DANCING THE DREAM
An exploration of the possibility of using dream images and dance in a therapeutic context.

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This article is based on an assignment undertaken during a dance therapy course at RMIT University Melbourne in 2003. For the assignment I explored the idea of taking the symbols that arose in a dream into movement and considered how dance and dreams may have a therapeutic use for people interested in self reflection, exploration and personal growth.

Dreams provide a connection to a world that is ‘unseen’ and as such form a bridge between consciousness and the unconscious. There is a long history of dreams being used as a way of connecting with a world that is a little apart from our every day rational reality. There are biblical references to using dreams for guidance or as a way of ‘listening to God’; dreams have been interpreted as part of psychoanalysis; the shelves of most book shops will have a least a couple of books explaining the meaning of dream symbols. Apart from interpretation, dreams can be connected to the idea of active imagination as developed by Jung - a way of being in creative relationship to the unconscious world (Kaplan-Williams 1985).

Underlying the practice of Active Imagination there are a number of concepts to be considered. Within a Jungian derived framework the psyche is seen as layered and can be divided into the conscious and unconscious. The unconscious contains parts of the whole psyche that have been forgotten or repressed and relate to a personal history and also aspects that are more impersonal and relate to the collective - “patterns of psychic perception common to all humanity, the archetypes” (Hopcke 1889 p14). The notion of ‘The Self’ represents an image of wholeness or potential totality and the ego as the conscious part of the individual that “…at best acts as the Self’s executor” (Salman 1997, p. 62).

There is an innate urge within the psyche to move towards wholeness - through a process of continuous integration and assimilation of the energy held within personal complexes and related archetypal patterns. (Salman 1997, Kaplan-Williams 1985). Psychological growth is seen as occurring by means of attempting “… to bring the content of the archetypes into conscious awareness and establish a relationship between one’s conscious life and the archetypal level of human existence” (Hopcke 1989 p. 16).

Active Imagination is a way of consciously relating to unconscious material. Unconscious material is revealed through symbols and images - Woodman (1988) describes images as “…the bridge between consciousness and the unconscious… [as]... we dream… our instinctual nature produces images that reveal our spiritual condition” (p. 150). Whitmont & Brinton Perera (1989) write of dreams as providing “… images of energy, synthesising past and present, personal and collective experiences…. it holds up to consciousness metaphors and symbols of the unceasing energy flow, sustaining and shaping personal life, it shows the underlying patterns with which, for the sake of our health, we need to be in more conscious relationship” (p. 2-3). In Active Imagination the ego is a participant in the communication and as such listens, watches, and may dialogue with images which arise spontaneously or emerge through creative activity or dreams. (Hopcke 1989, Kaplan-Williams 1985, Whitehouse 1979).

Active Imagination can also be considered in relation to the body and to dance. Being in relation to bodily experience can be looked on as a balance to the more abstract world of images and thoughts. As Ulanov (1997) says, “Without the body, we can easily float off into the timeless quality of the archetypal, lured by no longer having to be ourselves…”(p. 307). Similarly Chodorow (1988) describes the body as “ground[ing]... the limitlessness of the unconscious” (p. 96). The work of Woodman & Dickson (1996) brings to light the value of attempting to bring together the psychic and the physical worlds - “Body work, like dream work is soul work; together they illuminate that point where the apexes of the spirit and matter touch and do not touch … the individuation process follows a
natural flow ... energy blocks, which are personified in dreams, are manifested in the body in encoded patterns, which shape the body, adjust the posture, determine the movement or lack of movement ......" (p. 172).

