

Healing into wholeness: Psychotherapy practice informed by The Discipline of Authentic Movement

Introduction

In this article I offer my personal reflections as a somatic and movement psychotherapist whose practice is profoundly influenced by study, with Janet Adler, of the Discipline of Authentic Movement. I am also a teacher of this discipline and people study with me in both individual and group contexts. In this paper I am referring only to individual work with those people who undertake personal therapy with me, not with those who are students. I discuss, with examples, how the foundation of the discipline – close attention to embodied experience on the part of a mover and a witness – serves as the core of the therapy process, whether or not we are working within the form of the movement practice. The deep listening to what the body knows, the attention to the relational resonance between both embodied experiences, and the rigour of the speaking practice which seeks words expressive of the immediacy of the lived moment are the ground of the therapy work. I do not offer a full description of the discipline but rather I interweave accounts of particular moments in psychotherapy sessions with those aspects of the authentic movement practice that for me underlie what happens within the therapeutic relationship. In this paper I bring attention, in particular, to the intersection between psychological process and the experience of utter presence in the moment. At this gateway the concentration on personal embodied history may open out to a spaciousness, no longer so bounded by the personal, and a knowing that we are whole and complete, just as we are. Here we meet the healing that is inherent in the relational practice of presence.

The Discipline of Authentic Movement is a practice in which a mover closes eyes and in silence listens deeply to impulses that arise from sensations, emotions, intuition. As the mover attends closely to her experience these impulses may unfold through the body in visible movement or may remain as internal experience. What is important is the concentration on staying present with each moment, with no intention to 'do' anything. The witness sits to the side of the empty space, seeing the mover and bringing the same close attention to her own somatic experience as it resonates or 'moves' in her body while in the presence of the mover. Afterwards they speak together, both seeking vivid words in the present tense that express the experience as directly as possible rather than speaking about it.

The deep listening to present moment embodied experience and the rigour of a speaking practice which seeks words expressive of the lived moment are the ground of both the movement practice and the therapy work. The therapy client is the 'mover' and the therapist the 'witness'. In this paper the terms mover and client have been employed interchangeably to refer to an individual undertaking

personal psychotherapy with me, even if I am not speaking of an actual movement process.

It is important to note that the practice of authentic movement is not in itself a form of therapy. It is used in a wide variety of contexts by diverse practitioners. The shared foundational element in all practice is that of allowing movement to unfold from embodied experience in the presence of a witness, without conscious intention or direction. In this paper I am writing about the particular mode of practice called the Discipline of Authentic Movement, with regard to its manifestation in my psychotherapy private practice. In this therapeutic context, in those sessions when we choose to engage with the movement practice, the client and I not only bring to consciousness and language her less conscious, nonverbal movement experience but also explore any resonances in her psychological history and lifetime patterns. In groups with students of the discipline (i.e. not in a therapeutic context) our verbal dialogue remains largely focused on the movement experience itself.

The invitation to a client to enter the movement practice constitutes only one thread of my psychotherapy work. However, my own study of the Discipline of Authentic Movement over many years has profoundly informed everything that happens in the therapy room: the quality of my presence as therapist; the way I invite the other into a similar presence with herself; and the language we use to speak about our embodied experiences.

Throughout this paper the word ‘witness’ is used not in the general sense of one who sees but in the particular context of the mover/witness authentic movement practice as developed by Janet Adler (2002). This witness brings a full-bodied presence, deeply concentrating on her own experience while closely accompanying the mover with her attention. Every cell of the witness is awake to feel how her own being resonates as she sees the other. This witness has moved through the density of her own psychological history, meeting herself in those shadowy corners ready for light, thereby enabling a clearing, a release, an opening into clearer presence, able to be with the mover without so many of the projections that obscure clear seeing. The development of this quality of clear embodied consciousness in the witness has been Adler’s particular focus in her development of the practice. The study of the role of witness has deeply informed all relationships in my life and has been the most profound and helpful guide in my work as psychotherapist.

Presence is enough: ‘I don’t need to do anything’

A woman¹ walks through the garden, crosses the threshold and enters my studio for a therapy session. She enters in silence, sits down opposite me, looks into my eyes. She sees me seeing her. She exhales deeply. In time she chooses to speak. She tells me that in journeying here her thoughts had been

¹ For simplicity of writing style reference is made throughout only to women. Men also participate in the authentic movement practice and in somatic psychotherapy.

busy and her body reverberating with difficult issues in her life. However, upon sitting in her place, feeling my presence with her, feeling the familiar studio space – warm, quiet, clear and spacious, large windows looking out on the tall trees standing like an outer circle of witnesses – she finds herself ‘emptying’, feeling free, in body and thought, from the grip of emotional turbulence, simply ‘here’, accompanied.

