

In conversation with Sharon Chaiklin - November 2007

Elizabeth Mackenzie



Sharon Chaiklin

On a warm spring day, following the “Weaving the Threads” Dance Therapy Conference in Melbourne, November 2007, a group of Dance therapists joined Sharon and Harris Chaiklin for an alfresco lunch adjacent to Melbourne’s lovely Royal Botanic Gardens. This is a brief summary of a lovely time together.

Elizabeth Mackenzie: The conference has stimulated my wonder at this gift we have as Dance-movement therapists, to share with others.

Sharon Chaiklin: I initially got the hint of this gift for myself when I went into the hospital situation with Marion Chace – it was obvious to see with people who were so isolated, so withdrawn; that they had something to say and express for themselves, especially working with dance as communication, as Chace did.

I always wore my long braid in hospital - I didn’t cut it; it became an identifier. People who couldn’t touch me could grab it. They could say “When the lady with the braid comes around...” They could remember that, if not my name! I was so often asked if I was a volunteer because they couldn’t believe a staff member would act like this. (By the

way; Chace always had on a large skirt, ballet slippers, and usually wore her hair up.)

The essential concern with which we dance therapists work, is the valuing of the totality of somebody; who they are and that they do have something to give. That’s what you’re exploring with this: That you know they have so much there. We are both in this situation in this time, and we are sharing it together- that’s the value.

Linda Murrow: This is so interesting-can you say something more about Dance-movement therapy and your work?

Sharon: It’s about finding the joy as well as the difficult things: About playing, laughing together; about accepting the range of experience; that it belongs to each of us.



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Rob Baum: What do you find annoying?

Sharon: I never felt any annoyance with patients...maybe staff at times. Whatever people do, they need to express at that time. “Let’s find out”: Maybe I can focus on what they may really want to express rather than what they’re starting with. Even an interruption becomes part of the experience: How do you deal with that? It is stating the obvious: Maybe sometimes it gets in the way, but we can deal with it. If you are immersed in the group process, anything that affects the group

becomes obvious. Listen to the words; it may not be being stated, but underneath, it is being said. It is a matter of being aware always. It's a big responsibility, but people are very forgiving, as long as your intent is clear; to be the best you can. You can be forgiven to try again - "Oh, I missed that one!"

"Why?" is the question to ask, so we can learn from our mistakes, which is what they are for.



Linda with Sharon

L.M.: This is so refreshing. Often we are in groups where we feel we can't say what's going on.

Sharon: State the obvious in an obscure way!

E.M.: During the middle afternoon of your three day workshop, participants were obviously deeply affected by their experience. (It followed work in dyads on the mother/baby relationship.) Why was it so powerful?

Sharon: People were willing to make themselves vulnerable and to learn from their experiences over the first two days. The work was demanding and intense. An intimacy comes from the openness. There is something so powerful about people moving together.

I get attached very quickly to groups with the chances people are taking; I look around at the end at all the special people - it's something that happens to me. I've been deeply moved four or five times with different groups of people; I have turned to the organizer - tears come.

Don't underestimate yourselves; the power of what you do with other people. I don't really know on some level the power of what I'm doing.

R.B.: Your openness as a facilitator permits this process to happen and to be supported. I felt with you the unstated quality of the holding, a very different quality.

L.M.: It's a very potent brew after Sharon's decades of working. I feel now I know what Dance-movement therapy is: Something about your understanding - a way of being with people, movement, process, music - enabled me to have a very deep experience in the group, not just myself. I felt we had all been together in a very different way.

Jane Guthrie: A way of distilling something, making it simple and clean - a wonderful teaching ability.

R.B.: Especially to deliver the profound in a very simple way.

L.M.: I was very moved by your "eagle" movement image which you shared with us.

E.M.: It was an inspiring, aspiring, noble and intimate gesture.

Sharon: My eagle was a metaphor, and symbolism. There were eagles at the Healesville sanctuary: (Sharon and Harris Chaiklin had visited the native animal sanctuary outside Melbourne. An open-air display of raptor birds' behaviour by the rangers, the birds flying freely, takes place there.) - It was very temporal. The keeper had to keep the eagle so it wouldn't fly away. A tiny speck above, a wild eagle hovering, put the birds right off.

