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Integrity of Body and Psyche

Some Notes on Work in Process¹

Janet Adler

For many years I worked with people, mostly children, who were swimming in the realm of the unconscious. With movement as the medium, I tried to give them a taste of the conscious world and a hint at the joy of the power of choice between these two worlds. Recently, I find myself working, still primarily through movement, with adults, men and women, who want very much to release their constrained consciousness and know more deeply the life within themselves. They seek a freedom of commerce between the two worlds. And so my work changes, as a reflection, I'm sure, of my own personal growth. I grew from being a young woman primarily unconscious of my inner world to becoming a woman with a developing consciousness of myself and the way in which I grow. As my own consciousness evolves, I feel more capable of being with others as they journey into their unconscious lives and back to a clearer and fuller sense of themselves as conscious adults.

In these last few years I have been exploring a particular way of movement work which I experienced with my teacher, Mary Whitehouse. As I integrate some of what I learned from Mary, I realize that the mover can make deep and transformative journeys which can be appropriately understood within a psychological framework.

As I work with people in their search for connection between body and psyche, I have discovered some clear similarities between the process of movement therapy as I experience it now and the processes described in

¹ Revised paper, previously published in the *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual American Dance Therapy Association Conference*, Santa Monica, California, 1972, from a presentation at the same conference.

verbal psychotherapy. I am going to briefly and simply try to identify some emerging parallels within a progression of five stages of development. Although I describe them as distinct stages, in actual experience the boundaries are fluid.

I will be speaking about this particular kind of movement therapy and verbal psychotherapy for people who are not mentally ill – people just like us who are searching for a way to live well – to live better by learning how to allow themselves fuller access to the complexities of their individual development. I speak of a *process* called movement therapy, not a cure. My clients are each in his or her own way choosing to listen to and to speak from their inner lives with care. Some of them are also students of dance/movement therapy, of psychology, of the arts.

The search for authentic movement

In my work the first stage in movement therapy with an individual in a one-to-one setting is the client's search for authentic movement. Authentic movement, as Mary Whitehouse (1970) used to describe it, is movement that is natural to a particular person, not learned like ballet or calisthenics, not purposeful or intellectualized as 'this is the way I should move' to be pleasing, to be powerful, to be beautiful or graceful. Authentic movement is an immediate expression of how the client feels at any given moment. The spontaneous urge to move or not to move is not checked, judged, criticized or weighed by the conscious mind.

Gradually, as a client becomes comfortable with authentic movement and can recognize when she is experiencing it and when she is not, the true discipline of this sort of work emerges. She can move completely freely, with less inhibition, and yet she is conscious of what she is doing, as if she is watching herself move but not interfering, not even commenting. She is allowing herself access to her unconscious and, as her unconscious speaks through her movement, she can become conscious of what she is doing. This is what I learned in Mary's presence. Freedom to stumble upon authentic movement and then to slowly bring such experience in relationship to one's will is not unlike the natural development of a small child. Mary often, and beautifully, spoke of this important parallel.

In psychotherapy there is a similar beginning. The client tries to sort out and disentangle authentic from 'adopted' feelings. He is also seeking an experience in which he can speak freely from his heart, without his mind judging and criticizing that which he says. It sometimes can be more difficult

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to find one's authentic nature through speaking, as it seems to me that the body lives much closer to the unconscious aspects of the mind than the conscious aspects. And it is the realm of the unconscious which I believe holds our most important and powerful secrets. Growing closer to oneself means knowing, and then owning, these secrets as they are freed from hiding and allowed to be integrated with one's conscious reality.

The expression of authentic movement

Again, in my work, the second stage in movement therapy is the open expression of authentic movement. Once it is discovered, time is needed to learn to trust, to live with, to enjoy and explore the new discovery. Clients in this stage always experience the freedom to move with great joy. Some of my richest experiences in my work with Mary were imbued with such freedom.

