

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

**Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy
for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment**

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To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.

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Authentic Movement

From moving witness to witness, from sensing a mover with eyes closed to seeing a mover with eyes open, each individual enters the next place of practice and study within the development of embodied consciousness. The mover chooses to become a witness.

— Janet Adler (2002, p.61)

Being Moved

Authentic movement is opening to being moved.

In traditional dance or improvised movement, the mind is usually in control—“I need to take this step now” or “Wouldn’t it be neat if I did *this*...” There is nothing wrong with this approach. However, it tends to reflect how we run the rest of our lives, with the mind firmly in command, the body following.

In authentic movement, we ask the question, “What does the *body* need right now?” We close our eyes, pause, breathe, listen, and open to natural movement impulse. We follow that impulse. The movement that results is not planned, not controlled. It at first seems to be accidental movement, random or chance. But as we follow it, as we notice how it feels to move completely freely with no agenda, the unexpected happens: we begin to feel things. Our senses open. Imagery arises. We may find ourselves entering unexpected worlds of texture, motion, rhythm, raw emotion, metaphor, character, story, dream... Authentic movement opens the door to a journey into our own depths.

The practice of authentic movement was originally developed by dance/movement therapist Mary Whitehouse in the 1950s, and further refined by Janet Adler, Joan Chodorow, and others. I first learned of it in the mid-nineties from playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie, and went on to practice with a men's authentic movement group led by Tom Webb and others. Over the years, as Insight Improvisation has developed, authentic movement has become a central practice and a foundation for the work, upon which other techniques, such as psolodrama, have been built.

Authentic movement is a practice that promotes healing and creativity. In a therapy context it is a vehicle for an embodied exploration of active imagination, with the client as the mover and the therapist the witness. It also serves artists—dancers, writers, painters, actors, and others—as a practice for sourcing their work.

This chapter is written mainly from the point of view of working with a peer, or in a movement group, and provides an introduction to the basic principles of authentic movement as well as techniques, variations, and additional approaches one can incorporate into the practice.

Ultimately, as with any discipline, authentic movement is best learned in person from a teacher experienced in the form. In particular, learning to be a good witness—nonjudgmental, present, and capable of speaking in ways that acknowledge and own projection—requires training and modeling from an experienced witness.

(Authentic movement is described in greater depth in a number of publications. Please see the end of this chapter for recommended reading and other resources. For more on the use of authentic movement and other techniques from this book in a therapy

context, see Part IV, “Insight Improvisation in the World—Working with Individuals and Groups.”)

Authentic Movement		
Basics	Techniques & Variations	Other Approaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>The Mover</i> ▪ <i>The Witness</i> ▪ <i>Sharing</i> ▪ <i>The Container</i> ▪ <i>Pointers</i> ▪ <i>Ongoing Practice / The Inner Witness</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Drawing and Writing</i> ▪ <i>Active Witnessing</i> ▪ <i>Moving in Response</i> ▪ <i>Rotating Witness</i> ▪ <i>Open Circle</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Image-Story-Image</i> ▪ <i>The Lenses of Awareness</i> ▪ <i>Moving Alone and Together</i>

Basics

The simplest form of authentic movement involves two roles, mover and witness. Both are considered equally important. When one is first learning about the form, the role of the mover seems most important, but, over time, witnessing develops into a rich and fulfilling role in itself. As one develops as a witness one learns more about one’s own inner witness, and deepens one’s understanding of the role of mover.

When working one-to-one with a peer, the two may choose to begin with a verbal check-in and a warm-up, which may include meditation, yoga or stretching, and/or improvisational dance (with music or in silence). They then decide who will move first and who will witness.

Typically the mover moves for a set period of time—say, 20 minutes (this can vary depending on the participants, the available time, and the goals of the work)—while the witness sits to one side and observes. At the end of the agreed-upon time, the witness signals the ending, either by sounding a bell, or by saying something like: “Slowly, in your own time, begin to bring your movement to a close.”

Then the two meet, sit facing one another, and the mover is invited to talk about what he experienced while moving. Then if the mover wishes, the witness will speak, in support of the mover, about her experience of the mover’s movement. Usually, if there is time, the two then switch roles, so each has a chance to move and to witness.

That’s the process in a nutshell. Let’s look at the two roles in greater detail...

The Role of the Mover

The mover enters the space and, before beginning his authentic movement, finds a place and position to start. He can pick whatever feels comfortable or “right” to him in that moment—sitting, standing, lying down, crouching, being on all fours, etc.

Then he closes his eyes and takes a moment of stillness, to relax, breathe, and listen to his body—to be mindful of what sensations are present, and to become aware of his own emotional state, mood, or energy. Stillness also allows the mover to tune into the subtle movement, or potential movement, that is already present in the body

It is good to notice the movement—or lack of movement—that is already there, not to try to change it, or control it, but to just accept it. For example, the mover may notice that he is breathing in a certain way, that his chest is moving up and down. He may notice that he is chewing his tongue. Authentic movement is about listening to bodily impulses, not censoring in any way.

Through this process of opening to the body, and to the senses, the entire organism can begin to express itself. The mover can begin to follow his body, opening to what the body needs or wants, opening to moment-by-moment impulse.

Often this impulse looks nothing like “dance”. From the outside, one might at first see a mover, who starts in a standing position or on all fours, slowly relax the body and collapse to the floor. The mover is not concerned with entertaining the witness or finding interesting ways to move. Instead, the mover allows his mind to be a witness to the body—to listen to its impulses and open to them no matter where they lead. The mover’s intention is to let go, to let the body take over, to let himself “be moved.”

