

Everyone can dance

John Killick

As previously reported in Australasian Moves (Moving On, Vol 13, no's, 3 and 4), we are pleased to have permission from Hawker Press to reprint this article written about the work of Dr. Heather Hill. It is part of a series of articles on the arts in dementia by John Killick (U.K. poet/writer who works in dementia care) for the Australian Journal of Dementia Care (AJDC). Based on email exchanges between Heather and John, and information drawn from Heather's writings on dementia, the article represents dance really well. We are also pleased to have permission to reprint Cathy Greenblat's beautiful and sensitive photos taken at one of Heather's dance sessions. The adjacent photo was featured on the front cover of the AJDC in full colour, with the caption printed immediately underneath:



'Dance is for everyone, not just dancers': Dr Heather Hill conducts a group session with clients at a day centre in Melbourne in 2013. The dance and movement sessions are used to help people with dementia connect, interact and as a form of expression and communication.

John Killick is a poet and author who has been exploring the world, as seen by people with dementia for two decades. This article is one of a series in which he looks at the role of art, in all its forms, in releasing the creative potential of people with dementia. He has worked as a communicator with people with dementia for 21 years, has edited six books of poems by people with dementia and written many articles and books about person-centred care, communication and creativity.

In Britain dance and dementia seem to have come together in recent years and there are a number of professional dancers of all ages

who have taken to the idea that dance is a natural form of expression for people with the condition.

In Australia there is one practitioner in the field who has been contributing longer and innovating more consistently than any other person, and that is Dr Heather Hill. Heather is a facilitator and trainer in dementia care and has worked for 25 years in dance therapy and movement, in particular with people with dementia. She wrote what I believe is the first book on the subject anywhere, back in 2001, and has recently contributed a new text for the Japanese market. She has given workshops and published articles

and, for over two decades, has acted as a major ambassador for this aspect of creative activity.

The meaning of dance

I asked Heather first to define what she means by dance in this context. She answered that she considered this the fundamental question, from which every other characteristic flows:

“I and others in my profession work with a very broad understanding of ‘dance’, which runs counter to what most people in our society/culture would understand. For most, ‘dance’ refers to specific ‘techniques’ such as ballet, ballroom dancing, salsa. Accompanying this idea are the ideas that you need to have a fit, lithe and young body, and that our society is divided into those who can dance and those who can’t,” Heather said.

“My definition is very different. To me, dance is something everyone can do. Clearly we can’t all bring our leg up to our ears, or make grand leaps, but dance for all can make sense if you view it in the following terms:

- Dance involves bodies, and we are embodied beings.
- We live and function in our bodies, and mind/body/feeling/spirit are an integrated whole.



“Throughout history and still in many cultures today, dance is life. It is an essential activity of human expression and communication (Hanna J, 1987, *To dance is human*, University of Chicago Press). In some cultures, to ask if you can dance is as nonsensical as asking ‘are you breathing?’ “Dance is an art-form – and like all arts it relates to feeling and to human meaning-making. It can

offer those peak experiences, moments of transformation, when we are somehow raised beyond ourselves.”

Something for everyone

To achieve these objectives, Heather uses every means available, so long as it all connects-up: creative movement, exploration, folk (and other types of dance), recorded music, props, nature, touch, singing and musical instruments. I asked Heather whether people with severe physical



handicaps could still participate. She replied that she has worked with practically immobile individuals: to give a whole body experience it was still possible to move their wheelchair. One of her teachers used to say that if someone can move an eyebrow they can still dance!

Heather has worked mainly with groups, but if they include people with severe disabilities, it often entails her working with individuals within the group. However, she still attempts to find the means of maintaining connections with the other members. She strongly believes that the group constitutes the best way of assisting people to re-engage with life.

Elsie’s story

Music is a significant but not essential part of the process. However, there is a special stimulus in working with an improvising musician. In a ground-breaking article *A space to be myself* (Hill 2003), Heather described some sessions she facilitated and analysed as part of a research study. These involved Elsie; all Heather knew about her

beforehand was that she was 85 years old, had moderate dementia and had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital with a view to being placed in an aged care facility. She had already taken part in some group sessions and shown herself to be very receptive to both dance and music. Heather was able to bring in an excellent improvising musician for the four sessions which took place.

The sessions were videoed and then viewed, with Elsie, on the same day. Her reactions to the viewings were also videoed. In addition, Elsie watched the videos with her daughter, which vouchsafed more insights. Amongst the significant findings were that in the first session there was increased quality of movement, emotional involvement and focus on Elsie's part. The other sessions built on these qualities, as the relationship with Heather and the musician developed. Elsie seemed to become more integrated and her comments grew commensurately more coherent and apposite.

Here are some of Elsie's comments on the process:

- "Thank you for bringing me out of my shell."
- "I've got together again."
- "It's brought the dullness out from me...to the brightness."
- "...and I think it's brought me out...Wake up."
- "So that's brought me out of my cupboard."