In psychotherapy the corollary would be freely and continuously talking of one's true feelings, an experience that is strikingly rare and precious. Often during this stage in both types of therapy, the individual learns that she has permission to move in any way that she wants or say anything she wants to say. An awareness of freedom develops as the underlying ground of trust – in herself and in her therapist – becomes firm and reliable.

The recognition of an emerging repertoire

The third stage in movement therapy is recognition by the client and therapist of a slowly emerging repertoire: the same movement patterns continually reappear. The client finds herself moving again and again in the same ways. Authentic movement seems to have powerful and self-imposed limits and such limits often come to the client as an unwelcome surprise. In psychotherapy a similar phenomenon begins to appear – the client speaks repeatedly of the same themes or the same person, of the same behavior patterns.

The exploration of themes: focusing

The fourth stage begins the real work for most of my clients. In response to recognition of repetitive behavior, they begin to experiment with ways to focus on a specific theme, to get to know more about it, to go with it, to exaggerate it, to confront it. In psychotherapy, it seems to me, the very same thing occurs: the client begins to explore, dissect and work with the

recurring themes in his repertoire. It is at this stage in both movement therapy and psychotherapy that different therapists guide the client in remarkably different ways in an effort to help them come into fuller awareness of the problem and its modes of resolution.

The experience of resolution

The fifth stage is in the experience of resolution. My teacher, John Weir (1969), speaks so very clearly when he says: 'The only way out is in and through.' In the fourth stage the client is going in and through the feelings that need to be experienced. The fifth stage is the coming out, emerging with freed energy for continued growth. The deeper and more authentic the fourth stage, the more powerful and clear is the resolution. Thus the fifth stage embodies feelings such as relief, amazement, clarity, peace — all of the good and deserved aspects of self-love.

In movement therapy this stage is often more verbal than the previous ones. It is a time to collect, synthesize, organize and digest the process in which unconscious material has been experienced in the body and subsequently made conscious. The experience of resolution in psychotherapy is very similar to the same experience in movement therapy. In the fifth stage of psychotherapy the client also experiences clarity and relief as the pieces of his puzzle finally fit together and make sense as a whole.

A case study: Heather

I have referred briefly to these similar stages of work and want now to describe the illustrative journey of a movement therapy client whom I shall call Heather. My interest here is in providing an example, drawn from my own experience as a movement therapist, of a client's progression through the stages described above. I am not attempting an exhaustive account of the therapeutic process. I will address only a few aspects of Heather's work.

In discussing a client's work it is difficult to speak consistently of the therapist's behavior and to speak certainly of the relationship between the client and the therapist. Therefore, before describing Heather's journey, I want to say something of my behavior as a therapist with people like Heather who are not mentally ill.

The typical pattern of a movement session is as follows. Like Mary once did with me, I begin by asking my client if she wants a 'movement problem' or if she wants to move freely. If she wants a 'problem' to help her get started

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(this is often the case in the early sessions), I suggest a simple one which may lead to or stimulate an authentic movement. These 'problems,' usually related to the exploration of polarities, were a central aspect of Mary's work. For example, I say: 'Move, with your eyes closed, from a standing position toward the floor. Let the gravity pull you down. When you are down as far as you want to be, begin to move up. And when you are up as far as you want, begin again to move down. Continue to explore the cycle between the earth and the sky in this way'.

Often, a client gives me a clue, like 'I feel depressed,' and then asks for a 'problem.' I might then suggest finding a way to move in which her body can feel heavy and move downward. After the client moves, we talk together about her experience and sometimes about my experience as an observer. Mary always invited discussion with me after I moved.

As Mary was to me, I am primarily a guide to my client as she explores her feelings through movement. I suggest going with, staying with, exaggerating, waiting and, most importantly, I encourage her to trust where she is – to trust herself – and to force nothing. I find I increasingly trust the natural process of growth. Learning to give ourselves what we need, as much as we need, means satiation, and satiation means free energy for more growth. As I learned first in my work with autistic children, there is great power in regression to unfinished periods of development. Reliving, re-experiencing unconscious material frees the client to bring that material into consciousness, to talk about it in a way that makes sense to her. When it feels appropriate, I selectively share personal experiences with my client as I too am 'in process' and therefore do not represent a 'finished product' in the client's eyes. Also, I feel more real, more present, when I can be honestly responsive.

