

“The Blood-Dimmed Tide”: Witnessing War and Working with the Collective Body in Authentic Movement

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ABSTRACT *This article considers how the impact of witnessing war, violence, and news of sexual abuse, as well as processing these themes in clinical work, can be mediated through the practice of Authentic Movement in a group setting. Dramatic movement stories narrate the author’s journey into the underworld, and the processing of the visceral impact of violence in the embodiment of the self-states of victim, bystander, rescuer and perpetrator. Set in a reflexive discussion of the collective body, politics, trauma theory, Aristotle’s concepts of catharsis and pity, this article concludes with the acknowledgement that the role of a witnessing community is vital. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: Authentic Movement; collective body; war; violence; witnessing; bystander; pity; catharsis; Aristotle

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (Yeats, 1956/2000 p. 158)

Yeats wrote “The Second Coming” (1956/2000) nearly 100 years ago but it seems as prescient and pertinent as ever. In this time of war, in this time where the consequences of earlier wars reverberate in further violence, in this time where generations of adults who were sexually abused children are speaking out, we cannot but know that the “ceremony of innocence” is being “drowned”. The extended sensory system we know as the media (McLuhan, 1964/2001) brings the daily trauma in the world right into our bodies. And stories of war, upheaval, and wide-scale violence and sexual abuse of children and adults make us into bystanders whether we like it or not.

This article describes the practice of Authentic Movement and how it enabled me to digest my own response to “the blood-dimmed tide”. In parallel with the processing of collective trauma that

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occurs in an Authentic Movement group are healing processes activated in my own journey. I explore embodiment, catharsis, pity and unfreezing the freeze response, which includes encountering the perpetrator self-states, as well as the silenced and silencing self-states, and the identification with death itself.

AUTHENTIC MOVEMENT: EMBODYING THE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE PSYCHE

A group of people sit in a circle, witnessing eight people moving. The movers have their eyes closed. One woman is curled up very tight and still. Another is exploring with her hands, feeling tentatively the grooves on the floor. A man standing very tall makes cutting movements with his arms, rigid as they slice the air. Another man beats a rhythm, with his fingers against different parts of his body. A third man rolls on the floor, rolls into the woman who is feeling her environment. He stops, frozen. She feels his face delicately, sensitively tracing its outline. He begins to cry. Another woman has been swaying, her arms straining upward. She softens her movement, and begins to stroke her own arm. The drumming fingers find the floor, become clawing, scratching movements. Someone crawls towards him, starts clawing with him, at him. They hiss. Another woman is standing very still. After a while she sighs deeply, and begins to rotate her hips, letting out a long, deep cry. (Carroll, 1999)

Deriving originally from the work of the pioneering movement therapist Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911–1979) (Whitehouse, 1958), Authentic Movement has been extended by her student Janet Adler (1987, 1994, 2007) into a discipline with an increasing focus on embodying collective consciousness. As a practice, it bridges many traditions: ritual and improvisation, shamanism, dance, healing, psychotherapy, and meditation.

Authentic Movement has a formal and simple framework. The group is usually divided into movers and witnesses who later swap roles. They work in pairs or with the witnesses acting as a containing circle for all the movers. The witness "is not 'looking at' the person moving, she is witnessing, listening, bringing a specific quality of attention or presence to the experience of the mover" (Adler, 1987, p. 22). There is no music; the mover has to listen to, sense deeply, himself. With eyes closed to the external world, she traces the clues from the inner world, feeling into the unknown, listening for a sensation, an image, an impulse, a feeling. Viewed as a group practice, it often features extraordinary synchronous events as movers' gestures and stories coincide and converge in the intersubjective field.

Afterwards, the movers may draw, write or talk directly about what occurred for them. The witness responds by owning the subjective phenomenological detail of experience through phrases like "I saw, I imagined, I felt, I heard". Authentic Movement is as much about the witnesses' longing to see clearly as the mover's desire to be seen. The witnessing capacity is developed over time, with practice, and in conscious commitment to another. And the commitment is reciprocal.

JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD

At identifiable thresholds, penetration of fear or of awe – of an utter vulnerability – becomes the source of a growing strength. (Adler, n.d.)

In 1989, in my first Authentic Movement group with Anne Smith, we explored the structure of having the whole group witness one mover. I sensed the extra containment this provided and when

my turn came I let go into a “perilous descent” (Plevin, 2007, p. 109), a desperate spiralling vortex, which ended in a scream. In witnessing me the group expressed concern about the traumatic material I had touched on. I remember feeling stunned, but also relieved and calm: I had released an unconscious fear and met my own darkness.

