

Let Your Inner Child Dance

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Assuming that the essence of the child shares a great deal in common with the essence of the adult 'real self', Dance Movement Therapy is an appropriate and powerful tool to address old childhood issues, beliefs and patterns to manifest change in one's present behaviours and outlooks.

Based on the assumption that we are shaped and formed by our past experiences, healing of past wounds can only take place when we learn to become detached from the trauma rather than subsumed by it. By releasing childhood pain and trauma by remembering and re-viewing the past through Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), we are then able to re-construct and re-claim all parts of the self from which we can move forward and change. After reading books like *Healing the Child Within* by Charles Whitfield (1989) and literature by John Bradshaw, I was drawn into the belief that past patterns of childhood could be addressed and transformed using DMT through bodily-felt experience as well as verbal psychotherapy.

In every adult there lurks a child - an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed, and calls for unceasing care, attention, and education. That is the part of the human personality which wants to develop and become whole. C. Jung (Abrams, 1991: 15).

This "eternal child" is in fact, really only an image or symbol that we all carry within us since

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we have all experienced being a child. "Our inner child possesses the spirit of truthfulness, absolute spontaneity, and genuineness" and represents "renewal, divinity, a zest for life, a sense of wonder, hope, the future, discovery, courage, spontaneity, and immortality" (Abrams, 1991: 1).



Thus it is a subtle, complex image which incorporates the child of wonder, innocence and possibility as well as being a "developmental actuality" (Abrams, 1991: 1), which holds our past experiences including both pleasures and pains.

From infancy we seek intimacy and wholeness. We begin with the developmental stage of autism, then pass through the stage of attachment and symbiosis with the mother/care-giver. We then enter the process of separation-individuation before establishing self-identity (Horner and Aronson, 1979 in Leventhal, 1991). A well-formed self-identity encompasses a strong self-image, healthy self-esteem and a sense of integration and wholeness. In reality, however, most children do not develop in this way but rather have experienced less than perfect parenting where their feelings were often suppressed, judged or punished and love was not expressed. Thus these fragmented, cut-off aspects of the psyche - the damaged inner child - is what

the adult later seeks with which to be re-connected to become whole. "The inner child is a uniting symbol and brings together the separated or dissociated parts of the individual personality" (Abrams, 1991: 1).

However, "the part of us that is ultimately alive, energetic, creative and fulfilled" (Whitfield, 1989: 9) is the inner child that is a crucial part of our "real self" thus named by Horney and Masterson, or called the "true self" by the psychotherapists Winnicott and Miller (Whitfield, 1989: 9). Our "real" or "true" self is authentic, genuine, communicating and feels alive. It is able to feel and express feelings, be assertive, compassionate and is able to love unconditionally. The inner child aspect of the "real self" is spontaneous, child-like in needing to play and have fun, trusting, and enjoys being nurtured. Although it is vulnerable it is also powerful (Whitfield, 1989: 10).



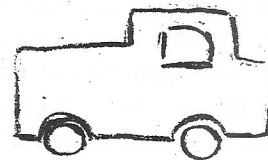
When this part of us is not nurtured and allowed expression and the inner child is denied, a "false self" or persona emerges. This self denies or hides feelings, is fearful, constantly planning and controlling. It is critical, perfectionistic, rational, other-oriented and overly conforming (Whitfield, 1989: 10).

This "real self" is referred to as the "soul self" by Dr. Marcia Leventhal. She describes it as an "inner, psychic and deeply intuitive place", suggesting "the more we have ignored the gentle whisper of the soul self, the further the distance has become between the adapted self and the authentic self" (Leventhal, 1992: 2). Since the "real self" is most receptive to the unconscious and creative expression it seems that DMT can be an important vehicle for accessing and developing the "real self".

Encoded deep in our cells and released through dreams, imagination, artistic expression, and 'unconscious' choices exists our essence or 'soul-self' (Leventhal, 1991: 2).

In the first of the four-week program that I conduct entitled *Let Your Inner Child Dance*, the general theme is that of remembering and reviewing of the past: re-mem-bering or bringing together of disparate 'members' or parts of the self, such as physical parts of the body, memories, feelings, images. This concept is experienced through two ways. The first way is in the relating and playing with a doll or toy the participant has brought along from his/her past or one that has some significance for him. Feelings, thoughts, memories or images of one's childhood and way of playing or relating emerge from this movement exploration.

