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Janet Adler, Galiano Island, B.C., March 2006.

# PRESENCE:

## From Autism to the Discipline of Authentic Movement

an address by Janet Adler

In this time of great privilege, there are many forms through which we can awaken. There are many disciplines, practices, teachers from which we can choose. We discern, we distinguish, we clarify, we choose this, we do not choose that. We sort, we categorize, we separate, and, before we know it, we glimpse our path unfolding. Each one of these precious details profoundly contributes to the manifestation of who we are.

I am thinking of a poem that I love by Wendell Berry concerning who we are becoming within the passing of time.

*No, no, there is no going back.  
Less and less you are  
that possibility you were.  
More and more you have become  
those lives and deaths*

*that have belonged to you.  
You have become a sort of grave  
containing much that was  
and is no more in time, beloved  
then now and always.  
And so you have become a sort of tree  
standing over a grave.  
Now more than ever you can be  
generous toward each day  
that comes, young, to disappear  
forever, and yet remain  
unaging in the mind.  
Everyday you have less reason  
not to give yourself away.*





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Movement is about. I have had the privilege for the past thirty-some years of inviting movers to step into the emptiness of the studio with their eyes closed, to step into not knowing and to open toward becoming more and more of who they are. Now I no longer move with the other, as I did with the children, moving with my eyes open as I witnessed them. In my current teaching practice, I sit still, with my eyes open, to the side of the movement space. I have shifted from being a moving witness to a seated witness. My wish is the same: I want to accompany the other, I want to participate in these moments of discovery of a presence embodied, of a developing inner witness.

The development of an inner witness is an excellent way of describing the development of consciousness. With the children and within the discipline of Authentic Movement, there is much learning about distinguishing between when we are here and when we are not here. In times of grace, there is a shared presence, and in these moments, with the children and in the Authentic Movement studio, ritual occurs—an immediate sense of inherent order becomes apparent within a felt sense of a sacred space.

I cannot trace the history of my own work without tracing the work that preceded it. In the beginning of humankind, being and dancing were inseparable within sacred space. I see one circle. In this one circle, individuals, in the presence of each other, are dancing in relationship to their gods. Dancing, they are healed. I see one circle, whole. Within this one circle, the embodiment of spirit heals. Within this one circle, I see the creative force entering from the earth through the feet of the one who dances, moving through the body of the one who calls to God, bringing God down into her body, down into the earth through her feet and back again, now circling up through her body, his body, their bodies, until the world is whole, until the world is whole.

Our ancestors—dancers, healers, mystics—knew much about this longing to be present, to enter the unknown. I believe that our ancestors trusted the body. I believe that they embraced suffering and that they undoubtedly desired clear manifestation of spirit. Their work tells me that surrender, in conscious relationship to will, was necessary. Their work tells me that direct experience of union with the Divine occurred. Their practices describe ritual space, and from that space, their offerings were known.

I cannot look into the history of modern dancers without discovering spirit in the bones of their dances. I cannot study the history of healers and mystics without acknowledging the depth of spirit that called them toward the suffering of others. The work of dancers, healers, and mystics forms the

I am hopeful in imagining that perhaps every day on our paths we are giving ourselves away a little more, a little more. I have been asked to weave some threads about the evolution of my own path, about the relationship between my experience with autistic children and my experience of the discipline of Authentic Movement.

I don't know what I am doing. I am searching hospitals and clinics for the child who cannot be found, for the child who cannot be touched. I am searching for the child who I need to find, the child who I need to touch. I am twenty-one years old. I see a boy in a big, dark room. The ceiling is so high, the chains on the furniture so shiny. I watch him from a distance as he spins. He is spinning with his arms spread wide and high, with his first fingers touching his thumbs. He is spinning and spinning in the back ward of a state hospital in New England. I remember how he brings his body into stillness. I see his eyes. He sees my eyes. In my heart I call to him. I imagine that he is calling to me. I need to come nearer to this mysterious being, this unknown presence. Yet why do I feel that I recognize him? Is it the indwelling God within this child that I need to touch, that I need to be touched by? Is it his suffering or my own that I need to open toward?

Forty years ago, autistic children were described as those beings who never had an experience of relationship with another human being. In such a child there is no hint of an internalized other, a mother, an inner witness. There is no internalized presence. For a decade I worked in big and empty rooms where autistic children, one by one, filled the space with their absence until, because of a momentary presence, we experienced a connection. Such moments of grace created resonance within our relationship, revealing a glimpse of light.

