

What is Contemplative Dance? - Tiffany Sankary interviews Alton Wasson

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Time: 24:51 minutes

T: "So what is Contemplative Dance or Authentic Movement? I know that you think of them as being the same practice."

A: "For me, it's a practice that is, that has a lot of different ways of supporting us. And I think about it as a kind of invocation of creative resources. And I think of it as something that is a spiritual practice. I think of it as something that works with our psychological narrative and lets it unfold in unique and powerful ways. And it really is a version of Active Imagination, what Jung talks about as Active Imagination, which is a way of inviting unconscious material to manifest through some art expressive medium. For me, using and having the body, our selves as body, invited into that, along with any kind of other expression, is most potent for me because it was very much in the shadow - my self as body - was very much in the shadow for many years. I was very into my head and thought. Nothing wrong with that but somehow that, with a lot of energy when I first started doing this practice because it was a way of creating a safe space and allowing me to be still or move and see what comes up. And a lot of times what came up were memories or just an interest in sensation, an interest, sometimes, in dreams, or just an emotion or a feeling. So there are a lot of different things that came up for me that wouldn't have come up for me just in thinking about it or talking therapy or any other kind of expression. So that energy that was released by paying attention to the body was very exciting for me.

When I started doing this practice, I guess it was 42, 43 years ago now, it was, and then again along the way, it was something that was, that just made me happy, made me happy to have found something that was that rich for me. And yet it built upon other practices that I had done, contemplative practices, because it does invite the inner witness to be there for myself, in addition to an outer witness, which is a very supportive and non-judging, accepting, compassionate external person that witnesses me as I move, when that happens. And yet that models for me and invites in me an inner witness that has that same kind of attitude toward myself - accepting, non-judging, compassion - for whatever I am, however I move, whatever is emerging. And it's very similar to a contemplative mindfulness practice, other things that I do, vipasana, and other kinds of simple practices that connect with what's going on in our selves as body and let's us bring it to consciousness and bring it to mindfulness and integrate it into our every day life. So it's just a simple practice that's creating a safe space with myself or with other people and letting a short period of time, usually 15 minutes or 20 minutes, be there for whoever in the group wants to explore in that time and explore whatever they want to explore for that time and discover whatever they discover about themselves and about their own inner imagination, sensation, qualities, emotions, whatever is coming up for them."

(5:00)

T: "Can you say a little about the actual, the structure of the practice?"

A: "Well, as I said, there is often, usually, an external witness and a mover. The mover is invited to just pay attention to what is going on for themselves. They're not doing anything for the witness; the witness is just there honoring whatever is going on for that person or those persons. They're given a specific amount of time for this exploration; a number of safety agreements that are about how to take care of yourself, how to take care of the room and other people, so that no one gets hurt as they are moving, usually with their eyes closed. Your eyes don't have to be closed but we do that for confidentiality so that people are not watching other people or seeing other people and thinking that somebody else knows how to do this because each person's way of doing it is what is valued, is what is invited here. So that then the person in that time can move or be still and the movement can be just simple stretching. It can be exploring a dream. It can be waiting for a movement, waiting to be moved in a way, sometimes that's a powerful thing that happens, that you're not trying to make something happen and just something emerges. Any of that range is possible and invited."

(7:00)

T: "What's the relationship between Authentic Movement and creativity?"

A: "One of the things that happens after that movement session, is that then we see how that material might be continued to be explored through other media, other art media, or choreography sometimes, or writing. And a lot of times what comes out of there, since it's usually raw material, raw images or gestures or explorations, then to let them flow into some other medium, it catches a kind of, not just rawness, but vibrancy, newness, vitality, that is right out of the person's, I think of it as sort of their larger Self. So the creativity is not something you can make happen or try to force it to happen but somehow the allowing that takes place or the honoring or the releasing of the Active Imagination enables people to – 'produce' is not quite the right word – but explore in different media in ways that are more creative, sometimes, than just saying 'I'm gonna make this happen' because it's that kind of rich material from in our selves that's connected to possibly other people that are there or something, sometimes we work in nature and move in nature and that produces the kind of, a different connection than just our every day self because it's a special situation and it's very much about saying this is something that I'm paying attention to, that I'm going to investigate further and integrate it into who I am."

(9:25)

T: "Can you say more about Active Imagination?"

A: "The Active Imagination is what Jung discovered really after he broke with Freud. He was very distraught and very upset about that sort of disconnection with his mentor, but it was a kind of differentiation and an important one for him, but it was very difficult for him. And so he started using mainly drawing and writing and other expressive media, sometimes Sand Play was one of the ways – it wasn't even called that, it was just playing on the side of the beach with stones but remembering and

recreating scenes, one of the important ones was from a dream that got manifest in playing with sticks and stones – that enabled him to reconnect with part of himself and have it be in a story before him that he was then able to move forward. And he used a whole, did a whole *Red Book*, which was his drawings and writings and explorations of this material that was coming up in the state that he was in, and I would say they were kind of altering states, sometimes agitated states and yet he was able to transform that...

