

# A Conversation on Compassion With Valerie Cherrin

## Transcript of Valerie Cherrin on the Healing Power of Dance

### *Introduction*

Hello! This is *Conversations on Compassion* by the University of Arizona's Center for Compassion Studies. I'm Leslie Langbert. It's good to have you here! Welcome back if you've been a listener before, and if you are joining for the first time, so glad that you're here listening.

I have a question for you: how do you feel about dance? Yourself...how do you feel about dancing? Yeah, if you're like me, it's probably not your favorite thing... maybe not something that feels really comfortable to do with a group of people. But I'm here to offer conversation today that might change your mind about that.

And if you're a person who loves to dance and when I asked that question you said, 'oh my gosh I love it! It's my favorite thing! Where can I get more?', then you'll *really* enjoy this conversation.

I'm talking today with Valerie Cherrin. She is a certified instructor of **OpenFloor** dance. It is a contemplative dance movement and it's relatively new.

There are many, many different ways for us to engage with contemplative practices, practices that help us to know ourselves better and to learn how to relate with ourselves and other people in better ways. OpenFloor is one of those ways. It's a transformative practice. A truly embodied practice that helps us to see aspects about ourselves that we may not have been aware of before. To help affirm things that perhaps we really like, and maybe to help us work through some things that we'd like to move along from. Valerie and I talk about OpenFloor, how it came about, how she got drawn to it, and where you can find an OpenFloor community. If you're joining us from Tucson, we are really fortunate that we have three certified OpenFloor instructors in our community, and there are ways for you to join the dance. I will start by giving you a place to find more information. You can check them out at: **DanceMoveConnect**. Thanks for listening, please enjoy.

*Music...*

**Valerie:** YAY!!

**Leslie:** How are you on this Wednesday?

**Valerie:** I'm doing well. I'm excited to have this opportunity to start sharing about OpenFloor! Especially with you since you have some experience with it, and just to practice becoming more articulate about it because it's such a little known thing... so it's like I try to explain it to people in my life and it's often met with silence and sort of a stunned look of 'what?', a look of incomprehension a little bit. So, it takes a while to explain because it's new for most people. So, I love the opportunity to have like an hour-long conversation where we can just be in the inquiry of 'what is it?', because I'm still discovering what it is.

**Leslie:** Yeah, I'm so excited too. It's so true... I know when I first heard about OpenFloor, from mutual friends of ours, and I hadn't yet met you, and they were telling me how incredible it is and how it's this wonderful practice that really helps you on this deeper level to know yourself and to be in community with others, and I think because I wasn't really clear about what it was like, on the inside I was kind of like... 'I'm good with my yoga practice and my meditation practice.' *laughs*

**Valerie:** Yeah

**Leslie:** But then I stepped into it, and like immediately got it, which is a huge reason why I wanted to have a conversation about it, because it is exactly so powerful- that embodied practice. So yeah, let's just start with what is OpenFloor? I know people are certified to facilitate this form of dance around the world. So let's just kinda start with, what is it?

**Valerie:** Yeah, it's a good question, and I'll start by saying that it's a new practice. It's an old practice and it's a new practice. It's a moving meditation. That's the short and simple version. It's a practice which emotionally resources people to become more able to hold capacity for life, in relationship. Right, so when we practice on the dance floor, we can go off the dance floor and have more capacity to deal with upsets. To deal with what's not working in our life. To look at things more objectively and then work with them with our conscious minds. So it is a meditation in that way. It's including mindfulness. But it's doing so in relationship and it's doing so in movement. So that piece is sort of new.

It's such a dense practice.



**Leslie:** Right. In terms of how it unfolds. What is taking place in an Open Floor class? What happens when someone comes into that room, what can they expect? Do they need to know how to dance? What is the requirement?

