

Seeking a Sense of Self

The Integration of Authentic Movement, and the Body-Mind Centering^R approach to Developmental Movement Therapy, in Body Psychotherapy Practice

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[O]ver the post-Freudian period there has been a gradual shift in the nature of the typical analysand, from someone needing to liberate her/himself from unconscious conflicts, to someone desperately seeking for a secure core of self.

(Frosh, 1987: 248)

It is the failure to develop a 'secure core of self' which brings many clients into therapy today, and the therapies which directly address bodily experience and expression are often an intuitive choice for such people. Early disruptions of development are somatic as well as psychological events, and may engender physical as well as psychological symptoms later in life; because of this, the adult client may look to body-based therapies in their quest to heal the somatised symptoms of psychological distress. When disruptions have occurred in the earliest stages of development, somatic therapies can offer an opportunity to enter the preverbal matrix directly, through the use of focused touch, movement and sensory awareness.

A tendency, all too prevalent within modern western culture, to split body from mind and to treat body as inferior or subordinate to mind, can leave us, as individuals, without a sense of inner ground, of being embodied, of subjectivity rooted in sensory awareness, feeling, and somatic process. Daniel Stern touches the root of the problem when he describes the primary task of the infant as developing a *sense* of core self (Stern, 1985). His emphasis on the *sense* of self brings the issue clearly into the realm of direct and felt experience, back to the body, to sensation, perception and action, and out of the realm of mental construct. He describes how the senses of an *emergent, core, subjective* and *verbal* self develop out of somatic experience, out of the intimate reality of bodily sensation, feeling, and expression - which is movement.

The fetus, infant and child learn through the body; through direct embodied experience they learn about themselves and the world around them. First learning is through the perceptions of touch and movement, and the nervous system matures through the continuous interaction of motor expression and sensory feedback (Cohen, 1993: 115; Hartley, 2004: 95). Deane Juhan writes: 'Movement is the unifying bond between the mind and the body, and sensations are the substance of that bond'. (Juhan, 1987: xxvi)

As the infant moves she touches the world and the world touches her, each adjustment bringing a new stream of sensory information to the brain.

This tells her about where she is and who she is. It also tells her about how the world is responding to her; relationship to self and other is based on an ongoing flow of sensations that are perceived as good, bad, or indifferent. Comfort and pleasure, pain and discomfort give rise to emotional feelings which are later given names and elaborated, associated, judged, censored and maybe repressed. Body, feelings and mind evolve, and will be integrated or split off from each other to different degrees; the embodied sense of self that is our birthright may be lost or never fully developed as overwhelming physical pain, emotional distress, or over-intellectualisation sever the unity between mind and body.

Developmental Movement Therapy

To enter the preverbal world of the infant we can observe the details of expression, the movement initiations and responses which embody her relationship to the world. The somatic movement therapy of Body-Mind Centering[®], originated by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (USA), has evolved a subtly nuanced study of infant movement development (Cohen, 1993; Hartley, 1995, 2004). Beginning with the first movement of new life, the expansion and contraction of the cell as it fills and empties in the process of *cellular breathing*, Cohen's description of movement development continues through embryological and fetal development, birth, and the first year of life.

In my psychotherapy practice I find this work offers a useful framework for viewing and working with early disruptions to the senses of self. It explores not only the neuromuscular coordinations of movement, but the process of coming-into-being of each movement pattern: what is the impulse for transition from one level of movement development to the next? how is a movement initiated and sequenced through the body, and how does it complete and resolve? where is there support for the intention behind the movement and where is support lacking? Through attending to how mind moves within the body during the initiation, sequencing and completion of an action, support can be given to re-pattern, or embody more fully, inefficient or inhibited sensory-motor pathways.

