

Authentic Movement: A dance with the divine

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Authentic Movement facilitates a descent into the inner world of the psyche through natural movement. Through the process we are reconnected with deeper instinctual resources and spiritual intelligence that dwell in the molecular structure of the cells, and recover un-lived parts of our nature on intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal levels. The practice develops a sense of embodied presence, of being 'at home' in the body. During a time when many of the patriarchal power structures that have given meaning to our existence for thousands of years are crumbling, Authentic Movement allows practitioners, within the context of a healing relationship, to discover a new paradigm that offers guidance from an inner source. Physical, psychological, spiritual, social, affective and aesthetic dimensions are included in this holistic practice. Authentic Movement is used in individual and group settings, is effective within the context of psychotherapy, medicine and meditative practices, and is a potent source for artistic expression.

Keywords: Authentic Movement; witnessing; cellular resonance; neuroscience; re-inhabiting the body; sacred

Authentic Movement

The body is the vessel in which the transformation process takes place.

James Hillman (1976, p. 145)

What does it mean to live a vital, embodied life in our modern world, which is so devoted to power, speed, technological advancement and materialism? How can we rediscover the sacredness of our bodies and the Eros in everyday life, given the numbing of the flesh and the continuing destruction of our planet, the physical embodiment of our world? What follows are some of my

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experiences with women and men who are actively exploring these questions through Authentic Movement.

Authentic Movement was originated by Dance Therapy pioneer Mary Starks Whitehouse (Whitehouse, 1958, in Pallaro (Ed.) 1999, pp. 42–43). Also called ‘Movement in Depth’ and ‘Active Imagination in Movement’, this approach invites a descent into the inner world of the psyche through natural movement and can be practised in individual and group settings. The mover/client closes her¹ eyes, waits, and then, witnessed by her therapist/witness, moves in response to body-felt sensations, emotions, memories, movement impulses, and/or images. The witness provides a safe, contained, and receptive presence, maintaining an awareness of her mover’s bodily expression as well as her own embodied experience.

At the conclusion of the movement session, creative self-expression such as writing or drawing anchors the mover’s experience, which she can then share with her witness. The witness responds to the mover’s expression of the physical, emotional, and imaginal elements of her journey without judgement or interpretation, describing specific movements she witnessed, together with sensations, images and feelings that arose in her as she watched (Adler, 1999, p. 142). The witness’s empathic mirroring helps the mover recall and reflect on movements arising from her unconscious. ‘Shadow’ aspects and dreams may emerge – repressed emotions, primitive instincts, and/or forgotten images. The process serves to widen the field of consciousness through confrontation with previously denied or unconscious contents, which can then be further explored and integrated (Jung, 1916, para. 193). Spirited, transpersonal experiences may also emerge, sacred energy that springs from the deeper layers of the Self (Jung, 1944, para. 44). These moments are often characterised by a sense of resonance within and between the mover and the witness. When this occurs, each can experience transformative shifts, as the boundaries of time and space, ‘self’ and ‘other’ begin to soften, allowing for the possibility of experiencing a sense of union, and a profound participation in the larger resonant field or life force.

Following Authentic Movement sessions, movers may continue their process through a wide range of creative explorations such as painting, choreographing dances, creative writing, sculpting, or composing music, bringing further form to what was once unconscious (Chodorow, 1997, p. 9), thereby enriching their lives and enhancing their contributions to the wider culture.

Recovering the ravaged body

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

Mary Starks Whitehouse (1963/1999, p. 53)

Practitioners can also use Authentic Movement to explore potentially meaningful physiological symptoms. My work with survivors of breast cancer

as part of a research project (Dibbell-Hope, 1989; 1992) offers an example of reclaiming the body after the trauma of illness and surgery. The following notes I made during one session serve as an illustration.

