to a new one</p>

Note: From Center for Ecoliteracy. 2011. “Ecological Principles” was originally published by the Center for Ecoliteracy. © Copyright 2004-2011 Center for Ecoliteracy. Images and text in column 2 reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. For more information visit www.ecoliteracy.org. (Text in column 2 is from <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/nature-our-teacher/ecological-principles>.)

2.4) Autopoiesis and Emergence – Life’s Self-Organizing Dance

En cada vivencia nacen bebés (Sergio Cruz)

Life thrives on life. Life is a continuous process of co-creation. Life loves to self-organize and unfold into something new. This is the dance of life. I remember very vividly how Sergio Cruz (now director of the International Biocentric Foundation) exclaimed during one of our training weekends: *En cada vivencia nacen bebés*: During each vivencia, babies are born.

The scientific name for this miraculous process of life’s unfolding is autopoiesis, which was originally coined by Maturana and Varela (1991). A closely related term is “emergence,” which is now receiving increasing attention in community activism, as well as organizational development (Brown, 2017). Let me offer an explanation of autopoiesis to illustrate why this is such an important concept for Biodanza.

Rolando Toro (2014) was deeply inspired by systems scholars Varela, Maturana (Maturana & Varela, 1991), and Capra (1996) when he developed the biocentric principle and the theoretical model of Biodanza. Capra (1996) defined autopoiesis as a “network pattern in which the function of each component is to participate in the production or transformation of other components in the network. In this way the network continually makes itself. It is produced by its components and in turn produces those components” (p. 162). Capra further defined the following properties of an autopoietic network:

- *Self-bounded:* The boundary is an integral part of the network. The system is organizationally closed but open with regard to flow of energy and matter. Its order and behavior are not imposed by the environment but established by the system itself.
- *Self-generating (self-renewal) and self-perpetuating:* All components, inclusive of the boundary, are produced by processes within the network. Production processes continue over time, so that all components are continually replaced by the system’s processes of transformation.

- *Structural coupling*: New structures are created in interaction with the environment, which results in continuing adaptation, learning, and development.

The three characteristics of autopoiesis—self bounded, self-renewing, and structural coupling—are very useful to consider as organizing principles of Biodanza. A vivencia that is alive AS an ecosystem will create a living boundary or “membrane” for each class. It will contribute to participants’ and the group’s capacity for self-renewal by nurturing the dynamic network of a Biodanza group, as well as individuals’ capacities to become renewed through the deeply restorative Biodanza process (self-renewing). And thirdly, a Biodanza group cross-fertilizes with its environment. Biodanza, as a laboratory for life, continuously influences our daily lives. Participants, in turn, bring these life experiences back into their process of deepening the Biodanza practice (“structural coupling”).

Autopoiesis, regardless of its literal translation as “self-making,” is, in its very essence, an “each-other-making” and “us-making” process. Thus, the concept of strengthening our identity in Biodanza and the concept of autopoiesis are inseparable: We need the group, and we need each other, to become witnessed into new, expanded autopoietic selves.

Autopoiesis is a very empowering concept in today’s world, and a very needed level of awareness to develop. It signifies that each one of us has co-creative capacities, in relationship with each other and the larger whole. This means that each and every one of us has agency to affect change. We have co-creative power. We cannot control the outcomes of our actions, but we can co-create the journey. We cannot predict the results, but we can always take the next step, continuously adapt, learn from cues life is presenting us, and try something new. This is the dance of Life.

Biodanza is designed to develop these autopoietic capacities in participants. Let me offer a few examples for each of the three core conditions of autopoiesis:

- **Bounded (membrane)**: A vivencia begins and ends with a circle and reconvenes the group in a circle throughout. The circle has an important role in creating a holding space or “membrane” for the vivencia (class) and group. I will elaborate on the importance of “membrane awareness” further below, in Section 4.
- **Self-renewing**: Biodanza exercises offer multiple opportunities for participants to inspire each other, connect with each other, energize each other, stimulate each other, learn from feedback with each other, and harmonize with each other – all these are the same functions cell components perform for each other in a continuous process of self-renewing.
- **Structural coupling (cross-fertilization with the environment)**: Participants bring their life experiences into class (spoken and unspoken), and in turn also enrich their lives with their experiences from their Biodanza practice. Biodanza is a laboratory for life. The experience of vivencia is meant to be shared and inspire participants’ lives and communities with loving, life-giving energy.

What “*bebés*” have been born in your Biodanza practice, and in your life, as a result of practicing?

2.5) Biodanza as a Pattern Dance – Dancing the Patterns that Connect

What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the primrose to the orchid, and all of them to me, and me to you?" (Gregory Bateson) (An Ecology of Mind, 2019)

Life is a dance of patterns that connect. The phrase "patterns that connect" was originally coined by systems pioneer Bateson (2002, p.7) in the late 1970s. Biodanza, as a dynamic system of patterns that connect, allows us to feel and sense these interweaving patterns with our whole being.

Let me elaborate a bit on the significance of natural pattern awareness for change agents of a healthier world, and how Biodanza helps us cultivate this pattern wisdom.

As the living systems principles so beautifully summarize, in any living system, continuous flows of information, energy, and nutrients are exchanged in a dynamic balance of giving and receiving through intricate feedback loops. They form a complex network of relationships, from the cellular to the global level, through subtle language of connection: nature's pattern language. In nature, some of the patterns that connect can be seen, such as meanders in streams, ripples in a lake, branching patterns in trees, network patterns of a spider web, spirals in snail shells, or honeycomb patterns. Underneath are also countless intricate unseen patterns of relating, patterns of energy and information, and chemical exchanges on molecular and cellular levels. This movement is not controlled by a single entity, it continually self-organizes. Patterns that connect are always in motion, flux, and ever changing. Critical here is the notion of fluidity, of unpredictability, of change.

Bateson (2002) emphasized that patterns are not fixed, they are a dance of interacting parts.

We have been trained to think of patterns, with the exception of those of music, as fixed affairs. It is easier and lazier that way but, of course, all nonsense. In truth, the right way to begin to think about the pattern which connects is to think of it as *primarily* (whatever that means) a dance of interacting parts and only secondarily pegged down by various sorts of physical limits and by those limits which organisms characteristically impose. (p. 12)

Biodanza offers a lived and living context in which to practice this pattern dance. As a system of integration rooted in dance, it helps participants embody the dynamic and changing webs of natural pattern awareness. I postulate that participants in the Biodanza process develop a truly sensed and felt experience of nature's organizing patterns and are then therefore more attuned to notice and embody natural pattern awareness in other areas of their lives, as well.

