

THE HEALING DANCE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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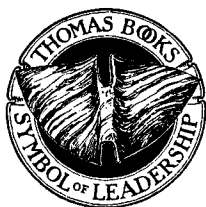
The Life and Practice of an Expressive Arts Therapist

By

KATHLEEN REA, M.A., OACCPP Cert.

With a Foreword by

Stephen K. Levine, Ph.D.



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FOREWORD

As parents, we may have the experience of suddenly looking at our child and realizing with a shock that he or she knows more than we do. This happened to me in reading Kathleen Rea's fine new book. Kathleen has taken what she learned in the training we offered her at ISIS Canada and the European Graduate School and integrated it into her own unique body-based way of doing expressive arts therapy. Her method is grounded on her own experience as a woman, as a professional dancer, and as a therapist.

One of the great strengths of the book is Kathleen's honesty and vulnerability as she writes about her own struggles. She describes her personal conflicts in a way that lets us see not only the pain she experienced but also the ways in which she found the creative resources she needed to find her way through.

We read first of the struggles that Kathleen had with her body-image as she dealt with issues of perfectionism and control. Her attempt to take charge after the chaos of her parents' divorce, combining with the strong cultural messages that are given about women's bodies, resulted in a battle between anorexia and bulimia that almost took her life.

Dance became her passion and her way to survive. From an early age, she was drawn to this mode of expression, and it ultimately became a lifeline that would lead her into a deeper and more profound relation with her own body and with the bodily basis of emotional life. At the same time, the world of ballet that was her chosen field became the demon that told her constantly that her body was not good enough and that she had to exercise greater and greater control over it. It was not until she found another way home through more expressive forms of dance, like contact improvisation, that Kathleen was able to use her body as a resource and a route to greater self-acceptance.

Finally, as a therapist, we read of Kathleen's own experiences with her clients, the ways in which, in paying attention to her own bodily sensations, she is able to find creative forms of therapeutic action that lead her clients into more fulfilling modes of expression. Kathleen's openness to her own body as well as her fine sensitivity to the bodily expressions of others are the foundations on which her therapeutic practice is built.

We can see all these realms of experience converge in the extended description of the therapeutic work she did with her client, Allen. Kathleen's own experience with bulimia gave her a special insight into Allen's addiction to food and the way he used it to give himself control over his life. At the same time, her artistic background as a dancer became a resource for the movement work she did with him. The "fussy dance" she learned in her dance work gave him the ability to go beyond the inhibitions that prevented him from engaging in bodily expression.

We also see how her training as an expressive arts therapist, her own therapy, and the experience she gained in her therapeutic practice provided not only the skills and knowledge that every therapist must have but also the conviction that the therapeutic process is possible, that beneath all our suffering is an enormous beauty waiting to be seen if we can unlock the doors that protect it from harm.

Ultimately, then, this is a book about beauty. As an artist, Kathleen knows the power of beauty as a cultural expression. Those of us who were fortunate enough to have seen her perform can testify to the beauty of her movement, the way in which her body seemed to exhibit a spiritual grace normally denied to us earth-bound mortals. But beauty for her was never about perfection of form; it always testified to an openness and honesty that is deeply emotionally touching in her work.

Similarly, the beauty that shines forth in this book does so because it is infused with love. Kathleen's therapeutic practice is grounded on the capacity to accept her clients completely for the beautifully flawed human beings that they, and we, are. Her work with them in the expressive arts is never for the sake of the art itself but for the way in which the arts can hold our beauty and show our inner light.

Reading this book, I can offer no greater tribute than to say that I wish I could have had Kathleen as my therapist. Unfortunately no matter how special we realize our children have become, they can never be the parents we wish we ourselves had. There is a time to let them go and to take satisfaction in seeing who they are. I am proud to be one of those who have helped this wonderful therapist come into the world. I hope that the reader will come away from this book with a living embodied sense not only of what it means to be an expressive arts therapist but also of how living a life based on openness and honesty can put us in touch with the beauty and love that is ultimately ours to come home to.

