

Personal expression: discovering the origins of creativity through Authentic Movement

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Abstract

This paper articulates the value of socio-therapeutic practice; in particular Authentic Movement to aid the stimulation of the body and mind, two components that are inextricably linked. This supports the theory of non-dualism, bringing an equal position to physicality and mentality.

The paper defines the history of this practice, whilst highlighting key practitioners that have influenced its development. The reference to existential phenomenology illustrates the contrast of the subjective and objective perceptions of the body. The ability to shift between an introverted and extroverted perspective is necessary to explore the unknown, whilst bringing relevance to this experience.

This investigation hones in on the effect external factors have upon expression, discussing the nature of sound, imagery and the environment to encourage or inhibit creativity. It is imperative to balance established literature alongside reflective analysis, in order to identify the true origin of movement.

Keywords: Authentic Movement, Non-dualism, Body Perspective, Expression, Holistic Practice, Body-mind Connection.

Somatic practice draws our awareness to the body-mind connection, whilst providing an opportunity to strengthen this rapport. Through the development of deeper body listening we learn to move in a manner that caters for our body's needs and demands, opposed to executing movement with an aesthetic intention. Adopting a holistic approach, integrating 'physical movement with feelings, emotions, personal images and spirit' (Halprin 2002, 20), allows us to develop our own unique style. This style can be clarified through relaxation techniques that heighten our awareness of the 'interconnections between all parts of the body' (Halprin 2002, 137). Once we understand this network of relationships within the body, it becomes easier to respond to impulses, and progressively feels more natural to act on these. As a consequence movement becomes embodied, inhabited within our form. From a young age it is instinctive to react and move with our whole body, yet as we grow up movement becomes isolated and minimal. Authentic Movement helps us to re-discover this misplaced quality.

This form was pioneered in the 1950s by Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911-1979), and formalized by her student Janet Adler (Pallaro 2007, 51). The idea of moving in the presence of a witness adds a

new dimension of consciousness. The witness takes a non-judgemental role, taking ownership of his/her experience. This not only increases the comfort of the mover, but also highlights aspects of the journey that may have been forgotten. Reflecting with a partner acts as an informative experience, and allows us to become aware of recurring habitual movement patterns. Exploring unfamiliar movement 'presents new emotional resources' (Halprin 2002, 25), and consequently a broader movement vocabulary. Opening up to new ideas makes self-expression appear less daunting and allows the body to indulge in the vast range of physical possibilities.

There are two ways in which the physical body can be perceived: subjectively or objectively; the body-subject 'can only be lived' (Fraleigh 1987, 15). This is the present-centred, pre-reflective state we hold whilst moving holistically. Whereas the body-object 'can be known' (Fraleigh 1987, 15), we can look at the body in a conscious, reflective manner. Although the body cannot be fully objectified, because we are still within it, this helps us to analyse and bring meaning to our experiences. This can be sought through imagery, drawing and writing. The cognitive transference of bodily impulses to paper is called visualization (Halprin 2002, 26). Visualizations give form to our experiences, presenting them through a different medium. They do not always have to be interpreted or understood, they hold value in their abstract quality.

Mary Starks Whitehouse was influenced by a range of practitioners that aided the development of Authentic Movement. The theories of psychologist Carl Jung held great significance within Whitehouse's practice, and they are prominent within the structure of her work. Active Imagination is when one has the power to 'open to the unconscious and give free rein to fantasy' whilst remaining in the present moment (Chodorow 1991, 172). This ability is necessary when practicing Authentic Movement, to touch upon unconscious material in order to access new experiences, surrendering to the unknown. Although the emphasis is on staying present and moving from impulse, it is equally necessary to objectively record. This acts as self-directed analysis.

Jung describes the polarities within the body as 'complementary, sometimes dualistic, lived oppositions' (Fraleigh 1987, 145). He draws attention to the male-female attributes that shape our lives, and highlights how we possess these opposing qualities that are related to both sexes. The concept of polarity is also featured physically within the muscles, as they work together to engage and contract. Psychologically we become aware of opposing feelings and moods, and the broad spectrum of possibilities in between. This idea reflects the mass continuum of movement opportunities that are available and supports the curiosity to explore and indulge in these. This

relates to the process of individuation, the understanding of the whole self – knowing all parts that form ‘an intrinsic unity’ when combined (Kepner 2001, 38). The recognition of the different elements is vital to find the balance of the self, and as a result experience the feeling of wholeness.