Autistic children represented the unknown to me. Now, so many years later, my desire to experience the unknown persists. I continue to be very drawn to that which I cannot see, that which I cannot touch, that which I cannot know. And this is very much what the discipline of Authentic



Photograph of Janet moving with "Amy," an autistic child, taken during the making of the film, *Looking for Me* (1968), about Janet's work with autistic children.

ground of the discipline of Authentic Movement, a way of work in which we practice compassionate witnessing of movement becoming conscious.

Looking for my roots, I read words of my teachers and my teachers' teachers, each one absorbing from his or her teachers what is needed, just as I did from mine. Looking for the web of lineage of this work, I find many dancers (Wigman 1966, Graham 1991, Duncan 1927) as well as teachers of body-based disciplines (Johnson 1995), writing of a specific sense that they must descend into their trust of intuitive knowing without yet feeling the form of it, as if they have no choice. Many write of the pain of their descents, wondering why then they continue to pursue their course. Some speak of their experience of sacrifice, but within the sacred meaning of that word. And through such an intense process of learning, often they are teaching others and, in so doing, acknowledge their choice to teach from their present, most current, experiences and questions.

What follows are words from specific modern dancers who I believe are a strong part of the ground of our work and who speak to me especially about spirit:

Rudolph Laban (1975) writes about an inner witness, about body dancing soul:

*...[there is] an inner attitude out of which true dance arises like aflame... There is an energy behind all occurrences and material things for which it is almost impossible to find a name. A hidden, forgotten landscape lies there, the land of silence, the realm of the soul, and in the centre of this land stands the swinging temple... in which all sorrows and joys, all sufferings and dangers, all struggles and deliverances meet and move together. The ever-changing swinging temple, which is built of dances, of dances which are prayers, is the temple of the future.... We are all one, and what is at stake is the universal soul out of which and for which we have to create.*

Mary Wigman (1966, 1973) writes about presence as if she is speaking the mover's prayer:

*Dance wants to and has to be seen.... I have always been a fanatic of the present, in love with the moment.... the dynamic force... moving and being moved... is the pulse beat of the life of dance. Not turning oneself, but being turned.... Time and again I gave myself up to the intoxication of this experience ... a process in which, for seconds, I almost felt a oneness with the cosmos.... I became the caller and the called all in one.*

Isadora Duncan (1927) writes about the longing for union with the Divine:

*I spent long days and nights in the studio seeking that dance which might be the divine expression of the human spirit through the medium of the body's movement.... "listen to the music within your soul. Now while listening, do you not feel an inner self awakening deep within you — that it is by its strength that your head is lifted, that your arms are raised, that you are walking slowly toward the light?" .... This awakening is the first step in the dance.... I had come to Europe to bring about a great renaissance of religion through the Dance.*

And Martha Graham also writes about the present moment, movement patterns, risk, death, fire:

*Movement never lies.... I fear the venture into the unknown.... In order to work, in order to be excited, in order to simply be, you have to be reborn to the instant.... anything that quickens you to the instant... each moment is a new one and terrifying and threatening and bursting with hope.... You risk. Everything is a risk.... When you have to do the same movement over and over, do not get bored with yourself, just think of yourself as dancing toward*



Reflection, a painting by Philip Buller. Oil on linen, 68" x 80", 2005

*your own death.... The ordeal of isolation, the ordeal of loneliness, the ordeal of vulnerability.... One begins to realize that all human beings are the same.... At least I think I know what it docs mean to bum slowly from within...to feel so possessed by flame as to be infinitely hot and about to disintegrate into an ash at any instant.*

Finally she says: "I would like to feel that I had in some way given my students the gift of themselves."

I want the autistic children to have the gift of themselves. I want every being to receive, to discover the gift of themselves, the gift of their own authenticity. Mary Whitehouse gave permission to the dancers who came into her studio to discover the gift of themselves. They were encouraged to explore their unique, personal experience of the archetypes, the same archetypes that the Graham and Wigman dancers embodied on stage. Within the intimacy of relationship, Mary's presence made it possible for each dancer to return

toward the one circle where being and dancing were the same.

And it was Marion Chace, whom I knew before I met the autistic children, who taught me about spirit manifest in the body moving. I had the great privilege of breathlessly running behind her, pushing a record player on a cart on wheels. I can vividly see her now working with psychotic adults in her flowered cotton skirt, her hair on top of her head, extending her arms wide toward the patients, and a room full of collapsed and broken spirits, perhaps remembering themselves, rise and dance.

The connection between my experience of autistic children and of the discipline of Authentic Movement not only concerns the blessing, within relationship, of arrival into the unknown but also the discovery of form, conscious embodiment, within such emptiness. What happens once we commit and stand, listening, opening into the vastness?

Our ancestors also knew about this. They knew about the practice of discernment. They knew about the impeccability of tracking movement and inner experience. They knew about the art of concentration. As many of us know, autistic children have a tremendous capacity to concentrate. They can do one movement indefinitely. What is the force in these children that draws them, continues to sustain them, into repeating certain movements over and over?

