

# The Dance in Dance Therapy

*This article presents three extracts from a conversation on the ADTA listserv on the nature of the "Dance" in "Dance Therapy." The conversation weaves through different aspects - from reflections on the elements - that make 'the dance' in Dance Therapy, to a discussion about cultural attitudes, the way in which the word 'dance' is used metaphorically, and ending with a poignant image of an historical depiction of dance.*



## **Judith Fischer (Dec. 2004)**

The dance in Dance Therapy for me speaks to ritual, beauty, imagination, multidimensional relationship, metaphor, kinesthetic expression of affect, and the innate healing component of the arts through 'all' time. It gives the breadth and depth to our work that is poetic and sublime. Pedestrian movement all around us is a dance of relationships, needs, desires, love and fear, when seen through a dancer's eyes. When this very same movement is seen through a Dance Therapist's eyes the movement also becomes diagnostic assessment of group systems, individual developmental stages, and physical references to 'working through' defenses, etc. (depending on your background and training). The movement will also stimulate curiosity for the Dance Therapist of what potential movement interventions (dance structures and improvisation themes) may possibly move the group, the person, or the situation forward to support human maturation and well being. The Dance Therapist's presence is the beginning dance of intervention. This is a dance of the Dance Therapist's own

consciousness and 'oneness and separateness' in movement with another. The dance is a creative coming together with another person's heart and soul, function and dysfunction. This is the dance and this is the therapy. Truly unique!

"At the still point of the turning world.  
Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards;  
At the still point, there the dance is."

I couldn't resist adding this quote from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets.. It comes back to me often when I think about my work.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Donna Newman-Bluestein (Dec. 2004)**

I guess another difference between dance and the body therapies is that dance is dynamic. Since hearing Lenore talk about research at the conference, I realize how much aesthetics has to do with everything I do in life, and certainly the interventions I make as a therapist. If I am feeling bored during a session (with cognitively and physically low functioning elders), I approach the question of what to do in the same way that I would an improvisational dance which felt too static. I respond in a very immediate kind of way with the element I need for "the dance" to be more dynamic - force, time, or space. Also, a question my interns often have, especially in individual treatment with elders who move very little, - "where is the dance in this therapy"? My response is that in addition to the dance of self-expression and interaction, dance may be in the eyes of the beholder. If either party in an interaction, or a third party watching it, perceives the interaction to be a dance, then it is a dance. It's interesting that in a culture which values dance so little, there are so many books which use dance in the title, i.e., "Dance of Anger", "The Dance of Wounded Souls", "Dance of Change", "The Dance of Deception". As a culture we are so afraid of it, particularly expressive dance and yet, we use the metaphor of dance freely in words.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Heather Hill (Jan. 2005).**

Donna - I think this is a very important point you make about the nature of dance. The aesthetic is a crucial aspect of what we have to offer. It's the air

we breathe. Also, it seems to me that we can separate the aesthetic from the technically proficient. When I talk about dance therapy to others, I always emphasize that the dance we work with goes beyond the technically accomplished, performance mode or a specific technique, rather it is dance in its historical/cultural sense, which has always been about expression/forming of individual and community experience/feelings etc., as well as teaching and educating. As J. Hanna says "To dance is human".



The two last points re transformation and "becoming" were central to my study of the experience of dance therapy for a person with dementia. It seemed to me that it was in the moments of "dance", that the possibility of transformation occurred. Through the research I also concluded that the experience of dance had indeed been about becoming, about re-connecting with herself.

Finally, in response to the phrases with "dance" in them, I am currently reading a book by an Australian historian, which is called "Dancing With Strangers". It is about those very early days of first contact between the British and the indigenous people, the Aborigines, those first precious weeks and months before race relations descended to abysmal depths. It seems that during these first contacts, on landing, the British actually danced holding hands with the Aboriginal people. There is an old painting of this on the cover - an incredible image.

**Thank you to Judith, Donna and Heather for permitting us to publish and share in this most interesting conversation – no doubt it will provoke many more ideas!**

**Photographs: Courtesy of Heather Hill**

\*\*\*\*\*

I like some of the ideas about dance from Sondra Fraleigh's 1987 book, "Dance and the Lived Body" - here are some quotations:

*"Dance is an aesthetic expression of the body"*  
(p.43)

*"Dance is by necessity grounded in vital movement sensibility"* (p.46)

*"Dance is at root an affirmation of the vital body"*  
(p.55)

*"The first requisite of dancing is the unification of the self with the intended movement"* (p.41)

*"I realize my freedom when I move as I intend. Then I experience my movement powers as personal powers"* (p.21)

She describes dance as a transformative experience. In describing the philosophy underlying the teachings of Mary Wigman, she writes: "Dance was a means toward self-knowledge - not a disclosure of personality but a construction of it, not self expression as self-indulgence but a creation of self in expressive action." (p.xxii)