Patterns connect in new complexities if they are given time and space to connect, if allowed natural rhythms of gestation and activation, of disintegration and integration, of ebb and flow, of the four seasons. Nature has cycles of day and night and seasons for this process to unfold, and provides countless niches and spaces protected by soil, skin, and bark where components disintegrate and slowly reintegrate into new life forms. The Biodanza process (both within a vivencia and also as a process of integration between vivencias), beautifully creates conditions for these cycles, seasons, and gestating spaces. That is why the organic curve of a Biodanza vivencia is also of critical importance, to support the process of integration. The Biodanza curve mimics and embodies the organic curve of Life itself. The structure of the curve and the supportive ecofactors of the group, music, and facilitation foster an

ecological integration process over time. Participants surrender to life's patterning as shifts and changes percolate, jell, flow, branch out, spiral inward and outward, and transform.

Living systems awareness is, in essence, natural pattern awareness. The living systems principles I introduced above are metapatterns of nature. By practicing living systems awareness, we become reconnected to this natural pattern dance of Life and are therefore better prepared to embody this natural pattern awareness in other life contexts, as well. Biodanza can help us become attuned to these natural patterns and to reawaken our own capacities to actively participate in Life's pattern dance.

Ecopsychologist Fisher (2002) proclaimed the need for awakening *unactivated interactional patterns* as an essential recollective practice for the healing of people and the planet. While this phrase might sound like a mouthful, I consider it very significant. The threads life needs for a healthy fabric are already here, waiting to be interwoven. We simply need to pick up the strands of the web of life and allow ourselves to feel that connection with life and with each other. Biodanza is a perfect practice for awakening unactivated interactional patterns, because it teaches us to reconnect with our whole being: from our hearts, our souls, our bodies, and our minds, and our spirit. Each Biodanza class is inherently designed to awaken unactivated interactional patterns of relating.

In these times where there is so much isolation and a sense of separateness, I consider this notion of activating unactivated interactional patterns of utmost importance. Once we develop a felt sense of pattern connectedness, we can more easily appreciate the patterns that connect in other life contexts, as well and more consciously and vigorously dance the pattern dance in all of our life. Pattern awareness is a transferable skill that is much needed in our times (Volk & Bloom, 2007). As an educator who teaches courses on sustainability, ecological consciousness, transformative change, and leadership, I consider teaching transferable pattern awareness of utmost importance. I postulate that people who actively practice natural pattern and living systems awareness will, over time, notice opportunities to "reawaken unactivated interactional patterns" in a variety of life contexts, at home, at school, at work, in our communities, and in our decisionmaking structures.

2.6) Contact, Symbiogenesis, and the Space In-Between

Life needs to rub against life in order to thrive. This is how life continuously self-organizes, co-creates itself and unfolds into new expressions. Let me elaborate a bit on the importance of contact, by offering some insights from ecopsychology and evolutionary biology and connecting them to the meaning of contact in Biodanza.

As mentioned earlier, living systems are highly relational. They are communities where all systems components are in continuous cooperation and partnership with each other, through intricate network patterns of communication, information exchange, and feedback. *Survival of the Fittest* is no longer considered a driver for evolution among leading scientists. Autopoiesis— emergent, self-organizing development—is a relational dynamic that takes place through contact. The key characteristics of autopoiesis (self-bounded, self-renewing, and structural coupling) manifest through contact between system components and between systems.

Ecopsychologist Fisher (2002) defined contact as "an activity of ex-change, transaction, meeting, fusion-across-difference, transmission, encounter, or engagement with the world—without which no life or experiencing would be possible" (p. 65). Fisher further stated "Reality is most fully given or revealed

under ongoing conditions of good, organismically satisfying contact: while we suffer a diminished and decaying reality under conditions of weakened or distorted contact” (pp. 65-66).

Biodanza is dedicated to creating conditions for good, organismically satisfying contact. Participants come together to heal from distance created by a society where isolation is running rampant. During a time where people spend more and more time on their screens and devices, where more and more work and school functions take place via virtual technology, where depression and suicide rates have become an epidemic, the call for creating conditions for organismically satisfying contact is more urgent than ever.

Contact happens when two or more systems meet and influence each other over time. In fact, according to Rolanda Toro, contact is “the union between two and more systems to allow the flow of information.” (Toro, n.d.a, p. 6). Contact is a process that develops gradually, in a nurturing environment. As Rolando states, “it is continuity, not just contiguity (p. 7). In this way, “contact allows a connection to the cosmic energy of life ...There are multiple repercussions in participants, from chemical to electrical reactions of neurotransmitters, processes of neurological conduction, to the fruitful fertilization from life to life.” (p. 7).

What Rolando refers to as the fruitful fertilization from life to life is what the process of autopoiesis does. Without contact, there is no autopoiesis, no emergence of new life. Good organismically satisfying contact is an absolutely critical skill to learn for the healing of the planet.

When life rubs against life, new possibilities unfold. Social psychologist Anderlini-D’Onofrio (2009) described symbiogenesis as one of the main principles of evolution: the symbiotic process by which a species acquires the genes of its symbionts into its own DNA. Drawing on biologist Margulis (1999), Anderlini-D’Onofrio proclaimed that the best way for humans to practice symbiogenesis, become reconnected to the rhythms of Gaia, and develop capacities for the healing of humanity and the planet, is to develop capacities for undifferentiated love, particularly types of love that stimulate oxytocin, the hormone of calm and connectedness.

Healthy touch in a heart-opening environment is an important way of stimulating oxytocin, not only for infants, but also for adults. Biodanza creates opportunities for symbiogenesis the way Anderlini-D’Onofrio envisioned it, particularly through the lines of affectivity and sexuality. Both differentiated and undifferentiated forms of organismically satisfying contact contribute to life meeting life and to new possibilities unfolding.

Contact, as “the union between two and more systems to allow the flow of information,” (Toro, n.d., p. 7) is not limited to just physical contact, though. We can practice organismically satisfying contact with a tree, with a cloud, with the sunset, and by contemplating a flower. We can practice this by gazing into each others’ eyes for a whole song, or by slowly approaching each other from opposite ends of the room, never physically touching. Contact fills the space in between with harmony, with resonance. As the space between two or more people who practice organismically satisfying contact reverberates, the whole group field reverberates in cosmic harmony. Contact is a primary way for the vital unconscious (Toro, 2014) to express itself.