In practice this may mean that the mover sometimes experiences periods of stillness as well as passages of rapid, active movement, even running around the space. The mover cannot anticipate ahead of time what the body will need. *(Note: the mover is encouraged to open his eyes slightly when moving through the space in order to avoid collisions. It is important to be clear that the mover is responsible for his own safety, as well as the safety of people and objects in the space.)*

As the mover opens to the body, he may find that his body position or movement has a certain quality—a particular stance, gesture, movement pattern, rhythm, etc.—which evokes an emotion or brings to mind an image, or a memory from his life, with its associated feelings. The mover can consciously choose to follow that emotion, memory, or image and stay with that movement a little while and see what arises. Or he can choose at anytime to let it go, relax, and pay close attention to the body once again, its stillness or its movement, and follow pure bodily impulse.

In this way, authentic movement is a dance with oneself: a dance between the body—with all its cellular complexity, sensations, wounds, stored feelings and memories—and the mind, which observes the body, makes meaning, relates physical reality to stored memories and images, and participates in the experiencing and interpretation of emotions.

The observing aspect of the mind is a form of witness—an “inner witness” which can notice the body, emotions, thoughts, memories. The development of one’s inner witness over time is a measure of progress on the path of authentic movement, as it is in meditation. In addition to moving in the presence of a supportive witness, another way to develop our own inner witness is through witnessing others move.

The Role of the Witness

The role of the witness is to observe the mover, and afterwards, if invited, to reflect back what she has seen.

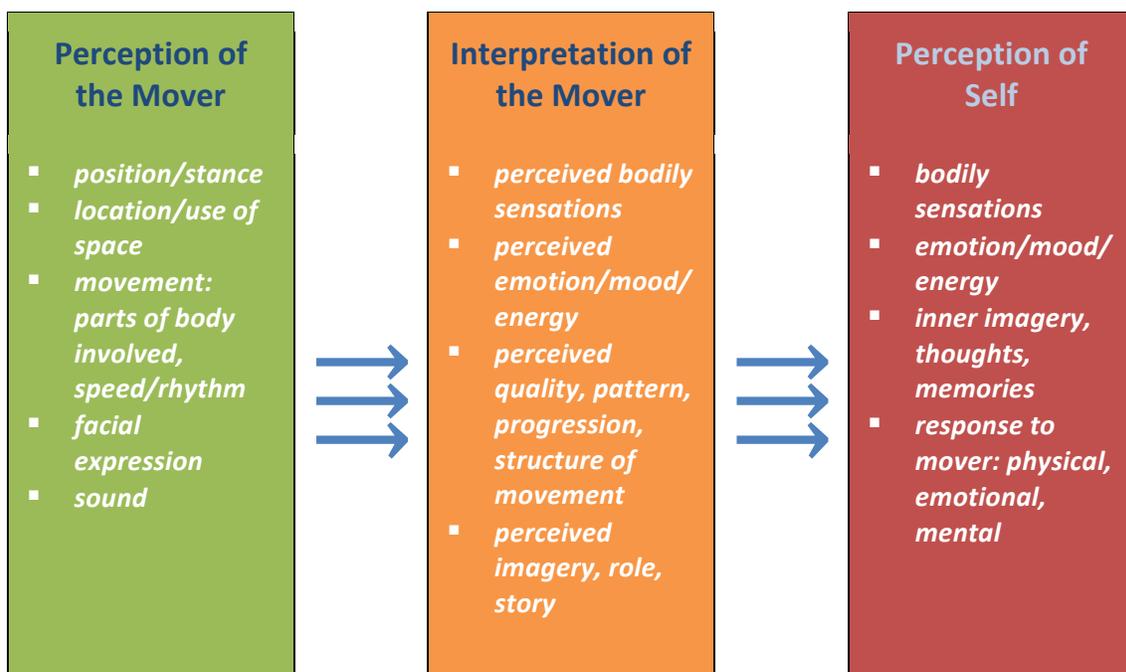
The ideal witness is fully present, in service of the mover, with an open heart and free of judgment. (This description extends to all witnessing/audiencing in Insight Improvisation, but it originates from the practice of witnessing authentic movement.) These fundamental aspects of witnessing are parallel to the three types of awareness that form the foundation of Insight Improvisation: mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.

Mindfulness. The witness is present, continually noticing what is happening in this moment, and bringing her mind back to the object of attention, the mover. Not only does this mean bringing the focus back to the mover whenever the mind has strayed, it

also means that if the witness is drowsy or distracted, she needs to exert more energy in order to stay focused and alert.

Choicelessness. The witness is open, aware of all the sense doors, including mind objects. As she observes, she discerns what is pure sensation—e.g. the sight of the mover’s leg or face, or the sound of their hand slapping the floor—versus what thoughts or feelings those sensations are triggering in her own mind and body, including her interpretations of what the mover is doing. She also notices her own state, how her body feels, other sounds in the room, etc.

Witnessing Authentic Movement: What the Witness is Aware of



One of my teachers, the dance/movement and drama therapist Penny Lewis, often referred to “somatic countertransference”—the ability of the therapist to feel in her body a reaction or response to the client’s feelings toward her. The witness in authentic

movement may experience something similar: she may feel in her body sensations that are a reaction or response to what the mover is doing, or feeling. This physical awareness can help the witness intuit more deeply the mover's inner experience. However, it is equally important that the witness recognize she can never know for sure the inner experience of the mover—any thoughts or feelings she has about him are projections.