Since that first opening I have developed my capacity to trust the process – to be curious, to surrender, to participate, to go into still or dead places, to unravel emotional knots, to inhabit and express fierce passions, and to expand into playfulness and celebration. As a witness I have come to love the “long circle” where movers and witnesses can choose to enter or move out of the circle at any time, providing a minimum number of witnesses are maintained. Afterwards, the verbal weaving of narrative threads and impressions with embodied haiku-like economy is full of surprises, synchronicities, and revelations that reveal the collective work in which we are engaged.

Moving with eyes closed heightens other senses. At the end of a five-day Authentic Movement retreat I feel a sense of loss at having to return to a world where most of the time I will function with my eyes open. Closing the eyes naturally facilitates the sense of entering the underworld. Many authentic movers have recognized the potential link between this process and the Sumerian myth of Inanna or the Greek myth of Persephone. (Hartley, 2001; Plevin, 2007; Stromsted, 2009). Plevin quoted Perera (1981) on Inanna’s descent into the underworld:

She descends, submits and dies. This openness to being acted upon is the essence of the experience of the human soul faced with the transpersonal. It is not based upon passivity but upon an active willingness to receive. (Perera, as cited in Plevin, 2007, p. 113)

I notice in my own movement process typical entry points to the underworld or what I refer to later in this article as “the story”. These include: fast, spiralling, repetitive or chaotic movements; lying on the floor and letting myself go deeper into stillness, falling, releasing; and when standing, finding a suspension point from which to hang such as an elbow or a shoulder.

Sometimes I am processing or surrendering to an emotion. At other times, the movement itself is the doorway to a buried feeling. One way in which the practice of Authentic Movement has been reciprocal with my development as a therapist is in finding ways to drop down into deep layers of a process. As a psychotherapist, sitting in my chair, I may have to tolerate my own dissociation, shame or frozenness as part of opening to powerful unconscious communication between the client and myself (Asheri, 2013; Asheri & Carroll, 2015).

I call the Authentic Movement experience I am about to describe “the Seed” because it sparked a train of associations and complex lines of enquiry that occupied me for over a year and have inspired this article. It occurred in December 2013 at a meeting with the West London Authentic Movement Group. At the previous meeting, while moving, I had a vision of, or encounter with, an owl. (The owl is often a guide to and through the underworld). That night I dreamt of a boat with a woman lying in it, half-submerged under water, and another woman swimming strongly beside the boat. I was starting a journey, traversing the river Styx, which flows through the underworld.

THE SEED

12 December 2013. I arrive at the group having already entered a process of grieving. I know I cannot be a witness; I grab a pillow and a blanket so I can withdraw and feel held inside the circle.

Burrowing down under the blanket intensifies a feeling of being hurt and little. I start to rub the blanket between my hands and find I am suddenly wrestling with it. Something is happening; a violent struggle; a doer and a done-to. I am fighting to survive. Yelling, clawing, kicking.

I am on my back now. I feel my spine on the floor. I start to snake my hips, feeling with pleasure the friction between my back and the carpet. My whole body sings. I feel sensual, powerful, coiling and uncoiling. Then my attacker returns. I am kicking, shouting, arching my back off the floor; raging, raging.

I am in turmoil, moving, rolling, arms and legs pushing, squirming, then still. One long scream, tears streaming down, helpless fury.

I lie on my back for a long, long time. I keep my hands cupped over my eye sockets. I am in limbo. I cannot look, I cannot see, I must not. I am stunned. I am shamed.

Something compels me to get on my feet. Without moving my hands from my face, I find a way to crouch. There is a crowd around me. I feel an unfamiliar desire. A desire to menace. It is so clear, so powerful a feeling, so precise. I want to intimidate, threaten, accuse ...

Everyone. Everywhere around me there is violence, bloodshed, rape. And there is a crowd of onlookers. My eyes remain closed, my hands are still over my eyes and my hair is over my hands. I stand, and through these shields I stare. I stare methodically, progressing round the circle so each person will feel my stare, my accusation.

I move further into the circle. My hands drop and fold together at my lap. I lift a sword, a big heavy medieval sword. I lift it up to threaten, intimidate, and menace those around me. I have never known such ugly brutal power. I am fearless amidst the violence. I am intent on ... I am intent ... I feel poised for revenge, capable of harming. But also, witnessing myself still, I question myself. What am I doing with this malevolent power? Why am I holding onto it? I am aware of my female witnesses, and the palpable sense of the circle holding me. What must I do?

The answer comes from an inner voice which says: "Turn it around." I take it to mean I must transform this hatred, not re-enact it. And so, as I hear the words I start to move the sword, still gripped by both hands, above my head. I circle it above me.