In order for emergent, autopoietic developments to unfold, creating a nurturing space in-between is essential. Biodanza does this by emphasizing positive ecofactors. Through a nonverbal environment of

safety, non-judgment, the resonance of organic music, and the careful practicing of feedback in self-regulation and co-regulation, the space in-between dancers, in-between exercises, and in-between vivencias participates in the dance of patterns that connect, as well.

As Martin Buber states: “Our relationship lives in the space between us – it doesn’t live in me or in you or even in the dialogue between the two us – it lives in the space we live together and that space is sacred space.” (quoted in Rhett Smith, 2019) This sacred space is what Biodanza creates so beautifully throughout a vivencia. The sacred space in-between nurtures organismically satisfying contact, and, in turn, organismically satisfying contact nourishes the sacred space in-between.

2.7) The Membrane as a Womb for Life Unfolding

A membrane is a permeable boundary that gives a living system a distinct place to be and evolve. It creates a holding space, a womb, a nurturing yet flexible container. It controls what kind of energies and nutrients migrate across the boundary. It allows for a space nested within larger spaces that also have membranes, nested within yet larger systems and so on. In social systems, a membrane creates a sense of safety, identity, and belonging to a whole, distinct from, yet interconnected with, other wholes.

I consider the concept of a membrane highly useful in the design of any learning experiences I facilitate as a teacher and facilitator, and also in the design of a Biodanza vivencia.

Cell biologist Lipton (2008), father of epigenetics, identified the cell membrane as a critical component of the human cell, more critical for evolution than the DNA. According to Lipton, the cell’s operations are primarily molded by its interaction with the environment, not by its genetic code. He also refers to the membrane as mem-brain, highlighting the critical role membranes hold in evolution.

The membrane is formed by community. A Biodanza facilitator alone cannot create the membrane. The Biodanza group is needed as a witness, as a place where participants hold and behold each other in a shared space of belonging. The primary structure for cultivating membrane awareness in Biodanza is the circle (both verbal and nonverbal). Every time a Biodanza group convenes in circle, it strengthens its membrane identity. Below, in Section 4, I offer some ideas on how a Biodanza facilitator can promote membrane awareness and can continuously help nourish and nurture the membrane of a Biodanza vivencia.

I consider the nurturing of membrane awareness of utmost importance in virtually any group setting, beyond Biodanza, in education, or business meetings, at conferences, at festivals, or at public demonstrations. There are plenty of unused and underutilized membranes in all of these settings. A membrane (or circle of any kind) is a core pattern of connection (referring back to Section 5 on patterns of nature). For example, every conference that starts and ends with a series of speeches and neglects the opportunity to invoke a participatory ritual of belonging, leaves its membrane potential un-activated. Imagine how different the world would be if we sat, stood, sang, and danced in circle more often, in schools, communities, business and policy settings.

3) Biodanza's Grounding in Living Systems: The Biocentric Principle and Vital Unconscious

"El reino de la vida abarca todo lo que existe, desde los neutrinos hasta los quasars, desde las piedras hasta los pensamientos mas sutiles. Toda expresión, todo movimiento, toda danza es un "acto viviente." (Toro, 2014, p. 75)

The kingdom of life includes everything that exists, from the neutrons to the quasars, from the rocks to the most subtle thoughts. All expression, all movement, all dance is a "living ceremony."

Biodanza, as a system of integration, is deeply rooted in living systems theory. Toro frequently refers to living systems scholars, including Capra (1996), Varela, and Maturana (1991), but also many other systems thought leaders and practitioners, such as Bohm and Prigogine (Toro, 2009).

In this section, I will connect some of the terminology Rolando Toro uses with the living systems concepts I have introduced above. Rolando does not specifically refer to Capra's six principles of living systems that I am using as a foundation for this monograph, and some of the literature I refer to above is more recent than Rolando's writings. However, I consider the literature I have discussed to be merely an extension of the living systems wisdom that has already been spelled out by Rolando. It is my hope that some of the living systems concepts I have illustrated so far may offer a helpful framing for Biodanza facilitators.

3.1) The Biocentric Principle

The biocentric principle maintains that life is sacred and that humans, being part of mother Earth, are called to put life at the center. In Biodanza, every movement, every encounter, every exercise is motivated out of that deep respect for life and out of a desire to nurture and protect life. Life, according to the biocentric principle, is not just something we seek to protect to survive as a human species. We *are* part of the web of life, life as a lived and living experience, and, from this knowing and experiencing, seek to take care of life itself.

Let me offer some of Toro's own words about the significance of the biocentric principle:

Toro states:

"Todo aquello que existe, elementos, estrellas, plantas, animals y seres humanos, son componentes de un "sistema viviente mayor." "El universe existe porque existe la vida," y no "la vida existe porque existe el universo." La evolución del universo es, en realidad, la evolución de la vida y culmina en el fenomeno de la conciencia (Toro, 2009, p. 74).

Everything that exists, elements, stars, plants, animals, and human beings, are components of a grand living system. "The universe exists because life exists," and not, "life exists because the universe exists." The evolution of the universe is, in reality, the evolution of life and culminates in the phenomenon of consciousness.

This is a crucial core message of Rolando that the Biodanza system sources from. With life at the origin of everything, and all life forms being intricately interconnected and emanating from the same

substance, our life as humans is just as precious and unique as all other life forms in the universe. We depend on the thriving of all life forms. They are all our relations.

El “principio biocéntrico” propone la potenciación de la vida y la expresión de sus poderes evolutivos. Biodanza es, desde este punto de vista, “una poética de lo viviente, fundada en leyes universales que conservan y permiten la evolución de la vida.” (Toro, 2009, p.78)

The biocentric principle proposes the empowerment of life and the expression of our evolutionary potentials. Biodanza, from this point of view, is “a poetry of the living, grounded in universal laws that conserve and permit the evolution of life.”

Cuando hablamos del principio de la vida, nos referimos a algo muy preciso, a funciones universales, a formas de vinculación, a desarrollo evolutivo. La Biodanza se inspira en los principios generales de lo viviente y no en ideas *a priori* o en dogmas religiosos. (Toro, 2014, p. 76)

When we speak about the biocentric principle, we are referring to something highly precise: to universal functions, to ways of relating, to a process of evolutionary development. Biodanza is inspired by the general principles of life and not by *a priori* ideas or religious dogmas.