Lovingkindness. The witness is **caring**, bringing a nonjudgmental, supportive attitude toward the mover, allowing her heart and mind to open with authentic curiosity and interest in what the mover is experiencing.

Practicing Awareness of Oneself. It is important for the witness to notice her own attitude, and work with it during the movement, in the same way that a meditator works with their state of mind.

For example, as witness, if I find during the movement that I am tired, or bored, or restless, can I notice these thoughts and feelings, and remind myself of my intention: to bring mindfulness, openness, and lovingkindness to the way I am witnessing—to be here to support the mover and serve as a container for the movement. My attentiveness is actively helping the mover, I remind myself, and it is important I not miss any detail. I bring myself back to this moment, back to the mover's body, the physical reality of what is happening now, as well as the images and emotions it is evoking in me.

I might ask myself: why is it I'm tuning out in this moment? Is there something in the way the mover is moving that is making me uncomfortable, creating an experience of aversion or avoidance in me? Is there some feeling, some emotion, that I am avoiding? By working with my own mind as the witness, I learn not only to be a

better witness and serve the mover, but also how to alleviate my own suffering in the process.

Empathy is central to being a good witness. If I can put myself in the mover's place, imagine how he feels, I can begin to imaginatively enter the process and fully engage with it. Then when it is time to share, I can speak from a place of feeling and connection, rather than purely objective description.

Sharing

Once the mover has finished and come to stillness, he goes and sits with the witness, and the two may share their experience.

In traditional authentic movement, the mover speaks first. This is because the mover's experience is considered primary; the witness's sharing is in service of the mover. Often some confusion or misinterpretation or mystery that the witness may have had during the movement is clarified or corrected when the mover speaks first.

When the mover shares, he can say anything about his experience of moving. Usually his intention is to express his internal experience of the movement, as a way to reflect on and deepen the impact and meaning of the work. The mover may begin with some overall comments—e.g., how he now feels having moved—or may choose to focus in on some particularly powerful sequence or image from the movement, or what happened when he shifted from moving to being moved. Sometimes it is useful for the mover to trace through his movement in order, sharing his internal impressions—e.g., sensations, emotions, imagery, memory—of each “pool” (Adler, 2002, p.82), or sequence of movement.

When the mover invites the witness to speak, she speaks with great care and attentiveness, as her intention is to serve the mover with everything she shares. Her sharing is as accurate a mirror as possible of what she saw (and/or heard). She can use not only her words but also her body to mirror the movement.

In addition, the witness can add to the description of physical movement her more subjective sense of the patterns, emotions, and images she perceived in the movement. When she does so, she makes clear in her use of language that those interpretations are her own—using phrases such as “I perceive” or “it feels to me as if”.

Certain other practices have developed around sharing. It can help, for example, for mover and witness to speak in the present tense. This may sound strange at first, but it helps both to reenter the immediacy of the movement, and the corresponding sensations and images. Another language quirk, most often used in group authentic movement, is for the witness to say “the mover” or “a mover” rather than “you.” This helps witness and mover focus more on the movement rather than the person, diminishing any tendency toward projection. (In group authentic movement to say “a mover” rather than “you” or a name allows the emphasis to be on the movement and the act of co-creation of the group, rather than on what one individual did.)

Taken together, these forms of speaking create a certain style of sharing—instead of “Next, you placed your hands together in front of your chest, praying” the language transforms into “Next, the mover places his hands together in front of his chest, in what I perceive as an image of prayer.”

Both mover and witness can move as they share, to recreate moments of movement that each is recalling. For the witness, this a great opportunity to discover how the mover may have felt, and is a step toward “active witnessing” (see below).

Both can share their experience of the movement from a number of different perspectives—different “lenses” of awareness through which one can look. In addition to an awareness of body position, movement, sensation, emotion, imagery, and memory, these lenses can also include a sense of the archetypal or mythical, the symbolic, story, and dream. (See below for more on the lenses of awareness.)

As the sharing process unfolds, it can become a dialogue in which the two are together reconstructing a narrative of the movement that occurred, exploring the physical, emotional, and imaginative journey of the mover. The sharing process can take as long as the movement itself—e.g. 20 minutes of sharing time for a 20 minute movement—and allows the mover to not only reflect on and relive the movement that occurred, but also to have the mirroring, support, insights, and affirmation of the witness. Skillful witnessing can transform a mover’s sense of his own movement, adding multiple dimensions to the experience and a sense of closure—as well as anticipation for further journeys to come.

Creating a Safe Container

The quality of one’s experience doing authentic movement is greatly dependent on the soundness of the container for the work. When meeting with another to move, agree up front on conditions, ground rules, and practices that contribute to that safety.

Choose a space to move that is quiet, pleasant to roll around in, and where you will not be interrupted. A dedicated movement studio is best, but, if necessary, authentic

movement can be practiced in any private room with a little clean floor space. Some also love to move outdoors—just make sure to find a secluded spot.

Confidentiality is the most basic ground rule and is worth discussing and confirming with your partner: what happens in the room stays in the room. Also, maintain clear boundaries around time. Turn off all electronic devices.

Create rituals such as a check in, a warm up, etc.—repeated elements that add to the sense of comfort and connection, helping both partners let go of the stress of the day and enter movement and witnessing in a more clear and unburdened state. Ask one another: what do you need to say (or do) to be fully present?

Be a great witness. Finally, the quality of witnessing has the most profound effect on the strength of the container. Are you fully present, awake, undistracted? What do you need to give your mover your undivided attention? Would it help to stand, or to take notes? Ultimately, the witness's attention *is* the container for the movement.

