

Keynote Address by Daria Halprin
International Expressive Arts Therapy Conference
Hong Kong, October 2015

As a dancer, my language and mythology is rooted in the varying complexities of the body. In thinking about how I might contribute to the opening of our conference I felt compelled to stay close to my own experience of the arts themselves, to the ways in which dance has spoken to me and for me, and my own path into expressive arts therapy. I will look to my experience and knowledge of the body, then to my own story and finally to the larger world body to explore our conference theme: The Flowing Tao of Expressive Arts. I hope to offer some of the challenges, questions, notions and possible new meanings I have encountered.

I needed to find a way to connect to the thematic title of our conference. The image of flowing made me feel a bit nervous because that quality can be so often misinterpreted in dance, as imitative, decorative, superficial - limited to wavy shoulders, arms, and hands, while lacking in rigorous forceful movements, rhythmic undertones, hips, legs and feet moving on the downbeat.

And, I felt a bit rebellious around the word. One of my sub-personalities began to mutter: "Hey, we don't fix things or make happy endings, we let the arts provoke, reveal, re-story our challenges. We let the underground life, our full range of emotions, the wounding, the oppressed and oppressor, as well as the light hearted and tending ones, all come out to play, paint, sing, dance, and speak."

I tried to calm my rebel down. After all, it's not that I don't want to flow and lighten up as much as I want to get down. However, I'm looking for a dynamic powerful full-bodied flow of the arts in service to the difficult and arduous path of healing, as well as their capacity to open the doors of imagination and creativity so often stuck, blocked, bolted shut, taken away, or made inaccessible.

What does the body tell us about that kind of flow and movement? And how can that inform our work as expressive arts therapists? I went about deconstructing the image, searching for a body mythology that might connect to my own story, my own healing process and my work. I found a library of metaphors in the science of the body that I used to decenter the image.

Flow is expressed through the fluid systems of the body, which act as a transportation system, a defense system, and a detoxifying system. Flow forms the basic connective pathways throughout the body and supports and binds all our physical structures together. All fluids in the body are essentially water, which changes character as it flows through different membranes, interacts with different substances and wears away obstacles. Fluids are continually flowing and changing as they move from one system to another, counterbalancing tension with relaxation, force with ease, structure with freedom of movement.

Here are some concrete examples:

- The flow of blood acts to diffuse and to solidify, delivers nutrients and cleanses the body of impurities.
- The flow of fluids through the lymphatic system provides a defense to the body's health, eliminates toxins and sets limits.
- The spinal fluids are clear and slow-moving, flowing into effortless, light movement, and balancing our need for strength and rest.
- The fluids in our joints allow for movement to travel freely from one part of the body to another, for weight to be shifted and displaced, for the body to seek new levels of movement and sense perception.

All of these fluids represent actual biological processes, but can also be seen as metaphors for different qualities and meanings of flow. Now I'm starting to like this concept!

In our bodies, we experience a continual flowing dance of opposites. We can observe how interruptions in flow cause breakdowns in the system as a whole. The balance between obstacles and unimpeded flow in the body thus becomes useful metaphors for how we might harness energy in the expressive arts: for nourishment, cleansing, and defense; for generating different degrees of force depending on necessity; for shifting between density and lightness, confrontation and play. I got excited with the process of deconstructing the image of flow to get underneath and layer its possible meanings. It helped me to expand the concept from a particular soft and lyrical movement into multiple qualities of movement, reflective of the full range of our human emotion, experience and expression.

It connected me with the notion that as expressive arts therapists, we define healing by working with what *is* rather than with a fantasy or an idealized image. Instead of creating decorative artwork or jumping into ease before we have explored the dis-ease, we search for

ways to give creative embodied expression to what ails us as individuals and communities. Creativity through the arts becomes the medicine.

We aren't out to fix or to remove symptoms. We look to uncover, to evoke, to grapple with, and then to transform. We value the descent as we value the ascent—both being intrinsic to any creative healing process. Could we think of suffering and pathology as interruptions in flow, and our expression of this suffering through creativity and art as a way to return to a healthier experience of flow? In this way we find beauty through the arts in holding and expressing the most painful and disowned aspects of our lives. Through this process of encounter with our lived experiences, the body releases, restores, and reimagines itself. Flow lets us dance through our history—our present, our past, and our possible futures—moving through our challenges in ways that generate new resources and options.

Continuing my search, I root myself in a dialogue between the art and science of the body. As a movement artist, the territory of the body is my medium. The body is intrinsic to any healing or therapeutic approach, and it is intrinsic to every art medium. In Buddhist philosophy the mind is understood as a sense organ. This really works for us in our appreciation of the power of imagination and its link to sensory experience and expression in the arts. All of the arts are based in sensorial experience. Each art medium is linked to and elicits sensorial responses, which feeds a dynamically flowing exchange between senses and imagination - we make new sense of things.

