

"Trauma: Dancing for Soul Retrieval" from *Dance: The Sacred Art: The Joy of Movement as a Spiritual Practice*

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A friend moved to Asia for her husband's work and went through a lengthy process of grief, deeply missing the nourishment of her community. Depleted, she mourned, "I miss the days when I had boundless energy and felt that I had much to offer friends and students. I miss being able to openly love. Sometimes I lie awake anxious about our unknown future. I cry and mourn my losses in those wee hours, wanting some of what used to be, friends who understand and can hug me tightly. I miss unashamed laughing and crying body to body. I've learned the body of a closed person. I long for joy, contentment, a sense of well-being, but I fear they're gone, something of my past, packed away like all the things I long to hold." My friend didn't recognize who she'd become, and neither did I.

Most of us encounter this kind of loss at some time in our lives. When we suffer accidents, deaths of friends or loved ones, injuries, or abuses, life can feel profoundly unsafe. Parts of us are likely to "give up" on staying present and move off to a hidden place. Our body offers this solution in graciousness. Unable to integrate trauma, our vulnerable parts, such as our confidence or calm, depart and leave a gaping hole.

When we experience overwhelming grief, violence, or shock, it is common to lose heart, lose our mind, and lose basic parts of our soul. We get psychically winded as life's abruptness knocks more than breath out of our body. People tell stories of feeling suspended outside or above their body. Psychology calls this experience "disassociation." When it feels permanent, healers call it soul loss.

Soul loss, an extreme defense mechanism of our bodyspirit, is a form of self-protection that freezes, contracts, or removes entire parts of consciousness in ways that even therapists struggle to help. Loss of energy, focus, passion, joy—and the classic feeling of a hole in our chest—are common indicators of soul loss. In these situations it is too difficult for us to operate as our own healer and make ourselves feel safe. Much like surgery, soul retrieval requires therapeutic levels of wisdom and support from those familiar with the language and communication patterns of the soul: imagination, imagery, and myth. Jungian therapists know this is where soul conversations take place.

In *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self*, Sandra Ingerman tells us that "in shamanic cultures people who suffered traumas were given a soul retrieval within three days after a

trauma occurred.” The healer would pray through dance, sound, and drumming and would journey into the spiritual realms in search of the person’s lost part. Accepting the imaginal realm as real, the healer was often able to find and negotiate a reunion with the personas that were hiding.

The word shamanic doesn’t actually refer to a person or belief system but to the practice of communicating with the spirit world. Shaman comes from the Tungus root s̃a, meaning “to know.” True healers need to know the soul, understand the way the imagination works, have ethical and consistent practices, and know themselves. Those with healing knowledge respect movement’s role in recovery processes. Movement directs both healers and clients to inner authority and acts like a “healing water gushing up to eternal life.”

Anthropologist Angeles Arrien found that, around the world, indigenous healers often asked suffering people, “When did you stop dancing? When did you stop telling your story? When did you stop singing your song? When did you lose your ability to simply be on the earth with joy?” The disappearance of these behaviors, once so integral to everyday community life, would have made it easier to diagnose the situation that caused the soul loss. The trauma would have been close to a time when the afflicted person lost her desire to sing, dance, talk, rest, or offer physical intimacy. Once the situation was clarified, the healer could facilitate a ritualized reunion of body and soul, using the elements of movement, shaking, rhythmic incantations, chant, word, image, air, breath, fire, and aroma. Working their imaginal muscles into trance states, they could set about reinvigorating the hurting person’s appetite for moving, singing, and wholeness.

Today, even with all our science and medicine, other modes of healing don’t replace imagination and dance as healing processes. Though we might not have access to a shaman in our contemporary society, some people have developed similar skillfulness and shamanlike bodies of knowledge.

At the Trauma Center in Boston, expressive art therapists work with the idea that “people need a physical experience that directly contradicts the helplessness and sense of defeat associated with the trauma.” Founder and director Dr. Bessel van der Kolk suggests, “Imagining new possibilities, not merely repetitively retelling the tragic past, is the essence of post-traumatic therapy.” Susan’s story appeared in the Oakland Tribune in an article titled “Trauma Survivors Change Lives through a Dance Revolution.” Hit by a car, she endured numerous operations before she joined a dance therapy program. Even though she had steel rods in her body, dancing for her was transformative. She

said, "I didn't know I could do this. I can dance. My fear has turned into movement." She regained her feeling of joy and confidence in her body in spite of the outcome of her accident.

In written correspondence, movement therapist Betsey Beckman spoke about creativity in spiritual direction and the powerful role of the guide:

Creative modalities can be deep enough to speak the truth in symbolic and artistic ways, but the next step is for those expressions to be received and honored. When the truth is received within the therapeutic-spiritual direction relationship, the possibility of right relationship with the other and with God can begin to grow. The therapist or spiritual director can model and embody the possibility of a God who cares enough to be present to the healing journey in a world which includes deep human suffering.

Through this process, as a sense of well being and energetic flow are restored within the survivor, possibilities of connection, soul, receptivity, relationship and spirit open.

You cannot perform a soul retrieval on yourself. In my own experience I wouldn't have the wholeness I have without the knowledgeable support of trained and indigenous healers who helped retrieve parts of me that were lost. Watching them dance on my behalf, I experienced immediate physical shifts. I felt their surpluses of objectivity, energy, and lightness. What a relief when they focused on my needs for a short time. These dancers were like angels.

Just as we don't perform surgeries or organ transplants on our own bodies, recovering lost pieces of our soul requires support. Someone in extreme distress needs an assistant, a guide committed to maintaining her own soul strength, someone who can call on the Divine and fearlessly intervene in imaginal realms. The soul-retrieval process requires training and dedication to the healing process. A good guide is committed to helping a survivor prepare in advance as well as follow up afterwards.

While we may not have the training to be able to offer soul retrievals, we can do one thing communities have always done for those who are traumatized: We can dance on their behalf. Just as we would if someone were hospitalized, by dancing on behalf of a person's wholeness, we can imagine and communicate our hope and confidence for healing. We can pray for her and embody the wholeness that we want for her.

Part of the mystery of prayer is knowing that we are powerless and that, as dancers, we seek intervention from a greater source. When we dance on someone else's behalf, one gift we give is our faith, offered in a dance with love. This does not require

great dancing or great dances. Our role is not to try to heal the person or to heap his concerns on our shoulders. Our act of dancing on someone else's behalf is an act of giving him over to the care of God. When I do this, I imagine my pictures of concern creased into the focused place between my eyes. Releasing them up in the air, I take a deep breath and shake out attempts to understand or help. My only job is to dance for him and myself, to take care, to enjoy myself, and to place him in God's hands.

I was initially surprised at people's willingness to dance on behalf of others. Ironically, many find it easier to dance for others than for themselves. In a large assembly I attended, worship planners had fashioned a service that gave people simultaneous access to multiple forms of prayer. Children and adults offered spoken prayers into a microphone. People lit candles. Some sang songs. Musicians played on instruments. Healing stations offered "laying on of hands." Dancers offered movement prayers onstage; thirty or more of us danced on behalf of the collective concerns as they were voiced. The spirit in the room was palpable. This group of normally rational religious folk hardly recognized themselves. Afterwards, many said that it was the most powerful experience of prayer they'd ever had. I invite you to give this movement form of intercessory prayer a try.

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