
Dance as Healing Communication - an inner view with Anna Halprin

Anna Halprin, a pioneer for over 40 years in using dance and the creative arts for personal and planetary healing, continues exploring and expanding the boundaries between art, medicine and the sacred. Her vision has been to broaden the definition of "dance" to include all natural, expressive movements of the body and to help people discover their body's intuitive wisdom and sensitivities. I first came to know Anna in the mid-seventies by participating in one of her workshops. Through that day-long exploration of drawing and movement I was able to reach and heal a deep emotional pain that I had not been able to touch with "conventional" talking therapies. When I began doing this work with children with cancer I saw more of its healing potential and it was Anna's personal experience with cancer that transformed her dance from performance to healing ritual. The essence of her PsychoKinetic Visualization process encompasses tuning into the body through movement, images, kinesthetic expression and ritual within the context of community.

The event in her life that brought her to this synthesis was a self-portrait in which she had drawn a dark spot in her abdomen. Her intuition about that "gray ball" was confirmed by a diagnosis of cancer in that area. The tumor, surgically removed, recurred 3 years later. That's when she turned to dance, not as entertainment for an audience, but to express her despair and power, to confront her darkness. She went into remission and stopped performing.

This began a most important transition in Anna's work from her own healing to sharing the transformative power of dance to heal communities and people with life-threatening illness. This article is a brief glimpse into her multidimensional work gathered through several interviews.

Q: What is the role of dance in healing and how is this communicated?

A.: People's preconceived idea about dance is colored by their exposure and in this culture dance is usually considered an elite art form. Professionals in psychology, education, and health think dance is something, which takes specific training that only a few talented artists can do; that it has nothing to do with education or medicine. We need to establish a different orientation about dance. In other cultures, like the indigenous peoples, dance is the most important form of education. Through it, value systems are passed on to the children, as are the most vital ways they deal with their mythology, speaking to their creator, blessing newborns and ushering the dying on safe journeys - all this is

done through dance. Dance they believe is the most effective and holistic way of communicating with themselves and the higher powers.

What my life work has been about has been redefining that term dance. In my eyes everyone is a dance, which is to be aware of the wonder and mystery of the body in motion, in its expression. We're always in motion and always expressing something whether we're aware or not. Therefore we are all dancers. That is accessible to everyone - movement that is freed of armor, censorship, of the mind controlling it, everyday natural movement. You don't have to be taught. I express the way I feel by the way I move and the way I move tells me something about how I feel. Once we get those two links, that feeling is connected with the physical sensation of movement there is a remarkable phenomenon that takes place all by itself. We begin to associate those moving feelings with memories, ideas, happenings in our lives, and insightful communication takes place between body and mind.

Our own personal belief systems act as a barrier between movement and feeling. Traumas, painful incidents interpreted through the nervous system automatically trigger muscular responses that can affect our whole stance in life. Sometimes our barriers cut us off from feelings that are too difficult to deal with, and because we don't have the tools to deal with them we build some form of protection or defense. Certain movements may be difficult because of mental and physical blocks. For example, women often have difficulty doing strong aggressive movements, such as hitting, striking, because feelings may be triggered they don't want to have. As women they may have been conditioned that it isn't feminine to show feelings like that. They may have had abusive experiences where those movements were used towards them.

I know from my many years of experience that we have a tremendous opportunity and capacity to tap into deep levels of knowledge in the body through movement and music, that haven't shifted into conscious awareness. In the visualizations that people draw, are the most extraordinary symbols, that on a conscious level they have no idea where that image is coming from or what it is telling them until they dance it. When the feelings come up, the connections made are absolutely extraordinary. It is mind-boggling what wisdom the body carries in it.

An important part of the process is to embody those images, using the body's language. This is different than trying to talk to the body using the rational mind. Word symbols are limited to what we already know on the surface. Experiences from deeper layers don't have words. Yet there is a movement experience that gives you a language for that image which can tell you something. You can connect with the feelings and make

links to what that symbol means in your life. When you connect the dance with themes in your life that's when dance becomes significant, when it once again becomes a ritual. There's a remarkable capacity to see what's happening, externalize it, become conscious of it and begin to make choices, change.

Another important part of the process is to have a witness, an objective observer of your ritual. If you have a witness who knows what you're doing in your dance, what your task is, they keep you on track. The witness is a mirror, a support that intensifies the experience enabling you to press past that point of censure. In Circle the Earth, for example, we work with masks and our internal warrior. One young HIV-positive person drew a very powerful looking warrior who could confront anything and win. Yet when he went into his warrior stance to confront his fear saying, "I fear thee not", his legs turned into "spaghetti." He was so frightened he could barely move or breathe, his voice cracked. Yet the witness was there holding the warrior drawing saying you can do it. In those 5 minutes the young person's legs grew powerful and he was saying, "I fear thee not," from his guts and meant it. If there hadn't been a witness, chances are he would have retreated and given up. The movement reshaped itself and through it he developed a tool to find the strength in himself to overcome his fear.

