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# Nature connectedness and the Discipline of Authentic Movement

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## ABSTRACT

This article follows a path linking the discipline of authentic movement with Nature connectedness. This deep empathic practice seeks to change empathy from the interpersonal solely to an interspecies dialogue, cultivating a shift from human-focussed to an earthly perspective of the world. It offers the author's reflections and examples from practice of an adapted model of the discipline of authentic movement which employs the roles of witness and mover outdoors to cultivate opportunities to experience participatory knowing from, and with, the more-than human world. There are enormous challenges to be met by the human species in the face of the climate catastrophe. This proposed creative, enactive, embodied, embedded model is another way to promote Nature connectedness to develop an ecological self which recognizes an ethical responsibility for the planet and its interdependence with humans.

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## Introduction

*Heaven's Wife*

We are called by drums  
to move outside  
to hear tambourines sing  
of colours within  
for the pulse of our planet

of gathering moments  
we sing for the days  
that lay ahead  
for the airs of flesh  
unite us now;

*(continued)*

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has rhythms that cry  
 out to our hearts  
 in this moving time  
 where evening fires  
 warm without  
 as the airs of flesh  
 unite us now;  
 we play with the pounding  
 echoes that shift  
 and skip to the pace  
 of quivering heat  
 as crackling flames  
 join in the beat  
 for we meet  
 at a time  
 when our notes  
 sing sweet  
 as the airs of flesh  
 unite us now;  
 so, we sing for the horses  
 at ease in the meadow  
 we sing for the trees  
 dressed in their best  
 we sing for the sun  
 to accompany her journey  
 we sing for the joy

and some of us sit  
 to consume the views  
 to take in the humour  
 of every mood  
 while some of us dance  
 in the evening light  
 to revel in the motion  
 of heaven's wife  
 as we greet  
 this mother earth  
 for the airs of flesh  
 unite us now;  
 and the body of ground  
 beneath our feet  
 connects our breathing  
 with every beat  
 as voices merge  
 with blending themes  
 to join the streams  
 that  
 flow in the past  
 flow in the present  
 flow in the future's waiting  
 where  
 the airs of flesh  
 unite us now (AM Circle outdoors, Bracegirdle, 2021).

This article provides an overview of the Discipline of Authentic Movement (AM) (Adler, 2002) as integrated with, and applied to, deep ecology to support connectedness with Nature leading towards the development of an ecological self. In doing so, it can create a way of growing individual's ethical responsibility for the climate catastrophe by healing the dissociation between humans and the 'more-than-human world' (Abram, 1996).

The author's practice of the Discipline of AM (Payne, 2006) (a method employed in dance movement psychotherapy), is informed both by her teacher Janet Adler, whose approach cultivates the spiritual self as well as the author's background, in, for example, Buddhism, integrative psychotherapy, and group analysis. The author was privileged to grow up on a farm in the English countryside, has trained in, and pursued, a range of outdoor activities throughout her life and has been fortunate to have always maintained a strong connection with sentient beings and the more-than-human world. The practice encompasses an embodied, enactive, relational, creative arts model within an eco-psychotherapy perspective (Chalquist, 2009) i.e., recognising the connectivity between the individual bodymind and the wider body of the earth.

The proposed model described here, (examples taken from training group work with members full acknowledgement), aims to bring AM circle members into closer relationship with the natural environment. The article proposes how AM can raise a greater awareness of the more-than-human-world and its inter-connectivity with humans.

## The Discipline of Authentic Movement

Authentic Movement was described as movement-in-depth in the 1950s by Mary Starks Whitehouse (1999a), who was influenced by Eastern philosophy/practices and the Jungian concept of active imagination. It was further developed by her student and dance therapist Chodorow (1991) as a way of evoking dream states whilst awake. Active imagination is a state in which fantasies from the unconscious are followed, for example exploring images, sensations, feelings or narratives giving access to disconnected fragments of the psyche leading to integration. The experience of the 'other' develops within deep embodied, kinaesthetic empathy in the mover-witness relationship.

