

Working with Anna Halprin - Reflections



*I recently read about Anna Halprin's personal experience with cancer and how she danced it away in **Believers with varied theories attest to the healing power of art, the language that speaks to the mind and body for the renewal of life**, an article by Steven Wynn, Arts and Culture Critic for the San Francisco Chronicle. The article, printed on 24/7/03,* (See reference under Acknowledgements) tells us about Anna and her Marin County hillside home, studio and legendary dance deck in Kentfield, where for more than 30 years, she has been "working out the dynamic of art's multidimensional power to heal mind and body". Steven goes on to recount the story, that many would be aware of, that in 1972, "Halprin drew a self-portrait that envisioned a blurry gray area in her pelvis. She woke up with a queasy feeling in the middle of the night, made a doctor's appointment and discovered that she had a malignant tumor. After chemotherapy, her doctor declared her cured". Her body, however, was telling her something different and her cancer returned 2 years later. She went back to her art in a concentrated frenzy, creating a series of self-portraits and dances that were "full of rage and anger" and her "cancer shrank and shrank" and*

then there were no recurrences after that time.

"Now 82....." she..... "believes that she was healed, not magically cured.....but doesn't pretend to understand it rationally" or be able to explain the connection of the drawing to her body dysfunction. In her work Halprin has sought to evoke natural movements and free her dancers and students, from the "armor" of a received style. "Learned style", Halprin believes, "can divorce physical expression from the psyche". Her dances "repeatedly address the interwoven processes of art and healing".

I was inspired by reading about this personal story and felt that it should be shared, which led me to approach some members of our community who have worked with Anna. These are the personal reflections of three of those people. JG

Anna Halprin – some brief reflections

Tony Norquay

Anna Halprin has for well over fifty years been a key figure in contemporary dance. Throughout that time she has had a growing attraction to working with movement and creating dance that grows out of life experience; that gives expression to our humanity; that helps to heal and transcend the human condition.

The inspiration for these dances over the years have been subjects such as bridging cross-cultural differences; transforming individual life stories; dancing for the planet in Circle the Earth; challenging life-threatening illness such as cancer and, more recently, AIDS.

I first read her short piece 'Dance as a Self Healing Art' in about 1980 and knew immediately that here was someone I wanted to work with. It seemed that she had a deep understanding of dance processes that I had begun to imagine and had just a taste of.

So I wrote and obtained information from the Tamalpa Institute that she had established in Marin County, just south of San Francisco. That led me to travel there and work with her and her team (including daughter Daria) in 1983.

Although Anna does not regard herself as a dance therapist, there is no doubt that her work is intensely therapeutic. Unsatisfied with dance as a purely aesthetic experience divorced from the stuff of life, she began early on to create groundbreaking dances with her own company that engaged life and grew out of it. It seems to me that in these dances she was seeking authentic human experience whilst at the same time always

being aware of the aesthetic form that the pieces took.

Anna herself (in the forward of 'Moving Towards Life') describes three major aspects of her work. The first is with creating new *forms* of dance – moving out of theatres and into the environment – city spaces, communities and, especially, nature. This in turn led to new *uses* of dance, in which the dance became a closer expression of people's lives and needs – perhaps returning to some of the ancient roots of dance.

Secondly, the kinds of people involved in the dance experiences broadened. Her dances were less for skilled performers and more for ordinary people. (I find it interesting to compare this with the experience of early dance therapy pioneers who began as dance teachers and found that people who were never going to become professional dancers were none-the-less deeply engaged with the dance experience for other than aesthetic reasons.) Thus there was a shift in focus from the *forms* of the dance to the *meanings* that they held and provided. The dances were being created from life experience and often had a ritual aspect with healing and transforming qualities.

This led to the third aspect of 'developing community through expression of these myths and rituals'. Her own confrontation of having cancer and working through that with dance as a primary medium was to deepen her work. She began to seek and develop ways that dance can help individuals in community to tap the essential life force that can heal and transform.

The explorations and the rituals we created at the mountaintop studio enabled us to identify, confront and transform our own and collective life stories, always with rich artistic expression. These were powerful and transformative processes of developing our movement range, knowing our body, drawing on its wisdom, creating individual and collective dances to give expression to our experience. And I vividly remember also the Wednesday evening community dances in the local school hall which were attended by dozens, with drummers and other musicians providing the music to which we created amazing, pulsing, energising group dances.