Suddenly the sword above my head is turning to decapitate me, and with a scream I fall to my knees. Shock and terror shake my body as I collapse on the floor. I know the sequence is over. I know I have survived. I feel relief and a devastating sense of impotence. Did I think I could choose?

The witness circle gathers to rock and soothe me. I am a child again, being comforted by women.

THE UNFOLDING

I have been digesting this movement experience for many months, and the rest of this article reflects some of the trails I followed. But its first and most immediate impact on me was an acute sense of our collective failure as bystanders to trauma of all kinds. I *felt* rather than thought: *why* do we not act to protect others from harm? It was a question which seemed to come from a horrified innocence, a genuine bewilderment.

The symbolic relevance to my own story occurred to me in layers over the following months. In the meantime, I was aware of two significant contexts for this emergent story. I was currently seeing four clients – two men and two women – who were working directly with their experience of being sexually abused as children. That very week, painful, explicit details in the narrative of their abuse had emerged. Their ongoing shock, fear, rage, confusion, shame, guilt, and despair were palpable and still reverberating in me. On the world scale, I was aware of escalating violence in the Middle East, in particular the civil war in Syria. My response to these stories had been a

sense of impotence and despair in relation to the murderous brutality, displacement, and horrendous loss suffered by so many. A few days after this I found the lines from Yeats' "The Second Coming", quoted at the beginning of this article, echoing in my mind.

Yeats' poem, one I have known by heart for decades, captures some of the threads of my experience: the turning circle of history – the "gyre" – and the turning movement of the sword above my head; the sense of the inexorable in the poem and, during the movement sequence, the shocking revelation that I could not choose to end the violence. The "ceremony of innocence [being] drowned" evokes in my mind the scale of child sexual abuse coming to light globally, in a constant stream of appalling stories. "The best lack all conviction" describes the paralysis of the bystander; in the movement sequence when I stare accusingly at the crowd there is an attempt to awaken the onlookers from their dissociation. Yeats' apocalyptic poem speaks to my own sense of horrified impotence as a bystander to cruelty and violence of all kinds, "the blood-dimmed tide". During 2014 and 2015 there has been an ongoing escalation of war, of decapitations, and of revelations concerning child sexual abuse.

The following August, at a five-day Authentic Movement retreat facilitated by Linda Hartley, my movement process was dominated by images of violence and death, paralleling what seemed to be ever-heightening news of war, disaster, and rape. Strangely the darkness of the material which hovered in my consciousness brought a reprieve from anxiety I had experienced during the past few years.

ENANTIODROMIA

"Enantiodromia": a process by which powerful unconscious counterpositions build up, which first inhibit, then oppose and subsequently break through conscious control. (Jung, 1971, para. 709)

Jung (1971) took the word "enantiodromia" (literally, "running counter to") from Heraclitus, who used it to describe how everything that exists will in time switch to the opposite pole. Jung believed that enantiodromia governed the cycles of history as well as personal development. Whitehouse (1958) saw the potential of movement to embody this Jungian principle of working with the opposites.

In developing her own ideas within the context of intersubjectivity theory, Benjamin (2004) used the phrase "doer–done to" to describe the dynamics of opposition, or, in her term, complementarity. Any self-state contains its opposite, and the flip from one position (doer) to the other (done to) is always potentially about to happen.

As we tune into the body we feel the pulls, twists, forces, and constraints deep in our muscles, our viscera, our skeleton. They carry the suppressed or dissociated energy of emotions and actions. While in a dream we are many parts simultaneously; in Authentic Movement we must make these shifts sequentially in real time and space. I find there is often a rhythmicity of diving deep and reaching wide, of searching and surrender, of directional and then non-linear movements, which seem to parallel the exploration of polarities such as dark and light, descent and emergence.

Part of my experience in the movement sequence I am calling the Seed was of feeling the transformations of strong emotions from one extreme to another: grief, then outrage and fear; then pleasure and surrender; then rage and protest; then shame; then menace; then hatred; then desire

for healing and peace; then power; then terror. I moved full circle, from weeping child curled on the floor through standing and wielding a sword, to sudden recapitulation to vulnerability.

This principle of enantiodromia occurring spontaneously within movers' practices may be an inherent part of an Authentic Movement process, an aspect of self-and-group regulation. Adorisio (2007) wrote: "Authentic Movement as a collective practice, in its continuous alternation of roles between mover and witness, offers us an external echo of what happens between the poles of the psyche. It reflects and activates the fluctuations in the individual psyche" (p. 91).

As the Gaza war became prominent in world headlines, I felt anguish not only at the terrible scenes of death and destruction but the escalating violence of irreconcilable perceptions between Israelis and Palestinians.