The mystical/spiritual orientation of the practice developed by another of Mary's students Adler (1995, 2022) and her student Stromsted (2009) who have written on the transpersonal, divine or archetypal wisdom beyond words in which numinous encounters in altered states of consciousness shift awareness to something beyond, and more than the self. Movers may dis-identify from the personal to experience states of 'being moved' (Whitehouse, 1999b, p. 47), impulses to move arising from cultural or the collective unconscious (Chodorow, 1999; Stromsted, 2009, 2019). Payne (2006) elaborates on how AM connects with 'trancing' citing Chodorow (1997, 2003) in which the self-hypnotic trance state offers a third person perspective providing access to, and activating, the personal somatic unconscious through implicit dream-like memories. Life forms can be seen arising from the collective unconscious such as aspects of Nature being metamorphosed as in the shape shifting of the Shaman. It is often the speaking witness who offers the necessary symbols to the mover as a context for the individual or collective unconscious embodied (Payne, 2003, 2006). Whitehouse writes:

Each contact was an existential moment [...] consisting of I and Thou and a third element—that which is between us, that which is not mine, though I am in it, and not yours, though you are in it [...] When this third element is present, the movement takes on simplicity and inevitability" (Whitehouse, 1999c, p. 62).

Transpersonal states have been described as emerging from, and within, the relational connections between mover and witness as well as between movers where separation between self and other dissolves (Adler, 1999; Bull, 2007; Chodorow, 1999). This phenomenological understanding offers a philosophical perspective of the potential transpersonal characteristic of moving and witnessing and has been linked to ecopsychology (Fisher, 2006). Merleau-Ponty and C (2002) proposes this as another way of understanding the body in which psychological processes are created from bodily states. On this view the brain is acknowledged to be within the body rather than directing it in the context of where action is created (Michalak et al.,

2009). Bodily systems provide information for perceiving, recognising and interpreting an emotion and bodily states effect the processing of emotional information as can be seen when different postures release distinct emotional experiences (Shafir, 2015).

Payne (2006) describes the AM ground form, its variations, roles, group process and the collective body for AM in groupwork showing how it can foster wellbeing for the bodymindspirit. The ground form consists of a dyad – a mover who makes eye contact with a witness then enters a clear space to wait for an impulse to move (or not) with eyes closed for a pre-determined duration held by the witness. The witness sits still and tracks their internal experiences such as kinaesthetic impulses (which are not enacted), feelings, images, thought/stories and sensations whilst tracking the mover's overt actions/sounds etc. The impact these have on their internal world will be shared with the mover later if the mover speaks of those movements/sounds. Following the mover's return to the speaking witness she reports her experience ensuring the significant movement-moments are communicated with any accompanying thoughts, feelings images or sensation. She can then request witnessing. The witness recalls those movements mentioned and her experience in their presence. If she did not see them, she cannot offer witnessing. She owns her projections and interpretations. She is a benign presence for her mover. There follows a shared dialogue in which the mover accepts, or not, the witnessing leading to a unitive or differentiated experience. There may be a transition time following the mover's return in which mark making, writing, or clay sculpting can take place as a bridge between moving and speaking for both mover and witness.

The creative arts therapies (of which dance movement psychotherapy is one) have been actively involved in supporting the evolving change in the collective (Atkins & Snyder, 2018), for example, adapting clinical practice to include nurturing the relationship and engaging creatively with the natural environment (Kopytin, 2021; Nash, 2020). Artistic engagement and reflective self-attention with Nature has been suggested as key to building a new relationship with Nature (Richardson & Sheffield, 2015).

By cultivating interdependence through participatory somatic awareness of embedment, of being in, and living through embodied reciprocity with the animal and plant kingdoms there is an argument for employing embodied, mindful, inner witnessing in an adaptation of AM to support and enhance Nature connectedness and the development of a mindful, spiritual, ecological self. It is proposed that experiential, creative and embodied practices within an ecological framework have a role in the development of an ecological self which can bring about increased ethical responsibility.

