

# Embodied Wisdom: The Dance of Three

Tina Stromsted

## ABSTRACT

Authentic Movement, also known as “active imagination in movement,” is a simple yet powerful meditative and therapeutic approach that bridges body, psyche, spirit, and relationship through expressive movement and reflective witnessing. Through the practice, participants can deepen their ability to be present with themselves and with another in a more vital, increasingly conscious relationship. The practice invites a level of perception of self and other that can evoke deep respect and empathy. Allowing natural movement to emerge within a safe, relational space, the experience may bring further visibility and form to emotions, developmental elements, and qualities that may have been previously repressed or unformed in the person’s life. This can provide a pathway toward wholeness – living a more soulful life. This workshop focused on *The Dance of Three*, a further application of Authentic Movement developed by Jungian analyst Marion Woodman, dancer Mary Hamilton, and voice teacher Ann Skinner in their BodySoul Rhythms® approach. A long-time practitioner and teacher of Authentic Movement and of Marion Woodman’s BodySoul Rhythms® work, the author reflects on how these practices help develop the embodied consciousness that is fundamental for healing our relations with self, other, and with the natural world.

**Keywords:** Dance of Three, Authentic Movement, Active Imagination, Marion Woodman, witnessing, embodied consciousness

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Our bodies and dreams may be our closest links to the unconscious, expressing the soul’s longing through image, breath, gesture, the rhythm of our step, and the music of our speech. Movement that emerges from a genuine source within us, when made conscious and integrated into lived experience, is by its very nature transformative.

## Authentic Movement

Before diving into the inner workings of *The Dance of Three*, some information about Authentic Movement provides a necessary foundation for this approach.

Active imagination, a self-guided method for contacting the unconscious developed by C. G. Jung, is the psychological underpinning of Authentic Movement. Authentic Movement was originated by Mary Starks Whitehouse when she integrated her dance experience and training with German modern dancer Mary Wigman and myth-inspired dancer and choreographer Martha Graham with her studies at the Zurich Jung Institute. A modern dancer and pioneer in the field of dance/movement therapy, Whitehouse returned to California to explore a particular form of active imagination through movement. She worked with dancers and people interested in personal growth from the 1950s until her death in 1979 (Stromsted, 2009a).

Also called “movement in depth” and “active imagination in movement,” this approach invites a descent into the inner world of the

***The body is the visibility of the soul, the psyche: and the soul is the psychological experience of the body. So it is really one and the same thing.***

C. G. Jung

psyche through natural movement, and can be practiced in individual and group settings. The mover/client closes their eyes, waits, and then, witnessed by their therapist/witness, moves in response to bodily-felt sensations, emotions, memories, movement impulses, or images. The witness provides a safe, contained, and receptive presence, maintaining an awareness of their mover's bodily expression as well as their own embodied experience. Through its incorporation of expressive movement and other creative media, Authentic Movement evokes and facilitates the integration of unconscious material as it arises in the body (Stromsted, 2009b).

After the movement session, creative self-expression, such as writing or drawing, anchors the mover's experience, which they can then share with their witness. The witness responds to the mover's expression of the physical, emotional, and imaginal elements of their journey without judgment or interpretation. Describing specific movements they observed, the witness may share sensations, images, and feelings that arose in them as they brought their attention to the mover's experience. The witness's empathic mirroring helps the mover remember and reflect on movements arising from their unconscious. "Shadow" (Jung, 1916, para 193) aspects and dreams may emerge – repressed emotions, primordial instincts, or forgotten images.

The process serves to widen the field of consciousness through confrontation with previously denied or unconscious contents, which can then be further explored and integrated (Stromsted, 2009b, p. 202). Early developmental trauma and/or subsequent wounding can also be sensitively explored, renegotiated, and moved toward repair in the context of a safe relationship.