Pointers

A few other things to keep in mind when first learning authentic movement:

Avoid overthinking. As the mover, it is important not to feel stuck in authentic movement. One thing newcomers to the form often have difficulty with is the word “authentic.” Is what I’m doing right now *truly* authentic? Overthinking this can quickly lead to judging/critiquing one’s own movement and turn the exercise into 20 minutes of suffering. The answer is to let go, to drop the requirement to be authentic—in fact, to drop all requirements, and to let yourself do whatever you like. Follow the joy of your own impulses. See where they lead you. Let yourself be as inauthentic as you like; follow every clever thought that pops into your head. You will soon begin to notice where the

body is leading, and learn to follow it, letting the mind be more of a witness than a director. Such a switch happens when you go from moving to being moved.

Don't get attached. Another area where new movers can get stuck is when working with a particular movement pattern or with an image or memory arising in the movement. You can drop any impulse or pattern at any time, letting something new in (a piece of wisdom that is equally applicable to living one's life!). Similarly, whereas it's fine to follow the images that are arising and fully embody them, it is important to not get attached to them. If the impulse is gone, it's gone—notice if the curiosity of the mind is perpetuating something that is not driven by the body. If so, let it go. For example, as I move, I may notice that a certain motion of my arms reminds me of ringing a bell by pulling on a large rope. I may continue to pull, exploring that image and feeling. However, if a new impulse occurs, say, a desire to roll over and relax, it is important to let go of the bell-pulling and embrace whatever is next. (If, instead, out of an intellectual curiosity to explore the bell-pulling, I ignore other impulses, I am no longer really listening to the body, and no longer fully present.)

The witness is not an audience. Notice where “shoulds” creep in. If I am moving very little, perhaps just sitting and wiggling a finger, a voice in my head may say “This must be very boring for my witness. I should move more. I should get up.” Notice the thought as a thought, and do not act on it. Come back to the body and find out what it really wants. It may really want to get up—or it may really want to keep sitting there. It is not your job to entertain the witness.

Agree on use of sound/speech. You and your partner (or group) can agree in advance on the use of sound, and/or speech. When working one-to-one, there is no

particular reason to restrict the mover's use of the voice—if the impulse comes to make sound, go for it. But in a group setting, the voice can be a form of contact, touching—or distracting—everyone in the room. (See below for more on guidelines for use of voice and physical contact in groups.)

Agree on note-taking. There are pros and cons to the witness taking notes during the movement. Especially for someone new to witnessing, it is important to have the experience of simply being present to the mover, with no distractions. In this way, witnessing is truly a meditation, with the mover as the object. Taking notes not only can be distracting, but it can send an inexperienced witness into her head—lessening her ability to form an empathic, heart connection with the mover, as well as to be present to her own body, emotions, and state of mind during the movement.

That said, note-taking has some benefits: it can help a witness, especially a sleepy or distracted one, be more present, as she notes each observation. In some ways, it can help the witness get *out* of her head: by writing everything down, she is not worried about remembering later what she wants to share with the witness. And in the sharing process, having notes can help the witness recall in greater detail what happened during the movement.

My suggestion is to begin without note-taking, but then experiment and see what you prefer. Also make sure beforehand that the mover is OK with you taking notes. And if you find you're looking at the page a lot, and missing moments, let the note-taking go.

Ongoing Practice and the Inner Witness

Like meditation, authentic movement can be a practice that deepens significantly over time. In my own experience, moving with a group of men regularly in the Boston

area, I have seen many changes in how I approach authentic movement, both as a mover and as a witness. These changes coincide with the development of my own capacity to be a supportive witness to myself, as I move—to develop a nonjudgmental inner witness.

When I was first introduced to authentic movement, I felt both self-conscious and self-critical. Was I moving well? In an interesting way? What did my witness think? As I became more comfortable with the group over a span of sessions, I found myself dropping my constant comparing and self-judging, and began to relax and accept my movement and myself more.

As I grew more at ease with myself—as my inner witness grew more compassionate and accepting—I was able to drop into the simplicity of body awareness. My movement became more relaxed, and I found myself slowing down. I began to spend many minutes in near-stillness, noticing my breath and the subtle movements, sensations, and impulses of the body. I realized that with my background as a performer, I had been more concerned with engaging the witness than with staying true to what my body really wanted to do. Discovering this very present stillness, accompanied by qualities of acute sensory awareness, as well as complete muscular release, took my authentic movement to a new level.

I also became more bold about sound, following the impulse to use my voice, to work with vibration. If there were a piano in the room, I might go to it and press keys, freeing my body to improvise.

I noticed inner imagery and followed it, entering realms of memory and fantasy led by my body. I felt truly in the flow of the movement, tapping into a source of creativity and inspiration that seemed to have no end.

The inner witness can develop in a number of ways. Foremost is the opportunity to *be* witnessed by an experienced witness who models the qualities touched on earlier. The inner witness can also develop through meditation, or through training (for example, learning to be a therapist or a coach). As one's inner witness grows over time, changes can occur in each of the three areas of awareness discussed earlier:

Mindfulness: The mover develops a greater capacity to remain focused, and return to the present moment.

Choicelessness: The mover opens to being led by the body and the senses, and is increasingly aware of the interplay between his mind and the movement. More and more, the mover is able to find inspiration in anything, even the subtlest bodily sensations. He has an increasing capacity to open to images, memories, and other associations arising from his movement.

Lovingkindness: The mover is more generous with himself, more forgiving. He notices his flaws and challenges and is able to smile at them, saying “how human...” He is also more open to the range of emotions that may arise in the movement, allowing their full expression.