As a somatic psychotherapist and teacher of the Discipline of Authentic Movement I have so many times experienced such a moment, when I find that shared presence, within a safely contained clear space, is the most important element in the healing process. Again and again I hear the words of my teacher, Janet Adler, speaking as witness in the Discipline of Authentic Movement, “may my presence be enough” (personal communication).

This gift received through study of the discipline, this trust in the sufficiency of presence, has profoundly informed my psychotherapy practice. One learns to trust the not-knowing, not-doing, the empty space, the silence, the spaciousness of no-thing, making space for all things, for wholeness. We come to trust that compassionate presence with the essence of who each one is, no matter what our wounding, can guide us to our own healing. The presence of the other, the witness, serves to embody this trust in the whole-making, healing process inherent in our humanness. In the early years of my practice I too have needed witnesses to hold this knowing for me, this trust, while I closed my eyes in their presence, following impulses, allowing movement or stillness to happen, experiencing the doubting, fearful, shadowy corners of my being, in time internalising – as movers learn to do -- the compassionate gaze of my witnesses, coming to trust, as they do, that ‘ I am enough. I am all I need to be. I am complete, just as I am’.

Naming

And now I come to the difficulty of writing this article: how to talk about an experience whose essence is that no words are needed, no identifying, defining, no explaining or interpreting, no stories. As soon as words enter this spacious emptiness they begin to fragment that which is whole. Additionally, they separate us from the lived moment, speaking about it as though we are beside it rather than living it. As soon as language names one part of our experience, the unnamed is excluded and our conscious experience of ourselves may become one of separation and fragmentation rather than connection and wholeness. Our ego identity may be so much less than the whole of us: ‘I am this. I am not that. I should be something else.’

In a short story by Ursula LeGuin entitled ‘She Unnames Them’ (LeGuin, 1988, p.195), Eve gives back to Adam and his father all the names they have given to living creatures:

None were left now to unname, and yet how close I felt to them when I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my

skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to smell one another's smells, feel or rub or caress one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm – that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food.

Two people in a group, moving with closed eyes, happen to meet on the floor. They have both developed sufficient trust in the form of the authentic movement practice and in their own bodies that they are able to follow surprising, unfamiliar impulses that arise, without inhibition. In their encounter they become two creatures -- snuffling, nuzzling, sniffing, entwining, playing, wrestling together. Both delight in this experience. Both recognise this experience – the remembering is in their cells.

The work: Digging deep, moving through

Each one who undertakes psychotherapy with me finds her way to the studio with some need to know herself more fully than her everyday consciousness allows, to alleviate suffering, to unfold her psychological history in order that she not feel trapped by habitual, unhelpful responses that constrain her experience of life. Sometimes I and the mover may sit and speak, while attending closely to somatic experience, hers and mine; or we invite movement to emerge while I stay close, maybe speaking together (here we use the fundamental principles of authentic movement without working within the structure itself); at other times I sit to the side as witness, leaving her alone in empty space and silence, with eyes closed, to meet herself within the form of the authentic movement practice. Whatever we do together, the quality of my presence is always deeply informed by my study, over many years, with Janet Adler.

We, mover and witness, engage with the personal stories that emerge: life experiences for which she has words and those for which there are not yet words, i.e. experiences that emerge as she listens to her body and perhaps allows movement to arise from sensations, feeling states, emotions, memories, impulses. Often the movement is surprising, cannot be explained, but intuitively feels 'right'. Whether or not there is visible movement she is always a 'mover', experiencing her living body. And I, as her witness, am also listening to the feelings of my 'inner mover', developed over many years of practice. These are the feelings and inner movements that are evoked in my body in the presence of the other, allowing me to 'feel into' her experience with her.

Together we listen to what her body knows. In this archaeology of embodied experience we unearth, from dark hidden recesses, experience that has never been conscious (often preverbal), or feelings which have been unwelcome, or unbearable, or unloved. The witness receives everything with acceptance which

is easy to do because the privilege of being with someone who risks closing her eyes and moving from the deepest parts of her being, in front of us, so readily awakens compassion. The mover is seen with utter respect for her experience, often in moments when she feels only shame. To feel seen thus supports the possibility of seeing ourselves thus, with love.

