

Embracing the Body, Healing the Soul©

by Tina Stromsted, Ph.D.



Blue Heron by Shannon Holt – Shana MacDonald, model. Ryder Gledhill, photographer

Nature as Witness

Dance was medicine, and nature my deepest container and first witness. As a child, when painful feelings arose around our family dinner table, I'd clear the table, load the dishwasher, and then dart across the street into the alfalfa field. I'd find the clearing at the center of the field and begin to spin and turn, holding the horizon line steady with my eyes as my body whirled. Blue sky, clouds, green leafy corn stalks, sweet alfalfa and the ground under my feet brought freedom, as family tension drained from my body into the soft, receptive earth. There, I'd dance, turning countless circles, my arms outspread. I felt full of abandon. Little did I know at the time that I was treating my wounded soul with core elements of Authentic Movement, which would become a cornerstone in my life and work.

A 'shimmer' ran through me; a life force that pulsed with spirit. Time stood still; there was a sense of oneness with the natural world all around and within me. In the natural way of childhood, I had stumbled on the whirling dance practiced by the early Sufis. Feeling free and

whole, my soul restored, I'd return to the house for more chores and homework. Nature was my primary witness.

Years later, while studying and performing dance and theatre, I realized that my heart was not in 'performing'. What really interested me was *transformation*, and how the body/psyche/spirit was involved in that. I sought the feeling of connection I'd experienced in my childhood fields. While teaching dance in my 20s, I began to focus not so much on the exactness of the students' technique, but on the 'shimmer' that came and went in their soul expression, the movement of light in the body. As I sought ways to support them – letting their vitality come through in the dance and reflecting those moments back to them at the end of class – many began to tell me their life stories. Wanting to better hold and understand their experiences, I did volunteer work in mental health clinics and returned to graduate school to study clinical psychology and dance/movement therapy along with ongoing studies in somatic practices, creative arts therapies, Zen meditation, personal analysis, and eventually post-doctoral studies and analytic training at the C.G. Jung Institute of San Francisco. (Stromsted, 2015, pp. 341-2)

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 you enter into the realm of the body, you encounter your history and all that may be dwelling there. 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. The body is not only personal, but cross-cultural and universal. Our thoughts and feelings express themselves as gestures, often striking chords of emotional and spirited recognition within people everywhere.

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, trauma work, quantum physics, affect and attachment theories and others. 'The body does not lie,' said the late modern dancer and choreographer, Martha Graham. The body remembers why it is here: for healing, for embodiment, for incarnation (Stromsted, 1994/5, p. 17).

Discovering Authentic Movement

In 1982, I was introduced to Authentic Movement by Jungian analyst and dance/movement therapist Joan Chodorow, and soon engaged in many years of study with her, and with dance/therapist and scholar of mysticism Janet Adler. I felt a deep resonance with the practice, as it took me back to my spontaneous dances in nature. However, there was an essential difference: here I had a human witness. How wonderful is that? To carry the *knowing* of nature into the realm of human relationship. Wounding often occurs within relationship, so it is within relationship that the healing process needs to occur. Authentic Movement deepens connections

with the self, with the other, and with the generative life force. The practice enables us to explore and acknowledge deeper feelings, images, relational dynamics and a more authentic sense of self as we re-inhabit our body in the context of a living, human community; the vital web of life. This is the foundation of healing and growth.

Application of Authentic Movement

“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

Authentic Movement is one of the most potent avenues I have found for recovering the body/psyche/soul connection. A Jungian form of dance therapy also known as ‘movement in depth’ or ‘active imagination in movement’, the practice provides a powerful avenue to engage the unconscious. Bodily expression brings clarity and healing to our woundedness, allowing the exploration and emergence of a new life energy.

Tina Keller-Jenny (Swan, 2011) and others explored including the body in their analysis with C. G. Jung and with Toni Wolff. Then, in the 1950s, pioneering dance/movement therapist Mary Whitehouse (1911-1979) further developed Jung’s active imagination method by engaging the body more fully in ‘*movement as active imagination.*’ Since then, Authentic Movement (as it came to be called) is increasingly practiced by therapists, artists, spiritual and healing practitioners, clients, educators and social activists. I believe its widespread use comes as a response to a growing need to embrace the wisdom of the body and its essential role in the process of integrative healing, development, and transformation. The ‘talking cure’ is not enough, particularly where repressed, preverbal, and/or dissociated material and traumatized affects are concerned. These take up residence in the body, until circumstances are safe enough to allow them to be felt, mirrored, brought to consciousness, and healed.

The attuned, containing presence of the witness/therapist in Authentic Movement allows the mover/client safer access to early, primary-process-oriented parts of the self. In the process, exploration of areas where development halted, together with transpersonal experience often emerge. Through this engagement, new neuropathways in the brain may be established, supporting further integration and embodiment.

