

The healing power of movement

*Published in Network Magazine Issue 79 Oct-Dec 2011 and
Inside Out IAHIP Journal No 65 Autumm 2011*

Throughout our history, human beings have used movement and dance to celebrate, to pray, to connect with and to heal themselves. The language of the body is movement. It is our first language, our most honest expression and the closest to the truth of who we are, and how we relate to ourselves, and the world around us.

Dance and movement have always felt like therapy for me. I feel lighter, clearer, more relaxed and in tune with myself in the aftermath of a couple of hours or even just a few minutes of movement. No matter what is happening in my life, when I allow my body to move freely and keep my focus on breath and motion, it brings a sense of peace and security that I rarely feel in my thinking mind (which loves to worry!), and allows the physical energy of my emotions to pass through me unrestricted.

Movement Therapy, a modality that had it's beginnings in the 1940's is based on the premise that the mind and body are inseparable and what is experienced in the mind is also experienced in the body. It invites the voice of the body into the therapy space. We have a mind and we live in a body, so we can access a fuller picture when we listen to what both have to say about an experience or situation. The body speaks through sensation, the physical energy of our emotions and the way we move. In our culture we are used to thinking and trying to understand with our minds; we are taught to calculate, to assess and to reason, which are all necessary skills, but we are not used to listening to the body or trusting it's wisdom. And without this direct connection to the body we are on a deep level lost, homeless and missing our greatest ally.

Working as a massage therapist and with Reiki (energy medicine) during the 1990's taught me much of the powerful connection between the mind and body and how deeply they interact and influence each other. I wanted to be able to work with both, and I knew I needed to be more 'grounded', but I found it difficult to stay in my body and to go with the sensations and feelings that presented themselves there. It was very uncomfortable at times and I would revert to old patterns of dissociating or distracting myself, keeping my attention on the whirlwind of thoughts in my head rather than being present with what I was feeling or sensing in the moment.

Eleven years ago I met the first of my movement teachers and slowly began to find my way into my own body, learning to listen to its voice and develop a healthy relationship to it. For me this was a very gradual process, as the wounds that were keeping me 'in my head' and 'outside' of my body needed to heal.

The mind/body split

There are many reasons why we split away from our bodies and come to live mostly in our thinking minds and all of them stem from some form of pain; family trauma, shame, substance abuse, emotional repression, violence, a culture that idolizes rich and thin people, failed relationships, a gradual erosion of our self worth and more. We all have an inner critic, a tendency to be hard on ourselves, and our body takes a lot of the fallout from that pattern. Not good enough, not pretty enough, not strong enough, not the right size or shape, too big, too skinny, too hairy, the list is endless. But what I noticed was the more I danced and moved, the more I just felt grateful to have a body, to have legs and arms that worked, that helped me express myself, and that related to others. I felt happy when the voice of my inner critic dissolved into the motion, and ecstatic when the joy of my spirit landed in my moving body. Dance and movement, particularly Gabrielle Roth's 5 Rhythms™, became my personal practice, providing me with a space to ground and physically connect to a place where I feel supported and available to what is going on internally. As I shifted from the experience of moving my body to actually 'being moved', I practiced allowing physical and emotional pain to just be there, opening to joy when it arose, and keeping my feet on the ground while all this was happening!

How Movement Therapy works in practice

While I found the 5 Rhythms™ movement practice to be therapeutic at times, it is not actual therapy, and it was only when I began to train as a professional counsellor that I met a therapist who focused on the body experience and used movement in therapy practice. This was a revelation for me as I experienced first hand how the use of movement in a therapeutic setting invites the body to lead the process, and that when given that space the body will naturally orientate towards healing.

My body became the barometer that guided the therapy sessions. We followed the rising and falling away of sensation to help me connect to my internal process and keep me present. At times when I was confused or 'stuck' in my head, my body would provide resources and a gateway into my true feelings, measuring when I needed to move forward, to access what had been shut down, to make contact with 'missing' parts or to acknowledge when I was feeling overwhelmed and needed to slow down.

It spoke so clearly that I couldn't argue with it! Sometimes I didn't like what it was saying, when it showed me all the ways I had learned to dismiss it, to go against what it was saying to me and how much I feared the outcome of really listening to and following the impulses that arose. I was surprised at how truthful and loving it was with me and of how clearly it had recorded all of my experiences, some of which I had repressed or long forgotten. Sometimes it was scary to let go of control and allow my body be in charge, and to have it's say about my experiences, but we worked slowly and the blockages and trapped energy unwound and released. It was necessary to work slowly and steadily so

that I did not become overwhelmed, which was something I had not been able to evaluate or acknowledge, to my detriment, in the past.

It was my body that taught me about boundaries and brought clarity into what had for so long been a murky and uncertain place for me. It showed me where I needed to erect them and what I really felt about situations where they were being pushed. Through the use of simple movement structures and being encouraged to follow my physical expression, I got a clear sense of what I really needed in my life. For example, when it was right for me to stay in a situation or when I needed to walk away, when I needed to speak up or when I needed to stay solid and centred in myself no matter what anyone else wanted. My confidence grew as my relationship with my body deepened and I began to trust its' voice and the fact that it was there for me.