Needing to find the children, to find myself in their presence, I chose to concentrate into the very stuff of each gesture by actually entering the precious detail of their bodies moving, trying to move exactly as they did. In doing so I had the privilege of learning their silent language. I found them in a merged state with their own movement—because of an absence of an inner witness—fervently focused on their idiosyncratic movement patterns. These children taught me about movement patterns. Could their prayer have been: "See me, and then I can see myself?" And so, slowly, accompanied by an outer, moving, open-eyed witness, they began, just began, to see themselves. In such moments of grace, an inner witness was born, barely born—tiny beginnings, enormous moments in my life. It was here that an opportunity for a dialogic relationship between us emerged.

Meeting the children in such an intimate way was a direct source of my experience with the phenomenon of the inner witness, with the phenomenon of the development of consciousness. Meeting the children in this way was also a direct source of my future experience within my own developing mover and witness consciousness, within my continuing commitment to the discipline of Authentic Movement.

In looking for more of the consciousness that I had glimpsed while working with the children, my questions brought me to brief but profound encounters with John Weir and Mary Whitehouse. I became a mover with eyes closed. The mover's prayer could be the same as the prayer of the autistic child: "See me, and then I can see myself." Because the mover in the discipline of Authentic Movement studies the art of concentration, she is attending to her longing to stay present. "Where am I now? What is my inner experience?" *Heneni*—meaning "here I am" in the Hebrew language—*heneni*. "I am here now with my wrists snapping together, my palms opening, my fingers extending, cupping. My shoulders are dropping, my arms are lifting. Here I am."

When the mover comes back after moving, she is intending to remember what she has been doing so she can speak her experience of embodiment in the presence of the outer witness. Because language is the bridge between the

body and consciousness, as the mover speaks her experience, she begins to see herself, hold herself, take herself seriously, attending to the detail, every precious detail of each physical movement and the concomitant inner experience.

The witness practices the same thing. The witness asks, while sitting to the side of the space with her eyes open, "Where am I? What am I doing? Oh, here I am, sitting on this chair. My hands are in my lap; my head is tilted slightly to the right. *Heneni, heneni*. Here I am. I see the mover's wrists suddenly snap together, her palms opening, her fingers extending, cupping. Her shoulders are dropping, her arms are lifting. I see the light pouring through the window into her hands. Here I am. I am seeing her, tracking the sequence of her gestures, their idiosyncratic qualities, and my experience in response. I am remembering her, holding her within my energy field, taking her seriously. I want to remember all of this and speak some of these experiences in her presence after she speaks of hers."

It is within such dialogue that the mover and witness begin to name an awareness of movement patterns. When the little boy repeatedly spins, he has no conscious understanding of what he is doing. When a mover in the discipline of Authentic Movement becomes aware of a movement pattern, she has no understanding of what it is about. The inner witness is not yet in conscious relationship to it. Both with the child and with the mover, following the pattern becomes possible because of the relationship—with the moving witness for the child, and with the outer witness, sitting in stillness, for the mover.

The center of the work in the discipline of Authentic Movement is about relationship: between a mover and an outer witness, between the moving self and an inner witness, between the self and the collective, between the self and the Divine. Relationship, relationship, relationship. This gift, this work, this challenge of being a person, is about relationship.

In my book, *Offering from the Conscious Body: The Discipline of Authentic Movement*, I explore three aspects of the discipline of Authentic Movement. In all three realms, I am studying the phenomena of being merged with experience, being in a dialogic relationship with it, and being in a unitive state with it.

In the Individual Body section, the development of the ground form is traced, revealing the phenomena of mover and witness consciousness. Beginning with a mover in dyads and then triads, the evolution of the work continues as the mover becomes a moving witness, the moving witness

becomes a silent witness, and the silent witness becomes a speaking witness.

In the next portion of the book, beginning with small groups, the Collective Body is explored. It is here in the development of the practice that individual movers and witnesses have the opportunity to experience themselves as part of a circle of witnesses and a body of movers within it. How do we consciously distinguish between being merged with the collective body and being in a dialogic relationship with it? The dangers of being merged are terribly evident in history as well as at this time in our own culture.

In working with the Conscious Body—the third section of the book—mystical text, dance, and energetic phenomena are studied. "Direct experience" is at the core of energetic phenomena. Within the discipline of Authentic Movement, direct experience is known as a unitive phenomenon, occurring when the felt separation between the moving self and the more familiar experience of the inner witness dissolves. There is an awareness of and immersion in the ineffable experience of nonduality. This definition is similar to the descriptions of direct experience in the mystical traditions derived from monotheistic religions and of *samadhi* in Buddhism.