Stephen K. Levine

Stephen K. Levine, Ph.D., D.S.Sc., REAT, is Co-Director of ISIS Canada and Dean of the Doctoral Program in Expressive Arts at the European Graduate School. He is the author and editor of many books in the field of expressive arts therapy, including *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*, *Trauma, Tragedy, Therapy: The Arts and Human Suffering*, and, with Paolo J. Knill and Ellen G. Levine, *Principles and Practice of Expressive Arts Therapy: Towards a Therapeutic Aesthetics*.

INTRODUCTION

My expressive arts therapy studio has a wooden dance floor and enough room to move around. The view from the window is a garden, overgrown and wild. There are patterned curtains and a comfy old couch. I have taken care to make it an inviting place, as opposed to a sterile office. People say it has a cottage feel, which suits me fine. *The Healing Dance: The Life and Practice of an Expressive Arts Therapist* is inspired by what happens in this room.

My clients dance, paint, play music, sing, write poetry, and act out scenes with the intention of overcoming psychological suffering. My practice is not just for skilled artists. We are all creators who create every minute of every day through the imprint we leave on the world – every time we take a step, we create a “footprint” on the earth. I help the everyday person discover his or her creative spark, which invigorates and shines a light on the dark path ahead.

The Healing Dance portrays the theory and practice of expressive arts therapy, as seen through my eyes. I combine my experience as an expressive arts therapist, dancer, choreographer, and educator with stories from my personal life to explain this broad and sometimes confusing field of science. My aim is to be informative and engaging, but most importantly, accessible. I wrote this book for students, practitioners, and anyone curious about the enlivening power of the arts.

As a ballerina, I strived to achieve an external ideal of artistic perfection, and this led to psychological break down. Years later as a choreographer, I discovered that portraying the truth of my suffering was a healing balm. From these experiences, I learned that the arts are a powerful agent of change that can hurt as well as heal. I spend a significant portion of the book describing the conditions that help guide the creative process towards therapeutic results.

Recovery from my eating disorder inspired me to see the body not as something to be controlled, but as the source of vitality and wisdom. This led me to cultivate a style of expressive arts therapy that focuses on body awareness as the source of creative inspiration. *The Healing Dance* presents a view of expressive arts therapy in which body sensations have a central role. This

concept is not just presented as a philosophical view, but is given life through client stories and practical techniques. Using a step-by-step outline, I describe body-based expressive arts methods that I developed. I also explain techniques that enable the client to pace the intensity of his or her sensation-based therapeutic work so that it does not occur at a quicker rate than he or she is able to tolerate.

Throughout the book, I refer to theories and research in the field of neuroscience and how they may relate to expressive arts therapy. While not an exhaustive exploration of neuroscience, I offer suggestions as to why expressive arts therapy might be especially helpful in changing brain pathways.

Most art-based therapists believe in the value of maintaining their own artistic practice. Yet an artistic practice is so often sacrificed because of the time pressures of the job. For me, the two worlds of therapist and artist have become so interwoven that they are often indiscernible from one another. I would not be the therapist I am today without my dance and choreography practice, and I would not be the dancer and choreographer I am today without my therapy practice. I hope the reader comes to understand how these two worlds can support and enrich each other.¹

For me, expressive arts are not just a form of therapy, but a way of living. *The Healing Dance: The Life and Practice of an Expressive Arts Therapist* demonstrates how to access the creative spark living in one's body that has the potential to ignite a fulfilling life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have many people to thank for making this book possible. Most importantly, I could not have created this book without my clients, whose courage and creative expression have been among my greatest teachers. A special thank you to the client who inspired the “Allen” story that animates Chapters 2 and 3.

Thank you to the *Long Live* dancers who wandered into the unknown with me, and then generously hopped on board the chair-on-wheels. Your brave performance of the work gave me the chance to step back and witness it come to life. Special mentions to Suzanne Liska, who let me intermingle her own story with mine during the creative process; to Karen Kaeja for being a creative force in my work for the past ten years; and to Tom Brouillette for your eyes that so powerfully relayed to the audience the dad’s internal struggles.

