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Integrating Organization Development and Authentic Movement: A Creative Journey

By Martha Isobel Lask

A Double Life

I have always lived a double life. I have my professional life, first as a manager in the non-profit sector and now as an Organization Development consultant and coach. And I have my “other” movement life, as a dancer, choreographer, and a teacher and facilitator of *Authentic Movement*.

The dream of bringing my two lives together has been an internal dialogue for two decades . . . and the integration of these different lives is now occurring, to my great satisfaction and delight. I am moved to tell my story because of the gifts that this integration has offered. I am:

- » A stronger consultant, using the wisdom of my body and spirit as well as my mind;
- » Bringing my values more clearly, consistently, and with more certainty to all my work;
- » Developing exciting connections between different fields of study, (OD, coaching, and Authentic Movement);
- » Internally more congruent; and
- » Bringing my “best self” to my clients.

In this reflection, I intend to describe my parallel journeys; to explain the process of integrating my two lives; and to discuss how each discipline informs the other to create an integrated practice.

My Professional Work in Organizations

I started working in the non-profit world as a VISTA volunteer in northern Maine in the 1970’s. I worked in legal

services, family planning, public school recreation, and the YWCA. I then spent 10 years in New England with The Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, consulting on the startup of 501c3 organizations dedicated to community revitalization, and serving as Executive Director of one such organization in South Portland, Maine.

These experiences shaped the rest of my career. I discovered that I am deeply committed to creating community partnerships across organizational boundaries, and to supporting the missions of non-profit organizations of all kinds.

In 1987, my efforts to build partnerships and a new interest in Organization Development led me to the American University National Training Laboratories Masters Program in OD, a serendipitous choice because of its humanistic values and its emphasis on experiential learning. After graduation, some experience working as an internal OD consultant in the private sector and training as a coach, I became an independent consultant offering a range of OD, facilitation, and training services in both the non-profit and private sectors.

Over time, my consulting business has focused increasingly on facilitating dialogue across organizational boundaries and providing coaching services. Five years ago, I created *Executive Exchange*, a two-year leadership development program for non-profit executives, which combines peer coaching, individual coaching, and OD values and approaches. I currently facilitate

Peter F. Norlin, PhD, (editor of the *Eyewitness: Personal Stories from the Practice Field* series)



is an external consultant, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he is a principal in

GreenLeaf Associates. Peter can be reached at pfnorlin@earthlink.net.

Executive Exchange within a regional network of organizations.

Over the years of consulting to organizations, several operating principles or values have emerged as core to my practice as a consultant. I care profoundly about:

- » Helping people at all levels of an organization to develop their voices and to make choices to benefit both themselves and their organizations.
- » Activating compassion between people in and out of the workplace.
- » Promoting human dignity and respect for the human condition.
- » Developing working partnerships across a variety of boundaries.
- » Affirming authenticity in communication.
- » Encouraging serious self-reflection and self-awareness.
- » Creating meaningful connection by *really* attending to one another and being fully present.

Parallel Play: The Dance Between My Two Lives

In parallel to my professional organization work, I have always sought dance and movement activities. When I lived in Maine and again when I moved to Philadelphia, I looked for dance classes, participated in dance projects, served on dance company boards, attended performances, and pursued various body therapies. I have also continued to explore movement improvisation and other movement modalities. These activities have consistently provided me with a window into myself and a way to reflect and slow down, and they have also connected me to others with similar inclinations. Those relationships, formed through kinesthetic connection, have a special intimacy and playfulness.

Several times over the years, I considered studying dance therapy or becoming certified in a particular movement modality, including Effort/Shape, Action Profiling, Feldenkrais, Pilates—and I did not. I continued to choose organizations as the forum in which to do my work.

Yet my dance and movement life has always accompanied my professional life—reflecting it, helping me explore the choices not taken, and providing a counteracting energy. In the early 1980s, while traveling to set up non-profit corporations in New England, I created dances about women and work. My choreographic partner was raising two children and directing a college dance program. Our dances, called *Piecework*, mirrored our very different lives and explored the themes of women's work in the world. These dances expressed the complexity of our choices as women, the challenge of multiple roles, the speed of the traveling business person, and the slow beauty of everyday household tasks. *Piecework* was also a way for me to reflect on my career choices and to trace my own trajectory.

Early Discoveries Through Movement

As I reflect on these parallel journeys, I now realize that the values I hold in my professional practice first began to show themselves to me through movement very early on in my life.

