Re-inhabiting the Body

Authentic Movement as a pathway to transformation

by TINA STROMSTED



Photograph: Beverly Hall

Some years ago, while rushing too fast through the dark to teach a class at Esalen on the California coast, I fell and pulled both hamstrings so badly that I had difficulty walking and sitting for months. This time would have been difficult for anyone and for me, a dancer who could no longer move freely, it was a time of coming to terms with how I had literally 'overextended' myself. It showed me how concretely my body was able to provide limits that my psyche was not yet able to acknowledge. Injury, stillness, or paralysis are the shadow side of the dancer and this experience offered an important vehicle for me to sit with the sensations and images that arose as my body slowly took me through a process of introspection, grieving and healing that resulted in what now feel like new, more feeling-ful feminine legs.

As with any trauma or insult to the body, the stages of recovery often begin with shock – the body and the psyche's way of protecting us from feeling too much in the moment so that we can meet our basic needs. This is generally accompanied by stiffness, numbness, or a slowed response to insure that we don't re-injure ourselves. The healing process cannot fully take place, however, until we begin to access the pain by experiencing, expressing and bringing to consciousness the range of feelings that may be associated with it, whether they be fear, anger, loss, hurt, tenderness, or grief. This allows the blocks of emotional and physical trauma to be dispersed, so that energy can move freely and good function is regained. What is equally crucial is to bring the wound back into relationship with the larger 'collective body' so that we can acknowledge, re-inhabit and re-own ourselves in the context of a living, human community – the web of life.

The body as transformative vessel

The journey through life is not simply metaphorical, psychological or spiritual, but also concretely experienced in the body. Together with our dreams and intuition, the body can act as a compass to guide our life's course.

When one enters into the realm of the body, one encounters one's history and all that may be dwelling there. The body is the best authentic history that we have and carries the feelings, memories and burdens that our psyche has repressed or disassociated from because it cannot yet consciously carry their weight. 'What we are made of is something that we don't always have access to; it holds the secrets,' said a colleague of mine when recovering from a near-fatal car accident, about which he confided, '[I was] in a symphony of pain which I often did not have the language to describe.'

With movement signatures that express us as uniquely as our fingerprints, our bodies serve as sculptured intermediaries between our inner and outer worlds. Our physical make-up reflects not only our genetic inheritance, but also the compromises and choices we've made in defining a lifestyle for ourselves, first as family members and then as individuals. Our experience, if embodied, also offers us a way to connect with all of humanity, as the body is not only personal, but cross-cultural and universal; our thoughts and feelings express themselves as gestures that often strike chords of emotional and spirited recognition in people the world over. The body should be thought of as a major initial text. It pulses with the oldest language, containing a deeper historical memory, which we strive to recognize through newer mediums such as neuroscience, genetics, somatic psychology, dance/movement therapy, quantum physics, affect and attachment theories and others. 'The body does not lie,' said the late modern dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham.[1] The body remembers why it is here: for healing, for embodiment, for incarnation.

Challenges to embodied knowing

Attending to bodily wisdom was an essential element in ancient healing practices and spiritual traditions, but it has undergone radical assaults in our western patriarchal culture for over two thousand years and can present a daunting prospect in a society that views the body in a mechanistic, material way.

The Greek heresy was the 'separate body', which elevated abstract, cognitive intelligence. Later, through Christianity, the body was believed to be the repository of sin. Dance, since humankind's earliest beginnings practiced as a kind of spiritual devotion, a path through which you could find your god, came to be viewed with suspicion. In many parts of the world it was literally stamped out and with it, the human connection to the rhythms, social mores and embodied spiritual values and knowings that provided a direct experience of the order of their cosmos.[2] As church officials of organized patriarchal religions wedged themselves between the people and the single male God, dance became known as an invitation to blasphemy.

Not only were sharp lines drawn between body and soul, flesh and spirit, but a woman's own voice was taken from her as she learned to repeat canonical refrains honouring a disembodied, masculine divine being (whom she could never know directly, nor ever hope could understand her experience or wisdom).

In the west, since then, the body, in this sense, has been, in the words of my fellow somatics practitioner Don Johnson, 'wildly discredited'.

