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Life, death and transformation: Keep moving

ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates the use of a new method of group work in dance movement therapy. The approach is existential/depth, and the major themes of confrontation with mortality, freedom and fate, death and rebirth are explored in movement. The benefits of this approach are seen in how these themes illuminate group process, through a small group improvisation and performance, and the way in which it helped participants understand and cope with a subsequent earthquake in Turkey. This article is co-written by a small group and their teacher, and aimed at helping therapists and creative art therapists understand the use of an existential/depth approach to group psychotherapy.

KEYWORDS

life
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transformation
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therapy
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On 13 May 2014, an explosion at a coal mine in Soma, Turkey, caused an underground mine fire. A total of 787 workers were underground at that time. They waited four days to be rescued, dead or alive, from the deepest and darkest part underground. The Minister of Energy and Natural Resources announced the number of dead at 301, but according to some political figures the number of dead was more than 340. In addition, there were many neglected responsibilities in terms of security and caution.

The Soma disaster happened just two days after the dance/movement therapy module with an existential/depth approach was created. As a group, we created a dance performance with the theme of life/death. In this article, we will describe how we approached the life/death topic, and how the group and our dance impressed each one of us.

In the first section, we examine our collaborative process in discussing the topic and reaching our group theme, 'transformation'. We then describe how we designed our transformation dance performance. In the second section, each of us present what we experienced during the group dance. In the third section, each group member shares thoughts and feelings about the group dynamics and after-effects of our dance. In the fourth section, we briefly discuss our theoretical and philosophical background about the theme.

WHAT IS AN EXISTENTIAL/DEPTH APPROACH TO DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY?

An existential/depth approach to group therapy draws on Irv Yalom's (1980) existential approach and a depth approach drawn from Rollo May (1975) and Carl Jung (in Jung et al. 1953). It explores key concepts such as how the life of a group goes through stages of existential responsibility, and confrontation with mortality, freedom and fate, death and rebirth. Each individual goes through existential choices about commitment, meaning, and joining groups; congruence between verbal and non-verbal expression in groups is a sign of psychological health; participation in a group is a reflection of participation in the family, the community and the larger world; and psychological health means respecting the rights of others while expressing the self. Group participants in dance therapy can experience and learn to revise how they move in relation to others in a group. All participants experience the terror of the blank page or the unformed movement, but follow Rollo May's 'Courage to Create' (1975) with the 'Courage to Move' in the face of the void (Serlin 2012) and commit themselves to live deeply.

EMBODIMENT

The group begins with an orientation to our primary tool: our bodies. Through a method called Kinaesthetic Imagining (Serlin 2014), students learn to increase their kinaesthetic intelligence. They learn to listen to the language of their bodies, to quieten their habitual ways of moving, and find an authentic self that is both an individual and also a group member. Because dance is non-verbal, we use space, energy (force), interpersonal distance, time and movement qualities to create a shared movement vocabulary. This vocabulary gives us a structure to explore individual style, leadership issues, interpersonal dynamics and change over time.

Towards the end of the class, the group chooses a theme to explore and meets in subgroups both in and outside class, and then presents a short performance for the final day of the class. By doing this, students gain experience in collaboration, improvisation and follow-through. They keep journals during the class, noting group process, their own experience in the group,

and themes of images to amplify. This article shows an example of one small group that was exploring the theme of life/death (confrontation with mortality). It shows their journal entries, gives an example of their lived experience, and draws conclusions about the power of an existential/depth approach to movement group psychotherapy.

