

Meet your body – Bringing Authentic Movement to Focusing

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I first encountered Focusing as a dance/movement therapy student at an afternoon workshop presented by Joan Lavender. I came to DMT because of my conviction that the body is central to psychological healing. I could not imagine an effective therapy that didn't include the body's responses and stories. In that first encounter with Focusing, I felt my whole body respond with that famous "felt shift" Focusers speak of when an issue is understood on a new body/mind level. It was natural for me to continue to work with the relationship between Focusing and movement and I studied Wholebody Focusing with Kevin McEvenue. For many years, I have also been involved with other internally directed movement practices including Authentic Movement, Contact Improvisation, Continuum Movement, and Body-Mind Centering®. These processes all invite us to explore inner sensation with curiosity and to follow subtle movements of the body and of awareness as they unfold in action. They can be looked at as Focusing in movement

For the past several years, I have combined Focusing with Authentic Movement, also known as Contemplative Dance, in a small group created with my friend and authentic movement instructor, Aileen Crow, and in a personal practice with my friend and colleague, Irina Harris, who also contributed to this paper. I used these experiences to look more deeply at the contributions of inner directed movement to growth and healing, the ways in which Focusing and Authentic Movement differ and support one another, and the role and experience of the listener or witness. (A witness, who observes a mover with friendly non-judgmental awareness, is a central component of Authentic Movement.) The witness, in Authentic Movement, corresponds to the listener in Focusing and the mover corresponds to the Focuser.

The internally directed movement systems I note above (Authentic Movement, Contact Improvisation, Continuum Movement, and Body-Mind Centering®) all invite us to explore inner sensation with curiosity and to follow the subtle movements of awareness. They are all process oriented: they all pay attention to the sensation within and let it unfold in action. Although they are sometimes overtly directed, they all have more investment in process than in control. They have all, independently, developed similar vocabularies. Those familiar with Focusing but unfamiliar with these different dance and movement forms will be interested to see how they correspond to the felt investigation that is at the heart of the Focusing process.

Contact improvisation is an interactive and collaborative dance form sometimes offered in performance. It is based in an unplanned, moment to moment, attention to the dancers' physical presence, their weight, and the points of physical or energetic contact between them. It directs participants to be aware, feel their weight, take responsibility, let responsibility define their freedom, respect their bodies and those of their partners, pay attention (and know that attention gives strength), be open and ready to respond creatively to every new nuance of sensation, and know that the dance is a living web formed together in a

felt collaboration. Within this framework, dancers lean, play, are still, jump, roll with one another, separate, come together, emote, are dramatic, and are calm. As an improvisational form, dancers honor what wants to emerge in each instance and discover and respect their own, and each other's, strengths and limitations. It generates a profound intimacy and trust.

Continuum Movement is an internal exploration done alone or in a class setting. Its directives say slow down, let your senses take in your fluid continuity. Christie Denhart, a continuum teacher, describes the process, on her website, as follows:

We open [to] the fluidity of the body and the creative process using breath and sound. We...follow the subtle sensations that arise as they lead us into gentle, fluid movement. Sensation and movement become the doorway to the direct experience of presence as it creates itself, moment to moment. We find ourselves discovering and following wisdom as it flows through our bodies rather than imposing ideas on our expression. As we open in this way, physical healing gently occurs and emotional issues ease. We relax into the creative flow that we are.

Continuum Movement invites movers to attend to the rhythmic flow within their bodies and to follow the continuity of this flow through the tissues: the blood, organs, muscles and bones. It promotes physiological integration. In its attention to the body, it also opens movers to affective states, connects them to archetypal mind states, and brings them into an awareness of the present moment.

Body-Mind Centering® (BMC) is a sophisticated system developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen that studies the intricacies of the body's biological processes and organizational patterns. Students spend long periods of time exploring a felt sense of the body systems' anatomical details: the cells, blood, the bones, the nerves, the senses, and organs, and the differing psychological and physiological characteristics of each. They also rediscover and integrate the early movement patterns of the developing embryo and infant, an exploration that promotes awareness of how these patterns inform our personality and our presence in the world. BMC emphasizes that the human organism, indeed all of life, contains awareness in each of its multi-faceted levels of organization. It teaches us to nourish this awareness through stillness, attention, movement, and dialogue, in community.