Additionally, many of the communities and methods of spiritual practice that used to give form to an individual's spiritual experience, to help them come to terms with the awesome power of the unknown, have broken down. The enormous progress in the sciences, medicine, information management and other technological areas has come at the cost of splitting off the psychological, physical and sacred aspects of our lives, causing a great deal of suffering and requiring intensive re-examination and healing.

Authentic Movement allows us to embrace the mystery of not knowing what is yet to come

Youthful physical fitness and 'perfect' body image represent powerful icons in our culture, but the psycho-emotional underpinnings of an embodied life remain largely ignored, resulting in a distorted sense of self, an unsatisfying relationship to one's body and feelings, a variety of addictive patterns and an excessive over-use of the medical care system. On the one hand, dis-ease may become projected onto the body through fastidious over-attention to our self-image, while, on the other hand, symptoms and illness can become the body's siren call that finally stops us in our tracks. Even adolescents are beginning to seek solutions through liposuction and 'body-enhancing' implants; like ageing adults, they choose the knife over a deeper, more natural exploration that could allow uncomfortable feelings to surface and support the development of unknown parts of the self.

Anticipating these developments, dance therapist and Jungian analyst Joan Chodorow speaks of the importance of what she calls the 'unholy trinity': the Body, the Shadow, and the Feminine,[3] which have been repressed for millennia. Carl Jung considered the integration of this trinity to be the task of our times.[4] Having been repressed for millennia, these elements are now unmistakably making their way toward consciousness and re-embodiment, upsetting the technologically driven, patriarchal culture with its emphasis on power, consumerism and the elevation of logos. From a Jungian perspective, that which has been repressed will be compensated for by finding expression indirectly. In an era in which the body is repressed, one could expect a lusting after material goods, a kind of compulsive acquisitiveness. Jungian analyst, Marion Woodman, reminds us that the Latin root of 'matter' is mater, meaning mother. And so, in an age when the Great Mother is banished from our temples and consciousness, we reach for her, unconsciously, through materialism, compulsive behaviors, and a wide variety of addictions that numb the body and silence her knowledge.[5] TS Eliot describes this as 'The Waste Land'[6] and Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes[7] sees it as being left to wander through our own wilderness, searching for the scattered bones to put ourselves back together.

But here is the good news: once the pieces have been gathered, many ancient stories suggest that singing over them will invite back both flesh and the soul. Healing practices that engage body, psyche and spirit can offer us support and guidance in rediscovering the wounded child, the Wild Woman and Wild Man archetypes and other aspects of the self that lie dormant, injured, or silenced in each of us, her knowledge deeply rooted in the body's instinctual wisdom.

Re-inhabiting the body

Movement to be experienced has to be found in the body, not put on like a dress or a coat. There is that in us which has moved from the very beginning; it is that which can liberate us. Mary Starks Whitehouse

Telling the story, developing healthy boundaries, alternative healing modalities, creative arts practices and nurturing self-care rituals can all assist in the process of re-inhabiting the body. Illness, too, though painful, can offer a pathway to transformation and an enhanced appreciation for life, if attended to and explored consciously. As Jungian analyst Arnold Mindell puts it, 'Body symptoms are dreams trying to happen in the body.'[8]

One of the most potent avenues I have found for recovering the body/psyche/soul connection is Authentic Movement, a Jungian form of dance therapy also known as 'movement in depth' or 'active imagination in movement'. The practice can provide a powerful avenue to engage the unconscious through bodily expression, bringing clarity and healing to our woundedness and allowing exploration and expression of the new life energy seeking to emerge.

Originated by pioneer dance therapist, Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911–1979), the work grew out of German dance expression at the Mary Wigman Schule in Dresden and the myth-inspired improvisational modern dance of American choreographer Martha Graham. However, it was Whitehouse's extensive study in Jungian depth psychology, specifically the method of active imagination, that enabled her to find access to the unconscious as expressed kinaesthetically through the body.[9]

This approach has evolved with three major applications: as a form of psychotherapy, as a resource for artistic expression and/or as meditation/sacred dance.





Top: Tina in her dance studio in Tuscany, following an intensive there. Bottom: the studio.