The universal laws of nature are actually very accessible to all of us – we are made of them, and we live them every day. The six principles of living systems as defined by Capra are a summary of these universal laws. They name what some of these general principles of life are that Rolando is referring to. They can help us highlight and create conditions for embodying, sensing, and feeling these universal laws. The six principles of living systems can be expressed in many different contexts. They can be expressed through music, dance, art, poetry, and they can also be applied to cognitive-rational analysis. In fact, in my teaching practice, I invite students to write poetry based on these six living systems principles. Biodanza offers a beautiful modality for dancing these universal laws, embodying them even more deeply and thus allowing us to access them more intuitively in every-day life.

El “principio biocéntrico” establece un modo de sentir y de pensar que toma como referencia existencial la vivencia. Este principio surge como una propuesta anterior a la cultura y se nutre de la sabiduría cósmica que genera los procesos vivientes. Tal propuesta puede parecer sorprendente, porque estamos habituados al uso de la lógica deductiva: o sea, estamos acostumbrados a sacar conclusiones predictivas a partir de ciertos hechos. El método usado aquí en cambio no es predictivo: éste procede del hecho ineludible de la existencia de la vida “aquí y ahora”, para interrogarse sobre el origen del cosmos. Mi abordaje hacia la conciencia, parte de la vivencia de la vida y da la certeza que esta vivencia ofrece como dato inicial (Toro, 2009, p. 79).

The biocentric principle establishes a way of feeling and thinking that uses the vivencia as an existential point of reference. This principle arises like a proposal prior to culture and it is nourished by the cosmic wisdom that generates living processes. This proposal might seem surprising, because we are habituated to using deductive logic: we are used to making predictive conclusions from certain facts. The method we are using here, however, is not predictive: it stems from the undeniable fact of life’s existence “here and now,” in order to explore for oneself

the origin of the cosmos. My approach towards consciousness awareness comes from the vivencia of life and (this approach) gives us the certitude that the vivencia offers as the primary data source.

Living systems awareness, like Rolando states, is a proposal anterior to language and to human forms of cultural expression. Living system awareness arises from the “here and now,” the lived experience. In a world that has become dependent on deductive logic, cultivating a way of knowing that is based on the lived experience of life itself is revolutionary, and deeply needed. The vivencia opens us to the source energy of life, like a wellspring we can always drink from, replenish ourselves with, and infuse our entire lives with. In a world where there is so much isolation and reliance on technology, learning to tap into that very source energy is perhaps the most important restorative practice we can cultivate.

As I have stated in my research as a transformative learning educator (Widhalm, 2011a, 2011b), grounding our lives, our learning, and our relationships in deeply lived experience doesn't deny the value of using deductive logic or the value of cognitive-rational decision-making. When we are sourcing from vivencia in the here and now, our hearts become more open and our minds become clearer, and thus we are better prepared to make life-supporting choices as integrated living beings on this planet.

Desde el Principio Biocéntrico podemos concebir el universe como un gigantesco holograma vivo. (Toro, 2014, p. 69)

Through the biocentric principle we can conceptualize the universe as a gigantic living hologram.

The notion of the holographic or fractal nature of the universe ties directly into Capra's principles of living systems. Systems are nested within systems. As we cultivate living systems awareness during a vivencia, this awareness then also becomes available to us in different contexts, in our lives, and in our communities. The more groups cultivate living systems awareness (via Biodanza vivencias or other modalities that do so), the more this awareness of being fully aligned with life's wisdom will become available to the world. This quote by Rolando is also an expression of the vital unconscious (which I will touch on below). Every cell operates according to the same principles as does a living organism, as does the planet, as does the cosmos. We are all part of the fractal dance of life.

El sentimiento de amor podríamos definirlo como la experiencia suprema del contacto con la vida. A través de la Biodanza llegamos a la Fuente originari ade los impulsos de vida. Danza, amor y vida son términos que aluden al fenómeno da la unidad cósmica. El núcleo creador de la cultura del tercer milenio está por nacer con la restitución de la sacralidad de la vida. (Toro, 2014, p. 72)

We could define the feeling of love as an experience of supreme contact with life. Through Biodanza we arrive at the original fountain of life's impulses. Dance, love, and life are expressions that allude to the phenomenon of cosmic unity. The “creative nucleus” of the culture of the third millennium is about to be born along with the restitution of the sacredness of life.

This beautiful quote by Rolando highlights the deep knowing that living systems are loving systems. It is through affective connection and through a deep cellular awareness of connection with all of life, that the principles of life become animated and reverberate. Life is inherently relational, and increasingly,

contemporary scientists are speaking about this connection, as well. Buhner (2002), in his book *The Lost Language of Plants*, expressed the tremendous capacity of all life forms to communicate and cooperate: from sacrificial plants dying so that the others may live, to different species warning each other about predators approaching, to plants sending healing chemicals through their roots when there is illness nearby—not just within the same species, but between species and kingdoms of nature. An awareness of living systems as loving system calls for a perception of the world as a living being that goes much deeper than cognitive-rational understanding.

Sustainability thought leader Hawken (2007) stated: “According to immunologist Gerald Callahan, faith and love are literally buried in our genes and lymphocytes, and what it takes to arrest our descent into chaos is one person after another remembering who and where they really are” (p. 165). He went on to say: “To salve the world’s wounds demands a response from the heart” (p. 188). Biodanza works like a healing balm infusing body, heart, mind, and soul on a personal and collective level.

And finally, let me highlight a quote that very much lies at the heart of my own motivation for this work, as an educator, and as a Biodanza facilitator:

“El Principio Biocéntrico no es simplemente una enunación teórica. Se trata de una propuesta a la acción.” (Toro, 2014, p. 44)

The biocentric principle is not simply a theoretical statement. It is a proposal for action.

I am reminded of the ancient Tibetan Shambala Prophecy that systems scholar Joanna Macy loves to tell as a teaching for what is called for in our times. This wisdom teaching says that the two weapons of the Shambala warrior to fight against the destruction of the earth and to dismantle weapons in the “corridors of power where decisions are made,” are compassion and insight into the radical interconnectedness of all beings (Macy & Brown, 1998, p. 61). Both of these capacities—compassion and radical interconnectedness—are sourced from a deep awareness of life as sacred and are calling us to put life at the center.

