



# THE BTS CENTER

[leadershipcommons@thebtscenter.org](mailto:leadershipcommons@thebtscenter.org)  
[thebtscenter.org](http://thebtscenter.org)

## Exercises for Embodied Practice and Play

Compiled and Introduced by Madeline Bugeau-Heartt

“...playing illumines how human beings anticipate, receive, participate in, and respond to everyday experiences of awakening to divine and other truths...playing opens up conversation for ‘leaning into’ God’s new Creation.”

-Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing*

The BTS Center recognizes the need for new ways of thinking, being, and processing in this climate-changed world. Or perhaps, the need to *return* to the embodied and playful wisdom we all possess. We can return to our bodies — these vessels that in today’s age are so often forgotten, cast aside. We can return to each other in a spirit of movement, creativity, and kinship. We encourage “play,” not as some frivolity, but as joyous expression to engage in together, unencumbered by a specified outcome in mind.

No matter the context in which you implement these thirteen stand-alone or cumulative exercises, our hope is that the spirit of experimentation, curiosity, and release only enhances your relationship with your own body, with those around you, and with our world as it begs for us to find new ways of better being. Each page contains a brief description of the exercise, as well as step-by-step instructions. The first tier of blocks represent “easier” exercises, the top, more advanced. We hope that these practices offer small doors back into your most embodied, creative, and present selves amidst these uncertain times.

You are encouraged to use these exercises in any way you see fit, but here are a few suggestions: 1) you can book-end a workshop or a meeting with an exercise or two as icebreakers or closers (for example, open with “chest opening,” and end with “free dance”) 2) you can “choose your own adventure” by layering a few exercises onto one another (and even over the course of time) to see what emerges in the group 3) you can use these exercises with specific intent: to build trust and connection within a group, or to create new solutions with such exercises as “Making Dances” or “Compositions.”

However you choose to use these exercises of Embodied Play and Practice, it is always a good idea to gather in a circle after the group has finished and allow each individual to go around and speak to how they felt and what they experienced.

## The Exercises

**Exercises with modifiable movement levels will have this mark next to them: (+)**

- 1) You Choose, I Choose (+), The Hum (+), Free Dance (+)
- 2) The Open Chest (+)
- 3) Circle Run: (Five Images and Run to the Center)
- 4) Oldies but Goodies: Improv, Fishy-Fishy Cross My Ocean, Hide and Seek
- 5) Two Up, One Down
- 6) Partner Walks (+)
- 7) Flocking
- 8) Vocal Odes (+)
- 9) Statues
- 10) Embodied Communication (without words) (+)
- 11) Viewpoints Kinesthetic Response
- 12) Making Dances (+)
- 13) Compositions (+)

### Music Suggestions:

- 1) Penguin Cafe Orchestra (“Perpetuum Momentum” Song)
- 2) John Adams (“American Classics” Album)
- 3) Jonny Greenwood (“The Master” or “The Power of the Dog” Soundtracks)
- 4) Brian Eno (“The Big Ship” Song)
- 5) Sufjan Stevens (“The BQE” or “Convocations” Albums)
- 6) Philip Glass (“Glass: Complete String Quartets” Album)
- 7) Emile Mosseri (“Minari” or “The Last Black Man in San Francisco” Soundtracks)
- 8) Caroline Shaw (“Orange” Album)
- 9) Alice Coltrane (“World Spirituality Classics 1: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane” Album)
- 10) John Cage (“In a Landscape: Piano Music of John Cage” Album)

### References:

Bogart, Anne, and Tina Landau. *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition*. Distributed by Consortium Book Sales and Distribution, 2019.

Goto, Courtney T. *The Grace of Playing Pedagogies for Learning into God's New Creation*. Pickwick Publications, 2016.

Sokolov, Lisa. *Embodied Voicework: Beyond Singing*. Barcelona Publishers, 2020.

“Unlock the Wisdom of Your Body.” *InterPlay*, <https://interplay.org/>.