Put together, one way to sum up the changes as one's inner witness grows is a feeling of getting out of one's own way, freeing up the body-mind to just “be,” less identified with and therefore less encumbered by neurotic thought—a calm, confident container for whatever needs to arise. These qualities of the inner witness correlate strongly with the meta-skills needed for being a good therapist, workshop facilitator, psychodrama director, parent, and leader.

Classic Techniques and Variations on Authentic Movement

In addition to the basic practice described above, there are many ways for pairs and groups to work with authentic movement. Here are a few variations that are widely used:

Drawing and Writing

One's verbal response in the sharing process is only one way of responding to one's own or another's movement. Another way is to draw, or write, before meeting to discuss what happened.

Writing may take one of several different forms: a description of the movement, either chronological or focusing on the moments which stood out the most, in any order; a poem or other creative writing which describes or builds on the images or stories evoked by the movement; or spontaneous writing, an exercise (described by author and meditator Natalie Goldberg in her book *Wild Mind*, 1990) in which one begins to write and continues to keep the hand moving for a set period of time, no matter what comes out on the page—without censoring or judging the quality of the writing.

Similarly, drawing after moving can range from a faithful representation of a moment or moments of the movement, to an inner image that occurred for the mover or witness, to a more abstract expression or scribble representing how the person drawing feels in this moment. It's nice to have a basket of crayons or colored markers available to add color as a dimension.

Writing/drawing can be for a set period of time—say, 10 minutes. A different approach is to agree in advance that writing/drawing will be optional, based on what the

mover desires, and that the length of time will be determined by how long the mover needs.

When finished, the two meet and share. They can begin by sharing their writing/drawing, if they wish (they do not have to). Sharing a drawing or poem first can add new levels or dimensions to the sharing process. Sometimes a very simple drawing—say, a tiny dot inside a large circle—can capture a metaphor that brings the meaning of the movement into focus. Sometimes a poem can capture the spirit of the movement, or its emotional qualities, in a way that speaking more descriptively or casually cannot do. The writing or drawing often becomes a springboard for a deeper conversation about the movement, and how it might relate to the mover's life.

There is something meditative about the process of drawing or writing, that helps serve as a transition between the often silent and solitary experience of moving or witnessing and the quite different social experience of connecting in the sharing process through eye contact and speech. It can be particularly helpful for those who tend toward introversion to be able to relate their thoughts on the page first, before sharing them with a partner.

It is not necessary to share one's writing or drawing. This is an important ground rule, allowing the writing and drawing to be truly free and uncensored. If the witness, for example, feels she must share her writing/drawing, it may stop her from being spontaneous, as she may wonder if her depiction will be accurate or will contradict the experience of the mover.

If authentic movement is a regular practice, one can maintain a journal of one's writings, or keep a folder of them to look back on. Sometimes a poem or drawing by the

witness can be so evocative or touching that the mover might request to keep it—this can be a small gift from the witness to the mover, and a further expression of *metta*.

Active Witnessing

Once well versed in witnessing as described above, one can explore other modes of witnessing. The witness can stand (a great thing to do if one is feeling sleepy) and can even move, while observing the mover. The witness might allow her body to take on his position, his movement, not only mirroring him on the outside but more importantly exploring how he might be feeling on the inside. The witness may also move in response to the mover or may choose to imitate only what the mover's hands are doing. The purpose of active witnessing is to deepen one's empathy and connection with what the mover is doing. An additional benefit of active witnessing is that it can be easier to recall the sequence and details of the movement during the sharing process.

The active witness needs to move carefully and not disturb the mover in any way. Contact and sounding are obvious no-nos.

In group authentic movement, the active witness is seen as a distinct role. Rather than sitting on the sidelines to observe, the active witness can silently enter the space, using eyes-open movement to mirror, explore, and empathize with what the mover is doing. As with the sitting witness, the active witness is in service of the mover, and makes sure to avoid disturbing the mover she is focusing on (or any other mover in the space). To do this, the active witness does not make sound or physical contact, and tries to be as invisible as possible. After the movement, the active witness shares just as a normal witness does and only after the mover has spoken.

Active witnessing is a powerful role to add to the open circle format (see below)—often a group will open up the form to allow for one or more active witnesses, in addition to a minimum number of sitting witnesses (usually two) to help maintain the sense of a safe container for the whole group.

Moving in Response

In this structure, the witness responds to the mover, not verbally, but instead through her own authentic movement. Then the original mover can respond to that movement by moving once again. The sequence ends with verbal sharing. Timing can be decided in advance; e.g., the first mover moves for 7 minutes, the second for 5, and the first mover once again for 3 minutes, in response to his partner. Afterwards, the two share their experience verbally, and then reverse roles and begin the whole sequence again.

When moving in response to another mover, the movement is still authentic movement. The responding mover enters the space with the intention to open to being moved—understanding that whatever movement emerges is in some way a response to the movement she just observed. She does not need to “try” to respond, or to work to recall aspects of what the first mover did. She may naturally find herself mirroring or taking on movements inspired by particular moments or images from the first mover’s movement. This echoing emerges organically, not from a thinking or planning place. Or, there may be no echoes at all—a response can be in contrast, or be an energetic/emotional reply. For example, one may find oneself responding to a rapid movement by being particularly slow or still.

This form can also be practiced in trios, in which the three rotate through the roles of initial mover and responder. There can be two responders moving at the same time, or the third person can be assigned to be a dedicated witness.