I am also reminded of William McDonough’s definition of sustainability: “How can we love all children of all species at all times?” (McDonough, 2010) Putting life at the center, in these times of violence, growing inequality, separateness, and climate chaos, means putting life at the center with every fiber of our being. It’s a call to action to become warriors of love, to loving life fiercely, and to stand by, for, and with all children of all beings with uncompromising commitment.

3.2) The Vital Unconscious

The vital unconscious, as coined by Rolando, is a concept closely related to the biocentric principle. It’s a form of cognition across all scales of life forms, starting with the cognition of each living cell. It describes how the intelligence of life is embedded in each and every cell of our body, and how each cell has the capacity to self-organize. Each and every cell is, in fact, organized based on the same universal laws as spelled out in Capra’s living systems principles, and each cell follows the laws of autopoiesis.

The vital unconscious...

”is the cosmic memory inscribed in the cells. It is a form of cognition that creates cellular regularities and tends to maintain the functions of regulating organic stability. The overall sense is self-preservation. The unconscious vital cell gives rise to solidarity, tissues creation, immune defense, ultimately the success of the living system.” (Santos, 2009 p. 42, referring to Toro’s definition of the Vital Unconscious)

Rolando believed that there is a “biological mind” that not only spans the individual or a certain species but also participates as a “guiding force” in the ocean of cosmic life (Toro, n.d.b., p. 12). He considered the human being as a hologram connected to this larger living order (Toro, n.d.b., p. 13).

A Biodanza vivencia, designed as a living system, awakens this holographic awareness in participants. Through vivencia, participants attune to the felt experience of being connected to this cosmic order. Both exercises of intasis and extasy in Biodanza connect us with the cosmic harmony within and without. As Thoreau states: “The earth which is spread out like a map before me, is but a lining of my inmost soul exposed.” (Ecopsych.com, 2019)

4) The Vivencia as a Living System: Explorations and Ideas for Facilitators

In Section 2, I have introduced key concepts from living systems theory and related schools of thought to situate my proposal that Biodanza vivencias are, in fact, living systems that can stimulate self-organizing, autopoietic developments in participants and the group as a whole.

The key concepts I have introduced include:

- Definition of living systems and living systems awareness
- The six principles of living systems
- The inner (felt) dimension of living systems
- Autopoiesis and emergence – life’s self-organizing dance
- Biodanza as a pattern dance – dancing the Patterns that Connect
- Contact, symbiogenesis, and the space in-between
- The membrane as a womb for life unfolding

I offered these concepts to illustrate why a Biodanza vivencia is, in fact, a vibrant living system. I then contextualized some of these terms in Rolando’s own writings about the biocentric principle and vital unconscious.

If you practice Biodanza on a regular basis, you will likely have experienced the concepts I have introduced above. Likely, the vital unconscious of your cells will already have been touched by Biodanza as a living system. Perhaps you will have left vivencias feeling more alive, more whole, more aligned, and more enthusiastic about being a living being on this planet. Perhaps you have felt deeply compelled to make small or big changes in your life to become more congruent with who you really are. All these feelings and sensations are indications that you have experienced Biodanza as a living system and that this system has helped nourish and enliven the living system that is you.

I will now offer some insight on how the specific structure and flow of a Biodanza vivencia helps stimulate living systems awareness. I will make this connection more explicit by:

- Highlighting the importance of membrane awareness in Biodanza
- Mapping Biodanza exercises across the six principles of living systems as defined by Capra
- Offering some consigna language suggestions that can stimulate living systems awareness during a vivencia, based on my initial experience and experiments as a new Biodanza facilitator.

4.1) Cultivating Membrane Awareness in Biodanza

In Biodanza, we begin every vivencia in a circle, and we end in a celebratory circle. We may also choose to reconvene participants in a circle during the vivencia (a circle of coordination, a swaying circle, a circle of gazes, a circle of caresses, etc.)

From a living systems perspective, the circle has a key function in evoking what I call “membrane awareness.” It allows participants to feel part of a larger whole. It invites a sensation of mutuality and solidarity in an energy field that is always moving, pulsating inward and outward, yet staying connected.

By holding hands lightly and welcoming each other, participants create their own systems boundary within which they can feel safe, vulnerable, and free to activate their innate potentials, in any of the five lines of vivencia. If we consider a vivencia a living cell, then the circle helps activate and energize the cell membrane.

The circle holds space for participants to enter into vivencia in both the higher and lower parts of the vivencial curve. A witnessing circle of participants cheering each other on helps strengthen identity, and a gentle circle of holding and providing containment helps participants enter into a deep state of regression. In either case, and anywhere along that continuum, the circle provides a crucial role of holding, protecting, allowing, cheering for, witnessing, and letting whatever arises be welcomed and unfold. The circle is a ritual of holding and beholding.

From my experience thus far, a facilitator can help evoke membrane awareness very intentionally through a choice of wording consignas. Let me offer some suggestions here:

“By holding hands gently, the energy between us begins to flow, and we become a living being together.”

“By greeting each other, we become alive as a living being (depending on the theme of the vivencia, I might specify what I mean by a living being even further, e.g. a dragon with xy heads – number of participants in the vivencia; an ecosystem, a forest, an ocean, a wave, an ameba, a school of fish, a river).”

“I invite us to let the rhythm of this beginning circle guide us in becoming a being together, forming a tribe together.”

“Everyone in our circle is equal, nobody dominates, so that we can attune to each other and attune to the shared harmony of our circle.”

“By holding our hands gently, we are creating sacred space together, and the space in between us beings to vibrate and resonate in unison.”

If facilitators choose to reconvene the circle during the vivencia, they might add:

“I invite you to notice how we have already softened together as a living being. I invite us to notice the shared harmony, the gentle field we are co-creating together in circle.”

“I invite us to surrender in our circle again, let us melt into a shared vibration, let us be carried by the membrane of life that holds us, surrender into our shared womb space.”

“Let yourself be cradled by Life itself.”

Celebration and gratitude circle:

“Let us celebrate life with a final circle, a circle where there are no endings and beginnings and where new life is always unfolding.”

“Let us celebrate the miracle of Life and share this miracle with the larger circles of our communities and the world.”

“Let us once again come together as one living being, celebrating the life we are co-creating together.”

“Let us come together to give thanks to the new life we have given birth to today and to yet more babies waiting to be born from our shared womb space.”

“...a circle of gratitude for our co-creative power, for our privilege to co-create our lives, co-create our communities, and co-create healing for this world.”

“...a circle of dancing a shared “yes” to life unfolding, and “yes” to our collective power to co-create healing for this world...”

