

**MOVING TOWARDS MEANING; THE JOURNEY FROM CREATING IN  
DANCE TO A HEALING PARADIGM OF DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY  
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The roots of dance therapy in its modern practice worldwide are founded in what John Martin has referred to as the “basic dance.....the dance arising from an innate potentiality of all men.....the presence of a stirred up emotional state”. (1) How from these common roots shared alike by performers, choreographers, educators and therapists, dance evolves into an healing/change transformation modality, and how paths diverge from these common roots is the focus of this workshop and discussion.

The pioneer and iconic modern dance trailblazer, Isadora Duncan, helps us to understand and create a bridge of understanding of the DANCE which is focused upon creating and performing, and the DANCE which is focused upon personality change, insight, heightened self awareness, self direction and self determination. From Ms. Duncan:

*“For me, the dance is not only the art that gives expression to the human soul through movement, but also the foundation of a complete conception of life, more free, more harmonious, more natural”.*(2)

And indeed, that is what we are hoping to achieve when our focus is therapeutic and not necessarily aesthetic.

The creative elements which are fundamental in dance, cut across ethnicity, culture and social orientation, offering opportunities for celebration, healing and self development, and certain of these shared elements become key to the development of therapeutic and healing paradigms in dance therapy. These elements may include, but certainly are not

limited to the use of imagery and imagination, the development of range and flexibility in the body and its expressive potential, developing skills in expressing oneself using the movement elements of space, time, energy, flow, the use of rhythm and/or musicality in one's physicalized expression and becoming adept at improvisation and spontaneity.

Though the aforementioned elements are common in both DANCE in which the focus is skill development leading to performance and choreography and in DANCE in its therapeutic and healing focus, how and where they are applied and with what intent is how these elements diverge into their respective professional orientations. Key here is the concept of intent in helping us to understand how to separate and distinguish the DANCE which prepares us for careers as performers, teachers and choreographers and therapeutic Dance. Fred Alan Wolf, the esteemed physicist who has written extensively about the New Physics has said that:

*“Intention is the tool that precipitates a probability into an event....intent is the hand that moves synchronicity, that weaves events into a tapestry of coherence.....if intent is absent, you can't see meaningful connections between events and the world appears random, capricious, even chaotic....When my intent is clear, pathways appear if by magic, taking me from one place to the next”. (3)*

In dance therapy, there is an implied, inherent intent to assist an individual to move through blocked growth patterns and unfold into one's fullest potential. Performing, and/or high skill development is not tantamount to the process or the treatment in dance therapy as it is in creative dance. But working through issues and themes as they become manifest in one's physicalized, expressive movement, and developing a range to be able to express and hold for a greater sense of one's self and potential is key to the therapeutic process. As Valerie Hunt says:

*“The healthy body is a flowing, interactive, electro-dynamic energy field. Motion is more natural to life than non motion-things that keep flowing are inherently good. What interferes with flow will have detrimental effects. As energy field blocks are removed and energy flows, neuropeptide information chains are apparently activated to facilitate normal healing responses.”(4)*

Energy as expressed through flow and rhythm inherent in one's basic expressive movement helps to catalyze an inner dance which allows one to begin to express repressed, or damaged, or fearful parts of the deepest essence of the personality. As one begins to discover their own unique “rhythm-print” and become familiar with repetitive movement patterns, which often have become habitual expression, they begin to have a choice for determining a growth cycle.

Awareness of how an individual expresses herself, and where s/he is unable to move, begins to allow the individual a healing cycle of a personal developmental imperative. Awareness itself as a process appears to lead ultimately to the acceptance and strengthening of an individual's core essence. S/he is given a sense of physical control

and extended range, which in turn creates an expanded perceptual focus with the ability to discern more conscious options for behavioral choices.

Within the expressive dance movement event, as guided and facilitated by a dance therapist, (rather than a dance teacher, who has a different intent and focus), there is the opportunity to discover the purity of the movement element's relation to us personally; to our own unique being, our core or essence, or "soul-self". As we are able to interact, re-discover moving with an awareness of energy, of time, of space and of flow, we are then given the opportunity to develop, release, re-form new rhythms or patterns more appropriate to our current state. We discover that we may have outgrown earlier formed patterns- as early defenses, but they no longer assist us in continuing to grow. Older patterns, formed when we were young and essentially helpless, can become heavy, a burden, out of synch with our current state. Thus, we have an opportunity to both release and re-form using the basic dance elements.

Concepts such as *balance, alignment, control* and *strength*, can be directly experienced through dance therapy experientials, and the processes which help the individual find their extended meaning as metaphors in their daily life. This is partly how dance therapy focused experiences facilitate the integration and alignment of body to mind, mind to spirit, spirit to body, etc. Dance is often the manifestation of the spiritual, ephemeral worlds, the "felt" but not seen until physicalized world. In personal expression comes the manifestation of our core or essence. It is in the interpreting of the imagery which occurs during the dance therapy session that the potential for the themes and their relation to an individual's life are manifest. There are certain universal or recurring themes seen in dance therapy which can reflect both the psychological and the physical manifestation of the movement elements. For example: *active-passive, open-closed, receiving-giving, self-non-self, accept-reject*, are but a few of the many body-based, dance explored themes which lead to deepening insight and change.