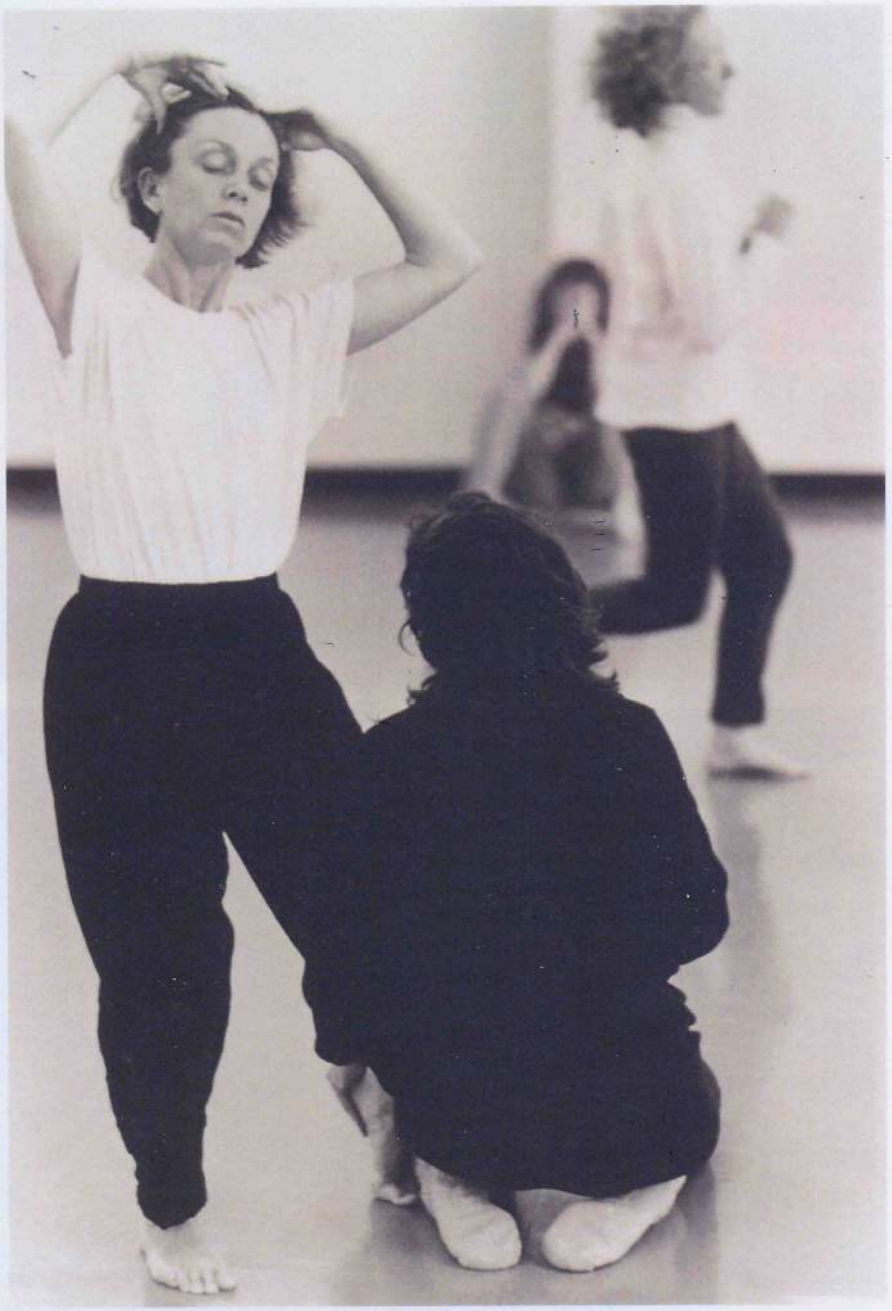
Practice and exploration

In a safely contained process involving a mover and a witness, the mover is invited to find a place in the room, listen inwardly and allow herself to be moved by her bodily experience, without performance or plan. (And in referring to the mover or witness as 'she', I include men and women.) The mover may then begin to surrender her defences, to attend to the flow of sensations in her body. Eyes are closed, in order to reduce outer distractions and to facilitate a greater depth of experience. Body sensations, memories, imagery, emotions and dreams may be evoked, as the ego or conscious self is allowed to become receptive to and take an active interest in the knowledge stored in the body.