Back home and keen to continue this association I worked with the Augustine Centre and Ausdance with Mark Gordon's support to bring Anna to Melbourne in 1987 for a 6-day workshop of the Circle the Earth score that she had developed and created in other counties around the world. This drew 120 people from all over Australia and New Zealand plus about a dozen musicians and

culminated in a performance in the Melbourne Town Hall with an audience of hundreds. Whilst the basic score was outlined, the specific shape that took for us was created out of our personal and collective journeys – creating community with the powerful 'Vortex Dance'; identifying what peace meant for each of us and how to symbolise it; acknowledging, dancing out and transforming our own 'monsters'; giving local form to the 'Earth Run' to acknowledge all life on the planet. It was an amazing experience and some described it as 'life changing'.

For me the most lasting outcome of my work with Anna (and the whole Tamalpa team) is to feel the dance grounded in my own body and being. It is something that I now know is within me always. The materials with which to dance are always there - the movements and motivations always ready to be discovered; the potential to join with others based in timeless patterns, fundamental rhythms and common human experiences of joy and anguish; the knowledge that dance is a profound vehicle for discovering and expressing our journey of the spirit.

Anna Halprin brings so many riches together – life experience, nature, community, ritual, understanding of movement, wisdom, myth and the dance – in such concentrated and empowering ways. I am deeply appreciative of having met and worked with her.

References:

Halprin, Anna. *Dance as a Self-Healing Art.* Tamalpa Institute, 1977.

Halprin, Anna. *Moving towards life. Five decades of transformational dance.* University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1995.

Anna Halprin – a reflection

Viv Neale

When I started thinking about Anna Halprin to write this article I realised that she has inspired and taught me for almost 20 years. I like the thought that her life's work has given me guidance and direction and I think of how she is most often present for me when I'm standing on the beach and I hear her direct voice reminding me how to stand easily on the earth.

Tony Norquay introduced me to Anna Halprin through his "Soul Dance" classes in the early 1980's. I loved the freedom and expression I experienced in his classes each week. After he returned from working with Anna and the community of the Tamalpa Institute he wove Anna's work into his and I began to meet Anna

through the processes and philosophy of the work she developed. He also showed a video of her work with terminally ill people in San Francisco where she took participants through a process over weeks, using movement and expressive art to face their illnesses and to connect to their spirit. I thought it was the most beautiful work I'd seen and experienced, for its possibilities of community healing as well as for individual self expression and healing. I thought then that I would study with Anna Halprin if I could.

Over 10 years later I went to train at the Tamalpa Institute because those impressions of Anna's work as a way of approaching life and creative, therapeutic work stayed with me. One of the great aspects of following the call of Anna's work was that I then had the opportunity to meet her and her deep knowledge of the how our bodies work, her willingness to experiment, her humour, large personality and humility.

I saw and worked with Anna Halprin last year at the Tamalpa Institute's 25th anniversary conference in California and while at 83 years old she is in the later stages of her life she is still passionately involved in teaching around the United States in different settings and in creating thought provoking performances for herself and with her performance collective. The recent one I was lucky to see, for the season of spring, was performed over 3 hours by performers moving in and like the natural world of a forest and also included Anna guiding audience witnesses into our own experience of our animal natures.

It's through working with Anna that I came to believe in ritual as a real source of strength and possibility for change in communities. I was part of her yearly "circle the earth" ritual one year - beginning standing on the peak of a small mountain with others in the fog at 5am, blowing conch shells out into the fog and then singing in a circle of about 100 people and eventually the "earth run" where we each ran together around the circle for whatever we wanted to heal, calling out our dedication as we began to run. It's difficult to evoke the sense of connection and possibility of running for my own concerns with others, with drumming and our bodies running and our puffing breath and the smells and sounds of the land.

This experience characterises Anna and her work for me. She developed work like herself that is full and dramatic, rigorous and gentle. I think she has contributed a body of work to the healing community that supports being embodied, being seen and seeing others and being responsible

Anna Halprin was a notable resident of Marin County near San Francisco and persuaded the City

beyond our individual lives for the wellbeing of our planet. I feel glad to have had her teach me.

