

Enhancing the Grace

An Interview with Alton Wasson

By Annie Geissinger

Alton Wasson has been teaching Contemplative Dance/Authentic Movement for over 20 years. His interests in religion, psychology, and body practices have led in myriad and intertwined directions. An ordained Methodist minister, he has been a chaplain at Yale University and a professor of Religion and Humanistic Psychology. He studied Theravadin Buddhist meditation and has taught Jungian Studies and Depth Psychology. In this interview, he discusses the connections between Authentic Movement and his Christian theology and practice.

Annie: I'm interested in how you connect religious practice with your work with Authentic Movement. Since Jung's theory of Active Imagination is what underpins your work, would you speak about how you see religious practice in relation to Active Imagination?

Alton: Active Imagination was something Jung discovered—or rediscovered—and then developed for his own healing after his break with Freud. He used drawing, sand play by the lake, stone carving, and other media to let his unconscious material find form that could mirror back to him. He made incredible books, drawing his inner guides and other characters that would emerge. A lot of his religious struggles came up in this process and got worked through there. Active Imagination is a psychological practice that crosses over into religious realms. Marie-Louise Von Franz, another depth psychologist, called it "a new form of one of the oldest forms of religion in the sense of giving careful consideration to the numinous powers." Mary Whitehouse described Active Imagination as "Jung's term for a process in which, while consciousness looks on, participating but not directing, cooperating but not choosing, the unconscious is allowed to speak whatever and however it likes." (Pallaro, 1999, p. 83)

Since it had been so helpful for him, Jung offered Active Imagination to his patients as a way to enhance their capacity to transcend a narrow view of an issue, to move beyond an "either/or" to a "both/and." By activating the imagination through the use of various expressive media, one enhances this capacity and transcends a limited view to a more poetic and artful holding of life's difficulties and life's bounties.

Active Imagination has a history through Jung, but it also has a broader history; something like it is practiced in a lot of cultures as an opening to unconscious material, altering states, or to a transformation that comes from the spirits, from God, from the whole Self, from something transcendent. The everyday self, the ego, has to give up its presumed dominance. So I see Authentic Movement as a form of Active Imagination.

Religious practices in many cultures are often designed just for that purpose. Some more ancient,

archetypal story is enacted so that one can shift from the everyday ego self to other parts of the self, or parts of the world. This expanded perspective can then be expressed and dialogued with. We can connect with the edges of this larger self, with things that are transcendent, numinous: the mystery.

But unless these practices are grounded in the body and connected to the earth—and Jung said this very specifically about the body and the earth—then they don't have the grounding that allows us to integrate them into everyday life. The practice of Authentic Movement helps me embody and experience more directly in my religious life. When I first learned it, the practice really "hit it on the head" for me because it was of the body, it was relational, and it was in community.

Annie: Can you say more about what you mean by "grounding"?

Alton: We're talking about a serious, potent process, or as Von Franz called it, "a form of play, but a bloody serious one." We're invoking these energies, and we've got to embody them somehow; we've got to give them some form. The form then makes it possible for us to dialogue between our everyday selves and those different parts, which we're not normally including. These three steps—the invoking, the embodying, and the dialoguing—lead to a fourth step, what Jung calls an *ethical obligation*: to take it into our lives. When we invoke this powerful numinous material, we have an obligation to honor it by seeing it continue to unfold, seeing how it plays out in everyday life.

For me, that's exactly what religious practices do. They invite us to connect with the world, nature, God, the community, or ancient traditions; practices, and stories. We can then move beyond ourselves in order to enrich and influence ourselves so that we have a way to be more than we usually are, a way of growing, healing, being attentive and compassionate.

Annie: So in your view, religious practice supports this process of Active Imagination, and vice versa.

Alton: Yes, I think so.