**Valerie:** Yeah. Right. So like a first timer's guide, right? So, like, I don't know what Open Floor practice is, but I just want to go check it out, right? So, for people who want to do that, there's actually a guide to refer to on the Open Floor website for first timers, which I think is really a useful place. But I can say some of what's on there, and that is, there's no steps to learn, first of all. So, it's a completely open space for people to come and just to explore what's alive inside of them through movement. So, a lot of times, if we were to walk into a room of people at a party, a lot of times, we would engage through words. So, this is engaging in the field through movement. So, the invitation is to go into our bodies and be creative about what's going on inside us and let that move us. So, it's an internally-oriented practice.

There is music, but the music is simply a guide and a friend. It's not...we ask people to even drop the music if it doesn't work. Like, don't worry about that, worry about what...or be focused and attentive to what's happening inside of ourselves.

So, there's usually a period...the way we do our classes- Lynn Fleischman, Rebecca Patterson-Markowitz-and myself, we're all OpenFloor teachers and we have a Tuesday night class in Tucson. So we have somewhat of a pattern for what we offer. We invite people to come in and just warm up for a little while.

And then we usually have a theme that we're working with. So the theme will be something that's in the realm of... it could be emotionally related. How do we...how do we interact in relationship with another? It could be thought related, right? How do we change certain thoughts or notice what thoughts are running us?

Or the theme could be spiritual, right? It could be, how do we connect to spirit? What does that feel like in our bodies? What does that look like through our movement? And it could be physical. It could be looking at literally creating new movement vocabulary. So there's lots of potential - infinite potential for themes.

So we'll have a warm up period. Then we have a time in which we gather and talk about what it is we're working with and then we practice that. We practice it in relationship to ourselves. We practice it in relationship to others. To the group and to our connection to spirit.

So it's... there's a weaving of a four by four. Alright... it's a foundational practice. But when I say four by four, I'm talking about body, mind, heart and soul woven into relationship with self, others, group and spirit. So it's... that's the foundation of OpenFloor.

**Leslie:** You know, I know for myself... stepping into it and still being pretty new to it, a couple of things that I *really* love about it- I'm the person that's not really comfortable on the dance floor. Like, you know I step in and I feel like I probably look like Elaine Benes on Seinfeld (*laughs*), and so to come in and just have that space that is so welcoming, just as you are bringing your whole self into the space, not needing to feel that there's a need to perform, or look or be a certain way and you're just in the space with others and the intentional piece of not using vocalization.

So just, you know, you're in the company of others- that feels supportive- just in movement, is incredible. So it's nothing else that I've experienced, even in yoga classes, where we're not talking with each other but it's a completely different experience.

It is difficult to describe, but I say this because I was really nervous and kind of reluctant cause I thought, oh, you know, people that are drawn to this are probably these beautiful beings that have been trained in dance or they're really comfortable with dance, and I'm not, even though I'm comfortable on a yoga mat because there's very specific direction- it's about, you know, put your foot here bring your arm here, you know, and to kind of have that left open is... it's powerful. Right?

**Valerie:** Yeah. Yeah. Yes, so thank you for saying that and bringing it back to the experience for somebody who might think they need to be a particular way in order to come on the to dance floor. One of the basic tenets of OpenFloor is 'move and include'. So anything that comes up is okay. Right? Like anything that comes up, we include that in our movement. There is no right way to be there.

Now of course the facilitator is there to hold safe space, to like, to hold a place that's safe for people. So, we're not going to let violence happen or think- you know- we're gonna contain it in such a way that it feels somewhat directed.

However, the space is available for us to notice what comes up, right? With the seated meditation, many people are familiar with seated meditation practice, and the invitation is to come back to our breath. Quite often. Right, to come back to, then we got distracted, we go away, we create a fantasy world, and then we remind ourselves to come back to our breath.

So this is similar in the sense that we're inviting people to come back to movement and to find movement that we can drop into and to just find steady resourceful movements for ourselves that we can just have hold us. Especially for the first time, right, to come into those, the place of the body, to anchor us, to anchor us in our present moment.

