

SEEING WITH THE HEART: THE AESTHETICS OF DANCE/MOVEMENT THERAPY WITH THE ELDERLY

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Donna, ADTR, LMHC has been working as a dance/movement therapist since 1978 with people of all ages from 3 to 103 with a wide range of special needs including mental illness, chronic pain, and coronary artery disease. Most recently Donna has been focusing on providing dance/movement therapy (dmt) groups to the elderly in a nursing home, where her focus on joy and moving from the heart attempts to transform the culture for clients and staff.

“Seeing with the heart” was written to provide a background for the workshop presentation of the same title, delivered at the American Dance Therapy Association’s National Conference in October 2005.

Abstract

In selecting movements, feelings, memories, and images to bring into the foreground or leave in the background, we are making aesthetic as well as therapeutic choices. In this workshop, we will explore how our personal aesthetics in dance influence our choice of interventions as dance/movement therapists leading groups. Through experience, discussion and lecture, we will discover how our artistic sense helps us elicit from our elderly clients the aspects of self which they most need and are ready to express.

Description

“It is only with one’s heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

‘The Little Prince’,
Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

The idea for this workshop was born out of listserv discussions with other dance/ movement therapists internationally. One such discussion was about our work with the elderly, discovering that many of us felt marginalized; that because our work was not in a mental health setting, it was often considered an extension of recreation therapy by other dance/ movement therapists. As we talked online about our strategies within groups and in affecting the environment, I felt validated and began to realize that we actually had much to contribute to the field of gerontology. In another discussion, several of us wrangled with the differences between dance therapy and other body oriented psychotherapies, which led to further discussions about the aspects of dance essential for dance/ movement therapists to be effective clinicians.

I began to be curious where the aesthetics of dance interfaces with the aesthetics of dance/movement therapy with the frail elderly who move very little. In this beginning investigation, I will be looking through my “aesthetics lens” at the dance/movement therapy groups I lead with the elderly with varying stages of dementia.

Definition of Aesthetics

As an adjective, *Oxford University Press On-line Dictionary* defines aesthetic as, “concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty”. As a noun, aesthetic is defined as a set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or movement.

My Personal Aesthetic in Dance

I began my research into this subject first by reading about aesthetics in biographies of dancers and dance therapists and in online literature, but found little to help me formulate my aesthetic principles. Turning to experiential learning, I attended a weeklong

workshop with Liz Lerman and Dance Exchange, where I was able to discern my personal aesthetic in dance. In short, the movements I found the most aesthetically satisfying frequently contained the elements of balance, dramatic contrasts, contracted abdominal muscles (center), and the dynamic tension of a strong internal focus on my kinesthetic sense at the same time as I was looking outward, aware of the audience. In addition, movements which emerged as authentic expressions from both conscious and unconscious aspects of my self were meaningful, as they recalled memories, or brought forth images which helped me bring a sense of cohesiveness to the dance.

In a “shapes” dance, my partner noted my tendency to create shapes which contrasted with hers. She described feeling increased energy when there was a dynamic tension between our contrasting shapes. I realized that I love playing off of others, and the energy I experience in the space between. I found that my energy increased in contrasting elements of the dance, as well.

Surrendering to playfulness was also very helpful, particularly when I felt stuck in creating my solo. According to Chaiklin, “The arts have the element of play underlying them”. (Chaiklin, 1989*) The spontaneity and present-centeredness of improvisational dance allow for something new, surprising and life affirming to emerge. As I created my dance, I was also very conscious of the element of time, finding in my luxuriating sustainment, sudden postural shifts and rhythmic shimmying a comfortable familiarity.

Amazingly, I found that in demonstrating my solo to peers, they found my most satisfying movements the most compelling as well. That experience reinforced my belief that the more deeply I connect with my own truth in dance, the deeper the connection the viewer can make to her own experience. There is something deeply satisfying in this paradox, in what Hervey calls “the universal in the particular” (Hervey, 2000 p.13) which seems to honor the uniqueness of each us, even as the bond between us is strengthened.

I also had the opportunity to explore my aesthetic preferences in watching an amateur ballroom dance competition recently. As much as I loved the glitter and glitz of the costumes and the joy of watching the gliding movements of the waltz and the sensuous movements of the rumba, I found the most memorable dance was one during the intermission with a young man in a wheelchair dancing with a lovely young dancer in white. I loved the joy I experienced as I saw his joy and involvement in the movements of his upper body. The moment when he

did the shimmy with his shoulders! The way he whirled his wheelchair around, and gave into the momentum! The moments when he lifted his right arm, sending her off into a turn, or when she sent him off into a spin. Why was I surprised that this was the couple I was most drawn to? In watching them I found the human story of frailty and imperfection and my emotions of both sadness and great joy. I could imagine my story in his; that out of pain, he was finding his way back to wholeness and healing through his kinesthetic pleasure in the dance. He was clearly kinesthetically enjoying himself in a way I’ve never seen anyone in a wheelchair do, even in professional performances. Thus, in his dance I discovered another aesthetic principle of this wounded healer, that of beauty emerging out of suffering.