We do many of these dances in a group setting creating community and trust. People are hungry for community. One of the values of community ritual is unity and mutual alignment. When you increase the body from the individual to a small group then to a large collective body, as in Circle the Earth or Planetary Dance, it takes you to an intensity that you don't get to by yourself.

This is a process that has been strongly supportive for people with AIDS and cancer. There is still a long way to go to include dance as an important complement to mainstream medicine. When we are ill, no matter what the medical profession can do, if we're not there in our bodies working right along side our doctor we're only using one tiny part of ourselves. It's a terrible error to simply turn our bodies over to a doctor and say do this for me. There needs to be a meeting between the sciences and the arts. That's crucial. Dance is healing communication with one's self and all who share it with you.

I do a weekly cancer group, Moving Towards Life, and work with 8 themes. One is the body as teacher that gives people the opportunity to reach into their bodies with pleasure, without fear. They do a drawing of themselves to get in touch with how they view themselves, then embody and dance it. This helps them appreciate their life's issues, what it is they want to work on and change.

Another theme is gathering positive, inner support for making change. I believe as long as you're alive, there is a spark that sometimes needs to be blown on to flame up again. Through meditation and guided imagery they find that hidden spirit giving it the form of an animal. It's amazing, everybody will draw something. They are always so surprised. They ask that spirit animal to help them and find that there is a caretaker within himself or herself. It's not out there; it's not their mother or their doctor. This gives them strength.

The next theme is finding the power to confront their illness, to communicate with it. There are lots of ideas how to do this. The Simontons for years used a very militant figure. "I'm going to kill you, bring an army and wipe you out" It's not up to me to decide what works for somebody else. Some people will use sharks that chew up the cancer cells. Some will use huge elephants that will stamp on them. One time I was a skunk. I was very tired that day and I just lifted my tail and fumigated them. It was very funny. Some people send loving light. It's different for everybody.

Another theme might be prayer. That's always been very important. How to pray, who do you pray to, what are you praying for, what connection are you making between yourself and the divine spark in yourself, the higher power. We'll do a session on nature discovering our connection with the trees, rocks, all of life. This nurtures spiritual growth.

I may do another on relationships. What is the primary relationship in your life? Are you doing the dance you want to be doing? People will make wonderful shifts in their relationships as a result of their dance. They may become aware that they have been too passive or too assertive, they have been taking care of their partner. They can find balance.

When we end a course we always do a second self portrait, to see what changes were made, what new images are there and appreciate that we can transform ourselves. It's not a cure in the medical sense, more in the healing, spiritual sense. Yet there have been 3 spontaneous remissions in our groups.

The creative process is a valuable way for the individual to tap into greater inner resources than can be used for healing and self-knowledge that they intuitively already know how to do. Dance helps us experience life holistically and fully through the body. Every moment we live is precious and needs to be cherished and every moment wants to be lived fully. I think that dance is one of the most effective ways to live fully, to

express yourself, to be with yourself, and to give your personal mythology a physical manifestation.

Anna Halprin continues to find new ways for individuals to create healing rituals and discover hidden possibilities within themselves for healing their wounded spirits. She shares her vision, her passion, and her loving heart, to help guide to a greater sense of connectedness and communication with all living things. In the context of modern medicine that may sound irrelevant to health. Yet so much of illness, personal and planetary, is surrounded or influenced by isolation, loneliness, and lack of communication. What a powerful way to break that shell of separateness - dance and the arts. That can be done through the creation of new rituals. If we were an indigenous culture, Anna Halprin would be called a Medicine Woman.

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Anna Halprin and her daughter, Dahria Kalighi-Halprin created the Tamalpa Institute which teaches this work to health professionals, to individuals challenging catastrophic illnesses like AIDS and cancer, and to communities.

The Tamalpa Institute will be celebrating in April a month-long Healing Arts Program that includes the Planetary Dance, Dance as a Healing Art Workshop and a benefit at Fort Mason. For more information: Tamalpa Institute/Dancer's Workshop, P.O. 794, Kentfield, CA 94914, and (415) 461-9479

Sondra Barrett, Ph.D., medical scientist, health educator, consultant, and workshop leader served on the Board of Directors of Tamalpa Institute and designs programs for health-care professionals and patients in psychoneuroimmunology which integrate the arts and science. A photographer and writer, she creates microscopic journeys and audiovisual media for education and relaxation. Dr. Barrett can be reached through HERS: Health Education Resource Services, PO Box 764, Larkspur, CA, 415-927-2928.