GROUP IMPROVISATION AND DYNAMICS: FINDING THE COMMON THEME

Our group had two new members: R and T. We started by brainstorming about the life and death topic and came up with a number of ideas. For example, that day was Mothers' Day. D proposed one theme of 'menstruation' in terms of how we see life and death in the menstrual cycle. It was a death of feminine productivity and of motherhood possibility, the death of possibility of giving 'life'. She proposed a second theme, about the transition of the seasons or cycle of day and night, which are like the cycles of life and death. While one season is dying, the other one is rising. The rising of a new day is the death of the day before. The death of yourself brings your birth as an awakened being. R connected to the blossoming of a flower and its dying. F approached the topic in terms of relationships. Every contact gives birth to a relationship, which comes to an end some day. Death is a loss, usually followed by a mourning process. After a relationship comes to an end, a kind of loss and mourning process occurs similar to that of death. E described how a person can continue to be alive after his or her death through his or her creations. Our existence could change its form from our bodies to our creations. L pointed to life stages. For example, when a baby is born, his or her life in the uterus comes to an end. When childhood comes to an end, adolescence starts. Thus, there is no gap between two stages. There is no gap. The moment something begins is also the moment something else finishes. Actually we were all trying to tell the same thing but could not define it in one word. Finally, the word came out: transformation.

AMPLIFYING THE THEMES, CREATING THE DANCE

It was new for our group to design a dance performance. In a very limited time, we tried to move together as R offered a choreography of a flower's blossoming and dying. We lay on the floor in different postures and started to rise slowly. Then we made a circle and acted together, moving in and out of this circle with our arms opening and closing like flowers.

F shared that:

What was hard for me was to move away from these very grounded thoughts and feelings about the theme to a more collective and new discussion. As I was more open to the richness of different thoughts and examples around the theme, such as menstruation, developmental cycles of human, etc. The lack of time to discuss and share on my end influenced my inability to focus the next day. As E and D expressed, 'the concept was still too wide', and we lacked the main plot, but moved with trust in a more free flow of the moment. I brought some materials based on my hunches, and thought that it would be nice to all be together to improvise a bit before and make it more of ours. Having a chance just to sit and stay together for a few minutes before we start the impro would be nice, so that we start with a clearer vision.

D would bring huge black and white scarves for our performance and F would bring some items symbolizing the life and death theme. We wanted to talk about the music that we were going to use, but we did not have the time for it. D said she knew a proper song and would bring it the next day.

E was absent during the movement part. We trusted each other and let the performance dance build itself through the themes inside us. It would be an improvisation dance for our group.

PERFORMANCE

The next day, we were the third and the last performing group. After we observed two very structured impressive dance performances, we felt a little bit anxious about what we were going to perform. However, this made us look into each others' eyes more. This was also the first time we danced as a big 'small group' with our new members. Unfortunately, one of two new members was absent that day because of her attendance at school. Actually, these were transformational days for the group. F brought a candle, a couple of little bowls, water, two little branches of a cherry tree, which is a healing object for herself, and a bit of bread since they were all basic elements of life, which also reminds us of 'dust to dust, ashes to ashes'. D brought the thought of yin and yang duality with two huge black and white scarves.

We put the items on a chair in the centre of a group circle and lit the candles under the chair. D started to play the song. We started to move from the ground level. Some of us were under the white scarf and some were under the black one. The song was a surprise for all except D.

We had some time moving under the scarves. Then we rose up slowly from under them. By letting the free flow continue, each started to move individually. We did not have much physical contact. Some continued to move with the scarves. F poured the water into a bowl. We took the bread and the branches in our hands and passed to the others while dancing.

None of us knew how we would start and where we would finish since we did not have a choreography. It was totally different from what we had tried the day before. But there was a strong energy in our dance expanding through the observers who shared this experience after our performance. F put it in these words:

I enjoyed the sense of being in the flow and creating within the moment and feel the energy flow. [...] As the elements of life were there, the transformation was not clear. But the ritualistic and the mystical tone of the improvisation with that background music was conveying the theme at a certain level, but the lack of a sense of direction sometimes affected our connection.