Authentic Movement is both an internal and interactive form. It is often used by dance/movement therapists because it easily brings people into their bodies and gives access to both personal and archetypal stories. With eyes closed and in the presence of at least one observing witness, the mover tries to "be moved" by his or her authentic impulses in the present moment. He or she can wait in stillness and attention for the body's undirected desire to move with the same careful and friendly curiosity as that of the Focuser. Micro and macro movements unfold, grow, subside, and evolve, and the mover notes repetitions, habits, patterns, stuck places, gestures, expressions, and stories. Every action, large or small, as well as stillness, is given respectful space offering a fresh experience of life in the moment. The movements have associations, which are also noted, so that the stories of the body rise into awareness as well. The Authentic Movement community website states:

Movers explore spontaneous gestures, movements, and stillness, following inner impulses in the present moment. The witness watches and tracks inner responses to the mover with the intention of not judging, but focusing on self-awareness. Authentic Movement cultivates a contemplative frame of mind, clarity of perception, and movement that is personally enhancing. The particular relationship between mover and witness, in moving and being seen by another, creates a powerful framework...

There are two important elements in Authentic Movement: a mover who follows inner impulses in the present moment and a witness who is a non-judgmental observer of this process. Authentic Movement is different from the other movement forms described above in this emphasis on the witness in a non-performance context. After the mover moves, mover and witness share their experience using a prescribed format that honors the mover. (Among other agreements, the witness only speaks with the mover's consent.) Because of this structure, Authentic Movement lends itself to an easy engagement with Focusing, which also involves a witness as listener. The role and experience of the witness/listener will be discussed further below.

All of these forms awaken the body. Their value to the Focuser and to the pursuit of self-awareness is multifold.

1) The body supports and gives meaning to psychological states. When the arm and hand (or mouth, as with the infant) extend to take hold of something, a knowing of "reach" emerges in both action and psyche. Without the movement, a full meaning of "reach" cannot be understood. Linda Hartley (2008) describes her experience exploring reach in its experiential and cognitive complexity while practicing AM.

I could reach in longing or fear, reach to touch with tenderness, to hold onto in need, I could reach out to offer, to give...to surrender and receive. These movement stories evolved until there was a moment when I simply stood, hand held out in front of me with upturned palm simultaneously offering and receiving(p. 26).

Thus, the full human range of reach and all of its interactive ramifications became clear to her. As with reach, the body's actions provide a more complete understanding of other qualities such as gentleness, strength, ease, relaxation, withdrawal, or force along with their cognitive/psychological implications. These words have fundamental meaning in their physiological expressions.

2) Emotions find their affective expression in the movement and neurology of the body. Expressive movement provides a more complete knowing of emotions. Anger, joy, and grief, for example, have gestural and affective components we can all identify. Soo Young Lee (2005), another practitioner of Authentic Movement, describes her experience as follows:

I am moving in a blue sea of fabric and tears that are floating around the room. The tears feel like small kisses on my face. With my hands I cover my face and let the tension from my jaw and neck move through me. I am crying. I cannot stop myself. I am the sea, I am the tears, and I feel so alone. Then this changes, and I hear someone else is crying with me [she is moving with others in a group]. The echo of the crying holds me as I have never been held before. The other mover's crying seems to say to me, 'I hear you and I see you.' My baby fingers are drawing a circle looking

for my mother. Then like an angry child, I am kicking and fighting this darkness that threatens to enter my body. Today I dive in deeper, into my unconscious, into the swirling eddies of sadness and grief. Below this sadness, there is anger, or is there sadness below the anger? These emotions move through me like the tide merging into the water leaving the shore while at the same time entering it (p.14).

In moving, there is a fullness and authenticity to emotional expression that goes beyond words. It opens the door to enlarging our emotional vocabulary and to further investigation and understanding of the wonderfully complex human drama we all embody.