The mover often feels fear of the feelings that may be opened up, for example pain, terror, shame, rage too difficult to contain or to bear. There may be a fear that the feelings could destroy herself or the therapist, her witness. The witness is always attentive to safety. The mover is never left alone in an overwhelming experience. Together they learn when it is right for the mover to surrender to an impulse and when it is better to touch only the edge of it. There is choice here. One need not be 'swept away' by a tidal wave of emotion. As they practise focusing on present moment body experience there is greater distinction between the past and the present. The mover is becoming increasingly conscious of herself, her freedom to choose, less influenced by habitual emotional reactions, more trusting than fearful of her body experience, more able simply to be here (and to know when she is not), more able to feel connection with herself. Her 'inner witness', which refers to her consciousness of herself, is becoming more spacious, more open to the present, less cluttered with stories, reactions, judgments, interpretations from the past.

A woman is speaking of a distressing recent occurrence in which her original developmental wound regarding feeling unacknowledged, unseen, was triggered. As we speak together, she fully re-enters the embodied experience of collapse, hurt, shame and despair. She has learned, with practice together, to listen attentively to how these feeling states manifest themselves so she can describe to me in detail what is happening. As so often occurs, the very noticing and speaking of feeling states, with an accompanying witness, bring about subtle shifts. Our inner body landscape is always in movement, when we pay attention. She begins to experience an upward awakening, an enlivening in her spine, moving both her physical body and her energy body, lifting her into her full height and bringing a firmness of tone in her body core. Her presence expands, upward, outward, with a quiet certainty. She becomes, to her surprise, transformed. Her words are spoken with a vigour that is new for her: "I am here." I, her external witness, have so often seen her, accompanied her in these experiences of utter despair. On this day, in an instant, her own 'inner witness' awakens to 'seeing' herself. In that moment, for her, the certainty of her existence and of her worthiness is everything. Her distress, her history have dissolved: "I am here".

Living words

We, as human beings, do need the words since they are an important bridge between lived experience and consciousness, a way of knowing our experience. The dialogue between mover and witness after the movement experience is essential in the practice. The nonverbal must be brought into consciousness and language in order to be integrated within the totality of

one's being. A fundamental way in which the Discipline of Authentic Movement informs my psychotherapy practice is in the quest to find language that approaches as closely as possible the expression of the direct experience of a lived moment. The intention is to convey, with exactness, its essence rather than merely fragments selected by our familiar ways of perceiving ourselves and of attributing meaning. In attempting to bring all of this embodied experience (sometimes preverbal) into consciousness we need a new language. In our culture we have little practice in listening inwardly, in giving somatic experience such detailed attention, in according it such importance, such worthiness; nor do we have practice in the work of finding words that speak from this experience directly, rather than speak about it. As Eve, in LeGuin's story, discovered (following the 'unnaming') (LeGuin 1988, p.196):

I could not chatter away as I used to do, taking it all for granted. My words must now be as slow, as new, as single, as tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining.

This is rigorous work, to find new language that does not carry old assumptions, narratives or interpretations. As mover and witness we speak in the present tense, sometimes closing our eyes as we re-enter the moving moment. We track in detail the movements and sensations, seeking to name what is present, not searching for meaning. How we speak the words is important, for example, the tempo, the rise and fall of our inflection, the tone in our voice reflecting body tone. We seek to speak of our experience in "movement words [that] glisten as the bare bones" (Adler, 2002, p.16). We may use many words in order to name as closely as we can (often long to name) that which in its essence is unnameable: the felt experience of the lived moment, what the body knows. Janet Adler speaks of "...a felt shift from the words carrying symbolic meaning or narration, towards the words energetically becoming the vibrations that they are, and thus directly being the meaning themselves" (Adler, 2007, p.264).

Presence as witness, as therapist

A woman sits opposite me. Neither of us knows what will happen next. Our eyes continue to look into the eyes of the other. Here we stay, for most of the session. We discover that this is her work: to experience the tiny movements of the many muscles of her face while seeing and being seen by another. As we sit together thus, in session after session, she discovers the new possibility of her face remaining quiet, settled – not needing to 'put on a face', a smile for the other, no longer feeling her own truth unwelcome. As we sit, over time, she starts to feel an alignment within herself, so clear, so present in her vertical axis, while also acutely aware of the thread between us, holding us together in utter connection. This is something new for her: the possibility of being in relationship with herself and with another at the same time.