Over time, movers learn to experience the difference between movement that is directed by the ego ('I am moving') and movement that comes from the unconscious ('I am being moved').[10] As the mover learns to follow her body there is no music, no choreography, no agenda and no right or wrong way to move. Instead, there is an attending to and surrendering to one's feelings, rhythms and authentic responses. In this way, one brings awareness to and more fully 'inhabits' what is already going on in the body, rather than trying to control the process with an outcome based on old patterns or notions about how one 'should' be. By being willing to engage in a conscious relationship with one's somatic experience, one embraces the mystery of not knowing what is yet to come, a trust that allows for new material to emerge and be explored.

During this process, the witness/therapist sits to the side. Though the eyes are open, she is not 'looking at' the mover, but 'witnessing', bringing a quality of receptive attention and presence to the experience of the mover.[11] In the safe container that is thus created, the mover/client can listen deeply to and follow her own imagination and movement impulses, engaging with unconscious material directly, through embodied expression.

The mover can further integrate the material that arises by then speaking about the experience with the witness/therapist. If invited, the witness responds to what she has seen, felt and imagined, without judgement or interpretation. Her task is to be present to her own experience as she witnesses her mover and to recognize and contain whatever issues, projections or judgements may arise, working with these elements to bring further clarity to the work. Within a therapeutic context, associations to dreams, developmental material, concurrent life situations and relationship dynamics can assist the



Dancers: Andrea Olsen (left) and Caryn McHose (right). Photograph: Erik Borg.

mover/client in further integrating insights that have emerged directly from her embodied experience. When appropriate, amplifying elements reflected in myths and fairy tales can help the mover feel less isolated and more meaningfully rooted in the unfolding stories, human dilemmas and rites of passage that have existed across time and culture.

This practice relies on an adequate degree of ego strength and is often helpful for those already capable of enduring their 'forbidden' thoughts, feelings and fantasies through self-directed exploration within a safe, contained environment. It may enhance contact with their inner life as well as develop a greater capacity to relate to others in deeper, more genuine and spontaneous ways.

The healing relationship

Self-awareness is enhanced through the act of non-judgemental 'seeing' by a witness who provides both a receptive mirror and an active mirror through verbal response. Body structure, postures, gestures, language, images and dreams are all a reflection of a person's history and ongoing embodying process.

At a basic, bodily level, this work involves supporting the mover/client in discovering links between current experiences and relational patterns established early in her life which have a powerful impact on her embodied experience, sense of self and ability to relate to others. Current advances in neuroscience affirm that new nerve pathways are also generated in the brain when healing occurs.[12]

Shadow work

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. CG Jung

What Carl Jung called the 'shadow' is those lesser known and often frightening qualities, feelings, and viewpoints we carry within which may be denied, split off, or frozen. They require tremendous energy to repress, energy which can have a profoundly transformative effect when experienced, differentiated, and integrated. The shadow may also represent positive elements within ourselves of which we are not yet conscious and/or tend to attribute to someone else whom we imagine has the capacity to do something that 'we could never do'.

Shadow elements often emerge spontaneously through unconscious movement responses, gestures, voice tone, verbal expressions, breathing patterns and mood. In Authentic Movement work these can, over time and with rapport, be reflected back by the witness/therapist and experienced more consciously by the mover/client. Through exploring physiological responses, the mover is able to find a bridge to the unconscious, to free life energy essential for growth and connect to a deeper sense of knowing, creativity, and wholeness.[13]

Conscious embodiment

As movers 're-inhabit' themselves through Authentic Movement, they become aware of the emotional conflicts that exist within the musculature and in all of the cellular structures of the body.[14] The practice emphasizes the importance of this awakening in relationship to each individual's own timing - in peeling off and entering into the layers of her history - personal and transpersonal. Over time, movers may awaken to their specific patterns of movement or series of gestures, which are often repeated unconsciously. In her own time, the mover will discover that, as Chodorow says, 'it is the fulfillment of action that makes the link to inner experience,' and, 'throughout is woven the relationship of the body, the imagination and the emotions.'[15]

Authentic Movement is powerful and affirming work as it can restore a sense of inner authority and the voice to articulate it. Blocks to creativity may be liberated, re-establishing a sense of hope and direction in life that springs from a deep inner source. The process also develops the capacity to be present, both with oneself and with another, in a more vital, embodied and increasingly conscious relationship.