I find another metaphoric image of the body that lends itself to a possible philosophy and theory of embodied practice for the expressive arts - the body as instrument. Responding to that image, I think of tuning all of our senses to respond to our internal life and also to the external world. Through our senses - feelings, emotions and imaginations are stimulated, so that we connect with our experience of life and respond aesthetically. We might say that the arts become the way for us to tune and play the instrument of our body/mind.

The late archetypal psychologist James Hillman stated that the more body in an event, the more emotion. The reverse is just as significant – the more emotion in an event the greater the necessity for bodily awareness and expression. Movement catalyzes and expresses emotions and ways of thinking. It also catalyzes changes in emotions and thinking. That is movement's dynamic flow. It connects directly into the body/mind experience through the neuro-pathways impacting emotion, sense perception and behavior.

We need all of our senses, the entirety of our bodily experience connecting with imagination—our aesthetic capacity—to embody and bear witness to our personal and collective mythologies. Now, from body to personal myth.

Each of us here have been called to practice in the arts and to utilize the arts as a healing force. We each have a story to tell about that calling, how it came to us, how we responded, the challenges we have encountered and how our studies and our work are shaped by our personal mythology as well as by our passion for art making. I want to tell you some of my own story. It is a story about a dynamically flowing dance interrupted - a feeling of having been betrayed by the arts - and a story of restoration through the integration of art and psychology. It led me to this work and inspires me to keep searching the way.

I was raised by artists in an alternative world of radical, experimental multimedia art—a world of dancers, musicians, painters, theater makers, environmental designers, psychologists, all collaborating and making art together. As romantic as it might sound, it was a very shaky affair. The challenge to shift between art-making and daily life was ever present, literally and metaphorically. There was a looming gap between creating art and a psychologically sound atmosphere. As a result, along with other related traumatic events, as a young adult I turned away from the arts, and renounced my path as a dancer in search of psychological understanding, structure and healing. At the time it hadn't occurred to me that art could actually be the path to healing, although in my own upbringing it was a well-known aphorism.

The call of the arts was always flowing strongly in my blood and as much as I tried to walk away, they called me back. I returned with a radically changed conviction: to find a way that art could actually fulfill the promise and be the healing balm. With a longing to find such an art-making process I attempted to create strong and very clear holding structures, a solid anatomy of practice. I was looking for a way to guide people to deep and evocative places, give them new ways to confront their realities and also return them safely back on daily life's shore, changed - with new insights and new ways of being. I was convinced that the right way was to bridge the two different landmasses of art and psychology. I focused on creating the best system I could to transport people back and forth between the two. I was thinking and moving from this two-sided point of view.

I had lots of debates with my artist friends who accused me of bringing too much therapy into the studio, while I accused them of being entranced with creating art and paying no attention

at all to quality of life. One of them waved Hillman's Revisioning Psychology under my nose and yelled triumphantly: "I told you so! Even Hillman says psychotherapy doesn't work!" I was devastated. I thought I'd found my Holy Grail—art on one side and psychology on the other—and the nicest safest strongest bridge I could build in between. I felt a bit like the daughter torn between mother art and father psychology, pulled between them as they argued and accused each other - trying to arrange joint custody.

I read a piece recently that so delighted me and somehow reminded me of this. I want to read a few excerpts from a letter written by a woodworking artist to her husband - a psychologist. She calls it a defense against his brilliant interpretations, at a time when their marriage is at a breaking point.

"I don't want to be defined by my abusive childhood. When you give all that importance to the faults of my parents and siblings, you define me by my traumas, as if the traumas had the power to create the person I am now. Your theory also does not account for my horse. Yes my horse. At the craziest period of my childhood I loved that horse more than I have ever loved any person. He was the living presence who really accompanied me through my teens. My horse heard my troubles, felt my sadness, carried my body and my psyche. Since I loved this horse more than I loved my father, why does your psychology not allow me to say that I was parented by a horse? I received a gift from my horse, an instinct that tells me to avoid your interpretations. They are not good pasture for me." (Excerpted from *Wisdom of the Psyche: Depth Psychology after Neuroscience*, Ginette Paris, pg. 51.)

As I was once again at a crossroads moment looking for my own good pasture, I met Paolo Knill. Inspired by years of collaborative work with Paolo, I began to question and reconsider how immersion in and dialogue with art-making as process, performance, ritual and artifact really might be the therapy itself- that I could just as well think as an artist as I could live life as one, and that I could psychologize through rather than in parallel to my bodily experience and artistic practices. It took another decade working with hundreds of people from all different kinds of backgrounds before the relationship I had brokered between artistic practice and therapeutic practice began to transform yet again, and I saw more clearly a fully integrated pathway between the two. Now I continue to deconstruct the image of bridge building in search

of a more useful new image. I want to swim in the dynamically flowing waters between art and psychology rather than ferry back and forth.