I understand there's a difference between spiritual practices that might be devoid of a context, or taken out of a cultural or religious context, and practices that are still connected or intentionally connected, that have a purpose within a specific religious community. It's easy to say that certain practices are valuable outside of a religious context and throw the religious connections out—or the roots that they came from. But this may be throwing the baby out with the bath water. I see the baby as the connections to the community, or the roots. I see them as having some value. And if we only keep the practices without recognizing where they come from, then we are probably missing some of that richness. It doesn't mean we have to become a member of that religious community in order to do the practice. However, staying connected to our own roots may give us more access to the meaning of a practice that comes from a different context or culture. Staying connected means knowing some of the history of one's own religion, its culture, and its practices, as well as being open to its meanings. William Sloane Coffin said, "We have both to recover tradition and to recover from it." (Coffin, 2005, p. 63)

Annie: That's a very different perspective for me. Though I was brought up in a church, I didn't make a meaningful connection to my own spirituality there. It was only later, in a very different cultural context, that I made a connection.

Alton: To some extent, I found the same thing. It took looking at other religions and consciousness of other practices to see the ones I was already doing, or to look further in the Judeo-Christian culture for mystical or bodily practices. I reasoned there must be something in my religion that has to do with breath or body or the senses. Until I learned a meditative practice from another culture (Vipassana), which included the breath and the body, this still didn't have that richness for me. Seeing it from the outside helped me appreciate the practices that I had done in the Methodist church: singing, communion, prayer, community gathering, and social service out of a commitment to love and compassion.

I encountered teachings from the Buddhist Theravadin tradition, which were very different from my Christian background. These teachings were not about focusing on the self or on God, but on awareness,

consciousness of each moment, each sensation, and the ever-changingness of this, so as not to be attached. Rather than being theologically oriented, or belief oriented, these teachings focus on practice.

I wrote my Divinity School (STM) thesis about several different meditative practices, Eastern and Western, that led me to a variety of experiences, all the way from calming myself, finding some peace from anxiety, to unitive consciousness. I loved these practices, but the goal was different from that of my religious roots. It made me look at regular church services

in a different way. It made me ask, "What are these practices which I do every Sunday? What are the parts of the liturgy? What are the rituals that resonate with different parts of my life or which point to different qualities of God?" Experiencing *all those qualities of God* reflected in one service, one community celebration, was suddenly wonderful to me. It didn't just focus on redemption, or love; it had a whole range of ways that people experience the divine.

And I recognized that these qualities are also a range of ways that I experience myself. I began to reflect on how I relate to the creation, how I relate to nature, how I relate to my own inner critic, inner judge. So some of those qualities were revealed in the

very tradition that I had found boring.

For me, one of the basic things in Christianity and in the Buddhist work I've done is the compassion, the love. How do I access that? How do I take that into my everyday life? So if I experience myself finding it easy to be judgmental about other people, it might be because I am doing that to myself. How does the practice allow me to find nuances of how compassion might work? Authentic Movement helped me learn to witness, to be present, embracing the person just as he or she is. My religious upbringing and the whole culture set up a critical way of looking at other people, evaluating other people. And how do you ease off on that and love your neighbor as yourself? Loving myself wasn't that easy either. (laughs)

I learned about the Mary Whitehouse work in 1969, before it was even called Authentic Movement, when I think she was calling it "Movement-in-Depth." The teacher who shared that with me offered it as a practice which he described as "your own Tai Chi or your own yoga." (Yoga is also a religious practice—in the West,



sometimes we think of it as exercise—but yoga is very much about yoking the body and the spirit.) At that time, because of the moralism and literalism I had experienced with religion growing up, I felt the need to find self-authority—not just my own ego autonomy or ego authority. I wanted to find the part of me that had natural authority. So I sought practices to find access to *that* sense of small “s” self, and I found that kind of authority in the Jungian notion of capital “S” Self. Authentic Movement offered me not only a practice for being compassionate, for embracing others in a non-judgmental kind of acceptance, but also that sense of Self-authority: my own yoga, my own religious practice, my own ritual.