I was lucky enough to be taught dance at a young age by a teacher who believed that her students should learn about dance of all kinds. She taught us ballet, modern, jazz, gymnastics, and African dance. When we were really young, she gave us time at the end of each class to dance, free form. She played music, and we moved freely in the space. Most of my fellow five-year-old dancers loved dancing to the romantic *Romeo and Juliet* ballet music by Prokofiev and to the violin concerto, "Summer," in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. I preferred the more passionate "Winter," by Vivaldi and Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*. Dancing in response to the intensity of these last two pieces of music allowed me to be myself in a way that did not happen at other times.

That is my first memory of being certain that I had an important secret. When dancing, when expressing myself through movement, I "knew" something about myself and the world, that was absolutely true, right, and mine. And I just knew that I was onto something.

What did I know? Somehow my five-year-old self knew that we express something fundamental about ourselves as humans when we move in a way that feels true to us. I knew that in those unique expressions of self, we also connect to one another and the human condition in a precious and spiritual way. I knew that movement was another kind of language. Through movement we can express the glory and vulnerability of the human condition, we can express great artistry, great sadness, and have loads of fun. I also think now that what I experienced then was an inkling of me at my best—a person who, as Kay Redfield Jamison describes in her book, *Exuberance, the Passion for Life* (2004), is "*incapable of being indifferent.*"

Movement and dance taught me about myself and allowed me to express myself from an early age. I seek out dance, music, and art for nourishment as well as for ideas. For me, art provides possibility, opens a window into diverse spiritual sensibilities, brings beauty into the world, and showcases different ways of seeing as well as innovative ideas.

Choosing not to become certified in a particular movement modality was not just about working in organizations. My choices also tell of my strengths and preferences. My strengths lie in fostering partnerships and encouraging expression in others. It has been valuable for me to learn various movement approaches and synthesize them into my own personal approach. But I was not compelled to study any approach in depth, until I discovered *Authentic Movement*.

Later Discoveries Through Authentic Movement

What is *Authentic Movement*? It is a structured form of movement that involves two roles, *mover* and *witness*. A safe environment is first established by a trained facilitator or a trusted peer group. Then, in silence, with eyes closed, the *mover* simply notices and follows whatever impulses arise in his or her body to move or be still, true to him or herself in the moment. At the same time, the *witness*,

sitting on the periphery, watches the mover and follows these guidelines:

- 1) Pay focused attention.
- 2) Select key behaviors to observe and watch mindfully.
- 3) Take accountability for personal assumptions and reactions.
- 4) Suspend judgment and evaluation and activate compassion.

Following a period of moving and witnessing, each person has an opportunity to speak about his or her experience, taking care to identify their descriptions as their own. Mover and witness are guided to pay non-evaluative attention to themselves while in each role, and to cultivate a compassionate internal witness over time.

A dance teacher and dance therapist, Mary Starks Whitehouse, created *Authentic Movement* in the 1950s. Over time, she became more interested in teaching people than in teaching dance, more interested in the process than the results, and more interested in human development than in art. Strongly influenced by her experience with Jungian analysis, Whitehouse originally called her work, “Movement-in-Depth”. Janet Adler, a student of Mary Whitehouse, helped to develop the practice and the role of the witness, and she renamed the form “*Authentic Movement*.” Both Whitehouse and Adler worked with John and Joyce Weir, pioneers in self-development and self-differentiation, to deepen the “witness consciousness.”

I first discovered *Authentic Movement* in 1989, as I was preparing to leave Maine for my first job after AU/NTL, a staff development job in the corporate sector in Philadelphia. After a few years of exploration, I decided that I wanted not only to practice *Authentic Movement*, but also to teach it, and I enrolled in a formal program of study. In the meantime, my OD work had evolved to focus on teaching coaching skills and providing coaching services. As I studied *Authentic Movement*, I began to note a connection between the process of coaching and the process of witnessing. The integration of my parallel lives began to occur when I made this key connection.

Integrating My Parallel Lives

In *Authentic Movement*, I was relieved to find a practice that not only allowed me to explore my own expression, but is designed for that very purpose. *Authentic Movement* has provided me with a safe place and a simple structure to explore deep joy and play, stillness, great intensity, and sadness, too. Because *Authentic Movement* is based on a deeply relational connection between mover and witness, it is a forum to enact careful partnership and is, therefore, a form that reflects and aligns with my

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values. Finally, it is a structure that enables me to use my expertise in facilitation, coaching, and workshop design.

The integration of my parallel lives is developing differently than I originally imagined, when I thought that I might bring movement directly into organizations. Instead, integration began to occur by incorporating the “witness stance” into my coaching and OD work.