23 July 2014. Lying down, I choose to yield to gravity, I let my face relax. Suddenly I have the sensation of falling and an image of lying amidst rubble, and I know I am in Gaza.

I see a man on a rooftop pointing a gun at me. I am apprehensive and curious.

My right arm is outstretched and I become aware of my thumb cocked and open. As I sense the shape of my hand, the right-angled space, I recoil at the image which inserts itself. Terror rips through my body and I beg "Don't put a gun in my hand."

What impacted me most in this experience was the shock of feeling I was on the cusp of being raped by history, by my tribe, which would demand that I too become a perpetrator. I felt changed viscerally by this experience of a self-state hitherto unknown to me.

IN THE STORY

Is it the image that is in us, or are we in the image? (Hillman, 1997, p. 83)

As my practice has developed over the years I have had increasingly frequent experiences of shifting from an exploration focused on a sensation, emotion or movement impulse into a sense of inhabiting a live three-dimensional story. I call it being "in the story" because it is akin to entering a dramatic scene in which I am a participant/character. Often these scenes are rich with associations to myth, culture and the collective rather than personal memories (Lowell, 2007).

In August 2014 I went to the annual Authentic Movement retreat, looking forward to being reunited with other movers from previous years. The first afternoon in the long circle I find myself in a story which feels optimistic and uplifting.

27 August. After moving for about ten minutes, I find a pair of legs which become a steering column, and simultaneously I hear another mover make a sound like a revving engine. Suddenly I am driving [the magical car] Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and two other movers, my children, climb into the back seat. We are off on an adventure. Excitement builds as we sound together, stop and start again, with immaculate timing, contracting and expanding, as one witness later tells us, "like a living organism".

At the end of the week I would look back on this cheerful opening and reflect that chitty chitty bang bang already presages the theme of death.

A couple of days later we are working in dyads.

29 August. I begin with little finger movements, delicate articulations. ... Abruptly, my elbow moves up above my head, and I hang suspended ... I am in a cave, and I have a purpose: to meet the bull and take it by the horns. I spend a long time trying to approach the bull slowly. I am slightly crouched, my arms extended forward, my attention focused on the creature in front of me. But in the end I can't do it. There is no way to grasp the horns of this bull. I turn away in defeat, disillusion, despair.

I was left puzzled and frustrated by this sequence: what was I supposed to grasp by the horns? The felt sense had been of an impossible mission that I was bound to pursue but hopelessly inadequate to meet.

29 August. We begin the long circle, and immediately my heart starts to race. I enter with directional arms and fast steps, cutting across the space, rapier in hand. I dart from one room to the next, pitching into dark stairways, sliding behind an arras. The castle walls echo with my footsteps. I feel a sense of desperate absurdity. I follow the tinkling sound of a bracelet – and grasp the hand of my princess. I pull her across the floor, feeling her mild resistance. We begin to dance, and my extended hand holds the sword, unbeknownst to her. I feel tender towards my princess, and I will kill to protect her. As we find our rhythm, I am pointing my sword at others – threatening, warning. Fiercely, I feel how I want to be witnessed in this. Through my closed lids, the intensity in my eyes burns. I want to pierce the onlookers, to threaten and provoke.

We gradually part, and then hate takes over. I am consumed with hate. I want to kill. My inner witness is asking the question – can I do this in Authentic Movement? Can I kill someone? Can I use the sword to kill – myself, her, the other (I hear another interacting with her)? The impulse feels so powerful, so frightening. What can I do? I plunge the sword into the earth, right up to the hilt. As I stand upright, I feel a rush of energy in my hands which flex and flex and suddenly I throttle myself.

Deep cold heavy shame descends. I stand grim faced. Again I feel the need to be witnessed. See this grimness on my face! I need you to see my stone-like body! I stand for a long time, dreading and longing for my execution. I hear the sounds of others and cover my ears. A witness later tells me she saw my silent scream.

I want to end this now. I want to get out of this state. I find a bolster and lie down holding on to it. Someone comes to me. Healing hands. Her head in the nape of my neck. Her low sounds enable mine. Sensory contact sends tingles down my upper back.

I came back to the witness position. We had a break for writing and drawing, and then gathered for the weaving of our verbal witnessing. I realized I was still stuck in the alienated state I had inhabited in the circle. I felt locked out, unable to witness myself or others; unable to speak. Inhuman. Only when a witness across the circle looked right into my eyes and “found” me did my breath come and the feeling and the sounds of fear. However, though parts of my movement sequence were witnessed, no one was speaking of the grimness, the look on my face. I felt panic and anger. This must be witnessed!