**Leslie:** Just really, yeah, to feel it from the head into the full embodied state. To know nothing but what we're feeling in the body. What we're feeling emotionally, what's arising in our thoughts and being able to...rather than sit in stillness with that and allow that to move through, we're actually able to use the movement of our bodies to help move it along or allow it to pass through and allow whatever is coming up.

I want to come back to what you said about- really as a facilitator- holding the space and creating a container. And you are so skillful with that. There's- I'm just amazed at how many skills go into facilitating an Open Floor class. I mean, not only do you clearly have this deep training in contemplative practice in being able to read the room, and you know, work with the theme that you've created, but actually meet every one in the space with that. And these incredible DJ skills that you have too, that you bring to it, and the way that you facilitate it where it's just everyone has time to kind of move in their own way, but then there's exercises where you bring people together.

So tell me about how you became certified in Open Floor, I mean, I just- having been to a class, I can really tell this is a really deep, skillful process. Tell me more about that. I don't think we've ever talked about that.

**Valerie:** Yeah...so, the training is fairly new. They called...I was in the first round of people that our founders trained, and they call us the first pancake because we were, you know... it's got some lumps and it's not always cooked evenly on both sides- you know it's like that, right? So there's a process and hopefully the second pancake is a little bit more even.

So, the facilitator training requires, um... I don't remember the number of hours, I think it's a hundred, maybe it's even two hundred hours, of accommodation of meditation, or other movement practices. So that could be yoga, it could be 5Rhythms, it could be Soul Motion, it could be Nia- and then we apply for that and then there's modules that you go through. There's three of them and they're ten days each. And that can be done expeditiously in about fourteen months or it could be extended to about two years.

There's currently trainings going on in Australia, New Zealand, North America and Europe. So they're... the practice of becoming a teacher is trying out classes.

So we have these core movement resources, we have these things that are the foundations of our practice and we have to teach at least three classes on each of the core movement resources. And then we get feedback, we go through a mentorship program. So it's a...it's something that will probably change slightly over time, given that this was the first round, but this is the foundation for what it is. I don't know if that's what you're wanting to know, but that was it. Yeah.

**Leslie:** Who started this, how did this even come about?

**Valerie:** Right...so the founders are Andrea Juhan, Lori Saltzman, Cathy Altman and Vic Cooper, they're the core founding members. They were all heavily involved in student and teacher trainers for Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms. Um...so, our teacher Gabrielle died in 2012, and the four of them got together, having known each other through the 5Rhythms world for a long time, and said look we want to create something new, and this is what's come out of it.

So Open Floor is a result of their combined energies and efforts. You can look up details about them on the Open Floor website, which is [openfloor.org](http://openfloor.org), and it has bios of them. They're all incredible human beings and bring something different.

One of the things that really inspires me about their structure is that they use dynamic governance. So, the way that works is that there's twelve members that are founding members, from all over the world, people who were steeped in the movement practice, and they came together and they collectively started to create a curriculum. And so they create a curriculum, and they create our marketing, they create our library of resources for people who are trained in Open Floor. It's got a wide knowledge base, if you will.

So, it really walks its talk in that it's constantly being updated. There's constantly conversation about what should be included and how it should be woven into the curriculum, and it allows for a wide diversity of uses. So, it's not just one person saying- this is what it is- and then when they die there's a bunch of confusion about what we're doing with this. It's...it's, you know all the founding members at some point, when they die, there's going to be new information that comes in, there's going to be people who have been in this practice who get to have a voice about what it looks like. So it's

designed for a collective intelligence. So that's something that's really exciting to me.

**Leslie:** Yeah. Yeah, it's such an important piece, I think, for it to be an iterative process and really to have teachers all over the world to be able to inform, based on, what are we seeing in terms of how people are engaging with it, what's needed, how do we refine?

