

# Arts and Social Change: The Lesley University Experience in Israel

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## Chapter 8

# The Courage to Move,

Ilene A. Serlin

Lesley University's tradition of valuing the arts and activism gave me a most important opportunity to practice this in Israel, where I worked directly with dance/movement therapy and the effects of war trauma on everyday residents. In the following chapter, I will provide concrete examples of the experience of war during a summer session of teaching through descriptions drawn from teaching and student responses.

In the summer of 2006, the war in Lebanon was heating up. Scheduled to teach Group Process in Dance Therapy in the Netanya campus, I was torn about whether it was safe to go to Israel. On the one hand, it was safe and I went. On the other hand, it got more intense and we faculty from the United States were eventually evacuated.

Once there, though, I had the chance to be part of an extraordinary experience. Our course in group process became a laboratory in which to explore feelings about safety and security, hope and despair during the war and resulting traumatic experiences. Through working with the dream of one class member, other class members had a chance to express their own connections to group and social healing. And although I did get evacuated that week, I felt my time there and the experiences I brought back with me enabled me to be a better activist from using the arts in a multi-cultural context.

Basing our approach on an existential model of group therapy, we looked at movement as a text, which embodied a kinaesthetic narrative of the impact of the war. Our understanding of the language of movement and its healing potential let us look vividly at how movement could express and transcend war-related existential challenges.

Class topics covered how to read kinaesthetic narratives, understand existential themes in group process, and create rituals of healing. After that, student papers will illustrate existential perspectives on the arts and healing in group process. One student had a particularly powerful dream one night during the course. She presented her dream the next day, and the group enacted it in movement. An extremely emotional experience, the dream sequence appears throughout some of the student papers that follow.

The class was organized along a range of key topics and activities. The first section gave an overview of Dance/Movement Therapy: Context, history and overview of theories. A key concept is that dance is a language that can reveal and work with group process, including elements of individual style and differences, roles, alliances and sub-grouping, conflict and reconciliation, and ritual.

The second section revolved around working with groups and the use of movement, art and music in group process. Key concepts were play, individuation, non-verbal group dynamics, and dance as a metaphor for life. Major principles were that movement expresses both states (situational events, mood, precipitating events) and traits (personality style, character structure, inherited characteristics, archetypes).

The third section asked the question: What is Dance/Movement Therapy? As a method, its key concepts are: Stay with the image, there is no "right" way of moving, and repetition is the essence of ritual. Deepening and amplifying imagery through the arts and dreamwork is a practice central to art therapy, and movement is a form of active imagination.

The fourth section looked at the language of movement. There is an objective language to describe qualities of movement in terms of time, weight, space, flow. All qualities occur in relation to space: planes, directions, and kinesphere. One of the key concepts is that all movement takes place in a coherent system which can be represented as polarities that exist in relation to space.

The fifth section examined existential group therapy and movement in terms of existential themes of freedom, individuality and death. Key concepts include: the life of a group goes through stages of existential responsibility; confrontation with mortality, freedom and fate, death and rebirth. Kinaesthetic Imagining is used as a process to generate bodily-based images that tell a

nonverbal narrative. Since trauma often stays stuck in the body, moving through the images and feeling the feelings in the body is crucial for healing.

The sixth section compared and contrasted symbolic movement and group dynamics—imagery, archetypes and the self, creating figures, archetypes, and myths of the self through art. Key concepts include: movement has a surplus of meanings and levels of meaning that include the phenomenological, archetypal, ritual, conscious and unconscious; imagery can take the form of metaphors, symbols, stories, myths, and archetypes

Following are two vignettes from student papers illustrating how the course and its framework of an existential perspective on experience and the war used the arts to express and work through trauma.

### **Vignette #1**

Part of the class was structured to explore the use of dreams in dance/movement therapy. One student brought in a dream that immediately spoke to almost everyone in the group as relevant to the war going on in the north outside the classroom. In addition, this woman had been relatively silent in the class; when she brought in the dream, her natural leadership qualities emerged and she became a kind of seer for the group.

She read her dream to the class. Then the group created an improvisation around it. We all started lying on the floor as if sleeping. Anna (fictional name) began to read her dream to us as she walked very slowly around the room. She began to chant this dream. She put on a pink silk scarf over her head like a dream figure that others attached to as the circle deepened and flowed around the room. One by one people stirred, moved, and practiced kinaesthetic imagining to become parts of the dream. People were sobbing, wailing...

This was her dream, her chant:

"I had a dream; I dreamt I lose all that is nearest to me. Arabs seize my home and take it under their control. Into my sister's kindergarten bursts a strange man who proceeds to pack all the children's belongings into boxes; in one box he places all the children's handiwork of butterflies."

*One small room,  
Lots of boxes  
One box,  
Lots of butterflies  
A struggle  
The man closes the box  
A woman tries to open it  
The butterflies in the box struggle to fly and be freed of the box....  
One small room.... lots of boxes...*

She reflected after the class that the movement helped her discover her center and equilibrium: "...what is the center of me or what is the place from which my movements evolve," and "begins with the heart." She understood that in expressing her personal dream through the collective, she was helping others symbolize and express emotions that had been held in the body. From the point of view of group process, her conclusion was, "It was an amazing experience for us in which we created a dream through narration and movement—and I could sense that it all came from the center, from the heart." She "felt that the dream told the story of the little spirits of the entire group and the butterflies in the box desiring to fly to freedom are a metaphor of each one of the group members' hurt spirits. This same hurt spirit of each one that desires to be free from its soul and to feel better, happier, in life after the burden is released from its heart." Finally, moving the dream brought needed solidarity and rejuvenation in a time of war and fear. The group brought a gift: "To receive, through the group, the energy that is within every one of us; to unite these energies and feel the strength of the flow that unites us all."