Then one witness of my movement made some personal associations with death and suicide. Suddenly I realized what was happening. I was Death! I was the Grim Reaper! As I recognized that, I could begin to move out of my frightening, locked-out state. I began to reconnect with the others, and as the group ended for the day some of us stayed behind to talk. It was my partner from the morning dyad who wondered about the subject of death: was this the bull I was trying to take by the horns? We started to speak of war, and of our own histories and connections with wars old and current.

EMBODYING THE PERPETRATOR

In my work with trauma survivors I often have the spontaneous, unpleasant, experience of embodying the abuser in my thoughts, impulses, body sensations and images. (Heitzler, in press)

It made me feel the chill of his psychopathic presence in my own bones. (Heitzler, 2010, p. 7)

In subsequent months after the Seed, I came again and again to embody positions on the victim/perpetrator continuum, with violent acts and death as the constant organizing theme and fulcrum. What was useful and humbling to me was the vivid sense of stepping fully into dissociated parts of myself and others. I entered an undiluted experience of the victim-turned-into-perpetrator who has an urgent need to prey on others to avoid an annihilating sense of fear, rage, and shame. As a kind of internal supervision of my own clinical work, one of the meanings I took from this sequence was the need to find and work more rigorously with the perpetrator in myself and the perpetrator states in my clients.

In 2011–2013 I had been dealing with two drawn-out, highly stressful processes. My partner was diagnosed with a heart condition and had major surgery followed by critical postoperative complications. The first phase of his recovery was very slow and shaky. In parallel with this, a month after his original diagnosis, I started being stalked and threatened with accusations of abuse by an ex-client. It took two years before this situation was finally resolved. The threat was intermittent and, at times, I believed or hoped that it was over. Feeling that my energy needed to be directed towards caring for my partner, I pushed away more active steps to confront the issue and protect myself. However, although I coped on one level, I was very frightened and frozen on a deep level as I dealt with these two extended crises. It affected my work with clients as some picked up on this, sensing a level of my absence or paralysis.

As part of our inherent multiplicity, we all already contain perpetrator, victim, rescuer, and bystander self-states. In trauma, the intensity, tenacity, and sudden switching of these self-states becomes heightened (Howell, 2005). The bodily dimensions of these states are powerful. The freeze aspect is one characteristic of the helplessness of victim and bystander, whereas perpetrator and rescuer states may feel more active, more potent. The rescuer may be satisfying many needs, including the need to feel loved. The perpetrator may be in the grip of powerful predatory urges: stalking, threatening, controlling, and using violence. He or she may be repeating their own abuse histories, identifying with the aggressor. Silencing and being silenced are dynamics that go with sexual abuse, and voices that speak up in protest may be suppressed through fear or met with denial. Moving from doer–done to done to–doer can occur over seconds or decades. The most dangerous point in the cycle can come as the freeze response unfreezes, when a repeat of a threat (real or imagined) can trigger a killer rage (Levine, 2010).

Digesting the Seed and the other experiences of murderous rage, beheading, throttling, facing execution, holding a gun or a sword, I came to seem them all as aspects of my own dissociated self-protective fight response. These emerged well over a year after the threat was passed; it took me this long to feel safe and begin to unfreeze at my core. I see the emergence of intense conflict over enacting violence towards others and myself as an illustration of that pushed-down survival response demanding to be heard, and yet repressed by me out of a horror at this murderousness.

I think these impulses also contained states of shock relating to my ex-client's experience of being impacted by the murder of a friend. The guilt about not being able to protect her friend from his murderer haunted her. She had been abused as a child and betrayed as an adult by a therapist

who started a sexual relationship with her when she first sought help. The desire to punish and seek revenge for wrongs perpetrated on her by others fuelled her sadism towards me: the hot fury of hurling accusations and the cold rage of menacing and threatening others.

Projective identification can be experienced as a violent process. I didn't manage to contain these states with her when she was my client. They pursued me later and came through in all their sinister power in the movement process, where they could finally seek witness and be released. This phenomenon of enactment and therapeutic failure which we know so well in the clinical context is amplified when we fail to engage in a dialogue with events on the larger stage. Benjamin (2014) wrote about her experience of struggling with the effects of violence and collective trauma, with particular reference to the war on Gaza, commenting on the forces in play when witnessing is either granted or withheld:

adopting a counter-identification in the form of moral indignation [which] is very different from identification with suffering as an empathic witness. Although some form of anger and indignation is absolutely essential, ... moralism [is] a manic defense, employed in the service of repudiating identifications with the aggressor. (2014, Parts 1–2)

I had a taste of an almost psychotic state of alienation and of being invisible in a context where normally I would receive very refined and subtle witnessing. And I try to imagine what happens for those raped and violated, cast out, displaced and robbed of any hope of survival, let alone being witnessed. Benjamin makes a further crucial point:

What [is] important here [is] less the line between perpetrators and victims than the line created by denial, lack of acknowledgement, between *those who live in a safe protected world and those who are left to perish without recourse or resources*. (2014, Parts 1–2; emphasis added)

EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF CATHARSIS

Catharsis is a term often used to describe emotional discharge linked to retrieving memories or connecting to powerful affect. However, I want to argue for expanding the concept of catharsis and recognizing its transformative function within the crucible of the Authentic Movement setting.