How did you become involved in this? I know that in your professional life you are incredibly skilled, both as a body worker- as a massage therapist- and a skilled teacher of people moving through massage therapy programs. So, embodied practice, I know it's been a big part of your life for a long time, but how did you come to Open Floor, what drew you in?

**Valerie:** (*Laughs*) It's a good question, it's something that I wonder about. I have a distinct memory of being about thirteen years old and I went my to first Grateful Dead show. And the reason I'm bringing this up is because there was a first time experience of seeing people move freely, right? That turned me on like nothing else- like I just went, 'oh my God these people are moving however they feel like!' Right, and that felt real, and then I started doing it.

At first it was like really awkward looking, and then I started doing it, and I was like-I just feel so good! Like there was a freedom in just being able to flail about, right, and look like a total idiot, and nobody cares, you know, which is very much what the space of Open Floor allows for. We need that time to just flail about, right, and just kinda find our way, and find what's moving through us, and how it wants to move.

So that was my introduction to free-style movement, and then as far as finding Open Floor goes, I remember in massage school, there was a guy named Robert Litman, he was a teacher and he had us do a two-day experience.

We had these giant sheets of paper, and we laid down on them and our friends would trace us- an outline of our body. Then we drew in the body, we drew in whenever we wanted to. We were given the opportunity to move to this piece of art, that was our body, in front of the group, and to pick music, if we wanted we could do it in silence. I had been...I had recently had three friends die in my life very young, in their twenties, and I was experiencing a lot of grief. I don't think I was aware how much grief I had moving through me. But...given the opportunity to draw those friends came to life in the art. I gave them each places on my body, as spirits for me, as angels, and then

when I danced, I realize that they were angels for me, that's how I considered them.

And my friend Scotty, he was very present for me, and I played the song *Angel* by Jimi Hendrix, and I danced to the song. And I just was able to have a space of being witnessed in my grief and in my connection to something that I couldn't see, or feel, or identify. I was twenty-two years old and I really had no reference for how to grieve, and it was so powerful. Both the witnessing and the moving, and the space- and I felt the power in that. Ever since then, I saw how much the body holds, and when we give a space to move what's inside of it, we can become conscious of what's there and be able to let that rise to the surface. So, I mean, I danced.

I went looking for OpenFloor with the Omega Institute years later, and I snuck into Gabrielle Roth's workshop. She was doing a professional workshop. She was doing 'Slow Dancing with Chaos', at Omega Institute, and I snuck in, and I totally was...I was like this is so cool! And I got what it was, and I started looking for 5Rhythms, and so I was going to do a 5Rhythms training for a long time, and then she died. And when OpenFloor came up, it was a clear 'yes' for me. Clearly, I went, 'Yeah that's-that's my training'.

**Leslie:** Yeah, there is an incredible power in moving the body, and as you said- getting to things that we may not know either how to access, we might not know they're there, we may not know what to do with some of the feelings that we have.

That's really resonant for me about how movement really supported you through the grieving process. 'Cause you're right, and I think in this...in our society- we don't really know. We don't know how to grieve. We don't know really how to be in community with it and I think many of us really struggle with how we're supposed to move through it in our in our own individual way.

Bringing movement into it, I think it's really powerful. And that taps into, for me, kind of this-you know- it's... As I mentioned, you know, I've spent a lot of years in yoga practice and have felt that OpenFloor has kind of created access or opened up some things that I may not have even gotten to in that practice, and...what do you think is around the way that conscious dance helps with that level of self-awareness and exploration that other forms of practice maybe can't get into as deeply or as quickly?

**Valerie:** Yeah, it's very different. I love yoga and have practiced it at different times as well. As well as Ahamkara and meditation.

I think the main two things that make OpenFloor different are, first of all it's done in a way that isn't directed. So whereas in yoga classes we are moving, but we're told where to place our feet, our hands, our breath. Right, it's very clear- you're doing this asana for this outcome.

In OpenFloor the direction is coming from within, so even though we have queuing through music, there's other people around us moving, the facilitator, the teacher, might be saying words of guidance- really, what the practices is, is to go from what's moving through us and what's alive in us, and to look at that, right?