## Nature connectedness

According to deep ecology (Naess, 1973), the self should be understood as deeply connected to Nature, as a part of it as opposed to separate from it. Deep ecologists often call that conception of human Nature the 'ecological self' (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Matthews, 2021; Sessions, 1995), and it represents humans acting and being in harmony with Nature, not in opposition to it (Vining et al., 2008). Healing the earth as opposed to destroying it by a collective unconsciousness (Aizenstat, 1995). The climate catastrophe highlights the need to take responsibility for the interdependence between human beings and Nature if we are to save humanity from extinction.

The challenge of the climate catastrophe is often presented as an issue for scientists and policymakers making it easy for the human collective to remain disconnected. Human suffering can be viewed as intertwined with the suffering of the larger Earth community, and/or as alienation from the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). There is a collective guilt, grief and/or denial for our actions/inaction causing an environmental despair (Macy, 1995) and referred to as eco-sorrow by Orbach and Extinction Rebellion (2019). It is suggested here that if humans do not respect and protect biodiversity and wild animals, they may cease to exist. UK activist and conservationist, Jane Goodall (2021) states that a biocentric perspective is to live in greater harmony with the natural world and that every individual can make a positive change through consumer action, lifestyle change and activism. Ecology needs to come before economy – there cannot be a healthy economy without a healthy ecology suggests Goodall (2021). This requires collaboration, sharing of resources and wealth across the globe to address the inequalities and threats to our home, this planet.

Lumber et al. (2018) call for further empirical studies after finding that Nature connectedness may result from specific interactions with Nature within several pathways. These include engaging the senses and noting Nature through artistry both of which, they claim, have implications for the creation and maintenance of Nature connectedness and interventions to increase that connectedness for individuals with a weak connection. Mackay and Schmitt (2019) in a meta-analysis suggest that Nature connection is a promising avenue for promoting pro-environmental behaviour.

Referring to the practice of psychotherapy Harris (2018) acknowledges the central role of the therapeutic relationship and found working outdoors marked the entry into a liminal or transitional space that facilitated psychological healing. He suggests there are implications for the psychodynamic model of transference (unconscious affect from one is transferred to another) based on dualistic ontology. He reframes transference as a local environment "becoming 'a world which speaks' to the client" acknowledging that "client and place are 'intermingled such that they 'constitute a new

whole' (Merleau-Ponty & C, 2002:13)" (Harris, 2018, p.44). Healing this disconnection involves remembering, re-connecting, and re-associating through re-placing our human selves within the larger place of the more-than-human world. Eco-psychotherapy (Rust, 2020) practices offer clients opportunities to explore relationships with Nature (Burns, 2012) and to heal the mind (Rozak et al., 1995).

Rather than the web of life being taken as a set of objective entities and processes, Merleau-Ponty and C (2002) believed it is the biosphere as lived from within (the lived body). Humans inhabit the body of the earth just as they dwell in their bodies. He proposed that the more this intertwined relationship between human and the natural world becomes a two-way dialogue the more recognition there will be there is some of us in Nature and some of Nature in us. He invites us to listen to what speaks to us from Nature. People can develop an identity of an embodied, ecological self by fostering this listening by being present to the here and now experience. As a result, compassion, consciousness (state of awareness), cognisance (taking notice of) and conscience (a moral sense of right and wrong) can combine to lead to ethical responsibility. Authentic Movement offers opportunities for developing presence, by re-associating with the more-than-human world.