Transpersonal experiences may also emerge – a spirited, archetypal energy that springs from the deeper layers of the Self (Jung, 1944, para. 44). These moments are often characterized by a sense of resonance within and between the mover and the witness. When this occurs, each can experience transformative shifts, as the boundaries of time and space, "self" and "other" begin to soften. This allows for the possibility of experiencing a sense of union, and profound participation in the larger web of life.

Movers may continue to integrate their therapeutic process following their Authentic Movement sessions. A wide range of creative explorations, such as painting, choreographing dances, creative writing, sculpting, or composing music, may be utilized. This integrative process brings further form to what was once unconscious (Chodorow, 1997, p. 9). This helps movers develop their sense of wholeness, and can enhance what they are able to contribute to the broader culture. Authentic Movement has many applications, and is practiced as psychotherapy, meditation, sacred dance, and/or as a source for creative work. It can also be used to amplify dreams, bringing further clarity, depth, and meaning to them as formative images become consciously embodied (Stromsted, 1998, 2004).



*Three Female Figures Dancing and Playing*

Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, 1833–1898

Our planet needs our awareness and compassion. As our attitude toward our body mirrors our relationship with the Earth's Body, working in embodied ways enhances our sensitivity and awareness of the natural world in which we play a vital role. Numbing, lack of respect, and manipulation of the flesh go hand in hand with the mismanagement and overuse of our natural resources. Authentic Movement is a holistic approach to reversing this trend, bringing us greater body/mind/spirit healing and integration in the current disembodied zeitgeist (Stromsted, 2009b, p. 210).

## Embodied Active Imagination: The Dance of Three

*"When there has been a radical split, a somatic container must be prepared to receive the psychic labor. There must be a greeting of the spirit, a chalice to receive the wine."*  
(Woodman 1982: 69).

From our earliest beginnings, empathic relating from our caretakers is an essential component in the formation of the self. Advances in interpersonal neurobiology point to the right brain's receptivity to nonverbal elements. These include facial expression, voice tone, movement, music, imagery, and the play of symbols in dreams and poetry. Authentic Movement provides a form in which developmental experiences stored in the body and the right brain may be accessed, explored, and further integrated.

*The Dance of Three* draws on essential elements from Authentic Movement, and was developed by Jungian analyst and author Marion Woodman and her team: dancer Mary Hamilton, who trained with the Royal Canadian Ballet, and voice coach and mask maker Ann Skinner, former Head of Voice at the Ontario Stratford Shakespeare company

(Hamilton, 2009, pp. 93-94). Together, these three women developed a profoundly integrative approach to body/psyche/soul healing, which they call BodySoul Rhythms®.

Marion's discovery of Authentic Movement came about by following the active imagination process in her body to heal a kidney disorder that had resulted from her struggles with anorexia. Then, in 1982, at Jungian analyst and Dance/movement therapist Joan Chodorow's invitation, Marion participated in an Authentic Movement retreat with other well-known dance therapists at Jacob's Pillow in Becket, Massachusetts. Marion's experience there affirmed her sense of the potency of having a personal "witness" while moving in response to an inner prompting – elements fundamental to Authentic Movement practice.

Returning to her teaching, through careful attending, Marion noticed that when her attention wavered during rehearsals:

*[S]omething went wrong on the floor. The energy became lax, muffled, attenuated, an edge of fear crept in, the courageous spontaneity was lost. I suddenly understood that perceiver and perceived were one: my perception of a block in a body influenced the energy in the perceived block without one word spoken. Similarly, my lack of perception (while I thought about softening the spotlight) resulted in unconscious whorls on the stage (Woodman in Stromsted, 2005, p. 12-13).*

Marion's insights about the effects of the witness on the group mirrored a crucial part of my own experience in leading body-oriented psychotherapy sessions and facilitating Authentic Movement groups. *The Dance of Three* brings in further nuance by including a "second witness" (the container/supervisor) who could reflect not only on the mover's experience, but on the dynamics of the mover-witness relationship as well.