All of the women have had mastectomies, and though they have volunteered for the project, they nevertheless feel some resistance to the Authentic Movement process, saying things like ‘Why should I go back into my body? It betrayed me!’ Over time however, enough safety grows in the group, together with enough trust in the process so that each woman is willing to close her eyes and listen attentively to her body’s responses. Many remember being on the surgery table, under anesthesia, and describe themselves as being ‘out of their bodies’. Each is ‘held’ in this frightening and painful experience by her witness. As the trauma is worked through, allowing the mover to stay in her body as this experience becomes consciously felt, many regain access to earlier memories of sensuality and a zest for life they had known before becoming identified with their illness. Most are surprised to discover how when they ‘block the difficult feelings,’ they ‘don’t get the positive ones either’. As a result, a kind of renewal comes about as each begins to ‘re-inhabit’ her body, gaining a more accurate and accepting post-surgery body image, and recovering a sense of pleasure in life.

A slim, athletic woman in her thirties, “Gail” reports:

“I curl up from the ground and stand tall in the middle of the circle, my right hand over the place my right breast used to be, my left arm raised first toward the heavens and then extended out in front of me toward my witness. Later, I share how ashamed I have been of my ‘flat, deformed side’. During my movement, however, I experienced my right as my ‘masculine side’ and my left breast as my ‘feminine side’, realizing how both have served me so well and how much more integrated I feel in my life now”.

Gail had become terrified when she discovered, while breast-feeding her baby, that the lump growing in her breast was not a benign cyst. Within the supportive container of the group she was able to grieve the loss of her breast and to reconnect with her love for her children. Passivity and despair were replaced by a new sense of strength and an appreciation of the preciousness of the life flow she now felt. This gave rise to an embodied experience of the coniunctio—the sacred marriage – as a palpable sense of her masculine and feminine energies came together within her.

Over the course of several group sessions, a potent sense of safety, trust, and support developed in the group as a whole, together with a deeper level of acceptance and healing in each of the participants. For mover and witness alike, the women’s grief at the loss of their breasts became collectively palpable; through the spontaneous enactment that Authentic Movement fosters, fear, alienation, and shame were replaced by a sense of empowerment, respect, and care.

Healing the vessel

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

C.G. Jung (1954, para. 335, p. 265)

Authentic Movement is equally effective for clients who are searching for inner discovery and self-knowledge without the prompting of a severe illness.

This experience took place in a retreat center in Italy where artists, therapists, teachers and parents from many countries had gathered to learn the practice. The description below demonstrates the transformative power of what Jung called the ‘transcendent function’. Jung describes this as... ‘a movement out of the suspension between two opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation’ (Jung, 1916, para. 189). Also illustrated are manifestations of both the cultural (Henderson, 1984) and archetypal layers of the unconscious – the embodiment of some of Western culture’s earliest mythic forms. Opening to the ‘collective unconscious’ allows individuals access to the experiences of all previous life forms, inherent in our genetic coding, reflected in myths that give shape and meaning to our world, within and without (Jung, 1927a; paras. 322–342).

That morning, ‘Sabeth’ had felt strongly drawn to witness ‘Anna’, who was wearing a red smock and cradling her six-month-old fetus in her belly.

Now, Sabeth closes her eyes and stands in the center of the circle of witnesses, her feet planted shoulder-width apart and her arms raised over her head, appearing solid and fully grounded. Gradually her arms lower to a horizontal position, remaining outstretched and still for 15 minutes, her expression intensely focused. I note how I feel increasingly present as I gaze at her; I feel firm, full, and aware of my contact with the ground. Very soon, I see a stream of energy moving up from the floor, through Sabeth’s legs, womb and heart and out through her arms and hands. As I watch, I feel warmth pool in my pelvis and my heart opening. My spine tingles with electricity and heat. There is a build up of pressure behind my eyes and I close them for a moment, catching a vision of a ball of radiant white light.