Early memories and emotions, associated with the original learning and embodying of primal movement patterns, are held within the neuromuscular patterning; Juhan writes of 'sensory engrams', habitual and idiosyncratic movement styles and gestures which are rooted in the sensations and emotions experienced as these pathways were being laid down in infancy (Juhan, 1987: 263-76). These memories may re-surface, emotions may be released, and energy integrated during the process of re-embodiment of early movement patterns. This can have profound effects upon other areas of learning, such as social, psychological, intellectual and creative development, as they are rooted in the neurological organisation established through the process of sensory-perceptual-motor integration during the early years (Mills & Cohen, 1979).

In the earliest stages, the sense of an *emergent* self is developing; Stern describes the sense of an emergent self as the process of 'coming-into-being of organisation', prior to an actual formed sense of self (Stern, 1985: 45-6). I believe this begins in utero and is supported by the motility of the cells through the process of cellular breathing, and by the organisation of fetal movement around the umbilical centre in the *navel radiation* pattern (Cohen). Here a rudimentary sense of being a unified whole, with separate parts that are both differentiated yet connected, begins to form on the basis of this movement organisation. Trauma or disruptions in utero could affect the potential for a developing sense of unity and connectedness. Re-embodiment of the navel radiation pattern of movement organisation can help create a support for recovering this underlying sense of unity; or for clients suffering from trauma at a later stage of development, it can offer an opportunity to reconnect to a state of health prior to the disruption. This can be an important resource, a safe place to return to when working through traumatic material (Rothschild, 2000:88).

Although development of the sense of a *core* self is considered by Stern to begin around two months of age, my experience with developmental movement therapy suggests that the process of birthing calls this sense into existence, if only momentarily. I observe and sense the core self as most clearly embodied in the spinal structures, and it is called into being during the act of birth which is principally a powerful *spinal* movement. Along the length of the spine, head to tail and tail to head, the infant yields into and pushes against the contracting walls of the uterus in order to birth himself. This is an act of great will, of *self-agency* and *self-coherence* (Stern, 1985: 71), which calls upon the power of every cell of the infant's body. Movements which recapitulate the birth experience can also awaken or deepen, in children or adult clients, the embodied sense of a core self, and might be integrated into therapeutic work (Hartley, 2005).

During the period from about two to six or seven months, the period of development of the sense of a core self, the infant is learning to support his newly integrated spinal core upon all fours. As the limbs develop control and coordination, meaningful interaction with others and with the world around becomes increasingly possible. First he learns to yield weight through each limb, establishing a rooted connection with the ground; out of this supportive contact he pushes himself up and out of gravity. Locomotion begins and self-mastery becomes a possibility. He is also establishing body boundaries during these actions, filling himself with substance as he yields into and establishes a dynamic relationship with the earth, and defining his personal space as he pushes against earth or other. With a stable support and increasingly embodied sense of core self, he can begin to reach out - for contact and comfort, in play or curiosity. Movements based on the principles of the *yield and push* patterns of locomotion (Cohen) can be introduced to facilitate this development at appropriate stages of therapy.

As he learns to reach out and move beyond his established boundaries, a myriad of interactions, and also responses from the environment, open up. Desire, frustration, fear, pleasure, rage, delight, shame

are evoked, and the infant's sense of a subjective self begins to develop. The therapist's ability to relate, to witness, empathise, contain and process these raw feelings is what is called for in work addressing disruptions at this stage, as the sense of a *subjective self and intersubjective relatedness* (Stern) is developing. Dance movement therapy offers a wonderful vehicle to work with this process, as the therapist attunes to, mirrors and reflects back the client's movement expressions in a variety of ways. Through her own embodied presence, the quality of her verbal expression, and at times her own movement interventions, she seeks to attune to, empathise with, and reflect back the quality and intensity of the client's energetic and affective expressions.