3) Movement has the power to awaken mythic images and connection to primordial life forms. The mover becomes wind, earth, snake, eagle, root, and water.

I am lion, my huge paws pad rhythmically against the ground. I am gorilla, there is great strength in my arms, I am horse tossing her head and mane in the air. Animal strength moves through me - different life forms. I am human. I am farmer scything wheat, my arms and body sweeping from side to side. All these identities merge into me to offer their strength and power (author's journal). These images carry a rich complexity and their own felt sense.

4) Bodily sensing and movement awakens early memories and experiences. Sensory recollections of the past emerge as in Soo Young Lee's account, above. In her personal journal of an Authentic Movement session, Irina Harris writes,

I am aware of my mother's anger and me as a tiny figure in the face of unbounded wrath. I feel anger in the sore jaw and, at once, recognize it as mine as much as the other's. I feel my fear in the pit of my stomach and anger in face, chest, hands.

5) In attending to bodily awareness, the ways in which one's growth and development have been constrained can become evident. Movement has the power to redress these constraints. In walking and reaching, our felt sense tells us which ways of doing so feel new and unexplored, which feel uncomfortable, and which supportive. We may notice how we have stopped ourselves from receiving and sharing in the past. We can newly experiment with ways of using our hands, arms, and bodies that want to be awakened and integrated in our daily lives.

6) The movement is pre-articulate. It may be accompanied by sound but there is no ongoing verbalization of experience which can sometimes take the mover out of his or her body and into mental processes. This provides access to deep, unconscious, inchoate levels of being that want to be brought into awareness.

7) New Focusers sometimes have difficulty finding a felt sense. With an embodied experience of these states, it is easier to sense into them – they are no longer abstractions. As they become organized into awareness, a felt shift occurs. The Focuser knows the body is the basis for experience and the emergence of a felt sense. But when the body has a chance to form a movement experience, this truth becomes even more evident.

8) For experienced Focusers, the movement can bring them closer to their true selves. The movement provides entry into a deep awareness of one's whole being on a sensory level. As the mover internally logs his or her movement process in its entirety (images, feelings, gestures, memories, sequence of process) its details can be reported to the witness, recorded later in a journal as words or art, or be used for further research in focusing.

The witness/listener

Traditionally, in Authentic Movement, an observing witness watches with non-judgmental support. There is always a witness in Authentic Movement as there is always a listener in Focusing. Although the witness is usually another person, as with Focusing, the witness can also be an internal presence in the mover. The witness provides a friendly container in which the mover's process unfolds. Having the space held by a witness can augment the mover's attention to his or her inner process. It also offers the mover the experience of being a part of a community (even if it is a community of two). Witnessing, in Authentic Movement, is based on the premise that there is value to being seen and value to the experience of seeing. In being seen without words, the mover senses his or her whole being as acknowledged by the witness. As the witness tunes into the mover's presence, disguises and pretenses fall away in the simple attentive awareness of a physical, energetic being.

The power of witnessing is further enhanced by the witness sensing and expressing his or her felt experience of witnessing and in the mover sensing and expressing the felt experience of moving and being seen. This communication of the mover and witness's inner experiences is central to the practice. The mover speaks first after having moved. The witness then, but only with the mover's permission, shares the feelings evoked within him or her by watching the mover, or recreates a movement he or she observed, being careful to set aside projections, interpretations, and analyses. As with Focusing, a specialized language has been developed that supports this interactive exchange and reduces the tendency to project. For example, the witness will say "Here is what is happening in me as I watch you" or "As I listen to you, I am reminded of the...part of me". In this way, the witness is speaking of herself but in the mover's context.