Expanding the sense of self while becoming aware of this connection and interdependence between self and Nature and experiencing the impact on the body from the more-than-human world, may generate greater knowledge in how to live in, and relate to, the earth which sustains all sentient beings. It may lead to more humans becoming ethically responsible contributing to slowing down climate change through ecologically ethical decision-making and possibly helping to prevent another pandemic. Hasbach (2015) notes the challenge of climate change requires a fundamental reorientation of our relationship with the Earth and those who share it. This change requires an alteration in consciousness, from viewing the world as an object ripe for exploitation and a resource to be plundered to knowing and living a deep interconnection with all that is. This awareness might enable greater respect for the animal/plant worlds, cultivating eco-systems rather than destroying them, reducing climate change and possibly opportunities for future pandemics to flourish. In nourishing and protecting the natural environment there is nourishment and protection of humans.

Jordan (2014) proposed the natural world can become a co-therapist offering an invitation to animation and connection with the more-than-human world, i.e., an increased intersubjectivity. There is an earnestness to enhance our embodied awareness of living within a complex ecosystem. Eco-psychotherapists regard human suffering as intertwined with the

suffering of the larger Earth community as opposed to a mutual dis-ease rooted in people's 'dissociative alienation' (Metzner, 1995, p. 64) from the Earth and all thereon. However, by cultivating awareness of this interdependence and our 'ecological selves' (Naess, 1995, p. 226; Totton, 2003) perhaps an improved relationship can take place for both humans and the Earth.

Working outdoors can also be a remedy for the restrictions and fatigue-making of online worlds and offers opportunities for, and just being with, wide, open attention, with less direction and dependence on verbalising (Marshall, 2020). There are additional experiences outdoors to feel alive in our bodies, for example, the sensation of cold, frosty air on skin, hot sun on backs, wind buffeting hair etc. and to relate to, and witness, Nature, whereby a greater participatory knowing and intersubjectivity can enhance our embodied awareness of living within a complex ecosystem.

### **Authentic movement adapted for the outdoors**

Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty have been found to be pathways to Nature connection (Lumber et al., 2017). The Discipline of AM, adapted to the outdoors and Nature, has the potential to foster an ecological self through: a) cultivating connection and contact though noticing, b) providing reflective self-attention and compassion (including self-compassion), c) acknowledging repressed emotions with compassion, d) making meaning from the experiences of moving and witnessing in Nature, e) promoting a sense of aesthetics, beauty and wellbeing and the auto-regulation of emotions any of which can lead to transpersonal experiences, and f) connecting to one's own body in Nature to create more connectivity.

When referring to AM embodiment is defined as the active, engaged process of sensory awareness of being in, and living through, the subjective body interacting with having a body (Husserl, 1989). Embodiment can also involve cultivating somatic awareness of being in, and living through, embodied reciprocity with the more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). Participating in embodied relationships with Nature (Burns, 2012) through AM can evoke a felt sense of one's ecological self and spirituality. Humans know their bodies only in relation to other bodies and that these 'others' include cawing crows, drifting clouds, reaching poplar trees, soaring kites, running hares and breaking waves.

The aim of the AM Discipline is to cultivate, through the practice of presence, an awareness of embodiment and embeddedness to foster transformation to ecological consciousness (O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004; Mest, 2008). Through empathic experiences during AM emerges an embodied, ecological self, involving relational skills that nourish reciprocal connections



with parts and wholes of ecological systems. This can be viewed as participatory knowing which requires receptivity, creativity, being authentically present in the moment, embodied, somatically engaged, and physically and energetically open to change i.e., knowledge is alive/enactive (Ferrer, 2002), and is interspecies (shared amongst all sentient beings). Participatory knowing, or consciousness, involves active engagement in reciprocal, co-creative happenings of making contact (Abram, 2010) and occurs in dialogue, i.e., an event in which one participates rather than within the confines of the intra-subjective world solely. The embodied experience of participatory knowing can be understood as kinaesthetic empathy, a felt sense of reciprocity, and somatic resonance vibrating between bodies.