In the first instance, catharsis involves a physiological reorganization often characterized by crying, sweating, sobbing, trembling, shaking, jerking, kicking, hitting, retching, pushing, yawning, stretching, laughing, uninhibited full-range movements, and making sounds using one's body or an object against a surface and a wide range of vocalized sounds, cries, tones, and overtones.

This moves energy through the body, either as part of releasing feelings, mobilizing impulses, completing an experience or forcing aliveness into numbed areas. A mover who has spent many years working through layers of bodily armour may move very fluidly through these stages. He is participating, surrendering in and to the field. Catharsis reorganizes the nervous system through breath, sound, affect, movement, *and the creation of forms and stories that carry meaning*. As long as the mover keeps listening to her body, catharsis can encompass involuntary release and an attentive, curious internal witnessing.

My original title for this piece, "The Wider Movement", contained the idea of surrendering to movements that were big, sweeping, dramatic, and in that sense not contracting into the trauma

inherent in the themes but expanding into the full expression, marking it as a larger story, as theatre, to convey my sense of a collective story.

Both ancient Greek theatre and Authentic Movement include processes that have been compared with or influenced by shamanism. Working consciously with embodiment of the collective creates the possibility of transforming the energy of the group or field. Though shocked by the story which emerged in the Seed, it felt reparative because of the reciprocal bonds already deeply established within this ongoing group. I felt the containment of the witness circle and heard their verbal witnessing of and resonance with the collective material. In the days that followed I felt a profound level of rest, a total yielding to three days of parasympathetic relaxation – a sense of peace and letting go.

REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF PITY

Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity ... for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. ... [Tragedy] through pity and fear effect[s] the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions. (Aristotle, 2013, p. 26)

Aristotle defined pity as “a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which one might expect to suffer oneself or one of one’s own, and moreover when the suffering seems close to hand (1991, p. 163). The function of tragedy, he declared, was to arouse feelings of pity and fear, bringing the audience to a climax of emotion, which would purge them, and leave them feeling released.

In Aristotle’s time plays were performed during festivals – a practice that has developed into the rich theatre traditions we know today. The representation of actions through a small number of actors, with speeches and song, was an exceptional experience. Nowadays we are swimming in representation of real and imagined human events, with images transmitted continuously on every aspect of life, including news events which are dramatic, violent, and confronting. Distancing and dissociation have become habitual even though some images or stories pierce our defences, moving us to outrage, horror, and overwhelming grief.

Pity is a word that has become associated with a condescending attitude but it means simply the sorrow or sympathy for those who suffer. Perhaps this word needs reclaiming. If I feel the suffering of those who are tortured or starving or murdered, or whose entire family or community is wiped out, is it not pity that I feel? I don’t think I can call it empathy since that implies more capacity to imagine the experience first-hand. I feel empathy for my clients as I take in their unique story with all my senses over time. I am relating to the other who is with me, I am breathing with her or him, I am taking in a voice and resonating with the feeling. Good journalism sometimes supplies the story of an individual in vivid detail, humanizing one representative of a suffering community. But what other word than pity, as well as horror, despair, grief or anger, can describe the way I respond to wide-scale abject suffering? As my political, thinking, reasonably informed self is simply overwhelmed by the scale and complex causality of events, I cannot think critically or constructively anymore; my capacity to analyse, formulate, make meaning becomes paralysed.

How can we – firstly as human beings, secondly as therapists who have developed a finely tuned sensitivity to others – not be impacted when we witness devastating world news? I feel that the containment and support of Authentic Movement groups allow me to process some of the suffering that I let in or is forced into my body. Sometimes I actively choose not to look

at images of horror and violence because I know they will impact me. I am also careful not to look into the faces of the terrified and the terrifying, I do this to protect myself from the emotional communication in their eyes. I also feel guilty for turning away. And sometimes in the instant before I close my eyes the image penetrates me anyway. Perhaps this is why I rage at the bystanders, for it is not looking, not speaking up, not acting, that we are all complicit.