There are clear boundaries between mover and witness and an acknowledgement that their experiences are separate but worthy. In taking in the witness's experience, the mover hears or sees the impact he or she has had on another. When the witness's words convey to the mover a sense of being truly seen, the latter may be deeply touched. When the witness's experience is different from the mover's, both may be surprised by the lack of congruency but there is another kind of opportunity. Martha Lask, an Authentic Movement practitioner, describes this on the Authentic Movement Community blog as a "gift of projections":

Rich dialogue and connection become possible when people share their distinct perspective and experience of a particular event [In] discussing the frames of reference that inform our assessments, examining our assumptions, and discovering how we make meaning of what we see...we can learn about the different ways people see the world. When someone shares his/her

experience of me that is different than mine, another possibility may open for me.... Being truly seen and attended to by another whether their experience resembles mine or not, creates a wonderful, satisfying connection.

In Focusing, on the other hand, the listener reflects back the Focuser's own words so that the Focuser can deepen his or her experience. The listener feels him or herself to be accompanying the Focuser's search. This active listening helps the Focuser bring the felt sense into cognitive clarity and accurately verbalize an inner experience. Projections can jump out in the use and choice of words so the listener is careful to remain true to the Focuser's meaning and experience. The listener may contribute a thought, word, or impression with the acknowledgement that this is his or her contribution, but it is a conscious projection, respectfully offered. The Focuser is invited to disregard it if he or she so chooses. The emphasis is on the Focuser's experience. There is no invitation for the listener to offer his or her experience during the Focusing process as is done in Authentic Movement. Instead, the Focuser, in touch with his or her felt sense, is helped by the listener to clarify and bring forth his or her experience.

The Focuser's experience is held central but the supporting journey of the listener can be equally surprising and rewarding. In my journal, I note:

as I listen to Irina, I feel this powerful interest in the unfolding of her process. I am eager to see where her Focusing goes and I feel, somehow, a part of it. There is an excitement in listening to her and sharing her growth, I am drawn into her process. There is a vitality in the partnership. I feel myself alongside her.

In another instance, I describe the struggle to understand Irina's meaning. She has associated a rhythmic flowing motion with anger:

I feel within how this puzzles me – I identify the rigidity, which she contrasts with her rhythmic motion, as anger. She reiterates that it is the rhythmic movement that embodies anger which she identifies as positive in its transformational power. She doesn't identify her rigidity as anger – this is my own association. I set aside my initial conviction (anger = rigidity) to take in her experience. I repeat back, clearly, that her rhythmic circular movement is positive anger. This brings a shift. Irina relaxes and smiles. She goes forward to articulate her other issue – the rigid opposition of two people facing each other - a no win situation in contrast to the fluid transformative energy of anger. Now I understand her perception of anger as a life force. I feel a thrill in following and understanding her meaning.

The role of the witness/listener can bring a sense of awe and humility. In Focusing, the listener may find new understandings through his or her support of the Focuser. In not taking center stage yet being active, there can be profound pleasure. It is sometimes a humbling revelation to see how misguided we can be by our own identifications and projections. On the other hand, there is the excitement of being with what is revealed when our projections are put aside.

A main difference between the Authentic Movement witness and the Focusing listener is the intent. In Authentic Movement the witness and mover each offer their experiences. Although enhanced

awareness and a sense of connection may blossom from this exchange, it ends there. In Focusing, the listener's intention is to enable the Focuser's process to continue. The listener's verbal responses help the Focuser's investigation sharpen and take further form. As the experience is heard and acknowledged, as well as seen, it gains dimension. The process continues until the Focuser is satisfied.

This continuation, or movement forward, of the Focuser's exploration is absent in Authentic Movement. After the mover and witness share their experiences, there is no next step. What one might call a "next step" happens in the context of the movement. The Authentic Movement witness supports this process by his or her completely silent observing presence. What follows, in the sharing, is the connection forged by the offering and welcoming of one another's perceptions and experience.

A Case Study

D practiced Authentic Movement and Focusing with the author for ten months. She was introduced to Focusing years ago but never connected to it strongly. She has a long history of meditation practice and brings a careful attention to her experience but little experience with movement.