I will speak about a series of twenty-eight sessions that cover approximately a three-and-one-half month period, with an average of two one-hour sessions per week. Heather and I first spoke together because she wanted to become a movement therapist and therefore had many questions about preparation for such a profession. I talked about psychology and dance but I also mentioned the critical importance of her own inner work. I insisted that those of us who want to truly help another person realize himself more fully must first begin to realize and awaken to our own psychodynamics.

Heather understood and wanted to begin working at once on her own personal growth in movement therapy. I learned that she was nineteen years old and lived at home in the New York area with her parents. She was an only

child. Her parents owned and together operated a toy store. She was not seeing friends, not going to school, not taking dance classes (she had been a dance student for years) and she was sleeping and eating a great deal. She felt immobilized: she couldn't leave her parents' home but she hated staying.

At the start of work with a client I rarely have more information than that with which I began in Heather's case. I find that I trust the client and come to know her best, in the beginning especially, through her movement. There are times, however, as the work progresses, that I explicitly ask for material from the client's personal history.

Heather moved quickly through the first stage of experience, in which she discovered authentic movement with little difficulty. Her only distraction was danced movement, which she gave up completely by the third session. As she then moved into the second stage, into free exploration of her authentic movement, there was great fullness, variety and enthusiasm in her work. When Heather moved, she was 'all there,' moving almost always from an unconscious source. This gift of accessible unconscious movement is rare; its cost can be a tenuous grip on self-management. In the beginning she had little or no memory for her movement and little concern for clarifying, organizing or verbalizing her experience. Heather simply had an insatiable need to move and, once she discovered the freedom with which she worked, she moved consistently with a sense of herself as free and newly found.

In the third stage I experience the themes in a client's repertoire emerging on three different levels: specific body parts emerge as more or less available and energized; culturally symptomatic movements become apparent; and idiosyncratic movements become visible. Heather's hands are the best example of specific body parts invested with energy.

In the very first session her hands were obviously more tense than the rest of her body. She wrote in her journal: 'What was interesting was the more I tried to relax them, the tenser they got.' In the second session, when her hands were again exceptionally tense, I suggested she focus on them, let them go where they wanted to go, not try to make them relax. She was able to do this easily and soon her hands clasped tightly together, her entire body sank and her face looked very sad. At the end of the experience she spoke briefly of a feeling of sadness. By the fifth session, Heather's hands were clawing at herself and she became aware of anger welling up beneath the sadness.

Heather was repeatedly shrugging her shoulders back and pushing away from her torso with her hands and arms during the first five sessions. These gestures might culturally be read as 'get off' or 'go away.' When exaggerated,

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that gesture pattern might commonly suggest claustrophobia. Indeed, her verbal response after experiencing this pattern during the sixth session was: 'I've always been very claustrophobic.'

Idiosyncratic movements are most powerfully expressive of the less conscious aspects of the personality. They seem to have no meaning to anyone else and appear unrelated to anyone else's movement patterns. Of its very nature, then, it is difficult to identify an idiosyncratic pattern as such until it is repeated so many times that it becomes clear. Even then, I seldom have the slightest idea what it means or where its source lies. These movement patterns or qualities truly reflect the uniqueness and the enormously complicated nature of the individual.

An idiosyncratic movement pattern developed in Heather's work while she was lying on her side. She lifted one leg straight up and then put it down, bent, foot flat on the floor in front of her other leg. She then pushed against the floor with her bent leg, pivoting her body around ninety degrees. As early as the fourth session this pattern evolved into consecutive quarter turns until she was into a tantrum. It was very brief and very frightening to her. She wrote in her journal: 'It's amazing how my body had remembered that motion where my mind had forgotten about it.' After this experience she told me that she had temper tantrums frequently during latency between the ages of nine and twelve. This characteristic leg lifting and pushing reappeared in fragments consistently throughout the sessions until she experienced a resolution which I will describe in some detail later.

