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How is that about You? Alton Wasson and Aileen Crow talk about Witness Projection

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In one of his semi-annual New York workshops, Alton Wasson, co-director of Contemplative Dance with Daphne Lowell, presented an exercise on projection. (1) Alton and his co-facilitator, Eileen Kelly, divided the group, and asked one half to do Authentic Movement for a half hour while the other half witnessed. Each witness watched one particular mover in the other group. After moving, the movers briefly spoke about their experience to the witnesses, who stayed silent.

While the movers stayed in the original room to further explore their experience using art materials, Alton took the witnesses into a separate room beyond earshot of the movers, so the witnesses could speak about what they had seen. He then asked the witnesses, “How is what you just shared about you?” Through his gentle posing of the question, he invited the witnesses to consider the possibility that what was “observed” in the mover’s actions was in some way about them—projections of their own memories, desires, concerns. Later, the two groups exchanged roles.

The next day, in another round of this exercise, Alton had the movers present in the space when the witnesses talked about how what they saw was “about them.” The movers could hear the witnesses own their projections, with Alton’s facilitation.

The following is the talk Alton and Aileen had after the workshop.

Aileen: The very idea of projection is not commonly understood. Clinically, it’s seen as a defense mechanism against dangerous and shameful feelings, and ideas that get disowned and then attributed to others. In our culture, we’ve borrowed from science the ideal that objective observation is the most valuable way to gather information, and that projection should be avoided.

Alton: Quantum physics has begun to teach us about uncertainty, relativity and mystery, so we need to catch up with newer understandings of objectivity.

Perhaps projection can’t be avoided, but it needs to be made conscious so we can learn from it and own it. In my work, I’d like to expand the concept of projection from its narrow use as a defense mechanism to a something much larger. I remember that in *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung talks about projection as an automatic, unconscious process, where something unconscious is transferred to an object, so that it seems to belong to it. But he also says that projection stops the moment it becomes conscious, and is owned. Bringing projections to awareness is an essential aspect of his analytic and therapeutic work.

His study of the origins of collective projections led him to his theory of archetypes—those pan-human, instinctual mythological projections. He saw that embracing the shadow aspects of ourselves that we project onto others can be a way to become more whole, more authentic. He shaped the active imagination process. We practice Active Imagination in the movement work, in the use of art materials, and in the encounters with nature, in order to make our projections conscious. This enables us to move toward wholeness by being more aspects of ourselves.

There is a continuum between perception and projection. We filter and interpret what we perceive all the time. We're drawn to certain things. We select, often unconsciously, what we pay attention to; we see through the lens of our interests, needs, dislikes and memories. Sometimes our perceptions constellate into a projection onto another person of some inner quality or image. This unconscious projective process is at play more often than we realize. Mindfulness of the projective process is something that Jung valued highly, as do I.

Jung says that since the unconscious does the projecting, the conscious self does not create projections but rather meets them. For example, during this exercise, one witness spoke about a movement she saw; she described the mover as a sad child. When I asked how it was about her, she became aware of her own sadness about her childhood. The mover may or may not have been sad during her movement. I asked the witness to imagine being the young child that she had assumed the mover to be, to see how it fit for herself. Realizing how the image of the child resonated with her, she recognized she did not actually know what the mover was experiencing. Another witness described a particular movement he'd seen as beautiful; the question, "How is that about you?" led him to acknowledge and experience his own beauty by applying to himself the words he had used to describe the movement.

So to work with this process, in the Week One Contemplative Dance Workshop (cofounded by Mary Ramsay, Daphne Lowell and myself) we developed the exercise of asking the question, "How is that about you?" Asking this question gives people a foundational process, a small connection with a life-long process—to know that projection is going on, how to be aware of it, and how to own it.

Aileen: . . . to own it as something potentially positive about oneself.

Alton: Yes. We ask the question so that witnesses have a sense of what is going on within themselves . . . not to try to be objective, or figure out what the movers are thinking, or doing, or what it means to them, but simply to be as present as possible to the mover. In so doing, the witnesses activate their own inner witness, noticing what is going on in themselves.

Even when we think we are simply describing the movement as witnesses, we choose and remember according to our own projections. During this weekend, the witnesses didn't give any verbal feedback to the movers. But if we do offer some response as witnesses, we must try to own it as ours so they don't have to take on.

Aileen: . . . my prejudices, my preferences, my history.

Alton: Yes. Then they can differentiate, and do what they want with my story, my sharing, or whatever I observed. There is no greater value in my story than in theirs. Sometimes in our visual culture we think that someone seeing what we did is more valuable than our own experience. This dialogue between one person's subjectivity and another's is valuable. As Kierkegaard said: "Truth is subjectivity." It isn't that objectivity is the truth and subjectivity is invented. We are continually modifying or finding our own way of being in the world; our subjectivity evolves. We're working to find our unique way of being, and that's what we're supporting in other people.