It took almost ten minutes. Towards to the end, E and T threw the branches to the observers. We were checking each other, trying to keep eye contact. At one moment, we stood next to each other, held hands, moved together for a short time and felt that it was the end. Then we finished our dance. Without saying anything, we were moving in the flow and in a strong connection that we created there. As D said:

I think that we created a beautiful improvisation; there was communication and unity in the improvisation. However, we were far away from

the concept of life and death, and it became more like a dance of offerings (for me). Although I enjoy the communication we develop during the improvisation and we finally gave a dance, we needed to have an agreement in the creation of the dance the day before, simple agreement: topic (idea) how to start, develop and end, and to really create this with the people who were going to be present in the process. So for me it was a presentation in which we connected through improvisation without a common idea. Here we lacked unity and more sharing". E stated that she felt lost in the beginning and let herself move in the flow. A rhythmic movement has been created, then she felt connected to the group.

At first view, it seemed to our group that we could bring our transformation theme to our dance performance by our symbols rather than our movements. (We discussed later how we embodied our theme while dancing.) However, each of us lived the theme during dancing in her body in her own way. E shared that:

As I was dancing to the life and death theme, freezing one moment and moving the other, I realized that when I freeze I can see only one part of the reality; I couldn't see the people behind or out of my sight zone. It translates for me, seeing one side of the reality is death!! That death means all my preconceived ideas, judgements, belief systems, attitudes that inhibit me to move ahead make me stuck. As I shared in our small group, 'we can be dead while we physical are living' as living deads.

E experienced it in this way:

We all born with a certain possibility of death, which makes us scared a lot. With the life elements and in the beginning under the white scarf, dancing from ground level, a story about life and death started to talk to me. As if I was re-experiencing a kind of beautiful, enthusiastic but also painful birth. I was fresh and clean without any hurts, guilts or any bad things. By keeping moving, when I passed to the black one, it was like a death. Despite the death, our dance and the story did not yet finish. Everybody around me were still moving. At that time, F came and offered me that piece of bread. I went out from the black part and started to move with the bread and then with the cherry tree branch. I existed somehow as buried dead bodies transform to a kind of nutrition for a flower, tree or something else. I felt happiness and lightness as if I had just learnt that I would never die. After my friends threw the branches to the observers, it was like we shared the life elements; we contributed them to be given birth as a mother gives a birth to a little human. But this could always keep happening. So, I could not find an end to my story in dance. I looked at my friends; we held each others' hands and finished it.

After the performance, that strong power of connection stayed with us.

REFLECTION: ACTION HERMENEUTICS

The third stage of Kinaesthetic Imagining is meaning-making. Making meaning is an active creative process, and movement helps clarify emotions and images. Using movement to clarify emotions and images is what is called

Action Hermeneutics (Serlin 2014). Continuing to move keeps the meaning vivid, and the group met after the class to continue the Reflection stage.

After the performance, the group met three times. We wanted to talk about the theme and dance one more time because in our minds the performance was not complete, and we had not reached wholeness in terms of choreography and theme. Similarly, we also had missing members in both meetings, so that we could never come together as a six-member whole group.

Two weeks after the improvisation, E, D and F joined the first meeting. Obviously, the newly occurred Soma disaster had touched the life and death process inside us.

I am so deeply touched and sad about all that is happening in Turkey, and 'death and life' is a theme so close in our lives today. Each and every one of us is experiencing how 'life is not valued in as we crave for power, recognition, Money and all material and physical things. Yes, it's the government but we all need to take responsibilities for letting this happen in our country', E said.

Even though none of us in the group had experienced the disaster personally, all of us were following the terrible events happening in our country, and the suffering of the people in Soma, on TV, through social media and the Internet, day and night.

I am also so deeply touched and feel sorry and terrified about all happened in Soma. Not only the disaster or massacre in many ways, but things that happened afterwards have shaken me a lot, as most others would share. Still I feel the pain for those whose bodies are still locked in that darkness in order to hide and cover the real scope of the event and the attitude towards the community who are not allowed to grieve and express their feelings ... there is lot to scream. On death and rebirth theme now, there is so much death around us ... but still need to feel the hope for the rebirth of a new potential life or era, F shared.