Often an Authentic Movement session might be intentionally focused on something in us that needs to be held. So we make a kind of ritual, a safe place for what needs to take place. For me, all these rituals and practices parallel, and sometimes exactly merge with, religious practices. I’ve even had people recently say to me that Contemplative Dance or Authentic Movement is just like prayer. For me, being with this community of movers is like being in a religious community. It definitely opens to that sense of Self-authority of each individual. People might have their own mystical experience, or experience of the divine, or experience of interpersonal relationship that is like the kind you hope to have in a religious community. And it’s nonhierarchical—it is not about having to be “one way.” It’s a context in which people can connect with their own divinity, or God, or nature. Yet the same kinds of distortions can take place in Authentic Movement circles as in religious communities: spiritual materialism, hierarchies, valuing some experiences more than others, giving one’s power away to others.

During a retreat at Esalen, our facilitator led us through the story of the Garden of Eden in a very embodied, imagined way. All the many times I’ve heard that story, I was never invited to *experience* it—in fact, it was almost forbidden. But this time we were encouraged to *go there* and experience: What do you see there? What’s the smell? What’s the sensory experience? It was quite powerful, because scriptures, like ritual, are often placed out of our reach. There are Church traditions in which the direct experience of God and the interpretation of the scriptures are denied to people.

But I think in the truest sense, religion tries to celebrate all the different aspects of life that we encounter. How do we embrace them and how do we practice? For me, practice is creating an embracing attitude toward life as it comes to us. And for me, Contemplative Dance/ Authentic Movement is also a practice of embracing whatever comes up, of somebody being there for us, of being there ourselves through our own inner witness or our whole Self.

Annie: To allow what comes up to be present.

Alton: Yes, to allow it to be present, and thereby transformed. For example, we can feel that sadness is fine—we don’t have to fix it, we can just be there with ourselves or another person in tears. Some people say that just by moving the body and revisiting imaginatively a difficult experience, it becomes transformed. The difficulty or sadness is acknowledged as a part of life, a part of reality, and is celebrated and accepted. Then we can go from there. We can keep it in denial—and sometimes denial is important for survival—but eventually there’s something that needs to be included, something in all of us that needs to be included.

Annie: Well, that’s a very integrated vision. I have images of being in church, particularly certain aspects of the service that I have a difficulty with, and then I have images of the work in the studio. And these two images seem very separate, very apart, in my experience. And as you’re speaking, I hear more clearly how they may come together, or be similar . . .

Alton: I think some of the disconnections between these two experiences come from ideas around power. The idea that “somebody knows the answer, somebody is the expert, and so I don’t really have access”—that’s been writ large in the Church and in all religions. This question of power can be thought of in terms of therapeutic transference and the client taking back the power. Often the “taking back” part doesn’t happen. This question comes up for me in my role as a minister. I don’t want people to give me the kind of power they usually give people in this role.

Annie: Because the authority is transferred to you, as the minister?

Alton: That’s right. Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig, in his book *Power in the Helping Professions*, talks about how we split the archetype: client/therapist, witness/mover, minister/parishioner, healer/wounded. They are really one single archetype; we’re in both of those, and both of those are in us. For me, what keeps this archetype from being split is a constant practice of being present to what is going on in the movement and in the witnessing. And when I do therapeutic work or do ministerial kinds of celebrations, I am always interested in how to empower the people to express what’s coming out of them as individuals or as a community.

Even in Authentic Movement practice, sometimes people want to split that archetype—for example, to act as if the witness really does see all that’s going on, rather than the witness having his or her own experience. As a facilitator, it is important to me to make sure people know that I am a mover, even though I might be facilitating a workshop. At some point, I always move so that participants know I do both sides of this prac-

tice. To say to people I'm facilitating, "I don't have the power to teach you everything about this; I'm learning it myself, we're learning it together," is a very important part of the work as well as part of any religious ceremony that I facilitate or any counseling relationship. For me, it's uppermost in my heart about how to make these things *not* about giving away your power—that your selfhood is *not* lessened by these practices.

Annie: This question of authority feels very important. In my experience of Church, the question of authority gets raised with the emphasis on *belief*. To be told what to believe seems to be a powerful imposition onto my authority. If someone can tell you what to *believe*, can that really be belief? If that is so, then what *is* belief?

Alton: Or if somebody says, you have to believe all of this to be part of the group . . .