In having the opportunity to dance our own unique dance, we begin to attune with our biological timing, our unique physiological cycles and rhythms, and the subtle resonating energy in our fields which hold patterns of cellular information experienced on an inner "felt level". In dance therapy we are offered a unique therapeutic path to releasing restricting or non-aligned patterns as they become manifest in body posture, degrees of tension, everyday "pedestrian" movement patterns and in expressive gestures. As we begin to move spontaneously in a purely non-competitive, self-expressive manner, authentic qualities of the deepest core of our essence begin to become discovered and realized. Trudi Schoop, one of the first generation of pioneers in the field of dance therapy who made the transition from dancer-performer-choreographer to therapist, shared how she became devoted to helping individuals discover dance as a healing/change modality:

*"I've always thought of the body as man's tangible reality....in the course of choreographing my fantasies and dancing them out in reality, I remember now that positive changes occurred in my nature....those first pantomimes acted as a 'dance psychoanalysis'...."(5)*

Forming is a key ingredient in both the creative dance and the therapeutic dance processes. In creating dances per se, we are sorting, changing, releasing and forming, but the intent is to satisfy a particular aesthetic we are attempting to express. In therapeutic dance, the forming process is similar, but again the focus and intent are geared towards insight, translation into interpretation, leading to a healthier body image and self concept and a more mature and appropriate expression of our current stage of development. The end result is not as much about the dance which has been created as it is about the person unfolding into the next step of their developing potential. The dance they have discovered and formed, hold this new form or pattern. Whereas in the creative dance forming process, the dance product is the goal and end result. The formed dance is the key.

As human beings we are biologically programmed to develop and grow according to a genetically encoded schedule---a **pattern** of growth and development. Most of our patterns are indeed the “maps “we use to navigate the tricky waters of living...relationships, careers, life’s dreams for ourselves. These “maps”, these developmental patterns assist us in negotiating our daily lives, the rituals of the mundane right up to and including the more abstract experiences of the deepest imagination and spiritual realms of being. But, finally, what does any of this have to do with dance and dance therapy?

Within any pattern, with a skilled therapist to initially guide us, we are able to discern a particular rhythm. The rhythm embodies time and space. In physicalized expression, we are able to become aware of patterns or habitual movement themes and thus have the option to release, transform, extend or re-form them when and/if needed. Meaning, we may have outgrown the inherent biological imperative, and the pattern now holds us back, creating a kind of trap interfering with our growth and change. Essentially, it no longer expresses what we are feeling or experiencing internally. As we become aware of, sensitive to our various expressive rhythms, and their subsequent patterns, we begin the insight-to-change process of therapy. These perceived and discovered patterns actually have helped us to define our “personhood” (i.e. roles, responsibilities, obligations), and they served an important purpose in helping us through various stages of development. It is when they are outgrown and outdated that we must attempt the change process. Recognizing that there is fluidity in any pattern, no matter how imbedded the imprint lies the first step towards creating a model of optimum physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual attunement and alignment with our highest purpose/self.

There are certain basic assumptions which are foundational to a healing model of dance in its therapeutic capacity. Three most basic to most dance therapy models are:

1. Movement expression of an individual is reflective of intra-personal dynamics;
2. A change in movement expression will result in a personality or behavioral change;
3. The greater the range of movement, the more adaptable or better able to cope with the changes and stresses of one’s environment. (6)

Healthy functioning implies adaptive behavior-----meaning that an individual has the facility to use appropriate dynamic elements, and can mobilize the body in space with ease and integration of thought, of feeling of expression. There becomes a discovered congruency between what we think, with what we feel, and with what we have the capacity to express.

Research in dance therapy has shown that significant changes occur within dance therapy treatment, particularly in the areas of the body image and the self concept. Results found working with special populations of children include improvements in attention/relatedness, and other key learning skills. Research has also found that the energy “released” during dance therapy sessions functions as a mobilizer, and tends to reduce fragmentation, diminish defenses and allow and facilitate the integration of feelings, with thoughts and actions. Also, in energizing and having the opportunity to find a non-verbal voice in energy expression, depression and anxiety reactions are lessened and decreased.

In summary, the roots of dance therapy are in the ancient healing practice of dance; only in dance therapy, the focus and intent shifts to create a holding environment for the therapeutic processes to unfold. Dance events or experiences with a conscious, healing/wholing focus have the potential to cause shifts in an individual’s personal frame of reference allowing new behavior to evolve. In re-remembering how to use our physical body expressively, we are allowing ourselves to discover a vehicle for bringing into conscious awareness a “subtle body dance” which helps lead us to alignment with our highest potential for growth and change.

As dance movement helps us to re-connect with our basic essence, our personal rhythmic expression and **life force**, it leads us to a union with our creative source, our higher self, our fullest, manifest potential.

As the great modern dance pioneer Mary Wigman poignantly wrote:

*“The dance is not only an act of time and space; it also is the art of the consciously lived and fulfilled moment”.* (7)

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