As I have in dance, many of us specialize in one particular art medium as we utilize intermodal arts. And many of us have also specialized in the study of psychology, and quite often one particular school of psychology. Specializing involves immersion and mastery in one's art and practice. That can bring depth and breadth to our understanding and to the structures we create in utilizing the arts, Developing my knowledge in both psychology and art, and immersing in the practices of both, allowed me to fully re-submerge in the waters between the two.

As I deconstructed the image of bridge and flowing, and as we gather here in the east meets west dance, I go to a poetic Taoist writing: there I find the word for flow, “xing”, a very ancient word derived from an aerial view of intersecting crossroads. The image of intersecting pathways like the nervous system in the body replaces the image of a bridge between two different realms. There are crossways, pathways and byroads between psychology and art that have been traveled by people in many cultures throughout time. We might say that we are rediscovering what indigenous people and ancient cultures have always known—that art and life are inseparable, and that our art is most profound when it is in service to a restorative experience of living.

I now find intersecting pathways everywhere in our work—in healing, psychologizing, creativity, learning and transformation. As practitioners we can channel our work down one path or the other, with the knowledge that each pathway has a powerful influence on every other. At times, the flow of the work demands pushing, yelling, and clearing out. At other times, we need to cry, let go, laugh, whisper, sing a lullaby, celebrate. We tell old stories to create new mythologies to live by.

With this new image of dynamic flow along intersecting pathways, I imagine the expressive arts like the nervous system of the body, carrying impulses and messages to be felt, listened to and danced. I think about how the individual body, family body, group, community, world body and environment are all interconnected. One body. I imagine a philosophy and theory that ensures an effective transportation system, one that has structure and that also includes free passage across boundaries and borders. And I think of Expressive arts therapy as a dynamic paradigm for enhanced creativity, connectivity, and transformation.

Our approach to art making in its relational capacity becomes a way of being in the world. Expressive Arts Therapy extends its reach from the studio and therapy office, not only to the wounding and healing of the individual, but also to the community and world. Human relations within a particular or global social context are the material for creating a participatory art that can transform culture. Art and performance are made accessible to all as a means to express our social challenges.

When I started out and folks asked me what I did I tried hard to come up with some understandable explanations- I even found ways to slightly alter my explanation to make more sense to whoever I was speaking with - but inevitably there were blank looks, confused looks, polite, even dismissive looks. The other day I was curious to see about the public awareness and messaging beyond our field so I Googled Arts and Healing. I was amazed by all the material that came up, most particularly around the health benefits of creativity through the arts- and in multiple fields spanning science, medicine, psychology, community health and the humanities. Expressive Arts Therapy and Education has an immense and now recognized offering across such multiple fields, for personal healing, community healing, and social justice. We have “arrived” and are integrated into the flow of the main-bloodstream. With this constant flow supporting us, we can afford to keep shaking ourselves up a bit with some challenging questions, rigorous inquiry and thought counterbalanced by creative play in the arts, a solid structure of philosophy and theory enlivened by our diversity of road maps, colors, songs, dances.

To be effective expressive arts therapists, artists and transmitters of the healing arts, we need to cross borders, becoming multilingual translators and social activists, making accessible the means and the methods applicable to the particular communities and issues which call to us.

As we live through the challenges of our modern times, filled with beauty and unprecedented threats, how can we best utilize the arts as a healing force? What kinds of dances, paintings, stories and songs matter to the struggles of people across the globe, some of whom are fighting for the integrity of their bodies, their communities, and the vital earth upon which we all depend? Using the arts, based in the senses and accessing universally known and felt languages, our work lends itself to cross-cultural participation, and solution-oriented action. We too are participants in the changes our world needs.

My offering is to look to the individual and the collective body where the wounding and the healing lives, and immerse in the arts, where creativity and spirit most love to be expressed in

all its variety. Let us continue to challenge one another to search and research, to question how we understand the power of the arts as a creative healing force. Let us swim in the dynamic flow of the expressive arts - our embodied practices filled with rich, pulsing blood and with fluid play.

Right now, we are here while somewhere on our body earth, in our body humanity blood is flowing

Tears are flowing

Refugees are flowing

River waters are flowing

Oil, smoke, gas, money is flowing

Words of hate and fear, love and hope are flowing

Paint is flowing onto canvas, words are flowing into poetry, feelings are flowing into dance, voices are flowing into song, eardrums and hearts are vibrating like strings of violin, like keys on a great piano or horn.

Across bones and boundaries, through joints, narrow passageways, barbed wire, deserts,

In trains, temples, mosques, churches,

Immigration pathways linking oceans, continents, cultures, millenniums

All of this flowing

With our walking, running, crawling, twirling, feet stomping, jumping, falling, getting back up again, hips swaying, fists raised in the air with an immense cry.

What are we calling for, what are we calling for, what are we calling for?