R.B.: I am wondering about the work Chace did in Israel. I am thinking of work with survivors of the Holocaust.

Sharon: The material was explored, not spoken (where trauma might be recalled by speaking). In an ongoing group, something will emerge, in some form. In short groups (as in those funded by medical insurance), you aren't given the same opportunity.

I worked with a co-therapist, a music therapist, in a forensic unit in a psychiatric hospital. There was a woman who had killed her children, and other quite horrendous things, too. But if you still see people for who they are in this moment in time and you respond to them, they have some sense: Can they live with this, be accepted in some way? I would go weekly to see them and touch their hand. There were forty men in a "troublemakers" group. I would go over with my record player and never had any trouble. If you come in with your intention and honesty and clarity, to give something, one man would say to another's behaviour "Knock it off. This lady has come here for us." People understand; the group develops.

Once, in a back ward setting, I got hit. I was interpreting rather than listening to someone. The

woman, who suffered from schizophrenia, apologised the next week. It was early in my career. I said, "I wasn't listening to you properly." I never had any other trouble.

L.M: I think your work is structured to allow process: it allows what is going to happen. It takes a lot of confidence and integrity to facilitate this process. It is necessary to be very clear in your intentions. **We have come to this with who we are.**

Sharon: At some point there is **also** a moment of decision: Will I stop this group and start again, or will I let it go on?

Sally Denning: With new, emerging dance-movement therapists, what is necessary for them to learn, in their training?

Sharon: Experience!
They need to learn early where they are comfortable, where they want to work. One trusts that what you have in the dance-movement therapy is valuable and that it works - and then we keep adding to it. Sometimes people think that the new information about the work is more important than what we are doing; but it simply validates it. I think people are discovering now how important what we are doing is. It would be nice if you could get a dance therapy program back into place in a university in Melbourne. When the course at Baltimore closed, we had no more students on placement. The learning process and the impact on community are lessened.

We can always talk about our work: You never know who you might be talking to.

E.M: What is the source of the remarkable vitality of mature dance therapists?

Sharon: It is the dance. It is definitely the dance. During my hospital work, I didn't take any dance classes for several years. Then I did a week long series of classes with Liz Lerman, and then became an older intern in her company, and I have been performing since. I think it is the dance itself that keeps you alive. With mature movers - there is a certain presence about an older dancer that comes through expressively.

R.B: What of the performance element in dancing? It walks a line between...
(Here Robyn was interrupted by comments on the "wonderful and very moving" performance of her dance therapy group at the conference)

Sharon: There is a difference between someone who is very focussed on the actual performance,

and someone who is very interested in the experience the participants are having within the performance. You brought us into the performance with you.

R.B: The performers loved the audience! It lifted their hearts. They were certainly empowered by it.

L.M: Sharon has said that the thread of performance must not be lost. It must be brought back.

Sharon: It gives people something special. Here you are being seen in a way nobody looks at you - as a performer. There is a process to it, because you are a dance therapist - a process going on with you and with each of their relationships. There is nothing like success to make you feel good.

E.M: What is the place of speaking, of words, in dance-movement therapy?

Sharon: We are social beings, and after going through a lot of experiences where we don't need words, language is a social way of ending; another level. Words, embodiment and movement are not separate; they are all connected.

I had an experience in Japan, when I was asked to demonstrate dance-movement therapy in a hospital ward for people with schizophrenia and paranoid schizophrenia. The patients came in and sat kneeling, waiting very quietly. A cultural behavioural difference! I used images of a lion and seaweed, which I thought would be familiar to Japanese people. By the time the session was half way through, I didn't need the translator any more!

L.M: When might you return to Australia?

Sharon: I never thought I would be here once! I might go to Turkey next. But I loved being here and really do hope to return someday.

Thank you to Sharon Chaiklin, Harris Chaiklin, Rob Baum, Sally Denning, Jane Guthrie and Linda Murrow.

(Thank you also, Elizabeth, for providing our readers with this wonderful record of an illuminating discussion between inspired and inspiring participants. Eds.)

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