So we could move, and I can be making very small movements, very subtle things with my hands, and that's all I'm doing, or I could be laying on the floor and really paying attention to innate movement, which is just breath, right, at the movement of cellular respiration. The movement of very subtle things that are going on that we don't even pay attention to on a regular basis. Our thoughts moving through us. Or it can be wildly expensive movement. So it vacillates, so it doesn't look any particular way- which is a unique thing.

The other piece, Leslie, I think is really interesting, is that it's all about relationship. We're relational beings. So as a moving meditation, OpenFloor really looks at how we are in relationship to other people, to groups. So many of us have challenges working in groups. Working with one other individual one-on-one. And bringing those relational discomforts, if you will, to the foreground and being able to look at them and go, 'Wow, I didn't realize I was so awkward with that'. And then giving opportunity to engage and disengage in a way that resources us, and that's very different because in most other meditation practices it's just us dealing with ourselves. It's a solo practice for the most part, or we're being guided through a solo practice.

**Leslie:** Yeah, I am really very very interested right now in doing some study around how we move contemplative practice from this place of just doing that work internally, to how we do it relationally. And I'm loving OpenFloor for that.

You know, I think when you come to the dance floor, there's that opportunity, right, it's just as you said- to see, you know- the way that you are in that space is really kind of a mirror for how you might be moving through the world at that point in time. And that shifts and changes, right, and we see how it changes when we're moving through the practice, which is really powerful.



One of the things that I found to be really incredible too, is that without speaking with others, what we're communicating non-verbally. People that I haven't had a verbal conversation with, you know, afterwards, when they've said, 'Oh, I noticed this', or some observation, and it's quite deep. And you know, sometimes things that I wasn't necessarily conscious of myself, but when I give it a little bit of consideration and contemplation, I'm like 'Wow, yes', I didn't realize I was just communicating that. But in a way that- it's not...I say this in a way, and I want to make clear that it's not in a way that felt unsafe or intimidating at all. It was really in a way of feeling like 'Wow, I've really just been seen by another person'. Which I think is really what all of us, as human beings, ultimately want, is to be seen, to be accepted, to be valued in community as we are.

And OpenFloor seems to be a way in which we can become better practiced at doing that, and at the same time, have this sense of play. I love the play, the movement. You know, I feel like a lot of our contemplative practices can feel so serious. They can feel very disciplined and Open Floor, to me, feels like it is this wonderful opportunity to let go of some of those sheaths, and just play. It's like when you facilitated a workshop, you know, that was all day, and I passed you on the floor and I said, 'Is this is real life? We're dancing all day?' *laughs*

**Valerie:** *laughs* Yeah, uh-huh. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think it's a... I remember Alan Watts's speech and he talks about, you know life is music, and we were supposed to dance and sing to it, you know? And that's...I think about that quite a bit when I'm dancing and moving. It's like how, what's my dance like right now? And it's an opportunity to observe, and man-there's so much variety.

I love how you say it shifts so much from day to day because I'll walk in, in the crappiest mood and just be like, 'Oh, I don't feel like doing this at all... *laughs* sooo don't wanna be here. So wanna just be, like you know, messing around on Facebook or back in my bed or something, you know, and then if I give myself to that, and give that a movement and just go, 'Yeah, okay. That's where you're at, move It'. And maybe that just looks like just dragging my feet around on the floor a little bit with my arms crossed, you know? And then if I really give myself to that, something new can arise. And then there's a space for me to go, 'Alright, I'm kinda done with that now, what's next?' *laughs* And something else just comes up, and I get to move *that*, and then there's the level of inspiration because, really the invitation is to look around and use our mirror neurons, use our empathy, use our creativity to inspire each other.

Knowing we're in relationship with everybody and everything in the room, and allowing ourselves to be inspired to move in a way that we might not have thought of.