Wangh, Stephen. *An Acrobat of the Heart*. Vintage Books, 2000.

## The Exercises

### 1) WARMUPS

a) **You Choose, I Choose (+):** In a group, put on some music, and stand in a circle. Have one person at a time lead a movement that feels good in their own body as the rest of the group mirrors it. I might listen to my body and decide I need to roll down and up through my spine, or circle through my arms to release my shoulders. Someone else might take a quad stretch, another — a couple of jumping jacks. Go one at a time until everyone has initiated a movement and the body feels warm.

b) **The Hum (+):** This is a gentle exercise about listening. Each person goes to a part of the room that feels good to them and takes whatever position is comfortable (sitting, lying down, standing). Each person, in their own time and space, will begin to hum. Try to find where the hum lives in your body using your own hand. It might start in the throat or the chest. Very slowly, move your hand to a different place on your body, and see if you can move the vibration to that spot. This takes deep listening to what is occurring within yourself. A good duration for this exercise might be 10 minutes.

c) **Free Dance (+):** is the best! Turn on some “emotional” music (see list of music suggestions if you’re having trouble) and encourage people to move expressively for the duration of the song. The key to this exercise is to be in space together, without infiltrating each other’s space. We are not watching others dance, we are dancing in our own expression to the same song with each other in the same space. I’ve found this exercise most successful when there’s a little “mood” lighting: if it’s safe, I might dim the lighting in the space, or put a blue bulb in the lamp. This, and the music, provides a heightened state which allows people to step out of any self-consciousness and lose themselves in their bodies and the music.

## 2) THE OPEN CHEST (+)

This is an exercise from the book *An Acrobat of the Heart* by Stephen Wangh, and is inspired by the work of Jerzy Grotowski. It is a gentle, intimate exercise for the self: to tap into the subtlety of the body and the connection between shape and the imagination.

*How to Play:* Allow folks in the group to find their own space in the space. Offer these instructions one at a time for them to feel their way into, with ample pauses in between instructions. No need to rush anyone! At the end of the exercise, return back to the group. Each person says one word they are feeling or to express their experience.

a) Center yourself with your weight evenly distributed left and right, forward and back. Let your head rise up gently from the back of the skull. Breathe easily. Relax the jaw. Relax the facial muscles. Let the shoulders go. Relax the pelvic muscles so that the pelvis is not held back or forward. The knees are not locked.

b) Allow the arms to open and lift forward a few inches. Keep the wrists and the elbows relaxed. Let the arms reach, slowly and gently, as if opening to the sky, as if feeling the sunlight or the rain coming to you, as if you were receiving a gift. Allow your gaze to be directed out and slightly upward. Relax across the face. Let your eyes relax so that they have peripheral vision. Breathe. Feel your chest open. Let your chest and your heart relax and open. Let yourself feel what you are feeling. Just feel it.

c) Let your arms reach out, but gently, without extra effort. Gently explore slightly varied angles for the elbows, the wrists, the hands.

d) Now reach out further, as if grasping for an image that is constantly receding into the distance. What or who is there?

e) Often sound makes an effective entree into the feelings of sadness or longing we have long locked away. Try vocalizing whatever feelings are arising without using words.

f) Trust what you find. Be careful not to divert your eyes. If the image seems to recede from you, reach out further to it. Keep checking that you have not tightened your jaw, that your head is still floating up, that your pelvis is relaxed.

g) Find a natural end to whatever sounds you are making. Let the arms gently fall by the sides. Take a moment to stand with the eyes closed, allowing whatever images rise to the surface.

\*\*\*

*A little historical context! A brief video on Jerzy Grotowski, who first created this exercise.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIUMyPLzkDg>

### 3) CIRCLE RUN (Five Images and Run to the Center)

As noted in the title of this exercise, this might not be the best exercise for those who are unable to run. Certainly walking is an option too. This exercise comes from *The Viewpoints Book* written by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau. This will work best if a facilitator steps out of the group to “lead” and offer gentle direction as the steps build. I would suggest that the group engage with the five images portion of the exercise, take a break in which the facilitator explains the Run to the Center portion, then commence with that.