Direct experience within the practice of the discipline of Authentic Movement is related to the phenomenon of presence. It is not necessarily true that we are more present as our practice matures, but we are more aware of when we are present and when we are not. When we are present, more than the details of our personal history engraved in our body matter become evident. The details of our personal history never change, but our relationship to them can change. This changing relationship in the studio happens because of the experience of being seen, seeing, participating, and belonging. Such experiences bring each mover and each witness toward the blessing of clear, silent awareness.

As the work deepens, "Where am I?" is less frequently asked. "Here I am"—*heneni*—is more frequently known. As individuals cultivate an inner witness with developing clarity and compassion, there is a felt distinction between personality and presence. Practice toward presence evolves into moments in which the body as vessel is experienced as empty. Longing to offer emerges from such emptiness. The form itself becomes transparent. Out of silence comes a word. Out of stillness comes a gesture. Out of presence comes direct experience of the numinous.

What follows is a short excerpt from the chapter on mystical dance. We begin in an offering circle, standing, witnessing the emptiness:

*I see one woman step in, her gaze  
downward, her eyes open. She begins  
to turn and turn and turn in one place.  
She spins, her hands lifting  
her shawl up behind her: She spins  
and I hear one witness singing a  
wordless, joyful song, a song full of  
light. She spins and I see the gaze  
of every witness riveted on her dance.*

*Now I see two other witnesses lift  
their shawls up behind themselves,  
as if joining her but from their stationary places.  
Another witness becomes  
a mover and begins spinning, and another  
and another: Now we are all spinning.*

It is no longer necessary for some to remain outer witnesses because the presence of the inner witness is clear enough within each person. We spin and spin until the song and the dance complete themselves. We return to our places and witness the emptiness.

It is here that my first teachers, the autistic children, again appear. I see the little boy in the big and dark room, the ceilings so high, the chains on the furniture so shiny. This child spins, and I hear him calling and calling. Responding, I spin with him, offering my presence, inviting the awakening of his inner witness. This woman in the dance circle spins, calling and calling. Responding, one witness sings, others enter her gesture, spinning, each one offering presence. Within this circle, in these moments, each one knows wholeness because of the presence of his or her inner witness in conscious relationship to the presence of all others.

The stone bowl in the corner of my studio silently receives the spinning, the singing—all that occurs here. It holds emptiness and now water, emptiness now stones, emptiness and apples, now a candle glowing at the bottom in the center—emptiness emptiness, all that begins, all that ends, again and again and again.

I conclude with this offering from the epilogue in my book:

*Dusk arrives once again. The studio is empty.  
I light a candle and sit at the stone bowl, tracing the  
rim of this empty circle with my hand, slowly, very  
slowly, so that I can feel the tool marks with my  
fingertips. Now I see others sitting with me around  
the bowl. Each one is vivid, present.*



*Under the Flag*, a painting by Philip Buller.  
Oil on linen, panel, 48" x 52", 2005

*Now my fingers stumble into a place where a tiny chip has fallen away, marking an indentation. Putting my finger in this hollow, I trace a dark and delicate line, a fissure, that moves away from the wounded place. I must enter this crevice, this sacred imperfection. My heart follows the fault line into the density of the stone, into the density of this vessel, within this studio, this home, this nation, our world. How will this crack in the container, this woundedness that is inherent in wholeness, call toward and receive the light of unbounded, conscious forces strengthening our vessel? How will this same crack release the darkness of unconscious forces, threatening to shatter the whole of our fragile humanity?*

*May the quality of consciousness  
that is emerging collectively  
within our world  
outweigh the quantity of unconsciousness  
that suffers on our planet  
May all suffering become compassion  
May we be ready, may we be able.*

The discipline of Authentic Movement is one more evolving embodied awareness practice, one more opportunity for participating in creating a world that must endure.



Janet Adler originally presented this paper at the American Dance Therapy Association conference in Burlington, VT, in October 2002 as the keynote address: "From Autism to the Discipline of Authentic Movement," with Introduction by Elise Billock Tropea. This paper is a revised version of that address. Other versions were published in *A Moving Journal: Ongoing Expressions of Authentic Movement*, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2003; and in *The American Journal of Dance Therapy*, Volume 25, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2003. It is also included in the newly released book, *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved—A Collection of Essays*, Volume 2, edited by Patrizia Pnllaro, 2006, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers; [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com).

Wendell Berry's poem, "No, no, there is no going back," Counterpoint Publishers, 1998, is reprinted with permission.

For more on Philip Buller's work, see [www.philipbuller.com](http://www.philipbuller.com)

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