And here are Heather's conclusions: "I believe that dance offered Elsie a space and time to be herself – in dancing she could rediscover her 'old self' and re-experience it in the present. Viewing the videos allowed her to reflect on the experience and reinforce it. The good feelings remained with her even after the sessions. For me, the enduring image of Elsie is one of a person in a state of ease with herself rather than of dis-ease and fragmentation."

Involving care staff

I asked Heather to comment on her attitude to dance sessions being attempted by care staff who were untrained in this kind of work. She said it was important that staff recognised the training and very real skills involved in this work, but she didn't want to be precious about her chosen art-



form. If someone was to move into this area of expression it was crucial they were enthusiastic about it. She offered this advice:

- Start with what you know. If it's exercise, start from there.
- Add some music, some props, some more interesting movement; if you do have any experience in any dance form, bring that to your work.
- Go to a workshop or a dance class, talk to others, build on your music collection, ideas and resources.
- Most importantly, ensure you are authentically involved.



A sense of joy

Heather believes that dance fulfils the principles of personhood, relationship and meaningful activity for people with dementia, and suggested this article end with a quote from US dance

movement therapy pioneer Trudi Schoop: “There are just no words to impart the measureless sense of joy, the love of life, the enchantment with existence that envelops the dancing human.”

Resources

Heather’s book *Invitation to the dance* (2001) was published by Dementia Services Development Centre, University of Stirling, Scotland, with a second edition in 2009. Order online from the DTAA at www.dtaa.org.au/publications.

Heather’s book for the Japanese market, *Dance communication – the power of communicating with people with dementia* (2014), was written with Mari Miyake, Setsuko Yoshimura and Mikiko Yamaguchi (translator), published by Creates Kamogawa.

Heather’s article ‘A space to be myself’ (2003) was published in *Signpost* (Practice Development Unit, Wales), but is now out of print. She is happy to send it to anyone who contacts her, at heatherhill3@bigpond.com

The articles in John's current series on the arts, take the form of features about individuals who have made a special contribution to the Australian scene. They are assembled from interviews conducted by email, phone and Skype, with texts agreed by both parties.

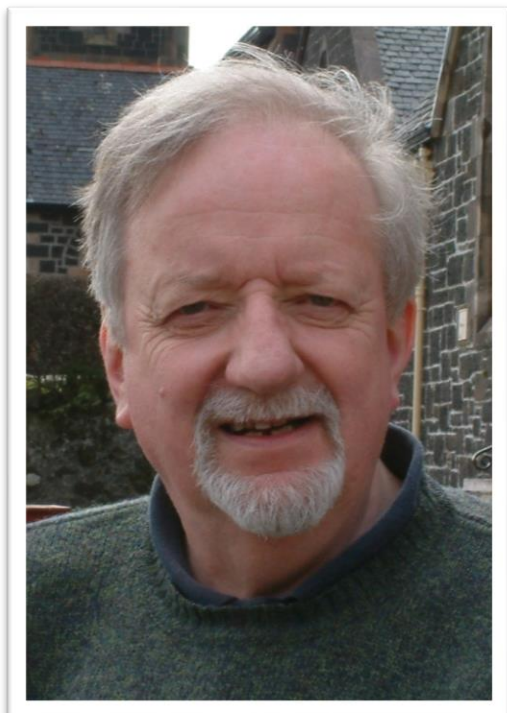


Photo courtesy:
http://wordswellscotland.co.uk/lapidus_contributor/john-killick/

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Photos: Cathy Greenblat, 2013.

Editorial note:

John Killick is very well known for his writings on dementia and, in particular, his poetry. Readers working in this area, or with any aging population, may be interested to look out for some of his books. There is such an extensive list to choose from that it is hard to know where to start! but one of the most well-known of them, and possibly one of the greatest interest to therapists working in this area, is *Dementia Positive (Viewpoints)*. Luath Press, 2013. Information on the Amazon website says that “This book is not about the past, which has gone, or the future, which is uncertain. But it is for those who want to improve the lives of people with dementia and themselves in the Here and Now”. It goes on to point out that Killick steers away from any sort of medical terminology but nurtures the often neglected aspects of dementia, reinforcing that these are of no lesser importance. Also, that he gives equal prominence to quotations from, and conversations with, people with dementia and their carers.

<https://www.amazon.de/Dementia-Positive-John-Killick-ebook/dp/B00EBO1YVA>

His latest book, just published (August 2017), *The Story of Dementia*, also by Luath Press, presents an alternative narrative of dementia.

The message from this is one of hope. This is expressed through nine main chapters that focus on individuals who in John’s view, have made significant contributions to our knowledge through hidden stories of positive approaches. These contributions have been made possible by people who have devoted their lives to finding creative solutions.

See: https://www.amazon.de/Story-Dementia-John-Killick-ebook/dp/B075QFSS39/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1509068138&sr=1-1-fkmr0&keywords=the+story+of+dementia+2017+luath+press