Just as the tension reaches its apex, something in Sabeth releases and the energy appears to drain from her, leaving her limp and feeling helpless; a release in my own energy also occurs. Moments later, another mover comes up from behind her and presses the front of her body into Sabeth’s back. At first, Sabeth’s body appears to stiffen, pulling forward and away from the contact. Soon, however, she releases her weight, allowing this new companion to support her. I feel relieved and revitalized. When the movement ends, Sabeth relates that when she had extended her arms, the image of an angel had come to her – her arms became like wings, and her womb felt ‘full of red’. At that moment, she simultaneously experienced herself as both the angel giving the annunciation and the Virgin Mother receiving it, feeling healed in the process. Sabeth then felt ‘full of tears that [she] couldn’t find personal history for’, followed by a sense of being cut off from her pelvis and legs as she ‘hung there’, her arms outstretched.

When the other mover initially came up behind her, Sabeth didn’t want the contact, fearing that it would stop her own process, or that she would have to ‘take care’ of the other woman. Then, an ‘inner shift’ occurred that allowed her to accept the firmness and comfort of the other’s physical presence at her back, which, she reported, ‘gave me the spine to move out of my ‘stuck’ place’. Indeed, she said, ‘the contact helped me bring spirit into my legs; light into dense matter.

It was excruciatingly painful in the beginning. I felt as though I would be torn apart in two opposing directions but there was nothing to do but to stay there. When the other mover came, I realised that I could embrace her from that part of myself that needs support, and that can love and accept the love of another. It was not at all what I had expected to happen and by the end, I felt more fully myself.'

Placing her hands on her pelvis and belly, she says, 'This is where I have always felt most uncertain and wounded.' Her eyes widen, and tears well up as she recalls the terror she felt in the violent contractions she experienced while in her mother's womb, as bombs dropped around them during World War II.

When Sabeth finishes speaking, we sit quietly for some moments, maintaining eye contact as her breath slows and deepens. When she invites my witnessing, I empathize with her terror, and then slowly reflect the movements I have seen and how they have touched me. I, too, had sensed the presence of a larger energy streaming through her, which had had an electrifying effect on my body as well. For me, her outstretched posture aroused the image of the crucified Christ, first in ecstasy filled with spirit and light, and then in despair, hanging limply and bleeding on the cross. Something deep in my body and psyche recognised the archetypal images of suffering and redemption, articulated centuries before Christ in the story of the Sumerian goddess, Inanna, who hung nearly lifeless from a meat hook in the underworld until an act of attunement and compassion released her to life in the upper world again (Perera, 1981; Meador, 2000).

Seeing her gestures mirrored back and hearing my words, Sabeth felt received and met. She then became conscious of how her prenatal trauma had likely filled her with fascination and longing as she witnessed Anna's pregnant dance earlier that morning. Lacking adequate support as a foetus in her mother's womb in her war-torn village, Sabeth now found herself held in the safety provided by a circle of conscious witnesses. Here she could surrender to a deeper source of healing through her streaming connection with the Virgin Mary—the nourishing presence of the Great Mother (Stromsted, 1996, pp. 26–28).

Moving Men: re-awakening the physical-emotional body

The body does not lie.

Martha Graham (1994)

Men often report a deeper sense of alienation from their bodies than women do, given differences in biological cycles, pressures to perform, and the denial and denigration of their feelings and felt-sense in our culture. Movement practice can allow men to rediscover their body's emotional wisdom, their inherent sense of worth, and a deep longing for relationship.

Some time ago, I taught an Authentic Movement course in the Somatic Psychology program at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco comprised of thirteen men and four women in clinical training, who ranged in age from their mid-twenties to mid-forties. Here, Authentic Movement offered a vehicle for identifying and exploring personal movement

patterns, body image issues, and relationship dynamics that had been unconsciously embodied in the student's family of origin and ethnic background. The practice also helped to develop their awareness of the somatic intricacies of the transference-countertransference relationship (Bernstein, 1984; Stromsted, 1998; Dosamantes-Beaudry, 2007; Pallaro, 2007).