Retrospectively, a year later, I see more clearly how my movement experiences are a commentary on this state of helplessness. The bull needing to be grasped by the horns is not just death but the whole unfolding catastrophe, globally and in the UK; war and its consequences, a refugee crisis on a scale not seen since the end of the Second World War and the suffering of the vulnerable and abused here and now – those whose access to support is further depleted as a result of austerity measures.

In the second longer sequence I had a sense of Hamlet from the moment I began – the castle, the rapier, hiding behind the arras. I was playing, mocking myself. As the sequence unfolded, I was not consciously staying with Hamlet but now I see that the feelings of shock, protectiveness, absurdity, murderousness, numbness, madness, and alienation all feel Hamletesque. Shakespeare's tragedy is often conceived as a point of departure in Jacobean theatre because it paints a portrait of a hero who is introspective, intellectual, and totally floored by the challenge posed to him when he discovers his father has been murdered by his uncle. He is traumatized in his bystander role, inept, unable to grab the bull by the horns, reeling with feelings and responses he cannot handle.

This seems to me both a commentary on, and a catharsis, an expression of, my disabled state of mind in the face of the scale of abuse and violence with which we are grappling more consciously perhaps than previously in history, but without a truly viable plan to address these.

FROM SEEING TO KNOWING

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life. (Gibran, 1923/1991 p. 106)

The experience of the Seed had been, paradoxically, uplifting. It was an awakening that threw up many questions and ideas, but also left me temporarily cleared of some psychic load. However, as I entered the underworld again on the August retreat I found myself struggling with the heaviness of the images and feelings, and wondering how much further I had to go with this, and what I was being asked to witness in myself and in the collective. The exuberance and playfulness I had known in previous retreats, the joy of reunion with other cherished mover-friends, was constrained.

On the final morning of the retreat I was working in a triad, with two witnesses.

I begin with a jig; jaunty.... then moving into slower circling movements, and coming to stillness. I stick out my left thumb and touch my breastbone with the tip. I trace it slowly in a line up my throat. I am slitting my throat. Then very suddenly I grab my throat, making a throttling sound. I feel the blood spilling out. My other hand joins the first and pushes my chin up while the other pushes down to the collar bone.

I wait. Then the thumb continues its journey down my centre to the pubic bone. I am eviscerating myself. Hung, drawn, and quartered.

I stand still, listening, waiting. Now I am an old man, bent over my stick. Strange urgent low sounds are emanating from somewhere inside me.

This was a long, unbearably slow sequence. My first witness noted that my back had been turned to her: "There is something I am not supposed to see and yet you want me to know." She described the moment later on when I am bending over my stick, making sounds: "You are telling me now, and for the first time I can see part of your face". The second witness noted that my hands moved briefly into prayer before I slit my throat. Her story about my sounds was that "these are the voices of the dead. The throat cutting was an attempt to silence them but they will not stay quiet." These images and associations felt very vivid and supportive. They gave me a sense that there was a purpose to this.

In each scenario where I was a perpetrator, or about to be or had been, I experienced a depth of emotion that was not wholly unfamiliar but many shades darker, colder, and more frightening than I had consciously known before. Or was it that these self-states were not so extreme but felt so because they were now being externalized, personified, and witnessed? My hidden shame about rage, hatred, revenge was demanding to be seen, heard, felt. And my process of self-dismembering, self-murder, self-silencing was also being displayed. And my identification with all who were suffering, the victims and the perpetrators Was it time for me to know about all this not from the position of bystander, therapist, or thinker, but to really feel it and let it move through me?

"In the course of practice surrender, suffering, even a sense of dismemberment and the awareness of death often permeate the work, when it is deeply transformative at a body level" (Stromsted, 2007, p. 253). In an interview with Stromsted, Adler said, "Once on that path, in my experience, the suffering which occurs has to do with death. Because I can't keep holding on to everything that I own ... my identity, ... my personality and my personal history" (p. 253). While researching this article it was grounding to come back to Adler's own writing, so rich in its articulation of the developmental processes that can occur in Authentic Movement.

For me, the consciously political dimension of collective processing is also important. We exist in an intersubjective transgenerational and transcultural matrix where we are impacting on and being impacted by one another all the time. This includes enantiodromia: the forces we need to recognize and reckon with in ourselves, in our work with clients, and in our political choices.