*The Dance of Three* explores the nonverbal underpinnings of psychotherapy through direct experience of bodily-felt sensations, imagination, emotions, and empathic witnessing practice in a safe, embodied, and relational way. A form of embodied active imagination, this approach involves a mover/client, a mirror/therapist, and a container/supervisor who explore the dynamics of their relationships. Working in groups of three, each participant has an opportunity to move, witness, contain, and reflect on their embodied experience. The triad supports the regenerative effects of natural movement and empathic response. Participants can deepen their ability to be present with oneself and with another in a more vital, increasingly conscious relationship. The practice invites a level of perception of self and other that can evoke deep respect and empathy (Stromsted, 2009a).

Teaching *The Dance of Three* gave me valuable insights into the importance of introducing elements from Authentic Movement practice – for example, employing the use of "percept language," which I'd learned from my colleague

and early Authentic Movement teacher Janet Adler. I had heard witnesses in the BodySoul Rhythms® work unconsciously use (though with the best of intentions) evaluative language like: "You looked a little stiff," or "I wish you'd kept going with that," or even "You were absolutely beautiful!" These reflections may initially seem affirming, although the mover may have been feeling anything but beautiful at the time. Instead, they may have been trying to connect with something more challenging or profound. However, this can give the mover the impression that they need to be beautiful for their witnesses.

Additionally, psychotherapists trained in psychodynamic verbal psychotherapy are often encouraged to interpret what they see in the client, assuming it to be helpful. However, this approach may inadvertently contribute to the mover feeling hurt, judged, or unseen at a time when they have freshly emerged from the depths of their unconscious and may feel deeply vulnerable.

Instead, the witness is encouraged to use "I" statements and non-judgmental, non-interpretive language to describe what they have seen. This way they "own" their experience, and do not project it onto the mover. This provides additional safety, depth, and clarity for movers as well as their witnesses.

Another element I introduced was what I termed "re-call." Here, a witness simply reflects words they heard their mover say, together with how the mover's words/experiences resonated within the witness themselves (with respect to the witness' sensations, feelings, and images). For example:

*[I]f a mover says (speaking in the present tense about her movement experience), "After standing for some time, I surrender to the floor and my hair falls over my face like a waterfall", the witness's "re-call" might be something like this: "Standing, surrender, floor, waterfall: As I hear you speak, I feel a deepening in my breath, a release in my spine, and a softening sensation in my face" (Stromsted, 2015, p. 348-349).*

Additionally, I worked with witnesses to help them develop more nuanced observational skills: tracking and describing what they observed in the mover's and their own body's gestures, postures, shapes, breathing patterns, quality of presence, and the use of space. I highlighted the importance of "holding the container" instead of talking to other witnesses, watching other movers, or losing awareness of inner experience through judgments, projections, or the stirring of one's own emotions. I also invited an awareness of what Jung (1927, par. 342) called "collective" elements that often find expression in the group field. While practicing Authentic Movement in a group, witnesses sit or stand in a circle to create a visible "container" for the movers. Adler (1994) introduced what she called the "collective body," the practice of exploring the possible underlying stories and motifs in the group's unconscious as they emerged. In BodySoul Rhythms®, we call this kind of

witnessing “reading the floor.” In both Authentic Movement and BodySoul Rhythms®, the presence of a containing, compassionate witness contributes to healing, as the mover/client opens to his or her senses, to natural movement, and to the unfinished business and un-lived potentials within. The witness, in turn, is often touched by the places their mover ventures to go. Thus, both people can open to their deeper natures, and to the divine, the “third space” that they share (Stromsted, 2009).

Unlike Authentic Movement, which occurs in silence as movers listen for an inner prompting, *The Dance of Three* is accompanied by music. While teaching in Africa, Asia, Latin America, different parts of Europe, Canada, and the United States, I learned to vary the music Marion had always chosen for *The Dance of Three* – Chopin’s beautiful, emotionally nuanced classical piano Nocturnes. The use of music was particularly crucial while teaching people from diverse backgrounds. Intermingling selections of music from a variety of cultures invited elements from the “cultural unconscious” (Henderson, 1984), and broadened the scope of our work. Through *The Dance of Three*, participants were able to explore individual and cultural differences while affirming shared human experiences. This approach provides a protocol for reflection and communication that is critical to any therapeutic situation.