Over the weeks, the students gradually relaxed their wariness, and were able to move from outwardly focused, dynamic movement to a more receptive, meditative, inner focus in order to access their feelings and inner states of being; what Mary Whitehouse described as 'moving' and 'being moved' (Whitehouse, in Pallaro, 1999, p. 43). In Keith's experience, we see how fragments of psyche, body sensation, feeling, memory and relationship dynamics become significantly more integrated into a sense of self. Below are excerpts from his journal:

Closing my eyes, I feel unsteady, like an infant. Then I sense myself moving into young adulthood and feel angry, restricted and inhibited. When Tina asks us to imagine ourselves in the context of our 'family's dance' I feel my family moving in tight dance steps in small circles, reflecting our strict Irish Catholic heritage which inhibited freedom of expression. My movements are wild Dionysian lunges away from them. 'Is how I feel inside being perceived on the outside?' I wonder. As I begin to move I feel the mystery of expectation in an experience that is completely unknown to me. 'Will anything happen?' I wonder, 'and how deep will it go?' Beginning with controlled Tai Chi movements I immediately feel chills in my body. This makes me close up and drop to my knees on the ground – a closing up that seems to happen when I stop controlling my actions. As I give up control I don't know how to act; my natural instincts feel as if they are dying of inactivity.

On my knees, anger rises up in me. I get up and begin to walk across the room and then pace back and forth. I feel very agitated and want to explode and let whatever is holding me so tight come pouring out. Then something happens so naturally that I am not even aware of the change. The anger and agitation give way to a sadness that feels as far away as it is present. I sit down and lean against the wall, feeling small and innocent and begin rubbing my right leg. I am lost in this moment for a few minutes when all at once I realise what I am doing. Tears come to my eyes. Was I not being seen? Was my pain not valid? It was months of this pain before my parents took me to the doctor. I remember looking at my mother in front of the doctor's office and saying, 'I hope something's wrong with me so Dad won't be mad.' There was something wrong but it took the doctors two years to find the cancerous tumor in my right hip . . .

When we gather together after the movement I share what I experienced, feeling deeply touched, vulnerable, and astounded that so much memory and feeling could be recovered in that simple gesture of rubbing my leg. It feels good to be heard and important to have my feelings and pain acknowledged. I feel a lost piece of myself return.' (Student participant, 1999)

Giving birth to myself: embodied voice

The symbols of the self arise in the depths of the body.

C.G. Jung (1940, p. 173)

Creative expression is an integral part of Authentic Movement practice, including writing, dance, visual art and sound. Vocal expression is challenging for many women, whose voices often become muted, squeaky, cut off, shrill or otherwise distorted as they seek acceptance in our mechanical, materialistic world. Qualities often associated with feminine ways of being – such as instinctual wisdom, emotion, intuition, relational sensitivity, empathy, and receptivity to one’s inner life, are often undervalued (Woodman, 1993). Authentic Movement incorporates ways to drop into the body, rediscover vital resources, feel nourished through reengagement with the parasympathetic nervous system, and open to authentic voice. Access to a deeper spiritual intelligence residing in the cells of the body also becomes available (Woodman, in Stromsted, 2005) – the teleological aspect of the Self, which, if attended to, can serve as a source of guidance toward self-realization (Jung, 1917, para. 210).

Following a workshop in London, one student described this experience of revitalisation. “Christina” had been practising with my colleague and me for several years at our Authentic Movement Institute in Berkeley and had developed a strong ‘inner witness,’ a capacity to maintain awareness and apply conscious reflection to her movement. Following the workshop, she wrote about a spontaneous movement experience that she explored upon her return home:

I am standing and start to jiggle my knees in an upward/downward movement. This movement becomes faster and faster and as I breathe I begin to vocalise, pushing sound out on the outbreath.

My abdomen suddenly contracts and I create a louder, sharper sound. It sounds animal to me. The sounds continue and my mouth begins to stretch wider and wider till it feels enormous. I have an image of a wide-open vagina and then I begin to feel a baby’s head emerging from my mouth. I am both baby emerging into the world and the mother giving birth. I have a sense of something profound happening and quite spontaneously I imagine you witnessing. I don’t think I called upon you consciously, but I sense a need for an outside witness, as well as my own inner witness. Imagining you witnessing me encourages me to continue with the movement. I certainly don’t feel so alone in this process.