Authentic Movement is a form of dance therapy that has been closely aligned with Active Imagination. Mary Whitehouse is looked on as the person who first worked to merge dance and the ideas of Jung (Levy 1982). She saw that movement could be a form of Active Imagination – “Where does movement come from? It originates in what Laban calls an inner effort - ... a specific inner impulse having the quality of sensation. This impulse leads outward into space so that movement becomes visible as physical action. Following the inner sensation, allowing the impulse to take the form of physical action is active imagination...” (Whitehouse 1963, p. 53). Using movement as a form of Active Imagination may bring forth forms of physical expression that are outside the usual forms of expression and movement (Levy 1982). Chodorow (1988) identifies five origins of movement in the psyche, which she lists as “1) conscious, ego directed movement, 2) movement from the personal unconscious, 3) movement from the cultural unconscious, 4) movement from the primordial unconscious, 5) movement from the ego-Self axis of identity” (p. 101). She suggests that, although patterns may emerge as being typical of different levels, in practice there may not be clear differentiation and “movement at any moment is not necessarily from any single level of the psyche” (p. 123).

Authentic Movement is described as a way of attending to bodily felt information, of listening to the wisdom of the body, of allowing movement which emerges to reveal unresolved pain and conflict, of providing a container for repair of physical and emotional trauma and an opening to moving forward for the energy that has been held. Authentic Movement is seen as a process of transformation, (Stromsted 2001, Musicant 1994; Wyman-McGinty 1998). The practice of Authentic Movement involves a mover and a witness - one who is just open to the impulses and following the movements they lead to and the other who is there to embody the idea of a consciousness that is observing - and gradually with experience the mover will begin to simultaneously move and witness the process that is unfolding. (Stromsted 2001, Adler 2002).

For my own exploration these ideas were the underpinning - the ‘why’ - for wanting to take dream images into a dance form. The process was really one that unfolded - much in the way described by Woodman (1992), “... we concentrate, put the image into our body and then let it go where it wants to go, change as it wants to change. The transformations are the healing process” (p. 136). I was guided by the four steps of active imagination described by Stromstead (2001) (as defined by Jung’s protégé Marie Louise von Franz); a) opening to the unconscious, b) giving it form, c) reaction by the ego, and d) living it.

I explored moving with the images - giving them form - carrying them through my body - allowing them to move and change over a period of weeks. Within my experience, after bringing the dream images into a bodily consciousness, there developed a different relation to the symbols - some of the images became important; others did not stay as the process developed; images gave rise to associations, memories, reflections and questions. New images and movements, not part of or suggested by the dream, evolved. I used drawing to record impressions of the process. I also reflected on the movement qualities that evolved in relation to the Laban framework. Eventually I created a dance that represented the dream and the process.

The fourth stage in Active Imagination as described by Stromstead above is to ‘live it’. One of the ways I have related to this part of the process is to consider the qualities of movement and reflect on how I can be open to bringing the experiences into an everyday awareness. There is also the feeling of having engaged in some sort of process that is ‘nourishing to the soul’; that will hopefully lead to an expansion and growth. Ulanov (1997) says, “if we do engage in ego-self conversation we come to know archetypal images inhabiting our very own bodies ... our bodies stretch, both physically and psychologically, into new postures, new attitudes of acceptance and celebration. ...We feel we live in our finite form, in touch with something infinite” (p. 308). Whitehouse (1979) writes about the process as having an effect on everyday life - “moments of insight... reveal a direction... show a development ...act as support and encouragement for what must be lived through, creating energy for the next step ...” (p. 84). Musicant (1994) suggests the process of attending to and responding to ones inner experience leads to fuller and more meaningful relationships with ones self and with others.

I felt I experienced dance as providing a powerful form for relating to, exploring further, and giving expression to energies that a particular dream was presenting at that time.
References


Apology

Our apologies to Joan Ingalls. An error was made in the spelling of her name in Quarterly Vol. 2, No. 4. 2003. It was correct in her excellent article, *A Sports Counselor and Social Therapist-in-Training: Searching for my Identity as a Dance Therapist*, p. but incorrectly spelt in the Contents Page and Editorial. Information about Joan’s ‘Personal Integration for Enhanced Athletic Performance’, can be found on her website [www.focusedtraining.com](http://www.focusedtraining.com)

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