In the last six years, I have been on an enormously creative and satisfying journey. In addition to coaching from the stance of witness, I have been introducing movement and facilitating *Authentic Movement* with clients, conference attendees, and colleagues, many of whom have had little or no movement experience, and helping them to make meaning of those experiences, (i.e., “how is life in here, in the studio, like life out there?”). In addition, I have created two seven-session series (Part I and Part II) for leaders and consultants, *Presence and Attention at Work*. These sessions use *Authentic Movement*

to practice witnessing skills—being truly present, listening at a deep level, and communicating with care and clear boundaries.

My leadership development program, *Executive Exchange*, is now in its fourth year and third group. Although I do not yet facilitate *Authentic Movement* with these groups, I do incorporate movement activities into each meeting and I teach witnessing skills as part of the peer coaching process. I describe *Executive Exchange* to the participants at our first meeting by giving equal weight to both

its conceptual and more “right brain” components. I list the objectives and OD topics. I also describe the underlying values and the “spirit” I am promoting: a “circular or spiral journey;” that “encourages pause and a look at perspectives and patterns;” that “asks you to slow down to speed up;” and that “facilitates unfolding”.

I have also used the actual practice of *Authentic Movement* with coaching clients, as a natural progression of our work together. For instance, I’ve facilitated *Authentic Movement* with co-directors of a program in an academic institution to illuminate the patterns in their relationship, and I’ve invited coaching clients into the studio to explore emerging themes in a full bodied way. I have also brought *Authentic Movement* to a staff retreat for a non-profit organization focused on health and healing.

I teach *Authentic Movement* with a distinct OD and coaching flavor: I am a facilitator, not a therapist, and I incorporate aspects of Appreciative Inquiry, Polarity

Management, coaching methodology, and the gifts I gained from John and Joyce Weir's work on self differentiation.

Integrating My Practice: The Impact of the Witness

I believe that consulting or coaching from a witness stance strengthens our capability to support individual and group level change in others, *and* helps us to maintain a highly attuned self awareness. If people are supported through a change process by a caring witness they increase the chances of sustaining that effort, because being seen and heard by another with compassion, without judgment, and with keen attention is highly validating. And the gift goes both ways. To see another without judgment allows us to recognize and appreciate the complexity of human reaction.

How can we *not* form judgments? We constantly develop judgments to help us make sense of the world; it is the suspension of judgment of another as right or wrong, bad or good that is the gift of the witness stance.

As a coach, the act of witnessing slows down the process and provides the same nurturing, reflective space that *Authentic Movement* provides.

Coaching/witnessing, with an awareness of the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—expands our view of the person. As a witness/coach, when I pay attention to the moving body as well as to the verbal exchange, I am awed by the beauty, frailty, strength, and resilience of human beings, a door to appreciation and compassion.

At this point in my journey I have begun to identify specific shifts in my work as a result of integrating these two disciplines and my two lives:

Defining “Help”

The experience of witnessing has changed how I characterize *help*. I now find it very powerful to simply watch with openness and care and then to offer my experience, freed from the reflex to solve or fix. The witness's experience of the mover's movement may be totally unrelated to the mover's experience, yet provide a valuable

perspective. I have been greatly helped by hearing someone else's experience of my movement, even more, in fact, when that experience is different than mine. It has expanded my view and given me another angle to consider.

To share my experience of another, as witness, coach and consultant, and to own it as *my* experience emphasizes our differences as humans. Paradoxically, it also creates a powerful connection between mover and witness, coach and client. To be truly seen, attended to, and cared for by another *is* help, and it has nothing to do with hearing the “correct” interpretation.

Facilitating as a Leader/Partner

Both as coach to my organizational clients and as an *Authentic Movement* facilitator, I assume the role of leader/partner. Many of my clients are in similar roles: leaders of organizations who partner across organizational boundaries. As *leader*, I design and hold the structure of the larger project, as well as the individual coaching interaction. I lead by modeling witnessing behavior and by taking risks to be vulnerable and express myself. I lead by offering possibilities—from movement vocabulary to OD approaches. As *partner*, I sometimes move with my clients, I participate in debriefing discussions, and I offer my feelings and opinions, joining with my clients as a human being. Facilitating from the place of leader/partner, I believe, generates initiative and confidence in my clients and decreases the possibility of dependence.

Developing a “Body Read”

Our bodies have great wisdom if we pay attention. They reflect our experiences in the world, and they carry messages across the boundaries of generations and geography. And sometimes, the right brain leads the left; we often know something in our bodies before we know it in our thoughts. Movement is another way of knowing, a way of using the body to express what does not have words.