In my original birth I was born with the cord around my neck, and when I begin to feel the baby’s head emerge from my mouth the baby becomes stuck once the head has emerged. This experience of birthing brings tears to my eyes as I feel wonder, amazement and relief all at the same time. I then become the present me, the mother, giving birth, and I move to the floor on hands and knees, pelvis wide, and begin to pant as though resting in between contractions. In my movement I alternate between being the baby being born and myself giving birth to my baby.

My hands reach towards my head and I gently rotate it. I sense a vast silence surrounding me . . . I open my eyes and look at a new world. (Participant)

Freud’s protégés, Wilhelm Reich and Otto Rank, pointed to one’s birth trauma as a potent blueprint which one inevitably encounters while navigating subsequent major life passages (Reich, 1950; Rank, 1952). Here we see

Christina's re-engagement with and loosening of the binds that had held her back for so long, limiting her vitality and sense of self. Having witnessed Christina's process over several years, her experience was a welcome reminder of the healing power of the energies of the Self, a deeper instinctual wisdom possessing the capacity to heal, and to unite past and present, personal and transpersonal.

Science and mystery

If you cannot find it in your own body, where will you go in search of it?

The Upanishads

Although the energies, openings and healings described here may at first appear idiosyncratic to the untrained outside observer, they stem from what is universal within us beneath the level of personality. The potential is enormous as the body becomes alive with spirit; senses awaken, and repressed emotions surface and find expression. Links between affect, sensation, and internal imagery that have been sundered by disassociated trauma, or undeveloped due to lack of early affective attunement can undergo healing, further development, and integration on neurological and interpersonal levels (Kalsched, in press). This is a far cry from the kind of 'spiritual bypass' that would take the individual 'up and out,' into the head toward a safe haven, disconnected from the deeper sources of repressed emotional pain stored in the body (Stromsted, 1994/1995, p. 20). Instead, tissues 'hummm . . .' in palpable cellular resonance – a 'shimmer' that carries transcendent energy, which can then be grounded in the body and brought to consciousness (Woodman, in Stromsted, 2005).

In recent years, medical science has begun to study embodied experiences of sacred phenomena. With the rise of interest in yoga, mindfulness, and other forms of meditative practice over the past several decades, scientists have been conducting research on the biological aspects of these practices to better understand their beneficial effects in calming the body and mind, improving interpersonal relationships, and in opening practitioners to spiritual experience (Davidson & Harrington, 2002; Siegel, 2007). Psychologists and neuroscientists using fMRIs and other forms of advanced imaging technology have gathered evidence for the impact of meditative practices on brain chemistry and function.

The findings show an increase of theta waves, which deactivate the frontal areas of the brain that receive and process sensory information about the surrounding world. The frontal lobe, 'the most highly evolved part of the brain which is responsible for reasoning, planning, emotions, and self-conscious awareness' (Stein, 2003, p. 53) tends to grow quieter. Activity in the parietal lobe, a posterior cortical area that orients us in time and space, is also lowered. By decreasing activity in the parietal lobe, inner and outer boundaries are softened, accompanied by a sense of feeling more 'at one' with the universe.

Brain imaging studies have also shown that the nonverbal state of mental and physical relaxation often accompanying meditation is reflected

in a preponderance of cortical activity in the right hemisphere (Schoore, 2003, p. 172/Fig. A-16). Structural changes in areas of the brain that are important for sensory, cognitive and emotional processes also occur (Lazar et al., 2005). Mystical experiences have been noted to affect the parietal cortex, body schema systems, and self/other distinctions (Beauregard & Paquette, 2006, p. 189), shifts that reflect an overall sense of interconnectedness, contentment and enthusiasm for life.