Annie: Yes . . . or to be *saved*.

Alton: To be part of the *next* group . . . (laughs) yeah, that's a big threat—and certainly I was raised with *all* that. For me, it's the wrong question, the wrong emphasis. Jung said that when people asked, "Do you believe in God?" he said, "I *experience* God."

There's the whole distorted tradition in which, as an ordinary religious practitioner, you don't get to have the experiences—as if to say, "We have it, or it's already been had, you don't get to have the experience."

Annie: Because we already did it.

Alton: Already did it. Or it's already been done.

Annie: Yes, I think of the Nicene Creed, for example. It was composed long ago, and now all we have to do is recite it.

Alton: As if that were a way to appropriate it within yourself. It takes a certain kind of "group think" to think that would work.

It's similar to the way I work in diversity in corporations. People will say, "We've already done diversity" or "We're already diverse." They don't get that the *experience* of being inclusive, or of being included, is the important thing. They think it has to do with numbers, or they think that just knowing diversity exists is enough. But how to actually *communicate* it, *create* it in the culture, in the community, is a practice, as opposed to a goal.

Annie: A few years ago, I was asked to be involved with an Episcopal church—which happens to be the denomination I was baptized and confirmed in—as a drumming group leader, to play during some services. And this definitely contradicts some of my earlier experiences—as a child I would never have been allowed to drum in church!

Alton: (laughs) You're being asked to do the very thing that you thought was not acceptable.

Annie: And now it's acceptable! As you can imagine, it's meaningful for me to enter a church community that accepts this part of myself that would previously have been unacceptable. Yet there are still parts of the service that I can't join in with.

Alton: You don't have to sign that dotted line, right? You can just participate wherever you can.

Annie: Yes, that's true in a way. But it reminds me that last year on Easter, when my group was drumming for the service, I was introduced to the bishop, who said to me, "Oh, you're the drummer, oh, wonderful! And are you a member?" I was briefly speechless. (laughs) I had no idea how to truthfully answer, so I just said, "Yes." But afterward, I had this terrible feeling, the little kid in me was filled with dread at the thought, "*Oh no*, did I just *lie* to the bishop on Easter?" (laughs)

Alton: Or did I just tell the *truth* to the Bishop? (laughs) That's lovely.

The whole question of membership—it's splitting the archetype again: I'm the one who's in; you're the one who's out. Yes, it seems that the Church's religious practices have been very circumscribed. Any time you have to do something different if you're not a member—to me that is counter to the actual practice.

Annie: I have never been able to answer this question of belief, of joining up. But I realize at one point that what I liked about the services were the most embodied parts—drumming, and singing, being part of the community—and also some of the prayers. The rest I try to just let be. When I'm at a church service, I have a singing practice, a drumming practice, and then a practice of letting a lot go. There's also a question of coming to terms with a certain identity, because I was raised in this tradition.

Alton: You *are* a member! (laughs) Is it like saying you're not American?

Annie: Right.

Alton: It's part of your identity, even though you've expanded. And that would be the sense of owning the roots. You can't cut them off, not really, not in the Jungian sense. You can never get rid of them; they will never *not* be there. Jung didn't say not to learn from other religions; but he was saying that you might want to look into your own tradition, because there's power in there, there are resources in there, in spite of all the problems with it.

For me, it's a great practice to be in a traditional role connected to the roots but not be caught in it. It's hard when you have all these robes on. It goes back to the split archetype: If you don't have beginner's mind, you can easily set yourself up—"I'm the witness, I'm the one who knows something, I'm the one who can do it for you."

This situation today, where I'm being interviewed, would be another example: I don't want people to view my ideas as the answer for themselves. And in terms of our relationship, you're asking me to be the interviewee; but I also want to include your experience. I don't want this interview to be an example of being authoritarian.

Annie: I don't experience you as authoritarian. I appreciate hearing the breadth of integration that you experience with your religious and your movement/witnessing practices. Especially as these questions are ones I've been working with, I experience what you are saying as somewhat surprising—and hopeful.