Applying My Aesthetic to Dance Therapy Groups with the Elderly

So, how does my sense of aesthetics influence my groups with the elderly? First, let me say that I start from a phenomenological perspective; belief in the therapeutic process is the deepest underpinning of my practice. I trust that healing wants to happen, and if I can set my ego and personal concerns aside, I am strengthening the container for therapy. Within the space of relationship, with compassion, humor, humility, and playfulness, I encourage the elderly to express themselves through the medium of the dance.

As in my own dance, the image I hold as therapist is vital and probably the most cohesive element. As group leader, I see myself first as container, holding not a circle but a sphere, holding the multi-dimensional group experience, involving the movement in planes, the emotional, the imaginal, the liminal, and the unconscious as well as the conscious. In addition to the image of myself as container, I hold the image of myself as hub of the wheel, with varying degrees of intensity depending upon the cognitive and interactional abilities of group members as well as their sensory deficits. As hub of the wheel, I connect with each member of the group individually, in hopes that they will begin to interact with each other. And finally, I hold an image of myself as one of the members of the circle, receiving as well as giving. The quality of humility is paramount and is symbolized by this image.

Groups actually begin from the moment I step onto a unit; my “antennae” attuning to the climate, noticing the emotional tone, the volume of agitation, or relative calm. Our dance begins with “setting the stage”, as I clear a space, and choose “music for gathering”, music which motivates me to move and is familiar and stimulating to them. Playfully and

respectfully I invite each person to the group, varying my approach as I empathically relate to each, moving rhythmically and singing all the while.

Without a curtain rising and falling, our dance is framed in time by familiar opening and closing movements. From the beginning, I am establishing movement as the medium in which we will be relating, with my kinesthetic sense giving me permission to focus internally even while letting my attention be drawn toward certain focal points, usually the most disruptive or needy person. I experience this focus as both direct and multi-focused at the same time. As people's needs for attention, comfort and safety are addressed through acknowledgement, mirroring of movement, and non-verbal focus for their attention, my focal point changes successively, until I have focused on each member of the group. My strong focus seems to help the group focus. This is very important with people with dementia who are easily distracted in an environment as replete with distractions as nursing homes are.

As we play with various movement structures, I continually change music and pull out props, playing with timing to regulate the flow of energy. The greater the dementia, the more directive I become. For the elderly who are often inert, I first want them simply to move, and then, once moving, I want the movements to be meaningful. The movements of these frail elderly are often small, slow, and close to the center of the body, slowed by aging and probably because they need to be cautious and may be fearful. To provide some balance in their lives while safely seated, my goals for them are increasing spontaneity, reaching into the far kinaesphere, having them move off their center of balance, and most of all to increase movement of the spine. In doing this and in every way I can conceive, I am attempting to get each person to release as much personal energy, take risks and give as much of themselves to the group as possible. It is not necessarily the size of the movement, but the level of engagement I am looking for. Sometimes, it is the smallest movements which are the most profound. I am looking for movements which demonstrate a sense of connection - to rhythm, to their bodies, to themselves, feelings, memories, and thoughts. I want them to move with some awareness of, and at least momentarily, in relation to another person, if only me.

It is in this atmosphere where openness and spontaneity are encouraged, that some new movement usually happens, whether in moving with a prop, or in gesturing as they speak, sharing memories, interacting with others or entrusting secrets. There is a depth and volume of synergy

which emerges from this interdependence which is always surprising, energizing me, and also them, by their reports. Donald Blumenfeld-Jones of Arizona State University quoted "James Macdonald and David Purpel;. . . 'A search for meaning is a search for experiencing connection with others in our world as well as with our physical and social environment. This connectedness carries with it an experience of wholeness (however temporary this experience may be).'" (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1997**)

In my work with the elderly, my sense of aesthetics is further fed by the beauty of their genuineness. As people age, they seem to become more of who they are, more themselves. I love working with people in a way which is real, unlike the everyday world where there is so much artifice. These people have to be who they are - it seems as if they have no choice. There is a paradox in dancing with the elderly and seeing them, who rarely see themselves, nor does the culture at large see them, as beautiful.

In conclusion, I would especially like to acknowledge the inspiration provided by Lenore Wadsworth Hervey, in her general words of encouragement on the listserv, at conferences, on the dance floor, and in her wonderful book, *Artistic inquiry in dance/movement therapy*. I found the reading so stimulating, I had to stop at times to dance in order to ground myself. It is my desire to raise the consciousness of the dance in dance movement therapy, for it is the dance which is healing for me. It is as though *the dance* as I perceive it is herself a goddess. "These dance elements are our uniqueness and vitality. If we lose them, we lose our identity." (Elissa White, 1993, p.10)

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