

Skin of Glass: Finding Spirit in the Flesh

By Dunya Dianne McPherson

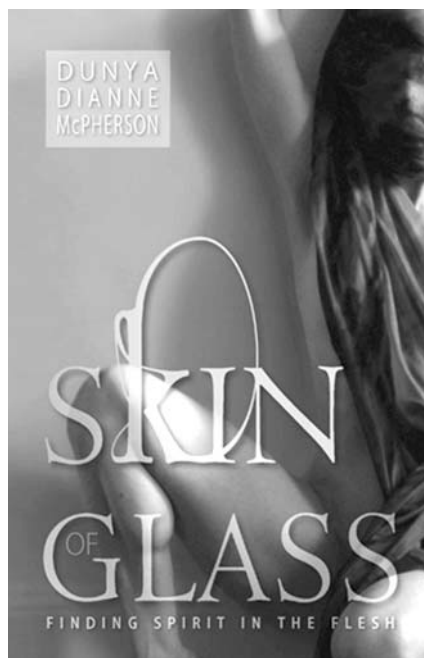
Reviewed by Mary Bond, Certified Advanced Rolfer™

The spiritual facet of structural integration is no secret, and yet, following Dr. Rolf's example, we practitioners seldom go public with the glimmering, mysterious folds of our work – how it cleanses our histories, frees us to explore our very nubs and helps us to embrace, though our bodily selves, our peri-physical being.

Dunya Dianne McPherson, dancer, choreographer, Sufi teacher, filmmaker and writer, shares a somatic journey that parallels our own paths as healers. Her memoir, *Skin of Glass: Finding Spirit in the Flesh* (Dancemeditation Books, 2008), recounts in graceful, evocative language her somatic journey to the center of self. She writes in a language of embodiment, her phrases flowing and rhythmic, rich with sensual imagery. The book is a resource not only for structural integration practitioners, but also for those clients who find themselves alone in their somatic travels. For them, McPherson's text may well become a beloved friend and guide.

In Part One, "Formation," the author tracks her body memories, from childhood's barefoot dancing on Cape Cod, through a grueling dance career in the dance mecca of New York City, and on into a seventeen-year apprenticeship with an Iraqi Sufi master. Through these diverse settings runs the common theme of the inferior and correctible Feminine. We see this in the sexual roles of her parents, in the role of dancer as instrument, and in the submission of spiritual seeker to guru.

We witness McPherson's disembodiment as she cruelly forges her body to the will of her art. At Juilliard she takes class with Nureyev, survives for years on a diet of *sashimi* and caffeine, and plunges into therapy when the depression becomes



unmanageable. In a turn of events that will ring true to many Rolfers, the inevitable debilitating injury precipitates the descent that drives the dancer onto a path of transformation, a path on which dance becomes prayer and passage to the Divine.

The experience of energetic transmission through which a Sufi student imbibes the teachings from a master takes up the balance of the opening section of McPherson's story. With her, we experience the sublime and the mundane, ascent and descent, empowerment and humiliation, until, no longer requiring a Teacher, McPherson sets out on her path alone.

The second part of McPherson's book, "Sensation," shares her daily Dance Meditation practice of an hour or more in which her body is the mandala and movement is the means of retrieving and integrating dormant aspects of self. In

sections titled "Legs and Crotch," "Spine," "Ovary" and "Skin", we are privy to intimate revelations that echo archetypal feminine experience, "the collective sorrow of women." Her body now the teacher, she seamlessly shifts between sensation and memory, past and present, thought and flesh, eroticism and spirituality. Movement becomes spiritual calligraphy, a divine statement that offers a glimpse of what it is like to live in full sentience. If we let them, McPherson's words seep into our cells, transmitting something of a finer reality, and the possibility of a fully embodied life.

I must admit that I read this book twice before I "got" it. During the first reading, I felt the prose overly literary. I'm a lover of simple sentences. But I was wrong. When McPherson's language becomes ornate, it is with conscious intent. Because she is a Sufi teacher, her presence – through her words – has the capacity to ignite new consciousness in receptive readers. My initial resistance to the book was just that – resistance – the stubborn kind that rises up to block release. Each reader's process with *Skin of Glass* will be unique. For me, once I let go, it produced a deepening sense of the co-rhythms between myself and the natural world, a reduction of separateness.

In the third and concluding part of her memoir, "Circulation," McPherson brings us into the circle of her Dance Meditation students. In a passage that will resonate with anyone who has ever tried to teach our work, she speaks of the fine distinction between "concentration, which involves effort, and Absorption, the state of being effortlessly concentrated." She artfully conveys the rhythms of a class, and the necessity to track the life of a group like a roaming animal. About being a teacher she writes:

I've been a Sufi teacher for almost twenty years. I undo, uncover, remove, kindle, erase and rouse, a contrast to my early teaching years when I ladled steps, repertoire and concepts into the eager bodies of young dancers-to-be. Then, leaning against a steady rock of information, which endowed me with institutional weightiness, I watched them scrutinize themselves in the mirror, tweaking their sinews as I had done years before. Now, I close my eyes, always looking at emptiness, and students follow me as I move and breathe, drawing us into the simplicity

of moving and breathing. I settle into a flow of focus. My student's wild non-realities eddy around me. I respect them by trying not to believe what they imagine me to be, a difficult task since I was once mostly a reflection of others. Every so often a recurring anxiety invades my steady now-ness. Perhaps my students, wanting something for their money, aren't so sure why they pay me for providing an expensive Nothing. I haven't much to say in defense of this

exchange except that Nothing is hard to come by.

Seasoned practitioners of structural integration will agree that there is more to our work than technical and scientific mastery, that there is an aspect of Rolfing® which we accept as mystery. Whether we seek to understand mystery through Buddhist practice, Continuum movement or biodynamic work, or whether mystery simply invades us, the states McPherson describes will be familiar to those who have

already approached them, and inspiring to those who have not.

More information about McPherson's work is found at www.dancemeditation.org.

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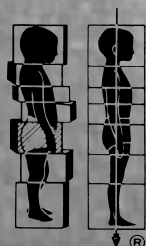
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