A second example of Heather's idiosyncratic movements was unusually slow movement. She appeared to be moving in slow motion. This quality of movement began to emerge around the eighth session and gradually became predominant in her work. I will also describe more of this later.

I have mentioned some of the themes: specific body parts, movement patterns and qualities of movement of which Heather and I gradually became aware. I will now briefly sketch the way she worked these themes and thus developed a richer understanding of herself.

As we focused on her hands in the early sessions, they increasingly embodied feelings of anger. The feeling tone of the short tantrum was clearly anger. The more she lifted and pushed her leg, the more she stopped or changed this movement. She vaguely associated it with the tantrum but repeatedly stopped herself, rarely conscious of the stopping but very conscious of her fear. This is the kind of moment at which I urge my client to be aware of what she is doing – not stopping what she is doing but simply

noticing. As Heather became conscious of the ways in which she was blocking her leg lifting and pushing movement, she experienced more and more frustration. I then suggested that she try to learn more about the movement by staying with it a little longer. As she did so her fear increased, as did the concomitant feeling of knowing she was getting closer to 'something.' Heather never chose to work on this pattern. It simply kept reappearing out of free movement. More and more time was spent in the sessions with this pattern and the variety of unconscious ways she blocked it.

During the thirteenth session she was violently stamping, covering the entire room. She appeared proud and, when she stopped, looking very satisfied, she said: 'I stamped them out.' She did not know to whom 'them' referred. I asked her if she was finished and she decided she was not. She proceeded in pantomime to collect the remains of 'them', burned them, smashed the ashes with a huge imaginary stone and then suddenly noticed a tiny flower growing out of the ashes. This embodiment of a fantasy is a rich example of the power of imagery and its relationship to authentic movement. After the release of anger through the stamping, the fantasy extended the experience of aggression. When it seemed that 'they' were totally and completely destroyed, new life freely grew from the ashes.

After the thirteenth session, when Heather's fantasy occurred, she began to talk openly of anger towards her parents, a feeling of which she could not remember being conscious before. There was also less self-directed anger in her movement after that session. The work with her hands, the gradual awareness of the leg lifting and pushing, and many other movement experiences in the first thirteen sessions seemed to be expressive of unconscious material related to feelings of anger. The expressive movement brought the feelings into consciousness, which, in turn, allowed Heather to examine them, own them and accept them.

Heather felt less tense, relieved, with a clearer sense of herself and her situation at home. And then, slowly, during the following weeks, she became depressed. During the nineteenth session she reported feeling a little better. Then suddenly, in the midst of free movement, her leg went up and down in the obvious pattern of beginning the quarter turn push and, this time, unlike the very first brief tantrum, she did not stop. She was fully into a wild tantrum, her entire body deeply engaged in the expression of rage. The instant the tantrum concluded, much to my surprise, Heather became immobilized. She 'could not move.' Her breathing quickened. She looked

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pale. In a few minutes she sat up and spoke of a 'film' that covered her the instant the tantrum felt finished.

And so came the resolution of one theme – she went into and through the rage – and, at the same time, came the beginning of a new theme. As we talked, it became clear that Heather had experienced the tantrums as a child as a fight against the 'film.' She said she felt claustrophobic and unhappy during much of her childhood. Some force was keeping her from being the 'real Heather.' The tantrum had been a successful way of keeping the 'film' – the force – from overwhelming her. Perhaps because of the full expression of her anger toward her parents, her energy was now freed to address directly the threat of the 'film.' The film, represented by a slow motion in Heather's movements, was the new 'enemy.'

Again, becoming familiar with this made it less of an unknown and, therefore, less frightening, so that confrontation was gradually possible. After the twentieth session she wrote in her journal:

I had an image of a greasy, grey film coming from the kitchen of our house. Before I could get to it, it engulfed me, coming very quickly towards me in swirls. I wanted to move but couldn't. It was so powerful, more powerful than my own will. At one point, one of the swirls turned into a face, looked at me and laughed, as if to say: 'you idiot, move.'