Her analysis further deepened understanding of the imagery. Anne thought that the connection probably came from her "strong unconscious thought of my connection with the Holocaust and the fear that enveloped me during the period of the war that we experienced recently, if so why a butterfly?"

"In the Lochamei HaGettaot Memorial Museum, a special building in memory of the million and a half children lost in the Holocaust, was built. Engraved on the metal flooring are the words, 'There are no butterflies in the Ghetto.' In the museum you lift up your eyes to see a huge stained glass

window illuminated by incoming rays of the sun and it depicts a colored butterfly surrounded by flowers. This expresses the memory of the million and a half little spirits lost in the Holocaust; this picture is deeply engraved within me from my visits to the museum and I continually connect the butterfly with a hurt spirit wanting to be freed. Through the experience of our group process I also succeeded in becoming released from the visions of the little children and their spirits in the Holocaust. When I accompany a group of school pupils to Poland this will surely assist me in dealing with the difficult journey.”

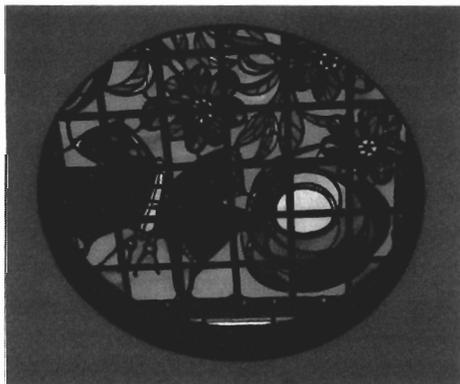
“In my view, the flutter of delicate butterfly wings represents the possibility to transfer emotions and thoughts through movement of all parts of our body. [This is accomplished] through the delicate wild movement of the butterfly in flight in varying situations. During the entire dream journey, colors were an essential part; they appeared in the imagination as part of the vision of the butterfly in all its wonderful colors and were expressed in paintings I painted freely following every experience we went through via the movement of our bodies. I felt that through movement I could also express colors.”

“Sometimes it seemed when I thought of a certain color my movement changed accordingly with the appearance and symbol of the color that I imagine; when I thought of blue my movements became flowing like the sea or the flight of a butterfly flying above. I understood that thought and symbols represent colors or thoughts that arise within me. They influenced my body movements and it was as though they lead my body to move in a certain way; the associations that appear were expressed naturally. It interested me to see in what manner the words that I repeated influenced my colleagues’ movements and later on I realized that for some of them the words held no meaning, but the rhythm and tone of speech and mantra-like repetition did have an effect and these led each one to her individual place and movements, this in itself was for me an astounding experience.”

“I must state that whilst presenting my dream—for me a kind of holy dream—I felt that within it was a kind of personal and holy dance for each of the participants.”

“After this joint experience in the group I read the following article: *Root Images of Healing in Dance Therapy*. I understood that in the group we had succeeded in sensing the great curative strength that exists in the connection

of body and soul, in this same special way that has existed from ancient days, through body movement. This is merely the beginning of understanding but the beauty lies in the manner of our experiencing; we felt it in our bodies and souls throughout the course. I feel that we have gained a chance to become strengthened through movement during the course, daily, whilst the winds of war blew behind us.”



*Illustration—Stained Glass Window in the roof of the ‘Hand-to-Hand’ Museum, Lochamei HaGettaot—The butterfly is trapped behind bars the sun illuminates with hope, this is the hope that I found during the war through the experiencing of realization of a dream by means of Movement Therapy.*

## Vignette #2

The other vignette shows how the group taught some of its members how to express and process long-held emotions in the body. One student described:

“...a very profound experience I had during the course. It was a time of war, a time of fear, a time of a lot of anxiety. We could not concentrate only on the “here and now” and the war outside kept crawling to the group space. My son was fighting in the north, and although I knew he was all right at that time I was much more worried than I allowed myself to admit. We talked about death and I cried a lot and I was invited by you to tell about my feelings. I shared my fears with the group and you approached me, and hold me so tight. The group approached me, reaching their hand to me and we stayed that way for a long time. I started to sing a sad song (although an optimistic one) and the group sang with me. I felt like a small child, a frightened child but at the same

time a child with a protective mother, a containing mother. I could feel the energy flowing into my body. I also felt part of a "oneness" as I felt the energy of the group. I was not alone any more. First I could feel it physically and then I could process it emotionally. I regressed to childhood and I felt secure. It was a healing process.

"She seemed to be asking me to mother her, to hold and cradle her... her twitching body asked for a firm grasp... I deliberately used my energy as a "holding object" to help her silent regression take place. As a re-mother with whom she was experiencing trust... and then helped her reintegrate using my own self." (Serlin, 1989, p. 56). Although this is the description of the therapeutic process of P, it reflects precisely what I felt. I was never held like this by my mother and it felt so good. It helped me realize once again during this course the importance of non-verbal communication and also the strength of the group. It gave me hope again. I found myself standing in the circle and reaching my hand to my group, inviting them to dance with me, exactly like the child in the old children's song. It was an amazing experience!"

She then realized that freedom from her trapped emotions was not enough, that she had to create something out of that freedom (Rollo May). Therefore, her thesis was to document her online support groups (using writing, narrative, poetry) for women who had lost husbands during the wars, or who needed to find places to stay or other kinds of help.

After that class, she reflected on how the training in kinaesthetic empathy helped her find the support she needed. It gave her a sense of attunement and group bonding.

## Conclusion

Through Lesley's emphasis on art and activism, we were able to use the language of movement/expressive arts to discover and express responses to the war, while we were able to let the outside world into the studio. The work was vivid, real, and made a powerful impression on all of us.

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