Alton: It occurs to me that your questions, your struggle with this, are very individual; and yet they are very much part of the culture right now. When I see people looking for practices like Authentic Movement, or trying to get the Church to change, or are just leaving it, this is an authentic longing for religion to be real. That's part of the story that I share, too. I've spent a lot of effort, time, and energy with these questions. It reflects on the institutions of our society, on the way our society's values are set up. They make us move away from our own authority, from the authority of our bodies. And Authentic Movement practice is something we value so much. How do we get it out to people?

Because there's the other extreme in the culture of literalism, fundamentalism, and moralism that are now rearing their heads so powerfully. It's the opposite of Self-authority and produces human beings, citizens, who do not enhance democracy. So it's not as though religious practices are only personal; they're shaping our country in a particular way that I think makes it even harder for us to find practices such as Authentic Movement or Active Imagination affirmed.

Annie: Could you speak about Christian practices that go beyond this kind of fundamentalism?

Alton: Theology can be a religious practice—not so much to fix belief, as the fundamentalists do, but to get experientially involved in the kind of thinking, the kind of intelligent grappling with the question of what is the divine. People sometimes still have God sitting on a throne with a white beard. Lots of people may say, "Oh, of course, that's bunk, I'm throwing that out." So if they don't believe in that form of God, they think they're atheists and don't allow themselves to experience God in other ways. In my work with spiritual counseling or therapy, which are inner processes, I see theology as a way of understanding how we hold a connection with our spiritual life. It includes nature, which historically got thrown out with the body. How



—Leslie Sweetnam

do you include the worship of nature and honoring the creation as religious practices? They're just as powerful a form of Active Imagination, of worship or prayer, as anything else because they invoke parts of yourself that you've forgotten or you thought you weren't supposed to connect with.

This comes from Paul Tillich, whom I read in theology school. Just one article he wrote changed my whole perspective: "You Are Accepted" from *The Shaking of the Foundations*. He was saying that sin is not all these little things we do or don't do wrong; it's more like an existential state that's about separation. The opposite of sin is being willing to accept or recognize those moments of grace and the unity—when the separation's no longer there—that comes in. How do we become conscious of that separation so that we can move toward and accept the grace that's built into the world, so that we know, almost by definition, that we are accepted? There is more grace abounding in the world than sin, according to Tillich. The practices that we develop would be to recognize that grace and to learn to accept our acceptance.

Authentic Movement includes noticing and experiencing that we are accepted. It's my experience that even though there are a lot of terrible things, if we are open to the grace, we can notice where grace comes in. It's not that we don't stay conscious of the separation, the sin, where it happens; it's just that we're as conscious as we can be of it and let this other possibility, this unifying grace, happen.

Annie: This is a beautiful phrase to me: "accepting your acceptance."

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Alton: Right, that's the heart of it. And Authentic Movement practice keeps coming back to that. Because here's the witness, the outer witness, accepting us, practicing acceptance, accepting themselves as well, practicing that. So the setup is that it's an accepting, nonjudgmental, compassionate role: a practice. As a mover, we can transfer the acceptance onto the outer witness or take it back into our own inner witness. Yet if we don't accept that God (or our witness, or our inner witness) is accepting, loving, forgiving, even if there's grace pouring in from the witness, the whole community, or the way the universe is, then we don't appropriate it. We don't know how to experience it. And our inner judge, our inner critic, keeps clamping down on us, telling us we're not doing it right, or that we aren't good enough, to be accepted. Doing it right, however, is irrelevant. Theologically, it is a move from "works righteousness" to a sense of being accepted, which is grace.

There is grace abounding in the world that we can participate in, that we can perpetuate, that we can enhance by this simple practice.○

Alton Wasson, MDiv, STM, founded Contemplative Dance Workshops and Trainings with Daphne Lowell and Mary Ramsay. He has a private counseling practice and consults with corporations and educational institutions on diversity and holistic education. He leads trips honoring the spirit of place in Italy, Greece, and the Grand Canyon. An article of his will appear in a forthcoming volume of essays on Authentic Movement, edited by Patrizia Pallaro. For further info, see www.contemplativedance.org

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