Aileen: Supporting each person's unique way of being, whether as Authentic Movement witnesses, group leaders, teachers, therapists, or as parents, friends and lovers. It's about relationships. I think that came across so clearly on the second day when the movers heard what the witnesses had made of what they had seen, and understood that, "The witness has their own story and I've got my story. Maybe they overlap and maybe not."

Alton: Yes. And whether they match or not, it's all sharing. That is a blessing. You bless me, if you're the mover, by inspiring these things in me, and I can share that with you. I not only saw you, but I was present as support, as a container. But I also had a story that you can do with what you want, as long as you don't think my story is somehow the truth, just because I saw you.

Aileen: "The Truth!"

Alton: We're such a visual culture that we give our power over to how we think other people see us, and that's what I'm trying to get us away from—the idea that what the therapist, or the witness, sees is the greater reality. So it's to give people their power back—including the witness or therapist—so the witnesses don't think they have to remember or know everything.

Aileen: They don't have to be omniscient. I remember witnessing long ago, sitting there thinking, "What am I going to say? I don't know what to say," and planning platitudes to say.

Alton: We are not offering training in witness response in these weekends, but this exercise is a basic step in learning what witnessing is. It started out as a way to protect the mover from whatever witnesses might say. Even though the witnesses are going to process and work with "how is that about me?" themselves, in front of movers, what they say will still have some impact on the movers. It still did have some impact today when we did Round Two, but I think it had a positive impact. The witnesses told their story, their projections, and movers might have thought to themselves, "that wasn't what I experienced, and it made me realize witnesses don't know what I've experienced just because they've seen me." That's the most significant thing. What the witnesses were saying was good for the movers to hear—to realize that the witness is not omniscient.

Aileen: . . . that the witness or group leader, or therapist, is not "God."

Alton: It's just a practice in being present to each other.

Aileen: Watching it happen was just beautiful. Everyone talked about what their projections meant to them personally, and how they felt. It was a profoundly therapeutic experience.

Alton: It is a kind of Active Imagination itself. By seeing, by opening up to your projections, you know that is your own inner material.

Aileen: As witness, you know that your projections are your own inner material.

Alton: Yes. If you're there to support the mover you try to discern what to share, and what not to share. Therapeutic processes make us more mindful of what is going on, so there is more possibility for change. One way to be more mindful of our projections is to use my metaphor of the Chest of Drawers. (2)

We have lenses, patterns of perception and projection we identify with. We think, for example, "My main lens or drawer is emotion and I should just pay attention to that." This is how we often limit ourselves.

Aileen: We do get into habitual ways of interpreting our experiences, when there are so many different ways of sorting what's coming in. Emotions sometimes get labeled ("I'm depressed") and their sensory cues go unobserved and unarticulated—they're wasted.

Alton: Yes, we need metaphors that help us remember that there are many ways of viewing. I actually like the Chest of Drawers metaphor better than that of the lens. I like the Salvador Dali sculpture of a body with drawers up and down the front of it. I prefer the bodily location to that of the lenses, which relate only to the eyes. The drawers are there all the time and can come out on their own.

If my habitual drawer is emotions and I always see emotions, I'll be responding to you based on emotion. There are other drawers such as sensation, story, ritual, archetypes, spiritual, developmental, myth, animals, dreams—all are influencing us all the time, even when we don't consciously pull them out. Active Imagination is really a way of transcending limitations. It's a way to counteract stuckness, so you get to be more of yourself.

Aileen: It's been interesting to me to see how we can benefit from getting information from every sensory channel. I was writing about a troubling relationship the other day, when I stopped and drew a picture of all the parts interacting—a "parts party." There I saw a solution to the problem. I started in Emotion, and switched to Visual and Relationship channels. I could have danced it (Kinesthetic) or made up a song or story about it (Auditory). The sensory channels are like your different drawers, with different kinds of histories and projections in them.

Alton: In each one of them there is a vast world. Rather than stay in one drawer, such as the emotional drawer, there is this movement towards wholeness or individuation. Individuating is a constant ongoing process I'm always excited about. Part of the goal is to be more of myself and to support the movers to be more of themselves.

Another exciting aspect of working with projection is that it's a way of discovering what we're drawn to and what possibilities are within us. It's a way of seeing what we think is possible, imagining it, and moving toward it.

Aileen: And also, uncovering what's positive in what we'd rejected previously can be a great learning tool—finding the "germ of truth."

Alton: Another thing about "my projection of myself" that's kind of tricky, often comes from what people want me to be, or how I want them to see me. I need to address it, and remember that's not me, but what is being projected on me.

Aileen: I get a lot of projections that I'm wonderful because I'm old.

Alton: Yeah, yeah. You're still going! You're alive and lively! Everyone wants to be like you.

Aileen: . . . when they get old. I always find it a bit shocking because I don't feel old. I don't want to refuse their compliment, because I don't want to insult them. I just want them to take their projections for themselves. I want to say, "Let's all be wonderful right *now*!"