FULL CIRCLE: COMMUNITY AND THE COLLECTIVE

Within the last century change away from tribal living has accelerated dramatically. For countless centuries preceding this change we belonged before we asked "who am I"? We were born belonging not only to a tribalbody but we belonged to the earthbody. (Adler, 1994, p. 1)

In her paper presented 20 years ago, "The collective body", Adler (1994) wrote of the need to bring the fruits of personal development back into our membership of a larger community. She suggested that the loss of community, of the "sacred circle", has "contributed significantly to the creation of unbearable rage, isolation and despair" (p. 2). The unprecedented task for us now is to find ways to re-enter the sacred circle, to come into conscious membership in the whole, and to be uniquely ourselves within it:

How we discover this is a great mystery. Willing membership just with our minds cannot create the shift in consciousness for which we long. The shift must be an embodied shift ... One by one knowing (and knowing implies consciousness), knowing in our bodies that we belong, creates a collective body in which life energy is shared. (p. 2)

It is in the experience of the group, whether meeting regularly or during an extended retreat, that we have the opportunity to feel part of a circle of witnesses, a body of movers. The trust and feeling of being held and seen are fundamental to each mover's journey. I regret not having made better notes of some of the verbal and non-verbal witnessing I received and gave during this year. The depth of support, love, and continuous mutual sharing is the background, the crucible, in which I was able to move deeper and deeper into this material.

So I finish with a few responses that have helped me digest the process and feel connected to others on their journey. The first is from Christina Greenland, a witness in the August group who I re-encountered by chance at the Trauma Dialogues Conference in Bristol later that year. She wrote:

Barbara [Morgan] said something in the debate section which really hit me because it felt powerful, true and related to the collective work you/we were exploring on retreat. She said that people, as part of groups, commit atrocities because the need to belong is so strong. (personal communication, 9 October 2014)

This email contributed to my understanding of the material I was exploring and confirmed my sense of the work as ongoing between us.

The second is a piece I wrote for a project started by Hazel Carey, one of the movers in the West London Authentic Movement Group, called "Ubuntu, My Life in Other People":

2 October 2014. You spoke about the darkness in the world at the moment, and asked the question, "where am I in this?" I felt you called to my soul, my struggle with the stream of news about violence and suffering that engulfs us.

The circle opens and the large pilates ball rolls in. You take it in your arms and carry it around, then release it. Later, in the witnessing, we welcome this 'new member' as Planet Earth.

Another mover is reaching her arm, making small movements with her fingers; divination; searching for water. Then she begins to drum.

I see you on your back, limbs in the air. I hear your cries of distress. I feel as though my heart will explode with grief. I see another witness move into the circle and up alongside you. Suddenly I know I can act too. I am not a bystander. I too go to join you, to comfort you and feel with you. (Here I unconsciously break the "rule" that a minimum of two witnesses must be maintained.)

I hear sounds and mistake them for the ending bell. My face is close to yours. I open my eyes and look into yours – pools of glittering dark pain-water, intense, alive humanness. (Here I unconsciously break a second "rule" of keeping eyes closed.) I drink in your eyes. I have longed for those eyes which mirror the sense of my own and the world's suffering. I weep with the joy of, connection. All the movers gather and hold each other, with our remaining witness sitting steadily and witnessing us.

Afterwards you say: "Even in pain, even in loss, there is always growth, always development."

You say of the darkness, "I needed to feel it, I am not simply separate".

It is well known that community bonds are the best protection from trauma, and witnessing as a collective and reciprocal process is a necessary part of that. Authentic Movement as a practice provides a particular resource; other kinds of collective witnessing, involving theatre, art, activism, and testimony, are also important. The South African concept of *ubuntu* means "a person is a person through other persons". Benjamin (2014) has linked this with reciprocal dependency of recognition, which she defined as the moral third (2014, Part 5).

Ubuntu is sometimes translated as "I am because you are". I was carried through the darkness of this movement exploration by a broad community. Many men have been important in this but I

want to particularly acknowledge the role of women, as witnesses, as thinkers, and as the often quieter presence in political debate.

I end this article with a quote from an email written by my colleague and friend Morit Heitzler after I recounted to her the experience I call the Seed:

I had a dream about you early in the morning: I dreamt that you were wearing all black and dark red ... and dancing at the centre of the circle with a big sword. (I think I was deeply impacted by what you told me, even though I was not aware at the time how strongly I took in what you said). Suddenly, still dancing, you slashed your head off, like you told me, but in my dream your head was then dancing by the side of your headless body. As these two parts of you were dancing together, slowly your body was growing a new head and your head was growing a new body. The person with your head who had now a new body was dressed in white and golden-orange, and the person with your old body and new head was dressed still in black and red, as before. These two figures slowly began to dance with each other, communicating, then embracing, connecting deeply and exchanging many feelings without any words. It was beautiful and awe inspiring, it felt so free, expansive, like an existential truth. I watched these and cried, feeling a deep sense of peace and knowing all over my body. (Personal communication, 9 November 2014)

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