D asked us how we embodied the Soma disaster and our transformation dance performance. E answered:

My improvisation dance experience was that we started all at a different place as the different elements of the earth, and then at the end we organically came together like the parts of a body ... for me to become a whole from different parts were very significant. As I am thinking of the theme of life and death, I ask myself what is going to be born now in Turkey after 300 and more are dead in Soma? Are we going to choose life by bringing all our parts together?

In addition to the Soma disaster, R was also experiencing death in her personal life that week. She shared it with us in the meeting after. She had lost her aunt-in-law who had been suffering from an illness for one and one-half years. As R said, she had a strong will to live. That's why she lived longer than what the doctors had expected. And just twenty hours after her death, her grandchild was born. R said, 'I lived both life and death in the same day. It must be a miracle of the creator. I felt both sadness and happiness, hope and

hopelessness, the beginning and the end of life together in the same 24 hour-day. It helped me to become aware of the reality of living'.

Out of dance/movement therapy, it seems that the life and death theme was our major topic today personally, socially and spiritually. We tried to put it in a transformation point of view and fully internalize it. In every meeting we discussed all the materials, theories, approaches and what we experienced from our own perspectives in detail as we tried to reach a common aspect about our transformation dance performance.

With this aim, we wanted to watch our performance on the video to recall and discuss our movements through transformation to embodiment or through embodiment to transformation. Unfortunately, we could watch just ten seconds due to technical limitations. But amazingly, we realized that it was different from what we had remembered. Yes, in the video all of us were moving individually but in the same rhythm, even rising at the same speed at the same levels. The elements, candles, big scarves ... The setting was changing but all of us kept moving in a sustained and very light free flow. None of us had sudden ups and downs or strong movements. We were dancing in a free flow and kept moving.

About our transformation dance performance, what we try to reach for or tell has come through our bodies in the video. 'Keep moving' is how we perceive and approach the transformation concept in a life and death theme. Like our performance, it is transformed into both a living memory in our minds and in many contributions to our bodies and souls. It keeps moving, living, being changed and transformed. 'Early dance celebrated this creation over and over – the creation of seasons and spring and agriculture, of new babies and the stars- of form emerging from chaos, and dissolving into formlessness again, of generation and regeneration, of birth, death and rebirth' (Serlin 1993). Thus, after three meetings, we recognized that it does not have an end. As we come together and think and dance about the theme, we could not reach a conclusion. Because there is no end, it is just the beginning.

DISCUSSION

As Yalom stated in *Existential Psychotherapy* (1980), we are the ones who give meaning to life. We can choose life by making choices and taking responsibility. We have the ability to change our circumstances any moment by making new choices and using our creativity. It is the belief that philosophical thinking begins with the human subject – not merely the thinking subject, but the acting, feeling, living human individual. Each individual is unique and has the potential to reach beyond limits by living in the moment and the future with hands full with all the good and bad things in life.

CONCLUSION

During our recent crisis of life and death with the mines here in Turkey, we were able to experience the existential depths of confronting mortality and finding the freedom to create our own lives.

We were able to do this by learning about nonverbal communication, kinaesthetic intelligence, building trust and group process through rhythmic attunement and trust. We trusted each other to confront our own and group issues, and yet have the courage to create. We created subgroups that further amplified existential themes through movement, ritual and story, and then

performed the themes for each other. This intensified the feelings of death and rebirth, and helped us discover ways to transform ourselves in the process.

The article also emphasizes how the 'courage to move' (Serlin 2012) can facilitate expression and awareness on a deeper level as a part of our transformation process. It functions to remind us to *keep moving since life is movement and also a never-ending journey of transformation*.

The process of an existential/depth approach to movement group psychotherapy can offer a profound way of exploring fundamental human themes such as mortality. During the difficult experiences around us these days of natural and man-made disasters, existential/depth approaches to movement or any other form of group psychotherapy can help build inner strength and resilience.

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