

# Reflections on Amber Gray's visit to Melbourne September 12 and 13, 2008

## The Center Post Framework (CPF) and Restorative Movement Psychotherapy a Model for Dance Movement Therapy across cultures



*Amber is the Clinical Director of the Rocky Mountain Survivors Center, a member of The National Consortium of Torture Treatment Centers, in Denver, Colorado.*

*The two-day workshop she presented for the DTAA was advertised as "a unique opportunity" and it was indeed a unique, fresh and stimulating experience. Amber travels far and wide to war-torn countries and disaster areas applying the model she has developed to assist in the treatment of the trauma, torture, and children's traumatic stress problems, that result from these terrible events. Her wealth of knowledge in this area and commitment to her work is impressive and the theory behind the work is as applicable to addressing problems of anxiety, stress disorders, or traumas from injury or illness, as it is in the devastating and tragic situations she encounters.*

*Two reflections of this workshop follow.*

### A Rich Snapshot

#### **Fiona Watters**

Amber Grey's workshop left me wanting more. It was only a snapshot into this framework, yet it was rich and packed with valuable ideas and information on how to work with the complex healing process of survivors of torture.

Amber spoke of the fragmenting of the self into parts and the rupture of an individual's boundaries with the administering of torture, and how one of the goals of the process is to begin the integration of the different parts of the self, using the body as a resource to do so. Changes in movement can lead to changes in the psyche (Levy, 1992).

We began with an experiential, we were asked to walk and become aware of what was going on in the body, this was used as a marker. We were then asked to imagine we were standing on the place on earth that we love the most. Amber spoke of the

importance of the client having resources to give them strength and help them not to be overwhelmed in the process. From there we went into a movement exploration beginning small and then expanding. At the end we went back to walking and were asked to notice the differences in the body from our first walk. She spoke about the primary objective being to develop greater expressive capacity through expansion of the client's movement repertoire. She suggested that this could be achieved through working with the client using the primary portals – spine, breath and weight and the secondary portals – time, space and rhythm. Amber took us through a number of experientials which focused on each of these portals. My favorite was the drum circle which focused on rhythm and was so powerful for me. I have used some of the ideas that Amber put forward in the circle with a number of my clients, with great success.



Another experiential I found most interesting was mapping what was happening in the body when remembering a positive and negative experience that happened in the past. We were asked to trace our body outline on some butchers paper and then

fill in the different body experiences on the paper. Not only could this be used to promote body awareness, it could also be a very concrete way of helping clients become aware of their physical boundaries, the awareness of which can be lost when they have been so violated. As well as this, clients seeing themselves outlined in space can be affirming that they exist, they are not invisible or undeserving of taking up space.

I found this workshop most valuable and am hoping that Amber will come back for a longer period next time, so that we can gain a more in-depth perspective of this very exciting way of working with clients.

**Fiona Watters, is completing a Masters in Counselling, is an Ass. Member DTAA, P. Grad. Dip. Dmt, Wesley Institute, trained as a dancer at the Australian Ballet School (Melbourne), worked in Germany as a dancer, is a personal trainer, pilates instructor and is now in dmt private practice.**

## Theory and Highlights

**Jane Guthrie**



I wasn't quite sure what to expect from the title of *Center Post Framework (CPF) and Restorative Movement Psychotherapy a Model for Dance Movement Therapy across cultures*, as developed by Amber Gray, but following this delightful taster would love to continue the work in more depth. I was impressed with therapeutic application being so strongly supported by a solid theoretical foundation. Amber's guideposts include, "movement is a primary language and dance is a creative expression of the body and the language of movement", "every breath represents the opportunity for change and transformation" and "the body never lies". (Gray, 2008)

Amber names the theoretical influences of her approach as Somatic Psychology, dmt, developmental psychology; the Poly-vagel / social engagement theory, the continuum of movement and Vaudu. (Gray, 2008). The crux of it, getting people back into their bodies and finding ways for them to engage once again with the outside world, is to achieve this through what she calls Primary Portals of Spine, Weight and Breath and then Secondary Portals of Time, Space and Rhythm. Simply based but with profound effect.

My understanding of her theoretical perspective is based on the following. Amber said that a person is traumatized when they have a problem with processing the painful experience, which results in the flight, fight, freeze response of the body.

But what is traumatic to someone is not necessarily traumatic to another. When a person suffers trauma, the arousal state reduces their range of dimensionality. There are different degrees of trauma, all of which can benefit from her approach. In most cases the nervous system – sympathetic (system of threat response) and para sympathetic – is resilient responding with flight, and or fight, when we are taken out of our comfort zone. People usually mobilise for danger, but for some when it becomes life threatening, they immobilize and people in trauma become stuck in this state. Energy is trapped and the hyper-arousal leads to restriction and feelings of helplessness.