Sensory perception, as employed in AM, is dynamic, an exchange between sensing and the sensed, both engaged, responsive, alive, and animate. Sensing bodies are 'open circuits' (Abram, 1996, p. 62) that complete in other beings as the act of ecological perception occurs (Sewall, 1995). As Goldhahn (2003) notes, observing Nature, and employing elements of the Discipline of AM can offer opportunities to engage in this sort of sensory perception within an embodied relationship with other movers and witnesses, expanding capacities for empathy with environments/organisms, creative intuition and awareness of projections.

Although AM is traditionally practiced between humans, in the author's AM practice and training the rural setting affords members to engage in an adapted format with the sentient world and Nature (outdoors with trees, vegetation, animals etc) both as movers and as witnesses. The human witness and/or the selected 'other' - be it sentient being or an element of Nature - complete each other in the exchange between mover and witness.

Indoors, in the studio movers also engage in numerous imaginative, embodied relationships with Nature, for example, embodying 'as if' animals, beings in water, digging into and being buried in the earth and so on. "Owning up to being an animal, a creature of the earth ... this huge wind-swept body of water and stone. This vexed being in whose flesh we're entangled. Becoming earth. Becoming animal. Becoming in this manner, fully human" (Abram, 2010, p.3). Here a mover writes of her experience in the presence of witnesses:

### *Changing*

Curving round  
on the floor  
crossing legs  
feeling bound  
around the room  
listening

concentrating  
 breathing  
 changing  
 suckers for fingers  
 suction to the floor  
 pull round  
 this cold body  
 this slithering reptile  
 marking territory (AM circle indoors, Christina Bracegirdle, circa: 2015).

One way to practice opening the door into Nature as a witness is detailed below as a first-person example:

As a witness I allow myself with eyes open to be drawn to the other in Nature, for example, a tree, flower/plant or animal and for a pre-arranged duration pay kind, non-judgemental attention to the 'other' and be present to my own experience whilst in its presence. I notice what happens in my body, any movement impulse, sound, sensation, thoughts/story, images, associations, memories, feelings. At the end of the time duration, I can make gesture(s)/postures, write, make marks, produce a collage or sculpt in clay my embodied experience. Then, I return to the group to share some experiences as a witness, verbally in the present tense and/or by showing the artefact.

To illustrate the practice of witnessing Nature herewith an example from outdoors:

### **A Flower in a Pot**

This flower is towards the end of life,  
 I become aware of my own ageing process.

It has been rained on – the petals remind me of tear puddles I notice the warm sun on my neck and feel grateful for being here

I see the flower vibrate and am reminded of the vibrations across all things

My body begins to sway in time with the movement of my flower

I notice a sparkle deep down near the red centre of my flower and feel a sense of excitement mount in my body

It is as though this is a treasure I have found, one to be honoured (outdoors, Helen Payne, 2021).

In Jungian analysis (which the author has been privileged to receive) the patient, with closed eyes, is invited to enter a fantasy and observe the evolving scene. It can materialise to afford the patient to engage in spontaneous dialogue with the imagined entities. The patient enters this imaginal world with personal responses 'as if' a reality. Similarly, a method to open the door into Nature might be to facilitate movers to be afforded the possibility of having an imaginary, spontaneous dialogue but within the reality of the more-than-human world when they move in the presence of

this silent witness. In this way Nature can become a silent witness by the mover selecting a sentient being, or a plant (as in the above poem), tree etc. with which they resonate, and moving in its presence for a pre-determined time frame, with eyes closed/half closed (i.e., an internal focus).

The mover's inner witness becomes alive to the sensations in the context in which their body moves. Participation is evident by, for example, the grass on which bare feet tread affording a different way of moving. In sensing the wind, rain, sun through their body they are moved to respond or not. The natural environment as a silent witness can provoke body-felt responses in movement which can make sense to movers and/or witnesses at the same time as bringing them into relational experiences with the more-than-human world. With reference to this, when practicing outdoors the discipline goes something like:

An invitation is offered to become a mover, to move spontaneously from an internal or external impulse with eyes closed or half closed in the presence of human witnesses and the silent witness of Nature.