Movement that arises from such an inner, meditative ground thus has the power to free us from our limited, separate, often routinely mechanical ways of experiencing ourselves and our world. Authentic Movement practitioners are able to surrender their habitual reliance on the primarily verbal, rational, linear, time-bound properties of the left hemisphere. Instead, opening to the nonverbal, affective right brain allows for further access to and expression of their emotional, imaginal and relational capacities. Through subsequent verbalisation with the witness, these experiences can become further integrated with the left brain, widening the scope of consciousness. Movers and witnesses alike commonly experience themselves moving beyond the confines of their script-bound personal stories and isolated sense of self. The witness's sensitive attending, mirroring and compassionate presence can assist in promoting healthy attachment and affect co-regulation.

This safe, affectively attuned environment also promotes the development and plasticity of new brain connections (Schoore, 2003, pp. 12–15) providing healthier alternatives in feeling, thought, action and in interpersonal relating. Anticipating developments in attachment theory and contemporary neuroscience, Jung noted that 'we cannot fully understand the psychology of the child or that of the adult if we regard it as the subjective concern of the individual alone, for almost more important than this is his relation to others (Jung, 1927a, para. 80). He also posited that 'the collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual' (Jung, 1927b, para. 342).

'From the dawn of human history dance has been a sacred language, a way of realising our connection to the cosmos,' says Dance Therapist and Jungian analyst, Joan Chodorow (Chodorow, 1982). Through the practice of accessing bodily sensations and learning to follow movements rooted in a deeper source, movers are able to give embodied form to the myths that have informed humankind dating back to creation. As we saw in the previous examples, images of Christ and Inanna, the wounded child, the Great Mother, suffering and redemption, death and rebirth, and other icons corresponding to one's cultural and religious background are among the many 'faces' that this energy may take on as it arises through embodied sacred journeys, such as these.

'Transcendental power,' says choreographer and researcher, Gabriele Wosien, 'articulates myth and ritual as it articulates the shapes of plants and trees, the structure of the nervous system, or any other processes beyond men's deliberate control' (Wosien, 1974, p. 29). In this way, Authentic Movement helps us to reconnect, with the deeper instinctual resources and spiritual intelligence that dwell in the molecular structure of our cells. Through the

practice we may recover un-lived parts of our nature, on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal levels (Stromsted, 2001, pp. 54–55).

Conclusion

From the foundations of archetypal myth to the present day corporate towers of the industrialised, developed world, Authentic Movement offers profound avenues for transformation. As modern people, our bodies and dreams still have the power to engage us in experiences that are both deeply personal and universal, spanning continents and centuries. Life on this shimmering, suffering planet has been deeply enriched for me through moving and witnessing with people from many countries and ethnic groups. Through the practice we can stay close to what holds most truth for us, opening to direct, embodied experiences of the sacred, rather than adopting outmoded dogmas and unforgiving gods. By listening to our body's deeper callings we can give shape to the feelings and images that surface from underground wellsprings, toward consciousness. The practice also has socio-political significance as we learn to discern and reclaim our own unconscious 'shadow' projections – inner fears and demons that we otherwise tend to attribute to outer 'others', making enemies of them and generating 'cause' for warfare (Stromsted, 1998, p. 160).

Our ravaged planet also needs our awareness and compassion, as our attitude toward our body mirrors our relationship with the Earth's Body. Numbing, lack of respect, and manipulation of the flesh go hand in hand with the mismanagement and overuse of our natural resources. Authentic Movement provides a holistic approach to reversing this trend, bringing us greater body/mind/spirit healing and integration in the current disembodied zeitgeist ~ a warm path, in sacred ground.

*Every child
Has known God,
Not the God of names,
Not the God of don'ts,
Not the God who ever does
Anything weird,
But the God who knows only four words.
And keeps repeating them, saying:
'Come Dance with Me,'
Come
Dance.*

Hafiz (1999, p. 270)

Author's note

Names have been changed for confidentiality and written permission has been obtained for all extracts.

Biographical note

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Note

1. The term 'her' includes men and women.

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