Amber says that ideas about this have changed since the inception of the Poly-vagal system (PVS), which advocates restoring the ability to engage socially and develop confidence in using Space. The thinking is based on the distribution of the Vagal or 10th cranial nerve, which in the human has 2 branches that work together to influence the extent to which they inhibit the sympathetic system. Steve Porges (developmental psychologist, Co-Director of the Brain-Body Center, University of Illinois) who writes about Poly-vagal theory, says it integrates a variety of regulatory functions that cover us from safety to danger to threat, that involve in particular the autonomic regulation of the heart and gut, with the experience registering at brainstem level. The Accessory nerve connects to the Vagus nerve, linking the brain and spine. The Vagus nerve innervates the diaphragm – hence the importance of the breath and mobilizing the spine. We apparently come into the world with our reptilian brain engaged with fight/flight options and our early responses to threats physiologically encoded. This includes involvement of the cranial nerves of the face, also having effect on relating and engaging socially and our comfort or discomfort in space.

Amber says that we need to aim to get back to social engagement and relationships, work from the core and use basic Space and grounding work. She also says that how we relate to Space is a measure of how safe we are in the world and that this is about our sense of self. She pointed out that it is important to be aware that there could be cultural differences and in some cultures where there is more of a sense of family rather than self. Or in some other places these ideas may not be relevant, but in the main DMT can help people to restore meaning and we need to aim towards creating physiological mobilisation without fear - which could lead into play. Humans need love and a safe space and an external rhythmicity that can effect the internal rhythmicity.

My understanding again is that, where the person can be so abused that they ‘part ‘ from their bodies, the key is to start with the breath to get back into the body. The breath is the very beginning of developmental movement.



Have you ever wondered why we all use the breath so much? It is in itself, naturally, a means of inner becoming outer and the reverse - the beginning of the pathway towards social re- engagement.

In fact Amber’s approach is all about getting back to social re-engagement, with the essentials being as mentioned, the primary portals, then secondary ones. That is the breath and spine as components of dimensionality, activating the core, moving towards grounding and Weight, then extensions outward from a body reclaimed to re-engagement through Space (that is environmental Space with a capital S), Time and Rhythm. So, in addressing the immobilization we worked with the breath, used the Bartenieff Fundamentals to get to the core, the developmental progression according to Bonny Bainbridge Cohen and the development of movement in Space, bringing in Time variations and work with Rhythm.



From this theoretical base we were taken through a number of experiences that could be used, which included:

*Finding familiar stretches – tuning into the breath- inhaling on the stretch or exhaling on the stretch, developing into other stretches, adding shaping qualities or Weight to them – lightness or strength.*

*We played with this theme and turned it into a dance. Then we formed a circle and sent individuals’ stretches around the circle using Time variations,*

*initially slow, then fast, then back and forth to sound cues. We mirrored the stretches of others, then, still attuning, we progressed to changing, and/or reflecting those stretches.*

*We moved around the room on an in-breath, and were still on the out, or we moved around the room on the out-breath and were still on the in. We were made aware of the pause inbetween the in and out breath, and played with this - using it to move or not move.*



*We played with many ways of mobilizing the spine and our head and tail connections, becoming aware of the tail – a long squirrel's brush or other images - connecting the brain to the tail - and ensuring that we moved the all important sacrum which so easily becomes immobilized in trauma. We spent time on developing one, two and three dimensionality and moved constantly towards playful activity. We took positive experiences out of our body drawings, moved them and shared gestures developed from them, coming up with something in small groups to be shared. We were invited to push some things away from us, but reach out and bring other things back towards us that were more nourishing.*

*The wonderful drumming circle was such a highlight. I paused within it to take a few photographs and became aware of the total involvement of those participating – midst all the noise – everyone was aware of Amber raising or lowering her fingers as cues so that we all started or finished at the same time. It was like absorbing power and strength, being a part of a whole – it engendered a sense of community and togetherness. Following a finishing cue we sat in silence just simply feeling the vibration of the drum with the hand left on it. During the many rhythms made, members of the group came and went from the centre of the circle to improvise with other instruments, or to move, voices were used in rhythm with the drum by some, or improvised around the rhythm.*

The theory behind the approach really excited me - the simplicity of it, which focuses on body and core awareness, breath and working from a developmental perspective, expanding movement into Space and restoring the person's dimensionality; to move from inner to outer. I came away from this workshop with a theory that supports my belief in the value of this approach and justifies the way that I choose to work so often.



Thank you Amber!

**Jane is a dmt, professional Member DTAA, MCSP, Bch. App. Sc.(Phy), M.Ed, Adv. Studies of M. and Dance, Grad, Dips. M. and Dance and Rehab Studies and CMA.**



**Amber and children - It is well worth looking at [www.ravandrumfoundation.org](http://www.ravandrumfoundation.org)**