*How to Play:* While running in place, still in a circle, introduce a series of five images (see list below), one at a time. The participants should try to visualize each image as fully as possible in their bodies. Finally, all five images should be experienced simultaneously.

- 1) Imagine a beautiful golden band around your head pulling gently upward.
- 2) Use soft focus. (Soft focus is the physical state in which we allow the eyes to soften and relax so that, rather than looking at one or two things in sharp focus, they can now take in many.)
- 3) Loosen your arms and shoulders.
- 4) Imagine that your legs are strong and muscular and that your bare feet are accustomed to walking in the soil. Feel the sense of descent into the ground.
- 5) Place your hands on your heart. Find the beating of the heart. Extend the arms outward and imagine working with an open heart.

Repeat these instructions so that all five images are present at the same time (the fifth image can now exist without touching the heart of gesturing outward.)

This exercise is a reminder that the body forms a line between heaven and earth, a line that unites the two. Encourage the participants to return to these images whenever they become exhausted or confused.

*Run to the Center:* Form a wide circle facing inwards and begin running in place. One person can at any moment initiate a run into the center of the space. In the split second of initiation, everyone should run toward the center together in a way that someone watching would not be able to tell who initiated. After everyone has run to the center, everyone should run backward to establish the wide circumference of the circle. After some repetition of this exercise, each participant will experience firsthand that anything can happen at any time and that one needs to be completely present in the moment, ready to move in response to stimuli. Repeat this exercise until the group is successfully communicating moment to moment.

\*\*\*

*Here is a short example of “Run to the Center.”*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9J1J6J1iBDo>

#### 4) OLDIES BUT GOODIES

These throwbacks are just for fun! In a world that is frightening and filled with grief, remembering to have fun and releasing your inhibitions is something we mustn't forget.

a) **Fishy-Fishy-Cross My Ocean:** I used this game several times with seven adults I was working with to develop a play. We did this in a large gymnasium but outside would definitely work too, though you'd need to set up some perimeters. It's essentially tag, but with a fun, oceanic twist.

*How to Play:* One person is "The Shark," — the tagger. Everyone else lines up on one end of the space. The tagger says "Fishy, Fishy, Cross My Ocean" and everyone must run to the other side of the space. If you are tagged by the shark, you can either turn into a piece of seaweed — a solitary position where you may lean to tag anyone else — or a crab where you have more range of movement, but can only move backwards, on all fours, in an upside-down table top position. Once you're tagged and have made your choice of either seaweed or crab, you assist the shark tagging fish until everyone is caught. Those who are still being chased run from one end to the other with the shark's prompt "fishy, fishy cross my ocean!"

b) **Hide-And-Seek:** The original oldie-but-a goodie. One seeker, everyone else hides and must be found by the seeker. A variation I've enjoyed is Sardines: Where one person hides and everyone else seeks them. Once you find the hider you must hide with them. It's the reverse of hide- and-go-seek essentially. This can be played indoors or outdoors. It always gives a little thrill to do this at night or in the dark with flashlights.

c) **Freeze Improv:** I always like to think of improvisation as throwback make believe. This is cliched, but the basic rule of improv is to engage in whatever made up scenario is presented with a "Yes, and" attitude. For example, if someone starts the improv with: "Oh my! The boat's sinking!" You would not deny this reality by saying: "No. We're on an airplane." Instead, jump in! "Grab the oars!" "There's a lifeboat just over there!" etc. etc.

*How to Play:* In this particular iteration two people go up and start a "scene." The group watches and lets this scene play out. When the moment feels apt, a person from the "audience" yells "Freeze!" At which point both improvisors freeze, and the audience member who called out the directive "taps in" for one of the improvisors and starts an entirely new "scene."

## 5) TWO UP, ONE DOWN

This is an exercise I first did whilst training with the Siti Company in NYC. It's a seemingly simple exercise, but also keeps you on your toes and keeps you connected to the hive-mind and larger kinesthetic energy of the group.