Rotating Witness

Safety Note: when leading any authentic movement exercise in which more than one person will be moving at a time, caution participants that they must open their eyes slightly when moving rapidly, making big gestures, or moving through the space, to avoid colliding with other people or with walls or objects. “You are responsible for your own safety and the safety of others.”

A simple form of group authentic movement—e.g. when working with three or four people—is to rotate through the role of witness. The first witness has a bell, which he rings when it is time to transition. The person designated to be the second witness slowly brings her movement to a close, opens her eyes, and moves to the side of the room, and sits down to witness. Once the first witness sees that this has happened, he can enter the space, close his eyes, and begin to move.

Once all three or four have witnessed, each shares equally as a mover and as a witness during the sharing process. The typical convention, in this form and in the open circle (below), is that a witness will not refer to a mover’s movement until that mover has had a chance to describe it.

Open Circle

When working with a group of four or more, an open circle format can be used, in which each participant can be either witness or mover, and can change roles during the movement. Typically, this activity begins with the participants agreeing on a length of

time to move, how many witnesses minimum there can be at any time, and what agreement there is around the use of sound. The participants then meet in a circle in the middle for a brief huddle to be present to one another, perhaps making eye contact in silence. Then the group steps backward, spreading out to the edges of the space, making eye contact with one another and raising their arms in a posture known as “sprouting”—signifying the container of witnessing and interpersonal connection within which the movement will be held.

Someone rings a bell, and the movement begins. Those who wish to move can step forward into the space, close their eyes, and begin. The rest are witnesses, and sit along the outer edges of the space. Usually there is a minimum of two witnesses at any given time. Anytime she wants, a witness can enter the space and become a mover, except if doing so would leave an insufficient number of witnesses. In such a case, the witness who desires to move can say “call for a witness” — to which a mover can respond “witness found.” That mover then makes her way to an edge of the space, opens her eyes, and becomes a witness, at which point the witness who made the request can enter and become a mover.

Movers can become witnesses anytime they like—it can be helpful after transitioning to make eye contact with one or more witnesses around the circle (this helps the mover change from an inner, personal focus, to being present with the entire group).

Use of sound and/or words is an issue that any authentic movement group must address. Some groups prefer to move in silence, others allow sound but no recognizable words (that is, gibberish or a nonsense syllable such as “Gaaaaa” would be OK). If meeting over a weekend, a group might choose to start with an open circle in silence, but

later do open circles that incorporate sound. All movers must be aware that by making sound they contact everyone else in the space—others cannot really block it out. On the other hand, the use of sound, sound that emerges organically from the body as it moves, can be a cathartic, freeing, and emotionally expressive aspect of authentic movement.

Physical contact is also an issue that can come up for any group in which participants are moving together. All movers must be sensitive to how their touch or contact is being received by the other—if the other moves away upon being touched, or is not responding, it may mean that the other mover would prefer not to have contact. It is also important for each mover to gauge his intention in making contact—is it something that emerged organically from the movement, by happenstance, or did the mover seek out the contact out of a personal need or desire? This is one area where it is important to make the sometimes subtle distinction between truly authentic movement—being moved by the body—versus having a “good idea” or following one’s desires.

At the end of the open circle movement, a witness rings a bell to signal the transition. Movers in the space slowly bring their movement to a close, and return to the edges of the space. All the members then sprout, raising their arms and making eye contact with one another, reaffirming the strength of the container and honoring the open space.

At this point, there are a couple of options for how to proceed. The group leader can suggest that everyone take some time—usually, 10 minutes—to draw or write. Or, the group can go right into a sharing circle.

Typically, movers share first—witnesses may only share about a mover they observed after that mover has spoken. If a mover has chosen not to speak, the witness can

ask permission if it's OK to share about that mover's movement. As when working one-to-one, movers and witnesses share their own experience, witnesses making clear in how they speak that their experience is subjective.

It is also helpful to be aware of the use of language when sharing in a group context. The mover may not be ready to have her movement singled out and described with a group listening, or to have her movement framed by another's language. It is preferable when offering witnessing not to refer to the mover by name, but instead to say "a mover"—e.g., "I see a mover crawling very slowly toward the windows, and suddenly finding another mover's leg blocking the way."

A group of movers meeting for a weekend workshop or retreat can experiment with a variety of different forms, as described earlier. One good way to begin is using the open circle format, moving in silence. As the weekend progresses, the group can begin to add in sound, and the amount of physical contact will often naturally increase as participants grow more comfortable with one another.

Other Approaches to Authentic Movement

Image-Story-Image

This Insight Improvisation exercise is a fun way to introduce authentic movement in a group setting by combining it with storytelling. It also is a helpful bridge between moving silently and the activities we'll be introducing later in this book that incorporate speaking and enactment into one's movement.

Moving. The first part of the exercise is a 15-minute group authentic movement, with the facilitator as the sole witness, divided into three five-minute phases.

Phase I—Opening to the Body and Movement. Invite participants to enter the space and find a position to start in, close their eyes, and take a moment of mindful attention to breathe and become aware of the senses, before beginning to follow their body and how it would like to move. (*Add a safety reminder to open eyes slightly when moving rapidly or through the space to avoid collisions: “You are responsible for your own safety and the safety of others.”*) If participants are new to authentic movement, provide guidance about opening up to movement impulse, allowing the body to lead rather than the mind. Allow the group to move in silence for five minutes.

Phase II—Awareness of Inner Imagery. At the beginning of phase two, add an instruction: “As you continue to move, begin to notice any image or picture arising in your movement. What does this body position or movement remind you of? Feel free to explore this image through your movement. At any time, you can let the image go, and just come back to following your body. Then another image or picture may arise.”