Whitehouse conformed to the non-dualistic view of Hungarian dance artist and theorist Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), that ‘the human body and mind are one and inseparably fused’ (Newlove 2004, 16). An artificial separation of the two helps to analyse and diagnose, yet they are realistically indivisible. This is linked to the theory of ontology, which is the nature of experience of ‘being’ in the world. Ontology suggests that our openness to living in the world effects the way we behave within it. In contrast, a dualist believes the mind is superior to the body, and views these as two separate entities. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) located the mind at core of perception, believing one person’s experience was isolated from anything outside of his own mind (Abram 1996, 37). This perception is evident in civilization as: ‘Industrialized society denies the life of the body and rewards the life of the mind’ (Halprin 2000, 21). An example of this is the Education System, which views intelligence as the workings of the brain opposed to the operations of the body. Authentic Movement houses the former quality, and approaches dance in a holistic manner. The spontaneity of this art from stemmed from Whitehouse’s training with the German dancer and choreographer Mary Wigman (1886-1973), who emphasised the importance of improvisation. Her accent upon individual creativity contrasted with a stereotypical, dualistic approach to dance, that was ‘simply understood as physical’ (Fraleigh, 1987: 11), viewing the body as an object to be analysed.

An amalgamation of ideologies and concepts has enriched this practice and aided the generation of the form, rules and rituals. The collection of rules that underpin this form build a secure environment where people feel comfortable to move freely, without judgement. A circle is created to contain the experiences that unfold within it. This is enacted physically as the group hold arms out to mark the shape, making this ‘more vivid, both visually and energetically’ (Adler 2002, 111). The time is held by a meta-witness, who conveys this to the group through the chime of a bell. This supports the Somatic view on temporality: perception is not static, since to perceive is ‘to become aware’ (OED), it therefore evolves through time, in the process of becoming. Among the participants eye contact acts as a non-verbal form of communication throughout this process. This allows one to check in with the group to indicate the opening and closing of the exercise, and signals the exchange of roles from mover to witness. The mover responds to unconscious impulses, with closed eyes ‘to expand her experience of listening to the deeper levels of her kinaesthetic reality’ (Pallaro 1999, 142). Meanwhile the witness is supporting his/her partner, paying close attention, listening and

giving presence to the mover. There is an inter-subjective relationship between the pair that contributes to the collective experience. Finding the balance of this rapport is essential to provide a level of care to your partner, but also to oneself. A heightened sense of self, being able to listen to your own body is necessary to offer a stable connection to another.

Closing the eyes is a simple way in which one can shift the focus to the inner body. Shutting off the visual stimuli brings an increased awareness to the other senses: sound, touch, smell, taste, motor and kinaesthetic (Halprin 2000, 21). An exercise which relates to this is the 'blindfold journey ... a world of proximities' (Tufnell 2004, 133). In attempting this exercise I was guided around the room by my partner with my eyes closed. I was apprehensive to travel around the space. I felt out of control and focused upon the energy between our hands. The connection of our palms generated warmth, support and a feeling of unity. This was surprisingly difficult and made me realise how reliant I am on my vision. Here is a section of my pre-reflective writing, determining what I felt in the present moment:

I trust my partner yet I feel scared. Travelling with my eyes closed is a new experience for me. This feels strange, I feel vulnerable. Shadows appear as I walk, I sense this is because I am close to the edge of the room. A gentle brush against the wall makes me feel uneasy. My posture has changed, my footsteps are uncertain. I feel relief as I open my eyes, to regain touch with my visual world (recorded 2/11/2011).

This exercise highlighted the fact that there are numerous ways to experience the world. Adopting a different approach can arouse new sensations within the body and draw attention to those that would be otherwise overlooked. Taking a simple everyday function and adapting features of the execution, affected me hugely. The application of this to other habitual tasks could be extremely useful, to help strengthen the relationship with my own body and the ability to trust another. Consequently, this will help me within Authentic Movement, to attempt more expansive movements with my eyes closed, and put more faith within my vestibular system.

The nervous system allows us to recognise sensations that are often stimulated from interaction with the skin. 'We are formed by touch, our sense of ourselves growing from the feel of contact between our bodies and what is around us' (Tufnell 2004, 122). The complex nature of the body means that the internal reaction to touch can change momentarily, according to how one feels in the present state. In the period of one exercise I experienced the opposing polarities of welcoming,

and feeling infringed by the touch. The diverse textures brought to the surface of my back awakened different sensations. The sweeping, brushing motions made my spine feel elongated and offered a light pressure to my skin. Whereas the tapping gesture stirred the imagery of ants crawling all over my body, making me feel uncomfortable and recoil from the touch. This relates to theory of Gestalt therapy, which highlights the boundary of the body and the exchange that takes place across it. Fritz Perls (1893-1970), the German born psychiatrist who coined the term, stated that contact should be received in an 'active and selective way' in order to reap the benefits (quoted in Kepner 2001, 166). This approach should be applied to other sensory experiences, such as imagery and sound.

Sound plays a large role in the way our bodies move: 'strong rhythms, loud sounds, and discordant tones can stir the physical senses' (Bassano 1992, 12). We are constantly surrounded by rhythms and vibrations, from the whistles of the wind to the stir of conversations. In relation to dance, I will specifically highlight music and the effects this has upon the human body. This is an external stimulus that can provide a positive or negative influence on movement itself. Bassano labels it as an assistant to one's expressive capabilities, encouraging creativity (Bassano 1992, 13). A prime example of music effecting Authentic Movement was a session that used a song, rich with different sounds and textures. In attempting this approach I responded literally to the bursting sound effects; this is a section of my personal reflection from this exercise:

I am surrounded by bubbles; I am popping them with different parts of my body; I feel like a mermaid; I am swimming (recorded 18/10/2011).