*How to Play:* The group works its way to the edges of the room in a large circle-shape. Three people must always be at the center of the space. Two standing, one crouched. These three people must always be moving. At any given point, anyone within the center, might leave the center, to join those on the periphery. There can never be more or less than three in the center, and so someone from the larger periphery must take their place, either standing or crouching. Where things get interesting is when two people try to jump in for the same spot, or none at all. The group must serve the larger "rule" of two folks up, one person down in the center and moving, and thus intuitively, willingly, and wordlessly, negotiate to make this happen.

## 6) PARTNER WALKS (+)

This is a beautiful and quiet exercise to build trust, to practice letting go, to accentuate our listening, and to encourage wonder in one another.

*How to Play:* The group will partner off into pairs of two. One person will play the “guide” first. Finding a quiet space, the guide will ask the follower, “will you trust me for this wander?” The follower responds, “I offer you my trust,” and then closes their eyes. The guide will take the follower’s hand and leads them on a walk, preferable around a neighborhood, or in a park (someplace outside,) but around the inside of a building is fine too. The guide will lead the follower to things of interest: a playground with children playing, to a tree with rough bark, to a spot of cool grass. The guide will “show” these things to the follower, who has their eyes closed the entire time. Minimal talking is good here, words are only to be used to convey safety (for example, “we are going down a couple stairs here.”) But mostly, the guide should lead by the hand. After about 15 minutes, switch.



## 7) FLOCKING

The “flocking” game allows us to move as a group, seamlessly and without any one leader. We become part of the whole, moving in synchronicity much like a flock of birds.

*How to Play:* The group will stand together, all facing the same direction. Each person should have enough room to move without touching another person. The individual at the “front” of the group begins to lead a full-body motion, and the rest of the group mirrors this movement simultaneously and as accurately as possible. Thus begins the flocking, with the group mirroring and following the movement of “the leader,” until the leader shifts direction. Once the direction shifts (thus shifting the group's line of vision) there is a new leader who begins their own movement to be followed. They lead until their movement shifts focus to another leader. “The object of the activity is for the group to look like they are moving as one. All movement should be improvised. This activity can be done with or without music.”

\*\*\*

*Here are two nice videos of “flocking:” The first is instructional, the second is inspiration for what’s possible!*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_7esQ08tGE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_7esQ08tGE)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnk6htWTbto>

## 8) VOCAL ODES (+)

It is so scary for so many of us to sing in public! But we are meant to sing: to express in a way that moves beyond what we can say with just words. Singing is a very pure form of play (who doesn't like to sing alone in the car?) and when we come together to lift our voices, we can learn so much about each other, and so much about how we ourselves are truly feeling. This exercise is taken from the great vocalist, Lisa Sokolov, and her book, *Embodied Voice Work: Beyond Singing*.

**How to Play:** The individuals within the group find whatever positions are comfortable for them: I like to do this exercise lying down, in a deep squat, or standing solidly on my own two feet. Any position where you feel grounded. It is best that everyone closes their eyes: this is a listening game, a game of bearing witness with hearts and minds instead of our eyes. One at a time, intuitively and spontaneously, each individual will sing an Ode to something that is inspiring to them. They will not use words, just sing an ode from their heart space. The group will listen in silence. After the singer is finished, they may title the piece with one word or phrase (i.e. "an ode to night," or "an ode for my daughter.") The group will not comment on this, only listen until the next person is ready to sing.

\*\*\*

*Lisa Sokolov is the artist who first taught me this exercise. Though this video does not show the exercise exactly, I think it gives a good sense of how she encouraged us to use our voice: the depth and dexterity and exploration you can explore in Odes.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kp0cjRm0SyE>

## 9) STATUES

This is a great exercise to build story from shape and also for seeing what organically arises when our bodies come together in space, without our intellectually planning anything. It's also a good kickoff game for imaginative generation. This variation of "statues" draws inspiration from *The Viewpoints Book* by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau.