This method has evolved with three major applications: as a form of psychotherapy, as a resource for artistic expression, and/or as meditation/sacred dance. Telling the story, developing healthy boundaries, engaging 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.” (Mindell, 1985)

AMI & Soul's Body

In 1992 dance/movement therapist Neala Haze and I established the Authentic Movement Institute (AMI) in Berkeley, California (1992–2004). Other founding faculty members, Joan Chodorow and Janet Adler, together with Joan's husband, Jungian analyst Louis Stewart contributed their areas of expertise to the teaching and curriculum development. Elements included Jungian and developmental psychology, active imagination, somatics, dreamwork, play, arts practices, choreography, theory development, clinical applications, and mystical studies. (Stromsted and Haze, 2007). Over time, additional faculty and guest teachers joined us in offering a variety of applications such as: treatment of cancer and other diseases; deepening our connection to nature; applied anatomy and neuroscience; poetry and storytelling; and non-violent community action.

Dreamdancing

From childhood, myths, fairytales, and dreams guided my understanding of life's challenges by showing that natural cycles of death and rebirth illuminate the path. Jung called this "individuation;" the journey toward wholeness. In the early 1980s I developed Dreamdancing® as an approach that engages the energies, feelings and action of a dream, helping to further embody qualities that can guide and enhance one's life. Exploring dreams through the body helps us 'incarnate' the inner life energies that are being out-pictured through the dream, seeking insight and integration into daily life. (Stromsted, 1984; 2010).

One way to work with dreams in the body is to identify key gestures which can be strung together like beads on a necklace in a dance that speaks directly from the nonverbal, emotional midbrain where the images are formed (Stromsted 1984, 2010; Wilkinson 2006). Clients can also deepen a connection by stepping into a dream character and continuing the dream through an active imagination process. When practiced within group settings, themes and stories often emerge from the 'collective body' (Jung 1927, par. 342; Adler, 1994/1999) bringing insight to both individuals and the group, enhancing community.

BodySoul Rhythms®

Jungian analyst Marion Woodman made a significant contribution to engaging the body in healing the body/psyche/spirit split with BodySoul Rhythms (BSR), which she co-created with dancer Mary Hamilton and voice teacher Ann Skinner. After completing their Leadership Training Program, I was invited by the Marion Woodman Foundation to co-facilitate training programs with Meg Wilbur (a Jungian analyst, voice teacher and playwright), and Dorothy Anderson (an artist and communications specialist). Our trio furthered the evolution of the work by leading 'Wellsprings of Feminine Renewal' intensives, adapting myths and fairytales into plays that illuminated the feminine individuation journey, integrated with other BSR elements such as movement, voice, dreamwork, art, mask work and ritual.

The Dance of Three, an application of Authentic Movement, is a vital component of BSR. It involves a primary mover, an engaged responder, and a reflective witness who take turns moving to music, witnessing, and containing. Their reflections on their own and each other's experience bring it to further consciousness. Inner listening combined with outer engagement enhances our

ability to be present with ourselves and others in increasingly conscious relationship, inviting a level of perception that can evoke deep respect and empathy.

In both Authentic Movement and BodySoul Rhythms®, the presence of a containing, compassionate witness contributes to healing, as the client opens to his or her senses to natural movement, and to the unfinished business and un-lived potentials within. The witness/therapist, in turn, is often touched by the places her mover ventures to go; in this way, both people can open to their deeper natures and to the divine, the third space that they share.

At my Soul's Body Center, I continue to engage and develop elements from Authentic Movement, BodySoul® work, Dreamdancing®, Embodied Alchemy® and other creative, embodied healing methods. Soul's Body® work focuses on attending to natural movement; supporting the development of a conscious, embodied container; engaging the sacred feminine and masculine; and working with the imagination, metaphor and dream images in the body. We also investigate the somatic foundations of the transmission process of multigenerational family patterns, explore body symptoms, cultural elements, and incorporate the use of non-judgmental/non-interpretive language in creative and healing work.

Conclusion

Over the years, I have come to see Authentic Movement as a 'safe enough' container, a kind of uterus from which the client/mover may be reborn, in the presence of an outer witness or 'good enough' mother figure, from the 'symbolic mother' of his or her own unconscious. This in turn roots him or her in the instinctual ground of nature, the Great Mother. My practice has made it clear to me that containment – psychic, physical, emotional and spiritual – is necessary in order for deep transformation to unfold. In this 'cocoon' the melting of old defenses, including the body-stiffening that reflected them and held them in place, can begin to soften (Stromsted, 2014, p. 50).

A more evolved awareness of self makes possible a more sensitive and nuanced relationship with your environment – interpersonally, politically and ecologically. The body plays a central role in this; for with a more vital, felt sense of our own embodied experience, we cannot help but resonate with the life force that animates all living beings. Instead of dissociating, projecting, becoming combative, and/or fleeing to spirit when feelings in the body are too uncomfortable to bear – thus passing them from generation to generation through unconscious trauma patterns – we can find a spiritual home in the body (Stromsted, 2014, p. 55). 'Shimmer' extends, and the seeds from my dances in the fields continue to grow.

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