It was this personal experience of movement therapy and my love of dance and movement that brought me to train in 5 Rhythms Movement Therapy with Andrea Juhan. We learned to cultivate the felt sense, the bodily experience of sensation and to support the moving body to follow the impulses that arise from within. We practiced limbic resonance – which can also be described as empathic harmony; a complex exchange of non-verbal information where our nervous systems tune in and meet another, and how we as human beings regulate ourselves alongside the systems of those around us.

In my work with clients I focus on assisting them to connect with their physical experience through some gentle awareness practice, to track what is happening in their bodies and to explore the emerging themes. Because physical expression is often much clearer than words, movement offers another path into the unconscious by allowing the body to lead. When we follow the flow of movement in our bodies, we can express ourselves in a clear and simple manner and use the body as a vehicle to create lasting change. In my experience when a client follows the sensations and motion of their bodies, they quickly become resourced and clear about what decisions they want to make. They recognise where they might need to soften and relax, where to use their strength and stay steady, how to soothe and confide in themselves. The beauty of listening to the messages coming from the body is that it is a very empowering process; the client will always have their body to rely upon outside of the therapy room and it reduces the potential for long-term dependency on the therapist or therapy process.

Counselling and Movement Therapy work well together, when combined they offer a holistic approach, where we attend to the mind, the emotions and the body. I recognise that movement therapy is not appropriate for every client and while it is offered as a possibility, it is always the choice of the client as to how to proceed.

Movement therapy is used successfully in medical and educational settings, in nursing homes and rehabilitation centres and can be applied to a wide range of emotional, physical and cognitive difficulties. It is particularly effective in the treatment of depression, abuse, anxiety, creative difficulties and food disorders.

Working with trauma

Trauma can occur when we feel powerless in a situation. Two people could go through very similar experiences but be affected very differently according to their response to the situation.

Traditionally counselling and psychotherapy have focused on the cognitive and emotional experience of the client but have not had the scope to include the body in the process, or if it does, it has been based on techniques rather than allowing the body itself to move and take the lead. This is changing as research, particularly in the field of trauma treatment is showing that trauma affects both the mind and the body and that the body itself can be used as the healer. In his seminal book 'Waking the Tiger – Healing Trauma' Peter Levine concludes that traumatic symptoms such as those displayed in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, are not caused by the 'triggering' event itself, such as a car crash or violent attack, but rather they stem from the frozen residue of the energy that was mobilized to deal with the threat, but was not resolved or discharged in its aftermath. He noted that animals in the wild will usually release this energy and do not tend to become traumatized, but human beings have difficulty with this as our intellect can block the simple physical release. His work focuses on treating the body as an intelligent organism with an innate ability to heal and engages the body process that **should have happened** rather than simply reliving what did happen. He finds that allowing the body to lead the process and using its somatic experience as a resource for treatment can release the energy of the trauma that was locked in on a physiological level. As trauma affects both psyche and body, then it follows that both must be attended to on the path to recovery.

Movement therapy attends to both. In the words of Mary Whitehouse, a pioneer of movement therapy

'The body does not, I would almost say cannot lie. We are like our movements for the movement is ourselves living; vital and experiencing or tense and restricted, spontaneous and flowing or controlled and inhibited. I don't think what we are doing is movement – physical movement – it's the inner movement of the psyche we are working on and trying to free'

Movement Meditation Classes & Workshops

I hold weekly movement meditation classes that are open to everyone. During The Moving Body class we focus on connecting with our interior and following the movement that arises from this space. We move sometimes in silence and usually with music, and each person is encouraged to move as they feel in the moment, and at their own pace. We move on our own and with others, and it is an enjoyable and effective way to release stress, and to connect with and nourish yourself on all levels.

The following is an extract from a study that found that

'Dancing makes you smarter'

A 21 year study of senior citizens in the United States researched the effects of a variety of physical and cognitive recreational activities. They studied cognitive activities such as reading, writing, playing cards, doing crosswords and puzzles etc and studied physical activities like playing tennis or golf, swimming, bicycling, dancing and walking. We know that stimulating one's mind can ward off Alzheimer's disease and other dementia but this research found that dancing frequently was the only physical activity to offer protection against dementia. Dancing that focuses on style or retracing the same memorized paths (as used in golf or swimming) did not offer this benefit however. Only freestyle dancing which requires rapid decision making as the body moves keeps the brain fired up, and the mind/body connection strong enough to reduce dementia.

A more comprehensive account of that study can be found on <http://socialdance.stanford.edu/syllabi/smarter.htm>

In my experience the body needs as much attention as the mind and the spirit in the healing process. Our bodies love attention. They are always there, waiting to take our hand and bring us home, to provide us with an anchor as we experience the ups and downs of life, and to find their way to balance and well being. I am always amazed at how profound the wisdom of the body is, how gentle, simple, loving and powerful this flesh of ours is, and the sense of communion in the room as the body receives and speaks with its owner. Without the use of therapeutic movement I feel I would have come to understand and release my history on a cognitive and emotional level but would not have been able to physically embody that freedom, or carry it into my daily life.

Life is in constant motion, and when we connect to the motion moving through our bodies we connect to life moving through us. Mindful movement builds pathways from our inner worlds to the outer world, shifts old patterns and stressful ways of being and encourages us to be authentic with ourselves, and those around us. Movement is magic, it is healing, it is life affirming and best of all, it brings us home.

Carol McNerney works as a counsellor and movement therapist in private practice in Dublin.

More information about Carol and on counselling, movement therapy and classes can be found on www.crimsoncounselling.com or www.themovingbody.ie