One of the things that he discovered was something called the ‘transcendent function.’ And he felt that in our psyche there are ways that we always move from an either/or to a both/and. And the either/or would be like, ‘Who’s in charge here: the unconscious or the conscious self.’ And he saw in his patients that people were always fighting with that, you had that set up as an either/or, that there was a fight going on; who’s going to win? And he saw that in the practice of Active Imagination it was a both/and, that both of those are important and the flow between them and the inviting rather than repressing or putting down the unconscious material, that it can be in our every day life, and it can be exciting and produce creativity. It can produce integration. His word was ‘individuation.’ So that it became a way for more of our individual wholeness to manifest rather than thinking I should really be more like somebody else. His idea was to be more yourself - that was the goal of healing and wholeness. That’s what he worked on for a number of years in this *Red Book* that just got published after decades of sitting in a vault somewhere, was this very careful reintegration of all this material he connected with. In his imagination there were guides that helped him, there were different kinds of scenarios and storylines and different kinds of ways of writing and different voices and different explorations of...

One of the things he was interested in was how humans all around the world had certain symbols or certain images that were similar. And he wasn’t saying... he was just interested in how they appear in our humanness, in our imagination, in our rituals. He wasn’t trying to say we’re all the same or all have everything the same, but that there were threads that connect us and one of which was the circle, the mandala, that he thought that was for most people a kind of image or symbol of wholeness that would bring the different parts of ourselves, another kind of both/and or many/and, to be more balanced or be more integrated. So that rather than identifying with just the ego or one small aspect of ourselves, we would say there are many aspects and how to both honor that multiplicity but also get to know different parts of ourselves and begin to identify with more of ourselves. He was using Active Imagination and eventually used it with his, offered it to his patients and to the world in a way, because there are many different practices that are just kind of entering into and inviting Active Imagination.

I think of it as, partially from what he’s written and other Jungians, is five different stages of Active Imagination. The first one is to invite and invoke unconscious material by setting up some safe situations for exploring through expressive media whatever comes up. The second aspect of it is to embody it, to give it some kind of form, put it in, play with a medium. The third one is to have some kind of dialogue between the every day self and whatever these images are, characters, or figures or monsters, or dream images, whatever they might be. To get to know them better,

know the different sides, or become them and have them in conversation. And the fourth one he thought was very important because he felt that you shouldn't invite Active Imagination unless you were willing to honor it, to have some exploration of how to live it, how to take it back into your every day life, rather than just either getting high or excited or low or whatever from a session or a workshop, to say, okay, each part of this is very important, this *is* part of me, how do I integrate it or take it back into my every day life. And then the fifth stage of Active Imagination is some kind of marking or ritual to say that this was an important time. It could be just a simple ringing of a bell or lighting of a candle or something that just gave it that kind of a small ritual that would say, yeah, this was important to me and I want to value it and work with it."

(17:05)

T: "What's one of the most interesting things about teaching this work; what has you keep teaching this work?"

A: "Well, for me it's such a simple practice and it's something that when I have offered it to people, and when I continue to offer it people, transformation takes place. People give themselves, I don't think of myself as giving them, I just set this simple safe space, simple practice, and amazing things happen. I just like to witness that and support that and rejoice in that. Because...I've tried other, I've worked with other kinds of therapeutic practices and other things that were exciting to me. Usually they had more of me, sort of interventions that were from me, whereas this seems like it's setting up so that you can do your own interventions or find ways that keep allowing that unfolding, that I don't have to use any pressure. It really is continually saying, you know, don't push anything, just allow and it will come in its own time. It's very much a caring for each person's way so that it isn't the usual sense of intervention or pushing or pressure. For me, that's really the goal because I want to give the, I don't want to take power from people, I want to, if it's something I'm doing they might say you're doing a great job of facilitating or whatever, but I'm always wanting to say well this came out of you and you need to have that reminder that you have that potential, you have that way of healing yourself or empowering yourself or producing some kind of growth and transformation. To me that is an exciting thing because it isn't, I don't, I mean I take responsibility for creating that space, and yet I always feel like it's better, when I do that, when I practice it, it's much better if it comes from me when I'm the mover. It's much better that it comes from you or from each person because then they know that it's not something external it's like my own larger Self offering this to myself, to my every day self. It's saying, here, this is my gift to you, but it's your gift to yourself. That's why I love to teach, to facilitate it and go around offering chances to do that. Right!?"

(20:38)

T: "How has it impacted your own life, your own personal imaginations, the work, if you do it? "

A: “Well, I feel along those same lines, I feel that – well, I think that the idea of the inner critic should probably come in here because that was very important and very influential, a kind of moralism that was taught to me that you had to be right or good and if you’re not you should feel guilty and bad and so somehow this idea that there are a lot of possibilities within ourselves and the inner critic is well educated by everything that is out there, how we should be and look, and to find a way to have some aspect of myself that is an inner witness that says this is how you are and it’s not about making everything perfect or right by some narrowly defined black and white rules. It’s about discovering. It’s about being curious. It’s about trying out different ways of being myself and not thinking that there’s only one way of being me; there is a rich multiplicity. And so that that changed, this and other practices, changed me from thinking it was about a kind of moralism... which was usually defined by how other people told me to be or thought I should be or by different institutions the way they were set up to make you think you’re supposed to be a certain way, but to say what you’re really, what I really want to do or support in myself and others is to find they’re unique way of being.

So that’s a basic change both in terms of how I am with myself and also how I am, how I want to be with other people. The practice itself makes it, something about the setup or something about the, I don’t know if it’s the theory behind it, but the invitations in it are to keep supporting that in other people. So it makes it easier for me to be compassionate and accepting of other people because that’s what the practice is. And so that then does manifest in my every day life that, you know, I do remember that’s the way I want to be in my other relationships outside of the practice. I mean, if it didn’t transfer at all that would be a shame, it wouldn’t be maybe worth doing, but when I do, I find that kind of compassion, you know really, that’s a basic goal in my life, so to find some practice that enhances that is and was a real boon.”

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