In this experience I am the therapist and the witness holding the space, holding the time, containing our work, and I am also, in some degree, another mover. As both of us sit in apparent stillness and see each other we are feeling the impact of this mutual seeing resonate in our faces and bodies. There is continual inner movement in both of us. When we speak, I speak to a certain extent as a 'moving witness', sharing from my own experience that which I feel may be helpful to her (and containing anything else). Thus she has the opportunity to learn how it is for another to be in her presence, while she is staying with herself.

Whenever I sit with another in the intimacy of the therapy dyad, I am aware of two qualities in my presence. Firstly, I am engaging directly and empathically, responding with the fullness of myself as I face the other. At the same time, my attention is wide, my body feels wide, at times I have an impulse to extend my arms to the sides, encircling. Here I am aware of the space surrounding the story and the feelings that are arising, space that is quiet, empty, like the pause at the end of the exhale.

Back and forth we go, immersed in the unfolding of personal material, at moments opening out into a spacious clearing. The mover is engaged with the feelings, memories, stories of her personal experience, with the therapist listening, responding, reflecting, laughing, crying with her and then, in another moment, we both exhale and know that we are simply here, together.

The embodied relational presence of the therapist and the focus on language that stays close to the client's felt experience of sensation and emotion are not, of course, unique to the practice of the Discipline of Authentic Movement. Various psychotherapy practices attend closely to somatic experience. There are, however, certain elements of the discipline that may distinguish it from other body-based psychotherapeutic work and that can be particularly supportive in the therapeutic process. Of primary importance is the movement itself, occurring within a context that is without direction or intervention from the therapist. This moving process is allowed time (between 5 and 45 minutes, depending on what feels right to the mover) during which the therapist sits aside while the mover meets herself. Rituals, such as the meeting of eyes of mover and witness at the beginning and end of the movement, serve to provide a containing form to the practice and, importantly, imbue the practice with a sense of sacred space, different from everyday consciousness. The silence, the empty space into which the mover steps, the darkness of eyes closed all support the possibility of opening to the unknown, of opening to states of being beyond ego consciousness, i.e. familiar identity, and allowing deeper body knowing (personal and transpersonal) to manifest.

Also distinctive in the Discipline of Authentic Movement is the completely non-directive presence of the witness/therapist, remaining silent for extended periods of time, trusting that the layers of the mover's somatic experience such as sensation, emotion, moving energy need that time to unfold without interruption, interpretation or narrative. This is an utter surrender to the ongoing

lived experience of the moment. Ritual contains sacred space as both mover and witness together enter silence, emptiness, the unknown.

Rigour is essential in the search for the words that really reverberate with the movement experience, rather than approximate it. The witness/therapist helps the mover dig ever deeper, with ever greater exactness, for example, asking “How do you experience ‘sad’ in your body, or ‘strong’?” or other questions such as “If there is an image, trace it down into your body being, seeking the particular sensation, feeling state, emotion, intuitive knowing that gives rise to this image”. We might spend one hour unfolding the experience of just one moment in the ‘move’, enabling the mover to meet herself ever more closely.

A Gateway

We do the work together, mover and witness, client and therapist, staying as present as possible with the fullness of experience. As the mover meets herself here, in the utter truth of what her body knows, in the full impact of her suffering, accompanied by her witness, she is, perhaps for the first time, not alone in this suffering. This changes everything, this human companionship that supports us to be with that which has felt most difficult to face in ourselves. Perhaps now, at last, with this companionship, we can be fully present, embracing all parts of ourselves. And sometimes this moment of being so present can be a gateway, opening out from entrapment and isolation in the grip of our wounding to an experience of spaciousness and belonging. An intersection between personal psychological process and the experience of utter presence in the lived moment – a moment in which we know that we are complete and whole, healed, just as we are. Our history remains unchanged, but our relationship to it is transformed. The longing that brings us into therapy -- to know ourselves better, to meet the hidden parts of ourselves, to feel seen -- may open out into experiencing something larger than ourselves. This embodied knowing may become, in a moment of full presence, an experience of connection with all of existence.

Janet Adler reminds us that our wounds can become our guides, if we come into conscious relationship with them: “Wounds never heal completely, perhaps mysteriously protecting who we are becoming because of our experience of our past” (Adler, 2002, p.42).