I was at an OpenFloor-I'm traveling right now in Philadelphia-I was-I had an OpenFloor class with Martha Sharples last week and she had us do something called an open circle, which is a witnessing piece. People stand around the outside and as their moves, they come in, and we'll dance and then go back out and witness. And there was a woman-and I was kind in a place of like 'ahhh- I'm kinda done'- like I feel a little bit like sluggish and not really into it, but then something just pushed, something from inside of myself just said 'yes' to whatever was happening. I went in to move that, and there was another woman and our sides, our arms met, our hand met, we kind of slid into each other's resonance and we begin to do this thing that happens so often in these conscious dance practices, we went into a place of resonating near-a limbic resonance is what arises. Like, it's a sense of our fields, and our emotional center started to merge and we started to move together in relationship to each other, and that relationship changed everything. It-like my emotional brain went into an expensive place and I was- I felt lighter. And in that lightning both of us got the sense of ease in our movement and it just transformed both of us. We just stayed with it. We stayed with it until it was done and then we went back out.

But that's the experience. So often is it's like...we get to give ourselves to the dance or to a relationship with another person and forget about whatever else is going on, or just letting it pass- it's not even forgetting about it. It's just letting that come up and then fall away.

And the other thing, in fact-yeah. Well...it's just it's such a fundamental piece for me because I remember when I first started dancing 5Rhythms and the instructor would cue us to partner, and I hated partnering. It was like 'nooooo', because in my mind that meant I was no longer free to do what I wanted to do.

It took me quite a while to figure out that was just my thought, that wasn't true, at all, and that not everybody thinks that. But that was my conditioning coming up, right, that was my co-dependency if you will. That was my conditioning of like, 'Oh now I'm gonna be in relationship with this person, and I'm kinda confined', I like my freedom, you know? It felt awkward, I have to do what they have to do, you know, how am I gonna... and I think it's something a lot of people confront in partnering, is there's a fear of...everything about being in a one-on-one relationship just comes right up.

And that's a cueing from our limbic system, from our cerebral, you know, from our hind brain, from our conditioning about our thoughts. But once I got that was mine, that it wasn't real, I got an opportunity to go past that and go, 'Oh let me play with just doing my own dance', and then I realized that was actually okay. *Laughs*. I think it saves a lot of my relationships off the dance floor. Right, this practice, because I got that like, oh it's okay for me to, like, do what is alive inside of me and still be in relationship to what they're doing.

**Leslie:** Yeah. That's such a powerful insight and a great example of how just being in this practice, you know, can open up really quickly and take us to, you know, some really deep places of self-awareness.

I loved what you were describing too about being with this stranger, really, in this most recent practice, and how your dance together it was so resonant. Because to me it speaks to part of our process of being able to cultivate authentic compassion for others. We're usually kind of naturally just sort of restrictive with our feelings of compassion as they arise. You know if I'm close to you, if I feel comfortable with you, if I identify with you, then that's really available, but it's work to have that vulnerability, to be in space with another and to really resonate with what the other person is feeling and experiencing, which is really the crux of how we cultivate compassion for those beyond our immediate group.

This is a really, really powerful practice on a lot of levels and I'm really excited that it's-that we have it here in Tucson. I know that there are certified instructors all over the world.

So for those that are listening, if you are in Tucson, there are three weekly Open Floor opportunities. The local website here with the schedule is: [\*\*dancemoveconnect\*\*](#), with dances on Tuesday evening, Friday evening, and Sunday morning. Are there are others that I am missing?

**Valerie:** So our OpenFloor classes are only on Tuesday nights from 6:00-7:30 at Dunbar Spring Pavilion, and people can find out about that through OpenFloor Tucson on Facebook.

Dance Move Connect is the larger umbrella of dance, and we have Freestyle Fridays, which is 7:30-9:00 on Fridays, and that's at the Old Pueblo Dance Center. It's near 1st and Ft. Lowell.