Phase III—Awareness of Memories. After another five minutes, introduce phase three: “As you continue your movement, begin to notice what memories may arise as you move, particularly memories from childhood. Notice what childhood memory this body position or movement reminds you of. You can explore this memory through your movement. Feel free to let the memory go at any time and return to simply following the body. Once you do so, another memory may arise. We’ll move for five more minutes.”

After fifteen minutes, say: “Slowly, in your own time, begin to bring your movement to a close..... Then take a moment in stillness, with your eyes still closed, to relax, breathe, and notice how you feel. Let the last memory or image go, and just come back to how your body feels, right now. Take a deep breath, relax, stretch, yawn—whatever you need to do to transition. When you are ready, you can open your eyes.”

Sharing in pairs/trios. Afterwards, have participants meet in groups of two or three to share their experience of the movement. Invite them to begin by sharing one image (from phase two), one memory (from phase three), and then end by sharing the image again. Demonstrate how you would like them to share:

“When sharing the image, physically recreate the image as well as describe the image in a word or phrase, aloud. For example, if my image were pulling on a rope attached to a bell in a tower, I might go like this”—mime pulling on a rope, repeatedly, with your whole body engaged—“and say ‘Pulling... Pulling...’”—speaking with the effort of pulling. “When you share your childhood memory, tell the story as if it’s happening right now. Act it out. Use present tense. For example:

‘I’m in the schoolyard. Big field of grass before me. Soccer goals in the distance. We’re playing a game. King of the hill. Mark is on top of the dirt hill. I run up. Try to push him off. He won’t budge. He pushes back. I fall. Land on the ground. I’m dirty. Dirty.’

When you’d done sharing your story, return to your image, once again physicalizing it and speaking the word or phrase: ‘Pulling. Pulling.’ Before you break out of the final image, take a moment to pause and breathe in the pose, then relax.”

“Begin by sharing this image-story-image with your partner(s). Note that the image and the story do not need to be consciously related to one another—although your partners may discover some relationship between the two. In any remaining time, you can receive their feedback as well as share more about your experience of the authentic movement as a whole. Feel free to share other feelings, images, or memories that came up during the movement. I will ring a bell when it’s the next person’s turn to share.” Give five to ten minutes for each person to share in the small groups.

Sharing as a group. Once everyone has shared in small groups, invite the whole group to come together in a circle, and provide time for any who wish to share their image-story-image with the whole group:

“This is a chance to share with all of us the essence of what happened during your movement—by sharing one image and one story, using the ‘sandwich’ structure of image-story-image. A little coaching up front:

Go back inside. “See if you can recall the original experience you had during your authentic movement of that image and that memory. Feel free to close your eyes, and take your time to get into each physical position you were in.”

Not a performance—an exploration. “Know that this version will not be the same as before, especially doing it in front of a larger group. So, see what happens in the present and let yourself follow that impulse. Let go of the idea that this is a performance. Your job is to simply relive and explore that image and that memory as fully as possible, letting that experience affect you physically, vocally, and emotionally. We, as witnesses, will get what we get—you do not need to entertain or impress us.”

Discover what’s unexpected. “This exercise is about not knowing, not controlling, while learning in the moment, so please allow the unexpected to happen. For example, the way you do the image the second time may be affected by the childhood memory. It may be subtly different, or very different.

Use pausing and breathing to transition. “Finally, begin and end with a ‘vertical moment,’ a chance to pause, breathe, and go inside. Take your time. Do not break out of the final image immediately; instead, hold the final pose for a few beats before relaxing and opening your eyes.”

The Lenses of Awareness

Earlier we mentioned the many channels through which the witness is aware—including their perception of the mover through sight and sound, their interpretation of the movement, and their perception of themselves during the movement.

Alton Wasson, a longtime teacher of contemplative dance, describes (2007) the different kinds of awareness or perspectives the witness can bring as a “chest of drawers”—each drawer containing a different way of viewing what is happening right now: the physical, the emotional, the spiritual, the animal, the archetypal, the artistic, etc..

The mover’s inner witness has the same chest of drawers or set of lenses through which she can view what is unfolding in her movement. These lenses begin with the six sense doors—the five senses plus mind objects—but also can include myriad other ways of seeing, experiencing, and interpreting her movement.

In this exercise, witness and mover are invited to focus on one specific channel of information—one specific lens—both during the movement as well as in the sharing process.

For example, if the category chosen were “Physical Movement,” each would focus exclusively on bodily movement. For the mover this means noticing every detail of how her body is positioned and travels through space; for the witness this means confining his observations purely to movement which can be seen objectively, without interpretation—e.g., “I see your head move down as your hands become fists,” rather than “I see you curl up in anger” or “I see you as a cave-man about to fight” (the first is a physical description, the second describes emotion, and the third a role).

If the category were “Sensation,” each would focus on opening to the five senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. For the mover, this might include not only noticing the movement of a limb but also the *feeling* of that movement—the slow stretching of muscle underneath the arm, the soft texture of shirt sleeve against skin, the cool of the floor against the back of the hand, etc. It can also include sounds, smells, etc., occurring in the space, or coming from outside (e.g., the distant sound of church bells). For the witness, there are two aspects to sensation—his own raw sensation (what am I, the witness, seeing, hearing, etc.), as well as his projection, guess, or empathy with what the mover may be sensing, e.g., “As you arch your back into a stretch, I imagine you feel a delicious ache and then relief in your shoulders and neck.”