The infant movement patterns of rolling, crawling, yielding, pushing, reaching, grasping and pulling underlie the secure passage through these stages of psychological development and the emergence of the senses of self. Therapeutic work might integrate these movements, either as specifically focused exercises if working in a more directive mode (Hartley, 1995; Stokes, 2002), or emerging out of spontaneous movement explorations as personal, idiosyncratic gestures and movement sequences (Menzam, 2002). As a movement pattern is embodied, memories and feelings associated with the relevant phase of development may be accessed and can be integrated into consciousness; insight into how early experiences underlie current behaviour, perceptions and patterns of relating may arise from this.

Authentic Movement and the Art of Witnessing

During the second year of life the sense of a verbal self develops. As Stern describes, language enables the infant to share experience with others in subtle and intimate ways, but it can also relegate whole areas of experience which are not, perhaps cannot be named, to the shadows, to unconsciousness:

[Language] makes some parts of our experience less shareable with ourselves and with others. It drives a wedge between two simultaneous forms of interpersonal experience: as it is lived and as it is verbally represented. Experience in the domains of emergent, core, and intersubjective relatedness, which continue irrespective of language, can be embraced only very partially in the domain of verbal relatedness Language, then, causes a split in the experience of the self. (Stern, 1985: 182)

In my work as a dance movement therapist and body psychotherapist I have felt deeply drawn to the practice of Authentic Movement (Pallaro, 1999), in part because it works so profoundly, specifically and integrally with the healing of this split in the experience of the self. Originated by Mary Starks Whitehouse (USA), and further developed by Janet Adler (USA) and others, Authentic Movement focuses upon the relationship between a mover and a witness. It gives equal value to both the moving process and the verbal sharing of the mover's and witness's experience of the movement; a discipline

of bringing bodily experience into language has evolved which honours the direct experience of both mover and witness (Adler, 2002).

The *ground form*, which is most relevant to individual therapy practice, involves one mover and one witness, although Authentic Movement is also practised in groups. It is the task of the witness to provide a safe space through her mindful presence, a container into which the mover can enter, with eyes closed, to attend to the stirrings of her inner world. An impulse to move may be felt and embodied; or it may be a sensation, an emotional feeling, an image, the mood or memory of a dream which provides the impulse to move. Whitehouse describes: 'the open waiting, which is also a kind of listening to the body, an emptiness in which something can happen. You wait until you feel a change As you feel it begin, you follow where it leads, like following a pathway that opens up before you as you step.' (Whitehouse, 1963/1999: 53) As the mover surrenders to the flow of impulses from within, she learns to witness her self moving, sensing, feeling, without judging or inhibiting what arises from the unconscious. The body becomes conscious; soul is embodied.

In speaking about the movement, both mover and witness speak of their own *direct experience* - about the movement itself, the sensations felt, emotions and images that arise. For a mover with a rich imaginal world, or one who likes to analyse and interpret, it can be a tough discipline to speak of the actual movement and name the sensations, but this is essential if the experience is to be grounded and integrated into consciousness. For all of us it is a challenge to take ownership of our experience rather than project it onto the other. In the process of naming the richness of detail experienced on many levels, the mover can integrate unconscious material, and clarity can emerge in the relationship between mover and witness. The quest for conscious language that is sourced in the direct experience of bodily movement, sensation, emotion, and the images that arise out of the body, helps to bring, piece by piece, those unnamed, unknown and disavowed parts of ourselves and our experience into consciousness; as they are shared with an accepting other, the extent of our shareable universe expands and the split that language creates in the experience of self can begin to heal.

Over time, being witnessed with clarity and non-judgmental compassion by another, the mover is enabled to see himself with clarity and compassion as his internal witness develops. And the witness, too, comes to see herself with more clarity as 'the density of her personal history empties'. Adler continues:

The heart of the practice is about the longing, as well as the fear, to see ourselves clearly. We repeatedly discover that such an experience of clarity is deeply and inextricably related to the gift of being seen clearly by another and, just as importantly, related to the gift of seeing another clearly. (Adler, 1994/1999: 6)

Authentic Movement can be used within the context of psychotherapy, but whether movement is the medium or not, the skills of witnessing can

always be used to attune to, empathise with, and monitor responses to the client. Tracking my own physical states, movement and posture, sensations, feelings and images in this way informs me about projective identification and countertransference. As I clarify my own sense of self within the therapeutic relationship, a space is created for the client to begin to see herself more clearly too, and as she embodies those unknown and disavowed aspects of her experience, her sense of self grows.