## The Dance of Three & The Brain

As we move from an inner source, and in relationship to one another, what’s going on in the brain – our embodied organ of perception?

Interestingly, like the participants in *The Dance of Three*, the brain includes three interconnected structures: the “body-brain,” the limbic system, and the cerebral cortex (Homann, 2010). These three dimensions reside within each participant, and also come into play within the dynamics of the triad. The brain structures are activated in the relational movement field, providing a foundation for our ability to move, sense the body, and feel and communicate empathy. Working together, they enhance affect regulation and deepen self- and other-awareness (Homann & Stromsted, 2011).

Importantly, the limbic system coordinates sensation, motivation, emotion, and memory. We share this part of our brain with all other mammals who rely on attachment connections for growth and survival. *The Dance of Three* provides a sense of holding, safety, and connection between the mover and their witnesses. This promotes healing as they free up blocked energy, express deeper feelings, and revisit and repair early attachment dynamics anchored in the limbic system.

Practicing deep inner listening allows us to contact the cellular resonance so vital to our body/brain wisdom. With

practice in a safe and open space, these learnings can be explored and integrated into our daily lives – in our relationships, work, and through engaging what brings most meaning and value to our lives.

## Conclusion

In *The Dance of Three* workshop, participants explored a dance in which they took turns in the roles of mover/client, engaged witness/therapist, and container/supervisor. With roots in Jung’s depth psychology, the practice allowed participants to access the play of imagination in the body, and provided a direct experience of how natural movement can enhance self-awareness and creative expression. It also helped them build trust in a deeper source within themselves, and with each other. This laid a foundation for empathic response, attuned communication, and a celebration of spirit in the body – soul’s body – the integration of body, mind, spirit, and relationship.

Embodied consciousness enhances all forms of psychotherapy. Here, therapist and client alike can become attuned to the somatic underpinnings of transference and countertransference dynamics within their relationship (Stromsted, 2009b). These are the bones of the healing process, which, with time, helps the heart shine through.

The workshop ended with participants sharing their experiences and a discussion on the somatic elements necessary for establishing a sense of safety, well-being, and belonging in the world. Responses reflected respect for individual and cultural differences, as well as universal aspects of human functioning and experience.

Participants spoke of how the practice supported them in staying true to what was most authentic. They were able to open to direct, embodied experiences of themselves, their partners, and a growing sense of community. As people connected to their depths and to one another, a sense of the sacred emerged. This natural process is not predicated on adopting outmoded religious dogmas and unforgiving gods. Instead, by listening to our body’s deeper callings, we can give shape to the feelings and images that surface from underground wellsprings, toward consciousness. The practice also has socio-political significance as we learn to discern and reclaim our own unconscious “shadow” projections – inner fears and demons that we otherwise tend to attribute to outer “others,” making enemies of them and generating “cause” for warfare (Stromsted, 2007, p. 206).

As C.G. Jung (1954/1985, CW16, par. 454) says, “The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in “You.” Wholeness is a combination of I and You, and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity whose nature can only be grasped symbolically.”

Won’t you join the dance?







**Tina Stromsted**, Ph.D., MFT, LPCC, RSMT/E, BC-DMT is a Jungian analyst, Board Certified Dance/Movement therapist, Somatics Educator, and author. Former co-founder of the Authentic Movement Institute, she teaches internationally and at the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco, the Depth Psychology/Somatics Doctoral program at Pacifica Graduate Institute, and is a core faculty member for the Marion Woodman Foundation. Founder of Soul's Body Center®, her work and publications explore the integration of body, brain, psyche, soul, and community in healing, with a special interest in the creative process, nature, and embodied spirituality. Her private practice is in San Francisco.

www.AuthenticMovement-BodySoul.com; Tina@AuthenticMovement-BodySoul.com

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