The mover follows the scenarios brought about by the moving body and the environ responding in a dialogue with the movement (and sometimes with sound too). A human outer witness in silence accompanies the mover with their benign, non-judgemental attention, using kinaesthetic empathy and presence. Before beginning there is eye contact between mover/s and witnesses. The witness regards their mover with eyes open attending to their embodied response in the mover's presence, as the mover moves in their presence and that of another sentient being or aspect of Nature inside or outdoors – a silent witness. Following transition, the mover speaks in the present tense, first recalling any significant movement actions and accompanying thoughts, feelings, images, sensations etc. The mover can ask her speaking witness for witnessing which she gives in self-referential present tense language.

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***The Tree***

I move  
 shaping your growing  
 with this body's limbs  
 aware  
 of your still heart  
 watching  
 from where movement  
 cannot be seen  
 as you observe  
 this figure  
 stretching to the sky  
 reaching for heights  
 unknown to me;  
 I feel  
 the tangling expansion  
 of your branches  
 curling these arms  
 into moving echoes

I envy  
 your longevity  
 for you will be here  
 when I am gone  
 as you continue  
 to give back  
 so much more  
 than you take;  
 through decades of life  
 and still today  
 I love  
 shelter under  
 lean against  
 and admire  
 many of your race  
 while you continually witness  
 our need to care  
 for if all your kind  
 are wiped away

---

*(continued)*

of your form;  
I sense  
your search for light  
for even through  
the sleeping dark of winter  
you never bow down  
but deepen your roots  
into the warmth  
and containment of the earth;

dug up  
decimated  
we will lose our lives  
for the many gifts you give  
like the precious present  
of cool clean air  
give us  
and this planet  
life.

(AM circle outdoors, Christina Bracegirdle, 2021)

In this adapted AM format the mover speaks about their experience of moving the presence of Nature and their witness to the witness/group in the present tense. She may imagine (project onto) the more-than-human silent witness (possibly previously selected) thoughts, feelings, images, sensations this element of Nature may have evoked during her movement experience. A group member in an AM circle outdoors writes:

### ***A Breathing Circle in a Field***

*Me witnessing:*

M is leaving the circle.  
YC is lying on the Earth crying  
M is eating something or drinking

*Me as a mover:*

I enjoy the open space!  
I am cutting something, a work takes place, an agricultural work which gives me pleasure produced by the body's functioning.  
The smell of the wind,  
The horizon to look far away.  
Fulfilment.

The contact with a plant makes me think what P said to J, and I start moving, as I am the plant moved by the wind. From this swing movement I am swinging my baby as my hands become a crib, but the wind takes my baby away leaving me alone, however conscious, mindful able to witness the loss.

In the circle we receive witnessing:

M says that she sees me caring [for] something priceless and she is afraid.

M: the wind inside her hair

Y: The Earth can carry everything even my burden

M: Feelings of loneliness

Me: Nothing belongs to us. But what if for avoiding the unexpected pain of loss, I make the loss happen in order to have control?

H said about a conscious, mindful, ritualistic sacrifice!

*My drawing:* "M" a piece of matter in the water (AM circle outdoors: Bara, 2018).

## Conclusion

The proposal here is that by creating an environment in which there are pathways to Nature connectedness AM circle members can come into closer connection with the Nature. This may help to bring about increased cognisance of the urgent need to act more responsibly and mindfully in the contexts of the climate catastrophe benefiting people's wellbeing in the process. Adapting the AM to engage both the mover and witness to sensitise them to their ecological selves can be a valuable process to creating ecological empathy through relational, spiritual and eco-embodied experience. By working with individuals in groups in this way whether as psychotherapy (Payne, 2003, 2017), teaching or with creative collaborations with artists/scientists, each one of us can provide opportunities for humans to become increasingly whole and attuned to the more-than-human world, raising consciousness and healing for both the self and the planet.

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