I have an ongoing practice of *reading* my own body. I am familiar with how my body responds to tension, for example. I pay attention to my physical experience

as I move through an interaction, and can quickly catch what I truly think and feel about the topic at hand by noticing my physical response first.

Creating Movement Cues

We often have physical reactions to a verbal exchange; conversely we can influence verbal exchange through an intentional physical stance or “movement cue.” I carry a few postures or movement cues that I assume in certain situations to help me play a particular role. In a contentious client situation, for example, when mediating between an executive director and her board president, I consciously assumed a strong stance with a rooted base to support me as the pace setter and mediator.

I have also helped both my *Authentic Movement* and coaching clients to identify their own movement cues to help them connect to a particular role or stance. In addition, they have created cues that will calm or empower them and cues that will help them to stay connected to themselves.

And, at a deeper level, I personally hold several movement images that instantly connect me to humanness and compassion.

Responding as a Witness in a Coaching Interaction

The witness stance strengthens my capability to foster partnership and to create an environment conducive to others finding their full expression. Before incorporating witnessing into my coaching, I focused primarily on empowering the other through deep listening and strategic questions. I might give feedback or suggestions, but I was very careful not to get too attached to my view. I gave feedback only in the context of the person's frame of reference.

I offer myself differently now. Still using deep listening and strategic questions, I now offer the fullness of my own experience of the other's story, making it *very* clear that it is *my* experience. In doing so, I have two intentions: one, to join with and give support; the other, to provide a glimpse of thoughts or feelings that I intuit are present, but may not yet be fully

owned by the person. My voicing them allows the person to consider them from afar. How is this different than empathy? I am direct and fervent about my own reaction and response in listening to the other's story. I provide a possibility that the person can choose to grab—or not.

Utilizing a “Resonance Spectrum”

I now also choose what to offer based on what I call a “resonance spectrum”. On one end of the spectrum, I offer my experience of the person's story that I think the person might recognize but not yet be able to name. On the other end of the spectrum, I take a greater risk and offer a possibility that digs deeper and may, in fact, *not* resonate with the person. I begin by saying, “This may not resonate at all with you, but . . .” And then I ask: “What came up as you heard me say this?” I only offer a witness response from this end of the spectrum after I am confident of the trust between us. On occasion, taking this risk has led the dialogue in a direction neither of us would have predicted, sometimes resulting in the client choosing to take a surprising next step.

Containing and Venturing

As witness/coach, I allow what pops up in me as I listen to take residence. I don't worry if it's correct, yet the experience has a comfortable certainty. I am not certain that it is *true*, but I am certain that it is a valid experience. Then I have a choice about whether to speak and for what purpose, given what I know about the particular person. Which parts of my experience would be helpful? What are the benefits of containing and not speaking? I have learned to be much more discerning; I contain much more now than in earlier times.

At the same time, I venture more. I am more willing to speak from my heart about my experience, which is different than offering my *impressions* of the other person, or what we commonly think of as feedback. After I speak, I always ask the client for his or her response. That question takes our dialogue to a deeper level where we discuss the frames of reference that inform our assessments, examine our assumptions,

and discover how we make meaning of what we see.

An Integrated Life

The journey continues. My long ago secret has led me to what I do best. Movement and kinesthetic experience, combined with the tools, concepts, and skills of Organization Development and coaching, have allowed me to surface what I know deeply and to offer it with increasing confidence.

Authentic Movement, simultaneously a structured and spontaneous approach, has expanded, strengthened, and refined my efforts to foster partnerships, to advocate for people to develop their voices, to activate compassion and respect for the human condition, and to promote reflection. My conviction about the importance of authentic, clear communication and connection continues to motivate my work.

To my delight, there is greater depth and breadth to my work and also more surprises; I find that when I dare to communicate my experience fully, the same response is elicited in others. I learn more deeply about them, and together, further insights emerge.

As I work more and more from the integration of these two disciplines, I continue to feel the benefits I stated at the beginning of this article: in using my whole self—body, mind, and spirit—I am more available to myself and to my clients. I now feel that I bring my best self to each project.

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Martha Isobel Lask, MS, of MIL Consulting in Philadelphia has 30 years of experience working as a coach, consultant, and manager in the private and non-profit sectors. A major focus is *Executive Exchange*, a program for non-profit leaders providing peer coaching, individual coaching, and OD approaches. She holds an MS from American University/National Training Labs. Martha is a dancer of 30 years and holds a certificate in *Authentic Movement* from Amherst, MA. Martha can be reached at martha.lask@verizon.net.

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