Accessing the Self and Parts Through Authentic Movement by Susan Cahill, MA, ADTR, LCPC

Authentic movement is a powerful, often profound, contemplative process in which one person follows inner impulses to move, be still, and explore space, sounds, images or sensations while a partner actively and non-judgmentally witnesses the experience. Authentic movement as a discipline was first formally described by Mary Starks Whitehouse, a pioneer of Dance Movement Therapy. Mary studied dance with Mary Wigwam and Martha Graham, two modern dance artists who used movement as a process for accessing the unconscious. Over time, as Mary combined her Jungian analytic experience with movement, she intensively studied and developed the process of authentic movement, which she referred to as movement in depth. One of Mary’s students, Janet Adler, founded the first school for authentic movement in 1981 in Oakland, California, which she named the Mary Starks Whitehouse Institute. Since then, students of Mary and Janet, trained in dance therapy and movement studies, have intensively studied and practiced the experience of authentic movement.

As a complement to the IFS model, authentic movement is a remarkably effective tool to access the inner voices of our parts through physical expression. Expression of some parts through movement is important because it helps them to feel known and accepted. In addition, managers and firefighters may feel less threatened when exiles express themselves in movement rather than in words. When a nonverbal relationship is developed between the Self and parts, parts are more likely to trust and accept the presence, power, and leadership of the Self. Authentic movement uses the kinesthetic experience to help us identify and track parts as they exist in and around the body. When we set aside our normal patterns of movement and focus inwardly while moving without conscious purpose, parts that are normally hidden or traumatized feel invited to surface. Parts can reveal their burdens through muscle tension, restricted breathing patterns, held postures and sounds. Movement can bring awareness to the parts as well as a kinesthetic awareness of the burdens they carry. Spontaneous unburdening and healing is possible during this process. As parts heal they can return without carrying the excessive energy of burdens. Movement will flow more easily when the Core is able to express its energy in the body and parts are able to move in and out of the body freely.

The nature of the relationship between the mover and the witness often quickly takes individuals to the unconscious. The witness can be a metaphor for the Core who non-judgmentally views parts of the mover. Young parts especially will respond to this opportunity when they sense the compassion and safety of the witness. As authentic movement is practiced over time, the Self can become internalized in the mover, allowing the mover to witness her parts from the Core. At this moment the Self is present with the parts, and the mover can have the awesome experience of moving while at the same time witnessing. The process of authentic movement begins when the mover enters the space and waits for an impulse to move. Movement comes from an attached connection to the mover’s sensate experience. Eyes closed and attention focused inward allows unconscious impulses to surface and flow in the presence of a witness who watches the mover non-judgmentally in Self. When movements are large, quick or travel through
space, eyes open gently to soft focus to ensure safety. The mover experiences the body traveling through stillness and action. It is not necessary to be in motion at all times. Stillness is powerful, filled with inner sensations and images, and it can direct movement from an inner resource to action.

Authentic movement is not goal-directed activity. Rather, the mover experiences the process of free association in the body. The witnessing partner is active and non-judgmental to the unfolding experience of the mover. The witness creates a holding container for the mover to explore the unknown energies in the space. She creates safety by remaining, as much as possible, in the Self. The witness resists impulses to move and instead tracks what calls her to action, to comfort, to withdraw or hide. The witness’ Self may be challenged by her parts that are activated in watching the movement. For instance, the witness may want to overprotect, interpret or challenge the mover. After listening to her own internal responses, it is important that the witness bring her attention back to the mover. The witness may become aware of previously unknown parts of herself through this nonverbal interchange.

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The managers, firefighters, exiles and the Self express themselves through different kinds of movement. Movement of the managers is usually self-conscious and deliberate. There will be more gesturing and posturing. Movement may occur in the upper torso or head. Movers often say later it was difficult to stop the chattering in their head. Thoughts like, “Oh, this is silly,” “What if someone sees me?” or “How much time is left?” are common for these parts. It is normal to feel this way. One can either fully explore in movement the feelings of these parts or ask them to step aside. Firefighters will tend to numb the body, induce drowsiness, or flee when exile parts begin to surface. When exile parts take over the body, memories, extreme feelings and sensations sometimes flood the experience of the mover. Authentic movement helps the managers learn that it is safe to surrender in order to explore more exiled parts and the Self.

As managers learn to trust the movement of the Self, tension in the body dissolves as parts release the energy devoted to maintaining the muscular armoring. Movement of the exiles and the Self is usually spontaneous, and the sensation is one of being moved rather than self-conscious movement. Movement of the Self looks and feels like fluid energy. The Self senses parts that need to surface for healing on a body level. Authentic movement allows the Self to experience its power, pleasure, and joy in moving. The mover experiences spontaneity, peacefulness and a sense of calm when parts are not acting out their extreme roles. Insight can occur when the Self is present and separated from the parts. The process of authentic movement permits parts to speak, unburden and transform themselves. For example: an exiled wounded part from the past may shape itself on the floor in a rocking motion. The mover may feel sad, gentle, or lonely. Then she may shift into powerful energy that sends her flying around the room. Movers at times seem to shift from powerful tension or conflict to peaceful and fluid states. There is
no right or wrong way of moving. The body in its wisdom decides what it needs in the moment.

After the movement, the partners sit together and discuss their experience. The mover speaks first. She may describe how she felt or images that arose and connections she made. She is free to express any new awareness from her experience to the compassionate witness. A primary responsibility of the witness is to guard the trust and safety created in the experience. To do this she must choose her language carefully. The witness must not interpret what she saw because the mover is very vulnerable after this experience. The interpretation may be incorrect and it is difficult for the mover to protect herself from feelings of criticism. A safer approach is for the witness to discuss her own feelings while witnessing the mover. For example, “when I saw you curve into a ball, I felt sad and wanted to come hold you,” or “when you began running wildly through the space I felt fearful and wanted you to stop.” When verbal sharing is complete, the partners switch places and repeat the process. Authentic movement is especially worthwhile for therapists to experience their own parts and Self, thereby facilitating their understanding of how internal systems work. As therapists more deeply befriend their own extreme parts, they will be less triggered by the parts of their clients.

The therapist’s ability to remain in the Self is essential to therapy. In therapy sessions clients are highly sensitive to the therapist’s reaction to extreme parts. When therapists have fully experienced their own extreme parts on a body level, they will be better listeners and less likely to stray from their Self. A cautionary note: The Self of the mover needs to be accessible for authentic movement to be meaningful and safe. The process mirrors what occurs in therapy where the therapist provides the role of the Self/witness. However, authentic movement is not considered to be therapy in and of itself. Movement can elicit exiled parts quickly for some people while others may be overwhelmed by closing their eyes. The therapist needs to understand how to intervene either verbally or in movement when parts begin overwhelming the system.

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