The next experiential activity consists of the actual 'meeting' of their 'inner child' which involves both a guided meditation as well as physical expression through bodily movement. The participant is guided to imagine their 'inner child' in the room with them and to attune with their body shape, feeling state and movement pattern before mirroring this back. Gradually, they begin to relate and communicate using movement and dance to establish a connection. In their parting, they decide where they will leave their inner child that is safe. This experiential can be very powerful as it highlights the quality of connection one has with their inner child which has often been suppressed, ignored or denied for a long time.



In the second session the participants experience a time-line journey of their lives moving through the different developmental stages of growth ranging from infancy to their current age. By re-experiencing the different stages of childhood, many feelings, memories, images and thoughts are accessed - once again many of which may have been suppressed for a long time. As John Bradshaw states: "When we are experiencing our emotions, we are in direct contact with our physical reality. Because our emotions are forms of energy, they are physical: they are expressed in our body even before we are consciously aware of them" (Bradshaw, 1992: 68). Many strong and painful emotions may

emerge when the "original repressed feelings" (Bradshaw, 1992: 75) are experienced. At this stage issues of past abuse, whether sexual, physical or emotional may arise often followed by emotions of shock, anger, hurt or sadness.

Grieving childhood losses and abandonment needs to be acknowledged as well as the reality of the experience validated. It is a crucial yet painful process to acknowledge that one's parents are accountable for causing deep psychological, emotional and spiritual wounds and at the same time acknowledging their 'good enough' parenting. "Toxic shame and loneliness" (Bradshaw, 1992: 79) often result from feeling abandoned, causing the child to feel flawed and defective. Thus it is a very important part of the process to not judge oneself critically but rather to validate one's self and one's losses.

To conclude this journeying experiential that may have accessed many painful emotions, it is important to provide an antidote. Participants are guided back to a time in their lives when they most felt their power, strength and positive feelings about themselves. Exploring this through movement, they find a gesture for their 'dance of empowerment' together with a self-affirmation.

As we begin to explore more deeply into our past, we discover that we are governed by many old, habitual patterns that may have served us well when we were young, as survival mechanisms, but are no longer appropriate as an adult. Many negative messages and beliefs have been passed onto us by our parents, relatives, church, school and others, causing feelings of shame and inadequacy. In this session we experience on a bodily-felt level what general movement patterns feel like - mirroring other people's different movement patterns - then discovering our own individual familiar, habitual pattern, linking the physical expression to the belief or negative message associated with it.

Some of the many beliefs often expressed by participants are: "boys don't cry"; "don't get angry"; "don't answer back"; "you're stupid", or "you're not good enough". After the belief pattern has been explored and physicalised in a movement pattern, variations of this pattern are experienced.

A variety of means is used such as the different movement elements of time, space, force and flow; or taking the pattern to a different location in space; changing the order of it; playing with it and allowing it to become silly; and finally creating a new pattern.

Dance-movement events have the potential to alter an individual's perceptual frame of reference, thereby allowing maladaptive patterns to be released and new behaviour to be developed (Leventhal, 1993: 257).

Although I have taken Leventhal's concept of maladaptive patterns literally, on a physical level, I have found it to be a direct and powerful way of working to assist in the change of patterns. One session alone cannot change a long-held pattern but it can bring about deeper awareness and shift of perception. As an antidote to this experience, participants re-create a belief or message pattern they would have liked to have heard in their childhood. This can become a very powerful and self-empowering experience where the partner is stating the words one would have liked spoken as the person expresses them in movement.

The dance helps to both uncover and own the enlarging pattern, and the movement helps to identify the primary exploration of self-discovery and awareness (Leventhal, 1993: 258).

To complete this four-week journey, the last session focuses on the integration of the inner child and adult and the exploration of one's future self. Some or many of one's past pain or abuse has been brought to awareness and experienced on a felt-sense level up to this point and as a result, different possibilities and choices have emerged. To help the participants re-gain a holistic perspective of their experience, they have the opportunity to re-visit their 'inner child' through movement expression. This allows them to discover changes and any new learnings; to move as their adult self, discovering their full dimension and how their inner child is an integral part of them; and then to explore their future, potential self.



Difficulties seem to arise when we create splits or divisions between our 'adult self' and our 'inner child'. When we, however, re-learn to become aware and acknowledge our inner child, in all dimensions encompassing both pain and wonder, we will then feel safe to assert ourselves and come out to play and dance!

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