My experiences with Anna

Denis Kelynack

I had heard of Anna Halprin's remarkable experience of self - diagnosis through art. My experiences with her have been limited to firstly a Peace Dance here in Melbourne many years ago (I think in 1987) with 120 participants. We met at a big hall overlooking Albert Lake and worked on our "dark sides" and our compassionate sides for one week. Then we had a performance in Melbourne Town Hall. I had several conversations with Anna at that time and she seemed to me to be a true guru or wise person. Her philosophy of dance as therapy is what she terms "the life/art process" which, as far as I can make out, refers to the way in which the art of dance, its power to reach the most impenetrable parts of the human psyche, transforms peoples lives.

Secondly, I participated in two of her workshops at Tamalpa which is over the water from San Francisco. There she took us on a blindfolded walk into the forest and, at a certain point, took off our blindfolds so that we could marvel at the miracle of a leaf with the sunlight on it or the beauty of a twig lying on the ground. In other words she revealed to us, through this simple exercise, the wonder of natural forms and the living bio-sphere around us.

We then selected a 'special' spot in the forest which drew us to it and, after getting to know it, we developed an expressive dance. We each did our own dance before the rest of the group who responded verbally to what the dance said. Anna, at this time, had had surgery for her cancer but one would never have guessed it. She seemed as lithe and graceful as ever. She was like a goddess.

I also took classes for three months at the San Francisco Dancers Workshop (the leaders here are all Anna Halprin trained). These classes are for everybody and are not therapy based. One of the classes was called American Contemporary Black Dance and was designed to get our bodies into the rhythms and movements of Afro-American dance. Our practicum was to go to a club frequented almost exclusively by Afro-Americans (the term in current use) and to blend into the crowd. Although the Dancers Workshop was inspired by the work of Anna Halprin she did not appear there but conducted most of her workshops at Tamalpa. Council of San Francisco to implement City Dance where the population of the city could get

out on the streets and dance. She is an honorary member of an American Indian tribe, the Pomo and in her wisdom, her stature in the community, and her powers of intuition, she displayed many Shamanistic qualities. She is a truly remarkable individual.

Not only do I treasure the memories I have of the dance experiences I had at Tamalpa but, also, the great influence that had on my own style as a dance therapist. The spontaneity and the genuineness Anna gave to everything have always remained as an inspiration to me.

Tony Norquay - has extensive practice as a dance therapist, particularly in work in private psychiatric hospitals . Tony currently conducts "Soul Dance" for anyone wanting to use dance as a medium for tapping their energy, inner wisdom and well-being. He has also extensive experience as an educator over many years with inter-personal skills and group dynamics training to group workers and is currently a guest lecturer in the IDTIA, Certificate in Dance Therapy course.

Viv Neale - is a practitioner in expressive arts therapy, having completed two years training at the Tamalpa Institute in San Francisco. She holds an Advanced Diploma in Gestalt Therapy from GTA in Melbourne and has trained in dance therapy. In her practice she works with groups and individuals in diverse communities to facilitate change and growth through the expressive arts.

Denis Kelynack – President of the DTAA - is a counselling psychologist who uses dance/movement as part of his work as a therapist. He runs workshops in dance/movement therapy for colleagues and supports the growth and development of dance/movement as a vehicle of self-awareness. He was a guest lecturer in the Post-Graduate Diploma Movement and Dance Education at the School of Early Childhood Studies and now lectures in the dance therapy component of the Grad Dip. of Visual and Performing Arts at RMIT University. He is a co-author with Johanna Exiner of [Dance Therapy Redefined](#).

Photographer: Kent Keno.

Acknowledgements: With thanks to Anna Halprin and Terre Parker, Anna's Administrative Coordinator, for kindly providing us with the photograph. Thank you to Victoria Lopes for sparking these reflections by drawing our attention to this article on the ADTA Listserve.

***Reference:** "*Believers with varied theories attest to the healing power of art, the language that speaks to the mind and body for the renewal of life*", Thursday, July 24, 2003: - <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/07/24/DD298688.DTL>

The Tamalpa Institute was founded by Anna and Daria Halprin in 1978. It provides educational training programs using the expressive arts for healing, transformation and creative expression. For further information: www.tamalpa.org