Alternatively, when a connection is not made to music it can inhibit movement and impose upon one's experience. Consequently, it can be useful to dance in silence, allowing movement to originate from a genuine source, creating dance that can stand alone. Mary Wigman termed this Absolute Dance, she 'gave dominance to dance' over music (Partsch-Bergsohn 1994, 31), emphasising its independent power. Moving without music can feel daunting, there is nothing to hide behind and vulnerability emerges. There is a level of confidence required to dance in silence, to be able to read your body and present this to others in its unrefined state.

When moving in the presence of others it can be challenging to keep the movement natural and unaffected by onlookers. Within Authentic Movement we typically practise mover-witness exercises in pairs; this provides an empathetic framework that allows the mover to explore their inner subjective relationship, in the role of a moving-witness. This was an unfamiliar position that

enlightened me to discover how I could stay true to my own movement, whilst mirroring that of another. Instead of copying directly I took an interpretive approach, embodying this for myself in an authentic manner. As a result of the movement feeling more connected to my body, I could provide a more supportive rapport to the mover. The witness enhances this process helping the mover to 'organize her mapping of her experiences by deepening her listening to her own experience' (Adler 2002, 27).

The recognition of multiple centres of experience within the space brings context to one's own journey. When an element of choice is presented to the individual, regarding the alternating process between mover and witness, a broader sense of awareness is required. This is apparent in the Long circle, the container is sustained by three people witnessing at all times, whilst the group are free to choose their role in this format. I found this refreshing to interact with all members of the class, differentiating from the standard structure of working in partners. This provided an opportunity to witness other movers, and it was interesting to observe the group as a collective. This wider perception was fascinating, and brought my attention to the unconscious sense of unity radiated by the group. Practising this exercise required, 'more awareness of inner layers of experiences intermingling and coexisting' (Adler 2002, 96). The relaxed atmosphere increased my confidence to move. When one is not connected to another in the space, it feels less intrusive, almost as if nobody is watching. As a result I feel the ambience set up by the group is extremely influential to the way I approach movement. When the group is disruptive it imposes upon my experience. I find it difficult to concentrate on my own body, and feel conscious of my actions, which is reflected in a more introverted quality of moving.

Amanda Williamson discusses the rapport we hold with the environment and states that we have control over our lives and the direction that they take as we are 'sensually alive, and co-actively engaged with our world' (Williamson 2009, 30). This receptive attitude towards external surroundings helps our body to find grounding and connectivity towards the environment. Active participation in the world ensures that our movement is indirectly responsive to everything around us. The relationship with the environment in which Authentic Movement is practised can affect the inner body, and the way in which these feelings are expressed to the external world. I have become accustomed to the same studio for Somatic practice, and have reached a level of comfort within this. Due to situational circumstances a different space was used. Although this setting was not ideal, I feel it was important to transfer this practice to different surroundings to perceive how it affected us personally. It brought a new dimension to my movement and I did not feel like this inhibited my

creativity in any way. I believe my adaptable nature was related to my well-developed sense of inner witness. This is the intrapersonal entity of the consciousness that 'is the continuing desire from the moving practice to see oneself more clearly' (Adler 2002, 62). Self-awareness is an extremely personal journey that is constantly evolving in reaction to diverse situations and experiences. Adopting a receptive approach has aided me to express myself fully within different groups and environments in a confident manner.

The body and mind work together to allow us to express ourselves physically and emotionally. When equality is brought to both components we can discover movement that is true and undetermined. Initially I struggled with this, the repetition of habitual patterns acted as a safety mechanism within somatic practice. I reached a state of boredom with the dualist approach that valued the mind over the body. It was not rewarding and my movement vocabulary was limited. Discovering the confidence to take an explorative approach brought a sense of richness to my movement. Halprin states that: 'The language of the self and the soul speaks in the images of our dances' (Halprin 2003, 32). Movement acts as another form of communication, a powerful tool of expression that does not require words. When I am engaged in movement my consciousness is extended through my actions, the self is made visible.

It is difficult to pinpoint the true origin of movement because there are so many external factors that influence the body, that are frequently unnoticed. Therefore the authenticity of movement is questionable, does the movement belong to me if it was inspired by a variable outside of the body? The investigation of this could continue perpetually; because if one danced alone in a bleak, vacant room, void of stimuli, the body would still react to the given situation. However, this is what defines us as individuals, the way in which we react to the outer world. If we all responded in the same way our movement would become restricted and meaningless. Consequently, our sense of self is established by the environment and how we act within it. The surroundings help us to contextualise our movement, relating this to imagery and known phenomena in order to make sense of the unknown. It is impossible to articulate why we dance the way we do, but it is certain that 'my dance, cannot exist without me. I exist my dance' (Fraleigh 1987, xvi).

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