*How to Play:* The group will stand in a large circle. One at a time, each person will run into the circle and hold a shape in their body. The next person will run into the circle and adds a shape to the first, creating a new shape out of both. Then a third person runs in, then a fourth, and so on and so on until everyone but the facilitator is contributing to the overall shape. The facilitator (this person can switch from round to round) will choose two to three people to remain in the center while everyone else steps out to observe. Ask the group what they see in this shape, what is strong in the shape? What stories immediately come to mind? Should you want to take this exercise further, a suggested story could be the start of an open improvisation between those in the center. Otherwise, the two or three will break shape when the group is finished conversing and return to the circle for the game to be repeated.

## 10) EMBODIED COMMUNICATION (Without Words) (+)

When I first experienced this exercise, it was in the woods with writer David Abram. One of the notes he gave us before we started was, “try not to laugh.” It’s going to be tempting! But if you try to maintain some reverence for the space and allow others to explore uninhibited, you’ll be amazed at what transpires: what you discover in yourself and the connection you can make beyond our quotidian norms of communicating.

*How to Play:* The group will form itself into a large circle, with room to move. Without planning or thinking about it, the first person to start will turn to the person next to them and begin communicating with body and voice but no words. Let this be expressive and creaturely and intuitive. Follow where the body and voice want to go. When the first person is finished expressing, the receiver will take a moment and then express a response in the “language” the first person has already established, with body and voice. When the receiver is finished, they will turn to the next person and communicate what they need to say (a new expression), and so on and so on....

\*\*\*

*David Abram gives a talk here about Animate Earth and Becoming Animal. This might be good fodder to deepen into the thinking behind this exercise....he has many other rich talks online as well.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUoH9gfUyNE>

## 11) VIEWPOINTS: Kinesthetic Response

This exercise is a little more advanced, but is such a joy in terms of moving with other bodies in space and developing keen attunement to the unexpected. This exercise is drawn from *The Viewpoints Book* by Tina Landau and Anne Bogart. Let us develop our listening.

The Viewpoints is a multi-layered exercise that takes a long time to master, however, we will focus on the point of awareness that is kinesthetic response for this exercise. What is a Kinesthetic Response? Kinesthetic Response is “a spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside of you; the timing in which you respond to the external events of movement or sound; the impulsive movement that occurs from a stimulation of the senses. An example: someone claps in front of your eyes and you blink in response; or someone slams a door and you impulsively stand up from your chair.”

*How to Play:* The group will work in lanes, equidistant, starting from one end of the space with a clear marker for the end of the space. Each person will remain inside their lane (ideally a length of about 20 feet or so) and is free to move back and forth in any part of their own lane. Each person will remain in tune to the other participants in other lanes. Bring in the awareness of kinesthetic response, then tell the group that they may “begin.” The options for movement are: stillness, changing direction, changing speed (walking, running), jumping, or dropping. An individual’s movement begins only in response to someone else’s movement. The movement must occur instantaneously and with full physical commitment. Let this exercise evolve for 15-20 minutes (it’s amazing to see what happens when we start to tire, how we begin to rely on our bodies more instead of the control of the mind.) Beware of a “stop-start” mentality that a group may collectively fall into. Truly listen, move on impulse, respond spontaneously.

\*\*\*

*This is a great video to look at the viewpoints and what kinesthetic response looks like. How you cannot tell who starts or begins a movement. How the group moves together. Though a different format than the exercise above, this kinesthetic awareness is very much in response to this.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiIHeQ8YU1M>

## 12) MAKING DANCES (+)

This is a really generative and collaborative exercise for a group. It moves through a step-by-step individual and group process removing enough control from ones hands so that what is made is organic and collaborative.