I acknowledge my teachers at ISIS-Canada and European Graduate School who opened the door to the wild and powerful realm of expressive arts therapy and encouraged me to explore. A special thank you Rowesa Gordon, Steve Levine, and Ellen Levine for being supportive of my career over the past ten years. I also appreciate my time as an assistant to Janine Hancock’s arts-based supervision course at ISIS-Canada. Your seemingly fearless conviction gave me the confidence to trust the artistic process.

Thank you to Kimberly Way, Tina Chase, Maya Potter, and Ariel Brink for their valuable editorial feedback that helped the book reach the professional standard of which it was capable. I could not have completed the book without my husband, Jeff, who re-read every page ten times over, always asking me the same question: “What are you saying here?” I would tell him, and he would always respond with, “Now just write that.” With this dialogue, Jeff helped me to arrive closer to the truth of what I wanted to say. I marvel at the fact that I married a man who naturally follows the expressive arts practices of asking non-directive questions, which allow the artist to find his or her own answers.

To my son, Wyatt, whose appearance at the end of the story in Chapter 4 gave it the best ending I could have ever hoped for.

Thank you to my family, especially my mother, Olja; my stepdad Mike; and my older sister, Lovisa, for your unwavering belief in me. Thank you to my dad, Craig, for being one of my biggest inspirations. I know you are looking down from heaven, and are really proud of me for writing this book.

Thank you to Michael P. Thomas for seeing the value in *The Healing Dance*, and for guiding me through the publication process.

To ensure my clients' confidentiality, many of the descriptions of session work in this book are composites of different clients' work mixed with typical representations of what clients tend to do in Kathleen's private practice. Where a client's actual session or series of sessions has been described, all defining details have been changed and the client's permission obtained. Clients were encouraged to review their segment and approve or make changes. They were also given the option to opt out at any point in the writing process.

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THE HEALING DANCE

Chapter 1

BECOMING A THERAPIST

I absorb every detail of the swan costume pictured on the back of my Anna Pavlova record. The coffee table is pushed out of the way and a large, open carpet beckons. The house is empty – a rare occurrence. Holding the record carefully by its edges, I gently ease it onto the turntable. Like most nine-year-olds, I’m usually pretty careless with my stuff, but this feels important and worthy of care. I gingerly place the needle onto the record; a single cello note hovers. More follow. My feet start to move and my arms float upward as my body becomes light. The living room walls disappear. Warmth builds. I turn and bend and move towards something unknown. It’s risky – anything might happen. My heart feels big, like it might break into a million pieces. Goosebumps flutter up my spine as my swan wings spread and I feel air rush through my feathers. Then it hits me: a knowing that cuts through all else. I am the reincarnation of the great ballet dancer Anna Pavlova. Her love of dance lives on in me, and I am born to shine this love as bright as it will shine.

I have found the perfect hiding spot to read my book, a window ledge alcove on the third floor of the National Ballet Company rehearsal hall. Here I will be safe from the judgmental eyes of colleagues who would probably laugh at a book called *A Woman’s Worth*. The ballet world is not exactly friendly to feminists. I have a single Twizzlers candy hidden in my pocket. I slip it into my long sleeve and nibble on the end, hiding sweets like a kid even though I am twenty-four. It’s my only source of calories in a day of nothing but Diet Cokes. My shoul-

ders curl in. I have to return to rehearsal soon and the licorice feels like it has already made its way to my thighs. I dig my nails into my thighs creating large red scratches. My rehearsal mistress warned me last week about my weight.

She said, “You’re a big-chested girl, so you need to be even thinner than the other girls.” She continued, sweeping her hand over my collarbone, “I want to see more bones.”

