

AUTHENTIC MOVEMENT: MINDFULNESS IN MOTION

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After graduating from Middlebury College in 1984 as a dance major, I moved to Northampton, Massachusetts and ‘discovered’ Authentic Movement—a practice which has been a gift in my life for nearly twenty years. Often compared to Vipassana meditation (with its focus on physical sensation and a deepened state of awareness), Authentic Movement offers a place of mindfulness from which your inner presence emerges.

The form itself was created by Mary Starks Whitehouse, a pioneer in dance therapy in the 1950’s, and was later formalized and named “Authentic Movement” by Janet Adler, a dance therapist who had studied with Whitehouse. The form is simple and involves a mover and a witness. During a timed session, the mover closes the eyes and allows inner impulses from one’s body to guide one’s movement--working with eyes closed in order to attend more deeply to one’s kinesthetic/inner experience. The witness sits to the side of the movement space and attends to both the mover and his / her own internal responses to the movement. Afterwards, the two speak about their experiences. The mover speaks first, followed by comments from the witness.

The idea of ‘mover’ and ‘witness’ evolved from the Jungian concepts of the conscious and unconscious minds —with the witness holding the place of

conscious presence/support such that the mover may explore the more unconscious realm through movement. Although I have had many meaningful experiences as both mover and witness, this example from my recent witnessing speaks of the potential depth and transformational nature of this process:

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*In one workshop of seven people, I noticed a woman lying down by the wall. As I witnessed her, I began to feel a particular heaviness in my body. Just then I heard the sound of a train coming. The studio was located near the train tracks, and in fact a train was coming outside the building. As I watched her, I suddenly 'saw' her lying on the tracks, with the train approaching, and began to have the feeling of approaching doom. I wanted to shout out, "Get up, get up! Move, move!" but it was clear that she was not going to move. For some reason this perception was so strong that I literally had to look away as the train sound got louder, so as not to 'see' her get hit.

Later when she talked about her movement, she mentioned that most of the session she had felt heavy and incapable of moving, almost as if 'frozen' in time. When she asked for my feedback, I shared my perception with her, about the heaviness I had felt and the strange image and sensations I had experienced at the sound of the approaching train. When I finished, she looked shocked, and glanced across at her husband, who was also in the workshop that day. He looked equally surprised. "Tell her," he said emphatically, and then, more gently, "it's OK." She then went on to explain that she and her husband had been in a

car accident just three weeks earlier. Apparently, they had been walking at dusk when a car had pulled out of a driveway and hit her. She had seen the car coming, but had been unable to move out of the way in time. Although she had not been badly hurt, she said, she had in a sense been unable to move on in her life, and kept 'replaying' this scenario in her mind. Her movement had revealed this to her again: that until she was able to process this scenario, she would remain heavy and "frozen"--in the past trauma of her experience.

In this way, trauma is not necessarily in the moment itself, but in our experience in and perception of that moment. By shifting her perception, or at least making efforts in that direction, she could begin to heal the trauma she had experienced, rather than continuing to fuel it in her imagination. As she later expressed, just being 'seen' in this pattern helped her enormously to free herself from it. Similarly, the process of Authentic Movement brings us to the present and reveals the reality of 'where we are' at any given time in our lives, while gently guiding us to the next stage—toward the possibility for change and renewal.

*(Story written with permission of the mover).

Susan Bauer has practiced Authentic Movement since 1984 and has facilitated groups in the U.S., as well as most recently in Thailand. She studied with several graduates of the Whitehouse Institute and with the Institute's founder, Janet Adler, in San Francisco.