Following movement sessions, creative arts such as painting, sculpting and writing can assist in bringing form to unconscious material and help to integrate it into daily life. Dreamwork too, in which inner landscapes may be revealed, bringing meaning to the movement as the bodywork grounds the images in emotional reality.

'Descent' as a pathway to individuation

Over many years as a dance and body-oriented psychotherapist with roots in Jung's psychology, my work has led me to a deeper investigation of the process by which we 'inhabit' ourselves. Early difficult attachment patterns and emotional deficits can present challenges that are further amplified by subsequent losses and traumas, resulting in a subjective experience of having 'left the body'. When this is the case, how do we 'get back in'?

My concern is that having been raised for so many generations according to patriarchal images of spiritual 'ascent', together with the quest for personal and individualistic power and perfection, our technologically advanced and acquisitive culture has caused us to all but forget its vital counterpart: the feminine path to individuation through 'descent'. It is as though we must now engage in an archaeological dig that is at once psychological, spiritual and physical, to recover what has been lost. This descent is not just at the level of metaphor, but requires an individual to release and surrender into the depths of her body: reclaiming memories, feelings and capacities for pleasure and new, life-enhancing energies that are critical to the healing and transformative process.

What we have forgotten and need to relearn is how to surrender to this descent process, trusting that something rich and good can come from it. That we have forgotten is no wonder, in an age where feminine qualities such as feeling, intuition, interpersonal relating and direct embodied knowing are undervalued. This was true, for the most part, in our mothers' and grandmothers' time as well, when the authentic female body was equally not cherished. How can a woman expect to love her own body if her mother, her earliest model of what it means to be a woman, has not valued her own? How can you surrender to the depths of your own body if you have not experienced being held as an infant in such a way that offers support for your weight, your skin, your breath, your inner organs, your goodness reflected in a loving gaze that assures the capacity for letting go to something larger without being dropped or abandoned or, in the case of over-mothering, being swallowed up, psychologically sucked back into the womb, the mother's identity?

Marion Woodman says of the body's role in the analytic process: 'So often at the psychic level the process is moving in a very healing direction. But then I may reach out to touch my analysand and the body pulls back. It doesn't feel worthy. It says, "I am unlovable." Therefore it's at that cellular level that the transformation has to take place.'[16]

Authentic Movement invites a descent into the body and psyche within a safe environment. Here the individual may go at her own pace, finding a style and rhythm that is uniquely her own. In this way, she will find her own gateways, which often involve literal re-enactments of the embodied movement patterns surrounding the trauma, wound, or stuck place in her development, the places where the resources ran out or she had to cower, freeze, or puff herself up just to survive. What I have learned through decades of practising psychotherapy and of witnessing people move is that the transformation is the other side of the wound. If we can return to the site of the wound, the scene of the crime as it were, with the additional resources of adulthood and embodied, depth-oriented therapeutic modalities, we can heal ourselves, just as the shaman who suffers a psychotic breakdown or near-death experience develops knowledge of the descent and the way up again.

Closing

As my women clients make the necessary descent into themselves through their bodies, I often see their struggles between the 'good girl' and the 'prostitute', the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, the cut-off intellectual or the dolled-up bimbo, the all-sacrificing mother or witch and the innocent maid, all of which mirror the feminine split common to our culture. Working with these courageous women toward bridging their way back to their bodies and to their instincts has provided me with the privilege of witnessing them as they take back what has been taken from them, finding hope as they heal the split and step into a more authentic, mature female sexuality with a sense of self-worth, of soulfulness and of finally being able to come home to themselves.

Authentic Movement provides a respectful vehicle for soul-making and body-making. Together, body and psyche, matter and spirit, find union and generate new form. This unfolding creative process yields enriched access to the self, enhances relationship and assists in building human community, rooted in the natural world. Wounds emerge and are healed on a cellular level, within the context of relationship. Life's riches can again be experienced through the senses and embodied presence and compassion are enhanced.

Whether you are a healing practitioner choosing to use or develop more active movement or body-based interventions in your work, a parent raising a child, a man nurturing your inner feminine, or a woman listening for your own deeper instinctual callings, allow your body to tell you her story, loving her in the process as we find ways to take the feminine by the hand, welcoming her back from the shadow and into the light. ✪

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References
Please see www.cacuceus.info .

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