There are different ways to approach the “Lenses” exercise. Mover and witness can agree beforehand on a single, shared focus, or alternatively, each can choose something different—with or without first telling the other (the secret is revealed in the sharing process). When practicing in a group, the facilitator can suggest a progression of lenses that the entire group uses in a series of shorter-than-normal rounds of movement and witnessing (e.g., allocating five minutes of movement and five of witnessing, focused only on awareness of sound; then five/five on emotion; etc.). Or, different lenses could be written on pieces of paper and picked at random from a hat by each pair or each person—see chart below for ideas.

Lenses Of Awareness

- This is not an exhaustive list—feel free to add your own categories!
- For witness, lenses can be dual: “my __ & what I perceive of the mover’s __.”
- *Idea: Cut this table up and put categories in a hat to pull from at random.*

<i>metaphor & image</i>	<i>archetype & role</i>	<i>use of space</i>	<i>shape</i>
<i>emotion</i>	<i>plot & story</i>	<i>speed & rhythm</i>	<i>time</i>
<i>thought</i>	<i>pain & pleasure</i>	<i>sound</i>	<i>breath</i>
<i>spontaneity & creativity</i>	<i>relationship to environment</i>	<i>animal nature</i>	<i>energy</i>
<i>beauty & ugliness</i>	<i>music</i>	<i>tension & relaxation</i>	<i>conflict</i>

Moving Alone and Together

Although the classic form of authentic movement—a mover and witness alone in a space together—is the most powerful way to experience the practice initially, there are many other uses of authentic movement, applications that break out of the standard structure.

Moving alone. Once one has gained experience with an external witness, one's inner witness may be strong enough to do authentic movement alone, without a witness. This can be a helpful and healing practice, especially in those moments in life when one can benefit from being able to stretch out, breathe, and let the body express how it really feels.

Working in my home office, I often find it beneficial when taking breaks to close my eyes for a moment and follow my body, listening to what it wants and needs. Sometimes it wants to collapse to the floor, my forehead to the carpet, and my back stretched in a way that I do not get to do when at my computer. Other times it needs to move rapidly, to dance.

At night, if I have trouble falling asleep, my first choice is to roll up my bed pillow and sit in meditation. But sometimes my body is restless, my legs need to move, and so I choose to mindfully follow the body, breaking out of the meditation posture and entering into authentic movement. Often I'll move for a few minutes, only to find that the body naturally returns to stillness in a new position. At this point I am usually drowsy and can drift off to sleep.

As a theater artist, I have used solo authentic movement when developing my one-man shows, as a way to enter an improvisatory, creative mindset, following my body and allowing characters and scenes to develop spontaneously.

Later, as a drama therapist developing Insight Improvisation techniques, I began to practice authentic movement as a prelude to doing psolodrama alone, without a witness. (*See Part III, the chapter entitled “Psolodrama Alone” for more on this approach.*)

Moving together. When meeting with a partner to do peer work using any of the exercises in this book, it can be beneficial to include a period of movement as part of the warm up (usually following a check-in and some meditation). It’s particularly helpful to do authentic movement for this activity, but instead of taking turns witnessing, to simply allow for a period of “Simultaneous Authentic Movement” (SAM) with no witness. This allows each person to become completely present to their body and what they need, and to begin to enter the flow of being moved. Doing so prior to other exercises—such as witnessing one another in the progression from authentic movement to psolodrama—is an ideal preparation. SAM not only allows the body to stretch, yawn, etc.—providing an opportunity for some of the stress of the day to melt away and the mask of the social self to dissolve—it also offers the mover the opportunity to notice how she feels within herself, without the gaze of the witness.

A few guidelines and tips for SAM:

Timing. Decide in advance on timing: how long should we move? Set a timer to go off automatically so neither person needs to consult a clock during the movement.

Sound. Also: decide on a ground rule for using sound. One nice approach is to start with silent movement and allow sound beginning midway through, e.g.,

if the warm-up is ten minutes, allow sound beginning at the five-minute mark. This provides each mover a space to arrive fully in the movement and be present, before hearing the other's (and emitting their own) sighs, grunts, hums, etc. Typically, speaking actual words is prohibited during SAM.

Physical Interaction. Also agree on a rule for physical contact. For those new to authentic movement, having a period to warm up and experience their own body without physical interaction is usually preferred. More experienced movers may be very comfortable with contact as it occurs spontaneously in the movement—this could be called “Simultaneous *Interactive* Authentic Movement,” or SIAM. If you'd like to experiment with this form, agree on timing in advance with your partner, e.g. by allowing five minutes of SAM followed by five minutes of SIAM.

Final Thoughts

Authentic movement is an approach of great depth, power, and mystery, both a therapeutic approach and a personal practice. As a form of therapy, it provides a way without words to access and explore what is stored in the body, the memory, and the unconscious.

Insight Improvisation builds on authentic movement by providing ways to begin with this wordless, physical exploration, but then add words (in **shared vipassana**), roles (in the **role stream**), and enactment (in **scene stream** and **psolodrama**) to take the exploration in new directions.

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Additional Resources

Pallaro, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Authentic movement: essays by Mary Starks Whitehouse, Janet*

Adler, and Joan Chodorow. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.

[Essential writings of the creators of authentic movement.](#)

Journal of Authentic Movement & Somatic Inquiry —

<http://www.authenticmovementjournal.com>

Collected writings, interviews, and other material from the authentic movement community. One excellent example, a discussion with Alton Wasson and Aileen Crow about the witness role and projection, is here:

<http://www.authenticmovementjournal.com/?p=794>