

WILD – a story

In 2010 (aged 25) I was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis: a chronic inflammatory condition that affects the joints of the spine. I'd been having back issues for years and, whilst I was glad to receive a diagnosis, the implications of it were huge. I was basically told that I had this disease, that it was a degenerative condition where the joints of my spine would eventually fuse and there was nothing I could do about it apart from take some quite scary immunosuppressant drugs.

This was a massive knock to my confidence as a young man. In the next year or so, my life took a downturn, sometimes struggling to get out of bed and walk due to the pain and feeling debilitated by depression and anxiety about what the future may bring.

Then my friend encouraged me to attend a dance therapy group. Dance wasn't a thing I did. I went anyway and immediately I was hooked. This facilitated space allowed me to express my emotions with my body (a part of me that I had grown to loath) through dance. I went every week for about a year and I'm not exaggerating when I say it changed my life.

Around this time, I spent some time in Alaska. I was staying with some friends in a log cabin they had built themselves on the Knik Arm of the Cook Inlet near Anchorage. The day I arrived, we took the short walk to the water to go fishing. When we arrived, I was moved to tears by the beauty of the landscape and the view across the water. We climbed down to the beach and started fishing. This was during the Pacific salmon run, so within less than five minutes I had pulled a fish out of the water, killed it and began cooking it over a fire. As I took the first bites of the delicious pink flesh I had a revelation. This is what we are meant to do and have been doing as long as humans have existed. This is what it means to be human.

This experience was what started my interest in ancestral skills: the knowledge and practices of our nomadic hunter-gatherer ancestors (such as foraging, tracking, fire-making, plant medicine etc.).

In 2013, I started taking more formal dance technique classes and workshops. My passion grew with my skill, which led to me being invited to join a professional dance company (Maresa von Stockert's Tilted Productions) in 2016. This was the beginning of my dance career, which has recently led to my moderate success as a choreographer.

Around this time, I read an essay by Kevin Tucker called *Hooked on a Feeling: The Loss of Community and the Rise of Addiction*. In this essay, Tucker writes that taking intoxicants are relatively recent in terms of human history and that "healing dance is near-universal amongst hunter-gatherer societies... The purpose is to achieve ecstatic states. To experience mutual derived joy." To cut a long story short, humans have been practicing healing dance for as long as we have existed. This made me realise that, during my experience with therapeutic dance, not only had I been connecting to my body, but to something that is an essential part of humanness: to dance.

It's been a while since this realisation, but I'm finally ready to bring together these experiences in a new project called WILD.



George Fellows

WILD – a vision

You were born wild.

No human being is born separate from the rest of the natural world. The idea of 'human' and 'nature' being separate things is a huge part of the reason that we are facing the environmental crisis that we face today. Humans are just a small part of a myriad of intertwining and living natural communities, which include not only animals, but plant life and the earth and waters on which we all rely on.

Indigenous people all over the world know this. Our ancestors knew this. Before the advent of agriculture (approximately 12,000 years ago), which began the Neolithic period, all humans lived in nomadic hunter-gatherer bands that were intimately woven into the fabric of the natural world. Like the rest of the world in which they lived, they were wild. This accounts for over 99% of our human history. Wildness is our DNA.

Fast-forward to now, and it may seem hard to believe that the way in which most of us live is far from the norm, as far as our history is concerned. Apart from a handful of surviving indigenous groups, like the crops that sustain us, humans are subject to a process of domestication.

Domestication is, at its root, about the creation and maintenance of a synthetic order. It is about control. It reduces the fullness of the world into categories and systems of needs and resources... It is about turning wild humans into something for civilized use. It turns individuals into farmers, peasants, workers, bosses, police and soldiers just as it turns forests and wetlands into gardens and gardens into fields surrounding cities and fields into deserts.

Kevin Tucker

I believe that in order to reverse the catastrophe that is the climate crisis, we need to think about the tensions between wildness and domestication. We need to reconnect to our universal heritage as wild humans. We need to listen to the people who see this planet as a living being and resist those who see it as a dead resource to be exploited.

This is the process of rewilding. Being wild doesn't have to mean going out into 'nature'. Many of us don't have easy access to wild spaces. However, we all have access to our wild bodies. As mentioned above, wildness is within all of us. It can be accessed in many ways through looking at the skills and practices of wild humans. What were the things we were doing before we became domesticated? Dance is one of them. Through sharing the practices of ancestral skills and therapeutic dance, we can resist the domestication process and access our wild-selves.

WILD is reminding children and their adults that they were born wild and that domestication isn't inevitable. WILD is resistance. WILD is freedom.



George Fellows

WILD – a praxis

When I started my career as a choreographer, the obvious place to start was with young children and their families, which whom I've been working with since 2003.

My first project, which I co-directed with Nick Lawson (for our company *Four Hands*), which was a participatory project for young children and their parent/carers, where we developed a new dance practice, which we called *Wild Rumpus*. These took the form of a series of sessions, which focussed on partnering dance and offered adults and children the opportunity to connect with each other through physical play.

Wild Rumpus slowly morphed into *TOUCH*, a performance project (again co-directed with Nick) with two professional performers dancing with their own children and a community cast of local families. The piece gives the audience a snap-shot into the highs and lows of the parent/child relationship: something that everyone can relate to on some level, whether they are a parent or now.

My next performance, *it's ok*, is a response to something that I feel is lacking in theatre for young children: looking at mental health, attachment and some of the 'difficult' emotions that children can face. I wanted to get away from the assumption that art for children has to be 'entertaining' and fun and created a piece that is quiet and complete and quite dark at times.

For my current project, *WILD*, I want to bring together my interest in ancestral skills (more commonly known as bushcraft or forest school) and therapeutic dance in a dance project for young children and their parents/carers/educators.

The project will begin with two research residencies: the first as part of Choreodrome at The Place in London and the second at Yorkshire Dance in Leeds.

During the first residency, I will work with a dancer, two writers, a body psychotherapist, a dance movement psychotherapist, an ancestral skills expert and a dramaturg to delve deep into the theme of wildness. Through a series of creative workshops and skill-shares we will begin to develop the seed of a project that aims to share elements of wildness with young children and their adults. This will include dance (participatory and performance) and other elements of ancestral skills, discussions and educational materials for children, parents and carers, as well as CPD opportunities for professionals who work with young children. We will invite two groups of children from local schools to share out practice with and ask for their input.

For the second residency, I will work with a dancer and dramaturg for a week, focussing on the choreographic elements of the project, inspired by the previous residency, which will culminate in a sharing of the beginnings of the performance strand of the project.

The next step will be to evaluate the project with my producer and develop the creation of the performance work and other strands of the project and the touring model of which they will be a part. The rest is yet to be seen.

For wildness.



George Fellows