There are, of course, countless variations on this theme of naming the circle as a membrane, a womb space, and gestating space for life unfolding, and as a space of co-creation and emergence.

4.2) Living Systems Principles as Inspirations for Vivencial Design – Explorations and Ideas

Below, in Table 2, I will map selected Biodanza exercises across the principles of living systems as defined by Capra. I am offering this table to illustrate that each component of a Biodanza vivencia corresponds to at least one, if not more, principles of living systems. Please note that this is not a prescriptive suggestion on how to design a vivencia. I am not creating a blueprint for vivencia design. This table does not replace the Biodanza methodology and it is not a substitute for the theoretical model and the many considerations needed to design a correct vivencia. My hope is, though, that my suggestions and ideas noted below may contribute to a shared conversation about Biodanza as a living system. Perhaps some of my ideas will inspire you to consider how Biodanza vivencias you are participating in or are facilitating stimulate living systems awareness, and how you could support the co-creative, emergent qualities of a Biodanza group as a living system even more intentionally.

You will also notice that the same exercise often corresponds to more than one principle. This makes perfect sense, as all these principles are inherently interrelated and mutually support each other. In a healthy living system, all of these principles need to dance with each other in order for autopoietic development to unfold.

These principles apply to all five lines of vivencia, and all four elements. Regardless whether you design a vivencia in the line of sexuality or transcendence, likely the exercises you choose will somehow map across these principles. That's because Biodanza is a system of integration that is already designed as a living system. Every vivencia following the organic curve and the guidelines of vivencia design will invariably map nicely along these six principles.


Please note that I am also not mapping all Biodanza exercises here. I invite you to play with this map yourself, modify it, add to it, and share your explorations with me!


In the right column I offer some language that may help evoke living systems awareness through this particular living systems principle. These words may be useful for different exercises and are not intended to be prescriptions for particular consignas or particular exercises.

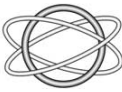
However, I propose that making ourselves aware of these principles can always be a useful practice for Biodanza facilitators. Whatever the theme of our vivencia may be, considering these principles may guide us in how we prepare our consignas and how we weave the various exercises together into an organic whole. A quick look at the principles may also help us notice if a vivencia could be strengthened as a living system somehow. Perhaps there may be more opportunities to evoke the felt experience of a network, or of being in dynamic balance and feedback with each other. Perhaps the vivencia could benefit from more reconvening opportunities into small or large circles to nurture membrane awareness.



These principles might also be helpful when a facilitator or participants reflect on a vivencia later on, in a verbal circle or by journaling.


Table 2: Living Systems Principles in Vivencia Design: Explorations and Ideas

Living Systems Principle	Definition of Living Systems Principle	Biodanza Exercises	Consignas that Can Evoke Living Systems Awareness: Explorations and Ideas
<p>Nested Systems</p> 	<p>Nature is made up of systems that are nested within systems. Each individual system is an integrated whole and—at the same time—part of larger systems. Changes within a system can affect the sustainability of the systems that are nested within it as well as the larger systems in which it exists.</p>	<p>Circles, compact groups, eutony in groups, circles of transformation</p> <p>Giving and receiving containment</p> <p>Circle of one or more participants dancing in the middle</p> <p>Dance of integrative trance in a group</p> <p>Exercises where small groups are then gradually joining with the larger group (in compact groups, or circles)</p> <p>This principle also refers to exercises that evoke an experience of holographic connection with life, with the cosmic harmony, by connecting to the vital unconscious going inward and outward (intasis and extasy), e.g. generative posture of intimacy, yin dance, dance of sensitive arms, as well as dances of expansion (generative posture of expansion, Yang dances, dances of rhythmic and melodic expression)</p>	<p>See discussion on membranes above and how to evoke membrane awareness with consignas.</p> <p>In addition, some of these phrases might be helpful:</p> <p>Nature is organized in pods and groupings – let us form a pod together.</p> <p>Let us huddle together in a nest, creating a protective membrane or holding space for each other.</p> <p>Each of our pods (nests, niches), is at the same time connected to all of us as a community, and we are in turn connected to a greater community, and the community of all of Life.</p> <p>I invite us to dance in this awareness of connection – how each of us is connected to the group, and the group is connected to a larger whole.</p> <p>“The earth which is spread out like a map before me is but a lining of my inmost soul exposed.” (Henry David Thoreau). I invite us to attune to our inner landscape, which is a reflection of the beauty of nature around us, and a reflection of the cosmic harmony.</p> <p>Each cell in our body is a hologram of the cosmic order, of the miracle of life. I invite us to attune to this cosmic order, by listening inward, and listening outward, and dance the cosmic order as your cells are feeling it.</p> <p>Invitation to bring the Biodanza experience into our own circles and cycles of life (an invitation at the end of a vivencia, or as part of the verbal circle).</p>

Living Systems Principle	Definition of Living Systems Principle	Biodanza Exercises	Consignas that Can Evoke Living Systems Awareness: Explorations and Ideas
<p>Network</p> 	<p>All living things in an ecosystem are interconnected through networks of relationship. They depend on this web of life to survive.</p>	<p>Rhythmic and melodic syncs with changes; walks with changes, coordination with changes, games with partner changes; fleeting encounters, encounters, mandala, circles of transformation, fluidity in groups, compact groups and nests</p>	<p>We are all interconnected within the web of life.</p> <p>Everything we do sends out ripples (butterfly effect), whatever we do, wherever we go, we are part of a great web of relationships.</p> <p>We are connected in visible and invisible ways, with each other, with our communities, with the universe.</p> <p>Let us weave our strands of life together.</p> <p>Let us interweave in a dynamic web of life that is always changing, always unfolding.</p> <p>We are relational creatures. We become more alive in relationship with each other, in community. We need each other to animate us.</p> <p>As our eyes meet, so do our hearts, connecting our heartstrings together into a shared greater instrument of cosmic harmony.</p> <p>We help each other come more alive. Each connection, each new dance, each new encounter brings out a new part in me, as well.</p> <p>Wherever the winds take us, wherever the waves carry us, whatever doors we step through, we are never alone – there will always be someone to meet us, community to greet us, hearts meeting hearts, souls meeting souls – all over the world, people are waiting to welcome us home. We are always connected in this larger web of the global community.</p>