After the twenty-first session she wrote:

I got the image again and still couldn't move. My body didn't mind because I didn't seem to panic. All my concentration was going towards the film. I started getting really dizzy. I seem to get dizzy when I get near to something.

During the twenty-second session the film seemed to her to be pulling her apart by encircling her legs and arms. She wrote again after the twenty-third session:

For the first time the film made a clearing (I didn't make it, the film did on its own accord). It made a tunnel but at the end of the tunnel a person was standing there in red, calling me to go through the tunnel. I couldn't move.

By the twenty-fourth session Heather was experiencing extreme frustration and exhaustion. She was trying anything to get more information about the 'film', wanting so much to be freed of it. She tried cutting it but it bounced back. She tried becoming the film and realized: 'I was my own prison.' This

realization was an important turning point in Heather's owning and taking responsibility for her own experience. She had to encounter the film repeatedly, letting her unconscious emerge in her own time, before she could understand or fully accommodate the feeling and the roots of her immobilization.

During the last two weeks of this stage of her work, the 'film' surrounded her frequently outside the movement sessions as well as dominating the sessions themselves. 'All my feelings and movements are death-like,' she wrote in her journal. On occasion, in the sessions, she would fall over and not catch herself responsibly. I told her that I would not catch her, that she had to catch herself. She then moved as if she had understood: she was responsible for her own work.

Feelings of fear increased as she remained in the immobilized state for longer and longer periods of time. Finally, during the twenty-seventh session, she lay 'death-like' with rapid breathing, pale face and tremendous fear for perhaps five minutes. When she sat up she said she felt like a huge block of cement was falling on her. I encouraged her to lie down again and to go with that fantasy. She did, and the odyssey that followed, taking her through life and death passages, was indeed extraordinary, full of vivid imagery reflecting her struggle at that moment with the life and death issue of the 'real Heather.' She ended, in the personage of a bird, by climbing out of a horrible dark prison, out into the sky and the sunshine, growing new feathers as she climbed.

I think Heather had experienced what always had been most threatening and frightening to her: no self, no 'real Heather.' In reaching for her own identity as separate from her parents, her work brought her to the inevitable but very frightening choice to live as herself and let aspects of her experience of the parents within her begin to die or to let her 'real self' die and live only the reflection of her experience of her parents.

Conclusion

Heather worked through to resolution two closely related themes. Her movement released anger at a body level. Through consciousness of her frustration and fear, and acceptance of her anger, she was able to relive fully the tantrum that her body knew so well from childhood. The second theme had to do with fear of immobilization, which first was expressed through the experience of the 'film' enclosing her. Again, as consciousness and ownership developed in relation to the 'film,' she was able to allow herself the feelings of

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immobilization and, finally, to let those feelings possess her. She then experienced a kind of death. Aspects of the internalized parents died, an archetypal occurrence in the experience of adolescence. And, as always, the psychic experience of death allowed a rebirth. More of the 'real Heather' was available for living. Heather returned the next session announcing that she had applied to college. She said she felt much better. She soon moved out of her parents' house into a dormitory and fully into the experience of college.

Heather followed several problems through to resolution, two of which I have described in detail. The first stage of her work concerned her discovery of authentic movement. In the second stage she hungrily enjoyed expression of herself through the free movement. Conscious awareness of the meaning of the movement was irrelevant for her at that stage. In the third stage we watched specific themes emerge – through her hands as specific body parts highly invested with energy, through her culturally described claustrophobic movements and, most powerfully, through her idiosyncratic movements, like her leg lifting and pushing pattern, and her slow motion movement. The bulk of these notes is concerned with how these idiosyncratic patterns were trusted and followed. Heather was able to confront each of them and thus experience the joy of resolving these problems with clarity and intelligence in the fifth stage.

Heather continues to work with me in movement therapy and has circled back at times on some of the themes, but the struggle is less intense and often of a slightly different nature. Her work continues to be rich with imagery. New themes appear and old themes slowly disappear as she grows towards a deeper consciousness of self.

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