And then Sunday mornings, from 10:30-12:30 at the Old Pueblo Dance Center, and that is also a freestyle dance.



Yeah. So, Sandra and Michael Morse started that about four years ago, and they have grown this beautiful loving community, as you know. So definitely a great way to get involved is to go to one of...if the class seems to intimidating or too much- going to a larger dance- I actually recommend going to a class first and then getting resources to go to a freestyle dance, so that when you go in, you're more available for what's happening.

**Leslie:** So Valerie, let's talk a little bit about how the movement, how the dance, how this embodied practice, actually supports us on a physiological and an emotional level.

**Valerie:** So, Stephen Porges talks about the vagal nervous system and Polyvagal Theory, and if that's too heady, there's so much research. I am not a neuroscientist by any means, but there's this social engagement system, which helps us to modulate and even calm our arousal in social situations. It is something that is developed to have us be able to be excited or emotionally engaged and then to, at the same time, bring our mindfulness or our pre-frontal cortex into the conversation so that we're able to stay with a conversation or a connection even if we're getting emotionally charged during it. And this is a practice to stay with our...without getting defensive, without doing fight or flight- which are normal responses, or freeze- but to be able to stay active and present. And this is a practice.

So one of the reason why mindfulness practices, and doing this through OpenFloor in relationship we get to be with other people and watch the emotional charge come up. Watch the thoughts around that come up and practice including that in the conversation and staying with it anyway.

Yeah, I mean, Willis Cozzolino, he says relationships are our natural habitat. So practicing being in relationship and staying with it, no matter what comes up, and staying present with ourselves so that we can respond instead of react is a huge part of what we're doing in Open Floor. Which is why it's a compassion practice. It's a place where we can have those harder conversations and still stay with ourselves and still stay with the other simultaneously.

**Leslie:** Stephen Porges and Polyvagal Theory, full disclosure I'm not a neuroscientist either, I saw him speak at Stanford a couple of years ago, and Chuck Raison, our Center's founding faculty director- he's a brilliant psychiatrist- and he said 'Oh Stephen Porges, he's my hero!'

Polyvagal Theory, yes, it's part of what really blew me away when I heard him speak and I think this really makes so much sense about the



movement. Our vagus nerve, which is connected at the base of our brain and sort of snakes all the way down to connect at the pelvis. He found that there are three different points along the vagus nerve that when they are innervated or activated, through particular movements or chanting, that it actually helps to strengthen. So, vagal tone, I guess, OpenFloor is a way for us to strengthen vagal tone. Which is so, so powerful, as you said in terms of being able to hold space, compassionate space, for ourselves and for others.

You know we have to, we have to have the ability to strengthen our nervous systems so that we can handle the discomfort that arises when we begin to explore our own emotional states, our own thought states, and certainly to be able to be present with others and to be present with others in times of difficulty or threat. And threat meaning, just what you were referencing earlier, around, you know, patterning of thoughts. I don't mean actual legitimate physical threat, that's a completely different scenario. So often we have these patterns of thought that that feel like threat, that aren't and so creating vagal tone is a way for us to unpack that, dismantle that a little bit and be with- be with the full range of experience. So amazing.

**Valerie:** I love that- the three places. I didn't know that. Do you know what three places of engagement are?

**Leslie:** There's... there's three different points along the vagus nerve and when I heard him speak at Stanford-you know this was my first time hearing this- and I just...at this point been engaged in seated meditation and asana practice for years, and you know, just had this sense of how asana is really transformative and I haven't really studied the science of why that is. It had emerged a lot in the texts and some of the more, I guess, esoteric learnings. But he's making his presentation and he's talking about how they studied monks and yogis and found that through chanting and the movement of the jaw and what's happening with the residence of the sounds that actually resonates some part of vagus nerve that brings us into para sympathetic. So, our rest and repair, part of our autonomic nervous system. And that's also innervated when we are engaged in certain movements. So there's asana practices that actually innervate that part of the nerve. And that for Muslims, for example, the kneeling and even the prostration in prayer does that as well. It was mind blowing.