Living Systems Principle	Definition of Living Systems Principle	Biodanza Exercises	Consignas that Can Evoke Living Systems Awareness: Explorations and Ideas
<p>Dynamic Balance</p> 	<p>Ecological communities act as feedback loops, so that the community maintains a relatively steady state that also has continual fluctuations. This dynamic balance provides resiliency in the face of ecosystem change</p>	<p>Eutony in pairs or small groups, rhythmic and melodic sync, walks and coordination in pairs, creative dance in pairs, encounters, generative postures of giving and receiving, dance of minimal contact, caresses (in pairs, in groups), games with multiple changes, mirroring each other, waking each other up (e.g. touching body part, mirror game, 1, 2, 3), trust walk</p> <p>The organic curve, as a whole, is a function of dynamic balance for the entire vivencia</p> <p>Of course, each circle is also an expression of dynamic balance and feedback.</p>	<p>All living beings oscillate a dynamic balance with each other – in a continuous dance of giving and receiving and attuning to each other.</p> <p>I invite us to a moment by moment exploration of being in contact, in connection, how your contact reverberates in me, and how my contact reverberates in you.</p> <p>Let our senses and sensations guide us as we attune to each other and explore a shared balance.</p> <p>Becoming mirrors for each other</p> <p>We help each other come more alive, by seeing each other, beholding each other, we are helping each other become bigger.</p> <p>We are witnessing each other into our larger selves, our full potentials.</p> <p>By dancing together, we are creating a shared space, where your rhythm and my rhythm meet. Listening to that shared space, attuning to a shared harmony.</p> <p>Helping each other harmonize, slow down, synchronize</p> <p>Dancing reciprocity with each other – sensing into the sweet balance of giving and receiving</p> <p>Invitation to approach each other with the greatest care, finding each other in the “space in between,” attuning to a shared resonance</p> <p>Listening to each other with all our senses, with our full presence</p>

Living Systems Principle	Definition of Living Systems Principle	Biodanza Exercises	Consignas that Can Evoke Living Systems Awareness: Explorations and Ideas
<p>Cycles</p> 	<p>Members of an ecological community depend on the exchange of resources in continual cycles. Cycles within an ecosystem intersect with larger regional and global cycles</p>	<p>Circles of all kinds</p> <p>Dance of the seed, dance of creation,</p>	<p>See membrane awareness suggestions above, and also the suggestions under the “nested systems principle” above.</p> <p>The circle has no ending and beginning, it’s a gift that keeps on giving. Every being in this circle affects each other and the circle as a whole.</p> <p>Everyone in this circle is equal, we all contribute to this circle continuously regenerating itself.</p> <p>Surrendering to the cycles of life, dropping into an awareness that we are all part of universal cycles</p> <p>As we dance in circle, I invite us to also connect to the greater cycles of life and let them nourish our being together.</p> <p>Invitation to bring the Biodanza experience into our own circles and cycles of life (an invitation at the end of a vivencia, or as part of the verbal circle).</p>
<p>Flows</p> 	<p>Each organism needs a continual flow of energy to stay alive. The constant flow of energy from the sun to Earth sustains life and drives most ecological cycles.</p>	<p>Fluidity series, dance of fluidity, fluidity in pairs, groups, free dance of fluidity, fleeting encounters, trains, games of changes (e.g. now or never, 1, 2, 3)</p> <p>Opening of vital space</p> <p>The segmentary movements also have a strong flow quality.</p>	<p>Life is a continuous flow of changes, subtle changes, big changes – changes we initiate, changes that are happening around us, changes we expect, changes that we didn’t expect – all these become part of the dance of life we get to co-create, moment by moment.</p> <p>Opening up to the flow of life</p> <p>The only constant in life is change.</p> <p>Everything in life is in motion.</p> <p>Becoming the flow of life</p> <p>Becoming water, becoming the wind, caressing the air, moving in a continuous current of presence</p> <p>Invitation to enter a zone of surrender, of trust, of allowing</p> <p>Invitation to become your own dance of curiosity, of wonder, of opening up to new possibilities, let each moment be a new opening to life.</p>

Living Systems Principle	Definition of Living Systems Principle	Biodanza Exercises	Consignas that Can Evoke Living Systems Awareness: Explorations and Ideas
Development 	<p>All life — from individual organisms to species to ecosystems — changes over time. Individuals develop and learn, species adapt and evolve, and organisms in ecosystems coevolve.</p>	<p>Creative dances: dance of the seed, dance of creation</p> <p>This principle is the culmination of all the other principles, and it is also embedded in all the other principles. It's the principle of co-creation, of emergence, and autopoiesis.</p> <p>All the principles above invite the energy of co-creation by dancing dynamic structures that support cross-fertilization from life to life.</p> <p>This principle also becomes activated during all exercises involving contact and caress, and during encounters, as it is through "life meeting life" that new life unfolds and now co-creative possibilities arise.</p> <p>The development principle will make itself even more known and felt once the group develops self-organizing capacities. For example, the group may start modifying an exercise together (e.g. letting small groups confluence into a big group, trains reforming each other or forming one big train, a train forming into a circle, a free individual dance becoming a group dance with the group as a whole co-creating something new).</p>	<p>For exercises inviting contact, caress, and encounters, here are some possibilities:</p> <p>When we meet, heart to heart, and skin to skin, we create a shared resonance together, a shared field of harmony.</p> <p>Whenever we offer each other the gift of touch, we give birth to new possibilities.</p> <p>Life thrives on cuddles and snuggles.</p> <p>Life rubs against life to create new life.</p> <p>The following types of consignas may give the group permission to self-organize:</p> <p>(for the verbal circle): When we attune to each other and become fully present with each other, we become a living being that takes on a life of its own.</p> <p>Let us drop into the shared awareness of becoming a living being as a group, and let's see what happens!</p> <p>We are part of a living universe, we are alive as a group, we are an ecosystem within the larger ecosystem of Gaia - let us celebrate the unfolding of life together!</p> <p>Let us become a river, an ocean, a forest teeming with life!</p> <p>I consider the consignas that evoke membrane awareness (see Membrane Awareness section above) very important in allowing the group a sense of becoming a living being together.</p>

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4.3) First Impressions of Nurturing Living Systems Awareness as a Biodanza Facilitator

Beginning my Biodanza facilitation practice has been such a tremendous gift of growth and deepening for me. I have been teaching regularly for close to a year now and have appreciated the opportunity to experiment with vivencial design considerations and consignas I have proposed above. While I am still a very new facilitator on a steep learning curve, I am loving and appreciating every step of this journey. How to design learning experiences as living systems continues to be an ongoing inquiry for me as a college instructor, as well, and this inquiry continues to inform my Biodanza practice, and vice versa.