D approached the movement aspect of this practice with tentativeness but an interested willingness to explore. As the sessions progressed, she became aware of sensations that carried a deep meaning and in fact, seemed to epitomize issues she'd been working on her entire life. As she explored with movement, her awareness of her bodily sensations seemed to progress, overlap, and deepen around the themes of sadness, fear, and physical inhibition. These themes she further explored in her focusing. Gradually, her ability to move and an awareness of her body's desire to move, accompanied by a willingness to examine her feelings, expanded. Although she did not consider the work therapy, she noted that the movement and Focusing led to an examination of deep, fundamental issues of her life that she had never reached in traditional verbal therapy. The experience was also different from her earlier understanding of Focusing as a tool one might use to examine specific, more ordinary issues in daily life.

In D's movement, she consistently explored her weight on the floor and movement using her arms and shoulders. Her subsequent Focusing sessions always began with a detailed attention to the physical sensations that opened up after the movement. She paid attention to her breath expanding and contracting in new ways and discovered an inner structure connecting and supporting the upper and lower parts of her torso. She often sat on a large ball while Focusing which invited her to explore the sensations that connected to her relationship with stability and instability. She began to construct an internal support connecting her upper and lower body. She experienced this inner physiological support as also providing emotional support and psychological growth. She also began to perceive her breath moving in her torso, a sensation that had always been unavailable to her. This was a major change and a meaningful one in light of her meditation practice.

Over the course of several sessions, D began to sense something being held in her body about a fear of "something being let out" and of sadness as well as a not wanting to feel that fear and sadness. She explored this in her Focusing. She acknowledged and respected her unwillingness to stay with these

feelings throughout her exploration, giving herself permission to retreat and never forcing her exploration. The Focusing gave her support in this careful investigation. Over time, she gradually came closer to these challenging emotions.

In one movement session, D explored large, fast gestures with her arms, something she hadn't done before. The movement awakened her shoulder joints. When she Focused, her attention went there immediately. She sensed something positive in these large movements and the feeling in her shoulders being "as if a door were opening". As she continued to pay attention to this pleasurable, positive, sensation, she identified a distant cloud - something like that in the Wizard of Oz which holds the wicked witch. She saw this as her inner critic who wanted to restrict her movements. She continued to Focus and say hello to this part until she saw that it moved from a place of fear. She became aware that fear wanted to restrict her movement. Here D felt a felt shift as she became aware of a sadness underlying the fear as well as a sadness in her body from having had her movement as a child restricted in this way. As she sensed into her shoulder joint, it was if as if the support provided by its new opening enabled her to feel the sadness. The awakening of her shoulder joints from the large, expansive movement she had explored somehow created a physical support in her body that allowed her to be with the sadness of having had her movement restricted by the inner critic's fear. She said that this has been a central issue of her adult life. She ended the session full of an eager excitement and a little overwhelmed at the future implications of this awareness in her life.

Overall, D said that Authentic Movement combined with Focusing had opened a door to inhabiting bodily experience in a way that hadn't been possible for her before. The awareness that formerly lived outside of her body had now entered into her body in a life affirming way. She had come to realize more fully that fundamental elements of a person's presence in the world are held in the body, not in the mind.

Conclusion

In writing this paper, my hope has been to share with the Focusing community other body based systems that enable people to feel deeply into their bodies and contact the messages contained therein. I have described some process oriented movement practices, particularly Authentic Movement, that have a similar implicit carrying forward as in Focusing. Meaning and images coalesce around these movement investigations as movers gently stay with, and bring their awareness to, small inchoate impulses.

Growth is a neuromuscular reorganization. Through movement and sensory explorations our bodies discover and develop their capabilities. Likewise, through active touch and movement we interact with, and bring the world into, ourselves. A Focusing awareness and an inwardly directed movement practice enables the reorganization of our cellular bodies - a formulation of new meanings that inform our personalities as well as our physical selves. In this way, the knowing of who we are is physical, emotional, and cognitive, as well as a living, breathing process.

As living organisms, we inhabit an internal and external environment that includes other human beings. Human beings thrive in community. In community we, by turn, speak and move or listen and watch. From each of these vantage points, in this ongoing interactive milieu, we discover new richness. As we witness, listen to, and touch one another, our presence in the community is strengthened and the community itself grows stronger. Our whole being feels nourished in a implicit unfolding into newness and growth.

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