Alton: I think it's important as a facilitator, or as a witness, to keep giving the power back. And sometimes it's not so personal. I may not know you, but I've come into a situation where you're my witness, somewhat randomly. Part of my projection on to you in that role is my asking you, "Am I being authentic?"

Aileen: I do decide who and what I think is authentic. And I do keep asking myself, "how do I know?" and, "what are my criteria?" And I ask myself, "how is this about me?" when I start to impose on my clients my desire for them to move in certain ways when it may not be relevant to their needs.

Alton: I was also thinking about the goal of the practice. If it is to show or be authentic for the witness, you could get into all kinds of issues. One time a mover in a peer group jokingly said to the witness, “What do you want to see today”?

Aileen: That’s a good one. “Who do you think you are?” and “what part of you do you think I am?”

Alton: Exactly. (Laughs.) If you’re picking and choosing on whom you are projecting, how authentic can it be? There is a mutuality of I’m serving you, you’re serving me. I don’t want people to think I’m the one that doesn’t need to do Authentic Movement myself anymore, or has done it enough.

Aileen: I do think it’s crucial for the leader to participate, and be seen as being in process like everybody else.

Alton: There’s a mutuality in this practice, and I want to honor it.

Aileen: I’d like to go back to the exercise we did this weekend. It seems magical to me to take the onus off projection and say: “Okay, there is something of value here. This is a skill I want to learn,” and go in that direction. Not to say to oneself, “I shouldn’t be projecting, because it’s something bad about me I don’t want people to know.”

Alton: I agree with that (laughing). And the main skill is to make this unconscious process conscious.

Aileen: With the group of witnesses I was in, Alton, you asked each one to talk about whatever they had seen their mover do, and then go into how that was about them. What I particularly appreciated was that it was so clear in your attitude and voice that you were not going to find fault with anyone over what came out. If there had been any hint that we were going to be criticized or blamed, people—I—would have been uncomfortable. It would have ruined what turned out to be beautiful revelations.

Alton: Thank you, Aileen. This self-reflective process helps us know what is going on inside, and creates a kind of humility in terms of thinking we know what another person is feeling or thinking. It enhances our ability to stay open to the unending ways of being within another person. It’s a pretty simple process.

Aileen: Simple. Accurate. Simplified through intuition and years of rich experience. Thank you so much, Alton. I think we all learned a lot about the benefit of working with our projections.

Alton: Perhaps being bored with others, or with our selves, comes from our lack of imagination and our lack of practicing this endless rich variety found in our larger identities. It enables us to go beyond our usual narrow identity to discover and integrate more of who we are.



Alton Wasson graduated from Yale Divinity School (MDiv, STM) and has been a chaplain at Yale, a professor of Religion and Humanistic Psychology at Prescott College, and a faculty member of the Center for Depth Psychology and Jungian Studies. Introduced to Mary Whitehouse’s work in 1969 by Ed Maupin, in the 70’s and 80’s he continued exploring this work with Janet Adler and Edith Sullwold. He has published essays in *A Moving Journal*, *Contact Quarterly* (Vol. 27/2), and in *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved*, edited by Patricia Pallaro. He taught Contemplative Dance at the first World Somatics

Congress. He leads trips honoring the spirit of place in Italy, Greece and on river trips through the Grand Canyon. He has a private practice.

Alton (with Daphne Lowell) is Co-Director of Contemplative Dance founded in 1989 with Mary Ramsay. They began teaching annual Contemplative Dance summer workshops at Hampshire College, and in 1994 they began offering the Year-Long Programs. With Daphne and Mary he organized the first Authentic Movement Facilitators' Retreat in 1995 and in 2006 the first International Authentic Movement Gathering. He continues offering workshops in Contemplative Dance/Authentic Movement around the country and overseas.



To see Aileen's bio, please see the Journal of Authentic Movement and Somatic Inquiry's opening piece, [Connecting Authentic Movement with Other Practices to Transform Trauma](#). She is presently writing about projection and traumatic flashbacks as related to Authentic Movement.

Endnotes

(1) For further writings about projections and Authentic Movement, see the [AuthenticMovementCommunity Blog](#). On right hand side of the main page, scroll down to: SEARCH THIS BLOG (Google) and enter "projections."

(2) See Alton's chapter, "Witnessing and the Chest of Drawers," in Patrizia Pallaro's *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved*.

References

Pallaro, Patrizia, ed. *Authentic Movement: Moving the Body, Moving the Self, Being Moved*. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishing Co., 2007.

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kathy chowanec says:

2012/01/07 at 3:45 pm

wow, wonderful! such great exchange of skills to support ownership of Self. thank you so much for sharing this conversation!
i will share it with others.

[Reply](#)



Sally Jenkins *says:*

2012/01/08 at 12:27 pm

Fascinating article — shed some light on authentic movement for me — interested in learning more

[Reply](#)



Irina Harris *says:*

2012/01/08 at 4:47 pm

Thank you both so much. I've been doing some Authentic Movement with Focusing. Interesting to think about the similarities and differences.

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