While I haven't conducted a formal research study on the vivencias I have facilitated, I do think I am able to discern some general patterns and insights related to my inquiry: I sense that intentionally framing a vivencia and certain exercises in living systems language (like the consignas I proposed above) deepens participants' experience of becoming a living system together. I have noticed this particularly with the circles and my framing of circles as membranes or holding spaces for the group, giving the group permission to become a living entity. It's almost as if this framing is allowing the group to relax more deeply into a felt, primal sensation of becoming a living being together. By offering a framing, such as "by holding hands gently and greeting each other, we are becoming a being together, a dragon with 10 (or whatever the number of participants is) heads, an ameba, an ocean, a forest....", participants are allowed to enter into a more instinctual state, not unlike when facilitators introduce specific exercises to help participants recover their primal instincts (such as the four animals). I believe that this kind of framing supports what Rolando intended when he stated (as quoted earlier): "The biocentric principle establishes a way of feeling and thinking that uses the vivencia as an existential point of reference. This principle arises like a proposal prior to culture and it is nourished by the cosmic wisdom that generates living processes." (Toro, 2009, p. 79).

Among all the structural design ideas, I consider fostering membrane awareness the most important. I have noticed that a vivencia tends to evoke a deeper sense of connectedness if I convene several circles throughout a class, at least one circle in the beginning, middle, and end. Participants really love being in circle together and allow themselves to surrender to a deep space of belonging, beingness and togetherness, as community.

How many circles to include, what types of circle (celebratory, circle of coordination, swaying circle, slow activation, fast activation, etc.), of course depends on the level of integration of the group and each particular theme. In general, I consider the circle as the heart of integration in Biodanza and at the heart of what helps a group sense and feel that they are becoming an autopoietic living being together. Each time participants convene in circle they strengthen their membrane awareness together. Each time I support membrane awareness, the group, as a whole, has a chance to drop deeper into a collective sense of awareness as a living being. It has a chance to breathe together, as a living being, dance together, as a living being, become a living being, and therefore also develop the healing capacities of the group, as a whole, as a living being that is connected, holographically, to the earth and the universe.

A circle can also be convened in-between exercises, as part of introducing a new exercises (e.g. Let us come together in a circle while I show the next exercise, and let us keep nurturing our community space in this way.....You are welcome to sit down but I invite us to stay in a circle and keep holding our shared space together...).

Over time, that lived experience of being in circle together becomes part of the shared cellular memory of the group, helping the group further relax into membrane awareness every time participants reconvene in circle.

4.4) The Biodanza Group as an Autopoietic Living System – Potential Guiding Questions

Just like a Biodanza vivencia is a living system, a Biodanza group that meets regularly also becomes a living system that co-evolves over time and that will likely develop autopoietic, emergent qualities.

This will happen organically through the process of being in vivencia together, nurturing a shared membrane awareness, and continuously dancing together in patterns that connect. Over time, the group will enhance its capacity for feedback, trust, and affectivity with each other.

As part of my dissertation research, I offered a few guiding questions as potential indicators that a group is becoming a living system with self-organizing, autopoietic qualities. I'd like to offer an abbreviated and modified version of these questions here as they may apply to a Biodanza group. These questions are not prescriptive. They may, however, serve as helpful reminders for what kind of group dynamics could be reflective of the group's emergent and autopoietic unfolding:

- Is there a palpable sensation felt by some or all in the group that the group has become a living organism, that it is pulsating with aliveness?
- Are there any new, unplanned developments? (connections, relationships, ideas, capacities for empathy and compassion, for action, events, movements). Any positive ripple effects? What may have contributed to these developments arising?
- Is the group becoming comfortable with prolonged periods of "pregnant silence"? Is the group becoming more friendly and imitate with each other? Are group members becoming more comfortable connecting with each other nonverbally?
- Is the group becoming comfortable with giving and receiving authentic feedback, including in areas of difference and conflict?
- Are group members beginning to co-create their experience together and take co-responsibility for the wellbeing of the group?
- Is the group becoming more adaptable to shifts and unexpected changes? Is the group becoming more comfortable with holding unforeseen developments? Is the group self-organizing and spontaneously taking initiative?

If we see a number of these developments unfolding, chances are, the group is developing emergent, autopoietic capacities as a dynamic living system!

4.5) Biodanza as a Co-creative Dance

Just like a group will enter into an emergent, autopoietic journey together, every participant in a group also embarks on their own emergent, autopoietic journey. In fact, one of my most significant learnings from practicing Biodanza has been a deepening felt awareness that I get to co-create my life, through a continuous process of dancing my dreams while simultaneously surrendering to the unknown; dancing my desires while letting go and dissolving into a greater mystery, supported by the nurturing membrane of community. The awareness that I am a co-creator of my own life doesn't always come easily for me. I still find myself feeling like a victim of circumstances quite frequently, but every time I enter into vivencia, I am grateful for the gentle reminder of life's co-creative capacity that I get to dance with.

How it is exactly that I get to co-create my life still remains a mystery for me at times, but the beauty about Biodanza, and about being part of the co-evolution of life, is that I don't need to understand in great detail how it all works – because I get to dance Life, every moment, and every day, and I can trust that life will co-conspire with me while I am in vivencia and dancing life's principles wholeheartedly.

The Biodanza system is designed as a system of pulsation between yin and yang, between surrendering and taking action, and each of the six principles of living systems offers dynamic structures that aid on

this path of integration and continual unfolding. This is not surprising, as these principles are at the heart of how life continuously self-organizes and evolves. They give expression to the holographic structure of the universe that Rolando refers to.

Biodanza fosters living systems awareness by integrating head, heart, and instincts on a relational journey, deepening our relationships with self, other, community, and the world. As such, Biodanza offers a profoundly powerful way of coming home to life and of developing capacities for nurturing and protecting life and co-creating regenerative conditions for life.

The world needs dancers of life, change agents who practice living systems awareness not just via a cognitive-rational understanding of what is needed for a healthier world, but by truly embodying and opening their hearts to a co-creative way of perceiving and loving the world as a dynamic living system. Rolando envisioned a biocentric education that would transform schools, communities, business, and policymaking by wholeheartedly and unconditionally putting Life at the center. It is my true honor to be part of this journey, and I am immensely grateful to be dancing the dance of Life with the global Biodanza community and the community of all of Life.

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