Dialogue between Conscious and Unconscious Processes

The therapeutic use of movement in psychotherapy can take two essential directions: it can activate both conscious and unconscious processes. As Chodorow writes:

Jung describes the ego as a complex datum which is constituted primarily of a general awareness of the body.' (CW #18, para 18.)..... Although the impulse to move may spring from a source in the unconscious, the body, which allows the impulse to manifest itself, remains firmly rooted in the fact of its own existence. The actual act of moving creates proprioceptive and kinesthetic feedback which serves to confront the unconscious with the body ego's reality. As the unconscious impulse and the body ego encounter each other's different realities, an intense and fully mutual education is likely to occur. (Chodorow, 1994; 34)

A more structured approach to movement can be used when the therapeutic aim is to strengthen the client's ego-position by clarifying body boundaries and spatial orientation; the use of specific neuromuscular patterning, rhythm, or spatial organisation helps to develop a body image that is rooted in the reality of the body, and to create a strong body-mind container. Such an approach can be useful for the client who does not have a strong enough ego to safely explore the unconscious; in working with borderline or psychotic clients, or when working through trauma, this direction can support the work of grounding and creating safety. Some of the infant movement patterns may be included in work at this level as they clarify neuromuscular and spatial patterning, and can support development of the embodied sense of a core self. In particular, the crawling patterns which are initiated by yielding weight into and pushing out of the ground facilitate ego development by embodying and strengthening muscles, creating a bounded sense of self, and encouraging a sense of substantiality through engagement with weight, earth and gravity.

When the aim of therapy is to open to unconscious material, the therapist must know that the client's ego is strong enough to contain and integrate what might emerge, as this approach can involve some temporary dissolution of ego boundaries; the client who is not ready for this may be overwhelmed if disturbing or disorientating material emerges.

A client who needs to cultivate a clearer sense of core self may have difficulty in emerging from the movement to speak about, and thus integrate, the experience; not knowing the place of the internal witness, which is dependent upon the sense of a core self, the client may become unconsciously merged with the experience, unable to differentiate inner and outer reality or past and present experience. In this, no 'mutual education' between unconscious impulse and body ego can occur. However, the practice of Authentic Movement may help such a client, over time, to develop this function - to become conscious, to witness herself as she moves, and then to return to ego consciousness to integrate what arose from the unconscious. With care and mindful attention from her external witness, she gradually internalises the presence of a compassionate and accepting witness, and with this her sense of self evolves.

For the client whose sense of self is secure, and ego functions strong enough, this approach offers a rich path of exploration into the unknown and unexpressed parts of the psyche. As the mover closes her eyes and enters her inner world, ego boundaries loosen; the experience of 'I am moving' transforms at times into the experience of 'I am moved', as unconscious impulses arise and are embodied. In this work not only the disavowed and feared aspects of ourselves and our personal experience may be encountered, but also the unowned potential for experiencing joy, love, power and grace, as spirit and the transpersonal is also touched as we descend deeply into the inner world of the body-psyche.

Concluding words

This article has explored some ways in which somatic movement therapy might be used within body psychotherapy practice, in relation to the development of the senses of self according to Daniel Stern's theory. Particular reference has been made to the application of the Body-Mind Centering® approach to developmental movement therapy, and to Authentic Movement, a discipline which has grown out of the field of dance movement therapy; I have looked briefly at how these approaches might support the development of the senses of an emergent, core, subjective and verbal self (Stern). The use of movement in psychotherapy can address a client's need to strengthen ego boundaries, or to loosen them in order to access and integrate unconscious material. These two basic directions were explored with reference to the client's developing sense of self and ego functions.

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