*How to Play:* Step 1: Each person makes a list of ten words or phrases. These can be organized thematically, depending on the group's needs. For example, a theme might be "Living in a Climate-Changed World." Each person will take about five minutes or so to create a list of five words or phrases pertaining to this theme (i.e. loss of biodiversity; anxiety; radical hope; storm walls, etc. etc.) Once the list of ten things is complete you will exchange your list with someone else.

Step 2: You should have someone else's list now. Each individual will find their own space in the room, in work for about 15-20 minutes to create 10 repeatable movements to coincide with the ten words. For loss of biodiversity, I might shiver down my spine until I hit the floor; for anxiety I might move my hands back and forth very quickly. Choose a different movement for each phrase or word. Each individual will practice putting these ten movements together into one long sequence. After everyone has taken time to do this, the group will reconvene.

Step 3. Put someone in charge of the music (the best music to use for this exercise is instrumental \*see list at the top of the page for suggestions\*) One at a time, each person will get up to "perform" their sequence three times through in front of their peers. Each "dance" should get a different song.

Step 4: Discuss what you saw as a group. What moved you? What stories emerged from these dances?

Note: You can skip the cerebral and come up with a prompt. You can make moves and string them together in whatever capacity you wish! For example: Make six shapes with your body in relation to the wall; print photos of bodies in interesting positions and put them into your own body; sequence them so you can run through them all-together and multiple times.

\*\*\*

*Dan Safer is an Amazing Choreographer and gives a fun talk here about his process. Throughout the video you can see a lot of clips of work that was built in such a layering process. Minute 22:30 is a particularly good example.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXsIWEuaaY0>

*This video seems to have been taken at an adult ed workshop and is a great example of how exciting this work can be for folks who are putting dance into a space not regularly used to choreography.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsF6eHuXmGQ>

## 13) COMPOSITIONS (+)

This was an exercise I learned whilst working with a theater company called The Team in NYC. It is another way to play and generate surprising material within a group. Like “Making Dances,” this is a step by step exercise that requires some time and thoughtful attentiveness from the group. Compositions are fully or partially realized explorations of a specific idea — they are a part of a larger map of theme. Compositions can do as little as establish a tone, an aesthetic, expand a moment, they can do as much as explore a character or a scene. They are bite size, imaginative, theatrical pieces.

*How to Play:*

1) Developing a Common Language: This embodied exercise begins with discussion. Perhaps you are discussing an issue within your organization or congregation, be it around a larger theme (for example, climate collapse or something more locally specific.) Encourage feelings, stories, and images to be lifted in this conversation. Each person should be making a quiet list of what resonates with them. It is important to remember that we are not trying to solve anything. We are just trying to come together authentically as a group. This discussion can last as long as it needs, perhaps 30 minutes to an hour. At the end of this, the group will come together to share lists about what resonated with them. What images stood out? What phrases? What ensuing inspirations emerged (“this made me think about...”)? A large list of these impressions should be made, preferably on a whiteboard or big sheet of paper so everyone can see. We are creating a common vocabulary.

2) Assignments: The group will pair off into twos or threes. Together, they will create an “assignment” for another group. These assignments should stem directly from the discussion you had; the common language you built. This will require some artistry and patience. The assignment might be to answer a question that was developed (such as “how would you spend your last minute on earth?” or “create an apocalyptic visage...”) along with some “ingredients” (3-5) in the form of moments: (a moment of burlesque, a moment of interruption, tears, feeding yourself, 30 seconds of chaos, etc.) Pick five of these “ingredients” to include for your assignment.

3) The groups will trade assignments and have 30 minutes to create a two minute to five minute “imaginative” piece based off of the “assignment.” They may incorporate song, dance, words, no words, props, ritual, or video. An important note: The “assignments” are kicking off points. The groups should feel free to “break the recipe or execute it like a Michelin star chef.” To do all of it or none of it.

4) The groups will reconvene and “perform” or offer their compositions to the rest of the group.

\*\*\*

*It is so hard to show an example of this particular process BUT here is a short, older clip of the devised piece Architecting by The Team who first introduced the concept of composition making*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKo6a3m\\_63Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKo6a3m_63Q)