**Valerie:** It makes me wonder about the bandhas, you know in yoga, the bandhas you know. So there's the root lock, the diaphragmatic or the solar plexus lock, and then the throat lock. I wonder if those three places correspond to the vagal systems enervation, the places where, when we

engage there, that makes a difference in helping us regulate between our sympathetic and para-sympathetic.

**Leslie:** Exactly. His work is so powerful. I am not well studied in it, but yes, it made so much sense to me. It felt it like a light bulb went on as to, you know, so as you know, we know we know through our lived experiences, right, that these things are powerful in ways that...in some way. We know it's not magic, but it's, you know, it's really amazing to see how scientists are making these connections around how...and it really reinforces, I think, how important it is for us to bring practices in that are embodied, that-you know- it's wonderful for us to have our traditional seated meditation practices. I teach those and I find them valuable. But I also know that, that my teacher- that I've learned from- I know that's not the extent of his practices. I know that there is a whole movement-these practices involved in his daily practices as well.

And I love that this is...OpenFloor is a wonderful way to explore without feeling that you're coming in to a discipline with a lineage to follow and rules. It's a really wonderful way to show up, as you are, with other people coming in as they are, in a safe and supportive environment to explore, to be with, and it's hard to describe- it has to be experienced.

**Valerie:** And to go from- one of the continuums we work with is going from shadow to possibility. Going from our habit to our choice, so finding what habits are engrained. I'm reading this book, *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself*, and it talks about the neuro-emotional physiological components of habits and conditioning. And if it were just changing our thought, that doesn't really work, if we're just changing our thought, our emotions it doesn't really work. We need to engage both with the body and the mind and the emotions all at once. And that's one of the opportunities that a moving meditation provides, is that you're working on several levels at once and it can be a more powerful access to doing something different. It's shaping us differently.

**Leslie:** Absolutely. Yea, that's a great, great idea. They're both amazing experiences. Valerie, this, as always, is so wonderful to be in conversation with you. I'm so grateful to have found you and have found this practice. I hope that folks that are listening come and explore it, if you haven't already. Because it is a really profound way to get to know yourself but also to really feel a strong sense of connectedness and community with others, and we need it right now especially.

**Valerie.** We do. Yeah, thank you for the opportunity Leslie. It's a very deep rich practice and I'm learning a lot from it every time I step on the dance floor.

**Leslie:** Thank you so much dear one...

**Valerie:** Yeah. Thank you.

*Music*

**Leslie:** Well, there we are friends. Thanks so much for joining Valerie and I in that conversation about conscious dance and our little process of what I call lay person geeking out on neuroscience therapy. And for those of you who are much more studied with that, I'd love to hear from you if you'd like to drop me a line. I hope that you come away from this curious about OpenFloor, curious about ways in which we can come into our bodies more fully, as a way to help access our hearts on a deeper level. I was talking with some friends recently about the experience of OpenFloor and I was so struck by the feeling of, that in that hour and a half that we're all together on the floor, everyone is free.

If you're in the Tucson community with us check out the schedule for dance at [dancemoveconnect.com](http://dancemoveconnect.com). There are three dances each week and everyone is welcome. If you are outside of Tucson and you are really interested in OpenFloor, check out OpenFloor online for a list of certified instructors in your area. There are instructors all over the world.

*Credits:*

Thanks for listening. We'll chat with you next time. To learn more about the Center for Compassion Studies visit us online at [compassioncenter.arizona.edu](http://compassioncenter.arizona.edu). This has been another episode of the University of Arizona Center for Compassion Studies 'Conversations on Compassion'. This has been produced by Garry Forger. Our sound engineer is Gary Darnell. Music produced by Gary Darnell and the incredible team at the University of Arizona Office of instruction and Assessment. This is Leslie Langbert with the Center for Compassion Studies. Thanks for listening.