Some movers may arrive swiftly at this threshold. A woman who has recently begun therapy feels drawn to fully enter the authentic movement practice. She closes her eyes and lies on her back on the floor. She feels a need to stretch through the muscles and tendons and connective tissue of her arms and legs, reaching, stretching to the utmost extremity of her reach. She feels very large. Then, in a ‘wonderful’ moment the urgency of this compelling reach quietens, her limbs soften, no longer straining to their utmost, and yet she continues to feel large -- even larger, expanded far beyond the limits of her physical body, so big, but now experiencing this vastness as an energetic current in her body rather than a muscular movement and physical sensation.

When we speak together we learn that her impulse to stretch is multilayered: it is physical, in her muscles; it is imbued with the emotion of longing; it derives from her personal history which expected striving to the utmost; and from a cultural context which celebrates achievement. So densely-textured is this impulse to stretch. Then, in a moment, comes the shift and all of this dissolves into spacious expansive effortless being. In the first she is located in her personal story, bounded by her physical body, her personality, her history. In the second she experiences these specific boundaries dissolve and she is in the realm of the transpersonal, wherein her being opens out to be part of a greater whole, rather than formed around and bound to a specific personal identity.

Staying

In the process, as movers, of coming into relationship with our wounding, so closely accompanied by the external witness who stays with us and trusts that every detail 'matters', our inner witness learns to stay engaged with every moment, welcoming the repetition of familiar gestures rather than judging them: 'Not this again!'. Our body wisdom, that repeats these gestures, apparently understands that 'staying with' truly means staying with ourselves: that we must meet, again and again, those parts of ourselves that are calling for consciousness.

A mover experiences, over many years, a familiar gesture of one hand tenderly cradling one side of her face, moulding with exactness of touch to the contours of bone and soft skin. This gesture has many intense emotional resonances, personal and generational: longing, loss, grief, protection, holding, being held, sorrow, love. Each time this gesture, once again, appears it brings something new. Over time there is less and less contraction around the pain and the longing evoked by the history. There is more acceptance, sometimes expansion into the exquisitely delicate quality of this touch. There are moments when she does not distinguish between suffering and joy – the touch holds both.

One day, after years of meeting this gesture, experiencing in it many forms of human emotion, of personal history, she speaks of an experience as mover:

'My right hand arcs forward and upward into space, then circles back towards me. My hand, softly curved, moves slowly downward in front of me – without touch -- so slowly, so precisely moulding to the contours of my body. Once again my hand arcs forward and up, again it circles around to caress, without touch, the front of my body. My face, my body know this caress, this soft cradling, this blessing. Every cell in my face, in the front of my body quivers with acute awareness of this connection that needs no touch, with the knowing of such tenderness. This circling of my right hand goes on and on and on and I feel the pulse of an internal accompanying rhythm. So simple is this gesture, so compelling in its repetition, again and again, so sure in the knowing that this is a blessing, so joyous. The form of my body dissolves – there is only this ever circling movement flowing without cease, my heart opened wide. The bell rings. The circling continues. Even when my physical body comes to stillness, the

feeling of circling continues. I want to laugh, to dance. I grin at my witness, in acknowledgement of the ending of the moving experience, of her seeing of me. I have some difficulty in being appropriately solemn as we stand in the closing circle. I know my experience partakes -- at the same time -- of spacious, ceaseless joyous Being, without boundary, and of exuberant human aliveness.'

Back and forth in life we go, alive, entering every cranny of our embodied experience, every whisper or roar of emotion, muscle, bone, the thrum of blood, the hum of our nervous system, the membrane of skin that surrounds our unique bodied beings and then, in a moment, perhaps in the pause at the bottom of the exhale, we are in the gap, in the space between, in the empty space where we find ourselves unbounded by our unique identity, our particular bodied experience, and we become part of a greater whole. Sometimes I use the word transpersonal here. Janet Adler refers to experience of the mystical. We each have our own words for this experience of utter presence in the lived moment, an experience which is essentially unnameable. The simple words often come closest: Complete. Whole. Here. In the studio the therapist accompanies the one who has come to work with her, as together they find words to bring to consciousness all dimensions of personal being and then, at that gateway between individual personalities and experience of utter presence, each sees the other in silent acknowledgement of being part of the same complete moment. No words needed. We are simply here, connected.

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