

Dance Psychotherapy ~ Therapist at work

Jennifer De Leon

Jennifer, Member NZ Ass. Psychotherapists, ACC registered, is a Freelance Tutor, Choreographer and Performer, and a Psychotherapist and Counsellor. Specialising in Movement Analysis and Dance Therapy, she has trained and worked in Laban/Bartienieff Movement Fundamentals and Dance Therapy and amalgamates these into her Counseling and Psychotherapy work. She is also the Founder and Director of Poyema Dance Company, New Zealand's only professional contemporary dance exponent of Liturgical and Mystic Dance.

Jo was flushed when she entered the room. She seemed to be 'sparking' - what I would describe as "feisty". In response to her "Hello"! I said, "you look alive"! Jo smiled and said emphatically, punching the air, "Yeah I'm ready to go"!

Jo's movements were fluttery and percussive. She held her shoulders, neck and head slightly forward and braced stiffly. Her body seemed brittle, held. What was she holding in? Afraid of admitting? Was she hiding? From what? I realised Jo's level of excitement was only tenuously managed, and dependant-little-girl-Jo was not far away under this outward Adult self that was managing, and who had brought Jo to therapy.

I evaluated that Jo needed (1) to experience unconditional approval thus (2) making way for emergence of self-approval thus (3) enabling the creation of a dance of polarities (of disappointment and love) thus (4) enabling 'Child' and 'Adult' to integrate. This within the larger work of establishing an environment wherein Jo may find strength to create the inner peace and wholeness she seeks.

'Creating the therapeutic environment' means containment that is un-judging, unafraid, warm and professional (Winnicott, D.W., 1976, p.160). To provide containment that is unconditional I have an attitude of warmth, yet not 'concerned'; attentiveness - without invasive body proximity; and the 'permission' of 'as you are - is alright'. I think of myself working from the 'body-ego' with an easy but conscious mental effort. Ideas and feelings come to mind; these are examined inwardly, and later, in Supervision and Personal therapy. Thus professional, yet still vulnerable involvement is maintained.

The therapeutic environment of confidentiality, ethical safety and therapeutic regard allow Jo to express and discharge her bound and self-destructive

energy. Then her 'dance,' her *Healing Dance* - begins to emerge.

I matched Jo's gesture, punching the air lightly and saying: "so what is going on for you"?

My gesture, though similar, was without the regressed frustration inherent in Jo's. I was involved but maintaining emotional distance. A slight but noticeable re-emergence of Jo's self-possession seemed to occur: a restoration of some ego strength. This enabled Jo to continue the session with greater consciousness and attention.

Jo walked into the centre of the studio, placed herself in front of the mirrors and proceeded to move and talk at the same time.

Jo's subject matter consisted of a family problem for which (she felt) she carried total responsibility and which left her discouraged and depleted. She felt conflicted between

- the need to mother-protect her 10 year old son from the boy's father, with resultant anger at the father,
- the need to mother-protect son from the family therapist, with resultant anger at the therapist, and then
- the need to deal with the reactive, sullen behaviour of the son.

Jo told of a recent family-therapy session in which feelings of antagonism, resentment, false co-operation, collusion, deceit and veiled anger, of all the people in the room, including the therapist, were predominant. Jo's movements contained some of the energy in her words, but did not reflect the convoluted themes of the story. Instead her movements were classically placed: symmetrical, linear, direct, ordered and harmonious.

Throughout this part of the session I stood beside Jo. Jo chose to communicate with me through the medium of the mirror. This seemed safer for her. I mirrored Jo's movements, moving in unison with her and echoing her energy. I also reflected her words back to her, asking for clarification on points that seemed muddled.

While participating; listening and mirroring her movements, I was also watching, observing, analysing and formulating. As far as is in my capability I do not miss or dismiss any movement or tiny gesture. It may contain vital information regarding the client's mindfulness of, ego strength

around, resourcefulness for, and possibility of growth from the conscious and unconscious processes that are happening.

It was a process of Jo hearing and seeing herself expressing herself supported by me. I am constantly eliciting my client's mindfulness through attention, affirmation; even minimal indications are noted - for every person has an inner knowing about the inseparableness of mind...body...soul...and spirit. It is a quadruple amplification. Simultaneously many-layered: muscular, neurological, biological, chemical, as well as (to whatever degree these have meaning for the client) - psychic and spiritual. Thus, aspects that are existential and transpersonal are extrapolated, illumined, and brought to a degree of awareness and mindfulness that may not typically be part of the therapy experience.

As a result Jo began making sense of the whole episode for herself, relating her realisations to me as they came to her. Reaching an ending she commented "well, that's all that."

I commented on the classical symmetry of her movements, mirroring them back to her. Watching, she suddenly said, "There's no curve"! I said, "What does that mean for you"? Jo said with great certainty, "It is exactly what I need at the moment - to be ordered and straight and balanced and direct". I affirmed her realisation by restating verbally the conclusions at which she had arrived, while also simultaneously reflecting a portion of her movement phrase back to her.

Suddenly Jo said, "I had a real problem with one movement we did the other night..." (showed me the movement). I said "Mmm... You have chosen this... of all the moves we did, this gave you trouble, you've singled out this one... this one is really important. What is it telling you"?

Jo seemed uncertain for a moment so I copied this position and said, "Well, this leg, stiff, rigid, who is this? Which one are you? Which one is M? (Jo's son).

Immediately, also assuming the position, Jo said "The stiff, rigid one is C., this must be M. - pulling in two directions: connected, but wanting to get away... and this one is *obviously* me!! - all the weight, all the carrying, all bent underneath me... I have to sit down! And when I do -" she crashed to the floor - "I land like this and it *hurts*."

I then did the movement myself, saying "The only way I can get down and release the tension from 'Jo' "- (ie: off the leg that symbolised Jo) - "is by enlisting the help of M." as I avoided crashing to the floor by pulling my arms (symbolising M.) back to

support my descent. Jo tried the move. Together, experimenting with the balance, weight and timing, we repeated it a number of times.

She spoke as if she had a profound realisation... "Instead of trying to protect him all the time, from C. I could ask him to help me..."

The session was nearing end-time so I asked Jo what she would take away with her to enable her to go on. Jo said "This position; what it stands for, with me and M. Instead of protecting M. so much, I'll talk to him... And some more of what I did at the beginning. I liked it. I'll be linear, and direct. I need that right now".

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