Back in the present, from my alcove, I hear music from the studio below – Swan Lake, one of the most gruelling ballets I have ever danced. I love it and I hate it. It’s stunning, but for the *corps de ballet*, by the third act, it’s a war field of bloody toes, hunger, and exhaustion. Just getting through it gives me a similar sense of accomplishment that I imagine climbing Mount Everest would. My rehearsal starts soon. I open the book I have been holding close to my chest and read:

“What?” you say. “Me, a goddess?” Yes, I say, and don’t act so surprised. You knew when you were little that you were born for something special and that no matter what happened to you, that couldn’t be erased. The magic could not be drained from your heart. . . Sorry to tell you, but you had it right years ago, and then you forgot. You were born with a mystical purpose.²

These words are my nourishment for the day.

I lean on the arm of my chair, chosen for its comfort – an important thing for a forty-something retired dancer with achy bones.

My client asks me, “Is it really possible to get better?”

“Well, it is possible. I had an eating disorder for ten years, and today I eat whatever I want, whenever I’m hungry. And I have learned to appreciate and love my body. But I understand what you are saying. I remember thinking I would never get better.”

After a pause, I continue. “Do you remember a time when you were young? Before you started not liking your body?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

She closes her eyes. “I think I remember something . . . I am very young. My mom helped me make a suit of armour out of cardboard. I wore it the whole day. I remember feeling so proud of how I looked.”

“Can you describe that feeling?”

“Hmmm,” she pauses for a moment before continuing. “It’s hard to describe. It’s like just . . . *being* . . . with no negative thoughts getting in the way.”

“How about exploring this ‘just being’? See if you can remember what it felt like to be that knight. How did you stand? What was your expression?”

She spends a few moments trying out different postures, finally settling on a lifted chest and a beaming closed-mouth smile.

“Now just stay with this posture and explore how it feels to move about the studio. See if you can welcome the knight back into your body.”

From a wild swan girl, to an image-obsessed ballerina waif, to a guide helping others, I have experienced the healing of hearts and minds. I’ve discovered that healing does not need to be a forward progression in which we continuously improve upon ourselves. Rather, it can be a falling back into ourselves, remembering and experiencing the current of life that pulses through us. It can be a coming home.

I will now take you back to the beginning and tell the full story of how I came home to my calling as an expressive arts therapist. I will describe pivotal life experiences that influence who I am as a therapist and the understanding I harvested from each. Many of the things that happened were challenging and didn’t feel like they offered a harvest at the time. It was not until decades later that I realized how these experiences helped me understand, and have compassion for, the suffering of others. I needed to walk the path in order to be a guide for others on similar paths.

Trying to Control the Uncontrollable

My sister and I are sitting with our parents in our living room. My Dad has asked us to stop playing and listen because he has something important to tell us.

“Your mom and I are not getting along and we . . .”

Adult words swept over my five-year-old self.

My dad finished with, “. . . and so I’m moving out.”

I looked at him with disbelief. I would no longer be swung up on his shoulder when he came home from work. There would be no “Dad belly laughs” to fill the house.

“Are you leaving because I’ve been bad?” I asked.

He told me I was not to blame, but I did not believe him. I was sure that I could magically fix everything by being a “really good girl.”

In the weeks that followed my dad moving out, my attempts to be a good girl did not bring him back. Grief overwhelmed me and I became too upset to eat. I remember lying in a big hospital bed with intravenous needles feeding my body while my parents stood on either side of me, yelling at each other. They were each blaming the other for my illness. I wanted to find some way to make them stop, but I couldn’t find the energy to speak.

Rescuing Others Rescues Me

My bedroom was the barracks for a small army of stuffed animals. I had two shelves of them above my bed. My favourites were my raccoon, Brownie, and a grey seal named Sleeky. I wanted to cuddle with them every night, but I believed that all my stuffed animals were alive and had feelings; I didn’t want any of them to be lonely. I understood how lonely felt. For months after my parents’ separation, my mom was despondent. She would often close the door to her bedroom and play sad music on her guitar for hours. I only saw my dad every other weekend. I missed both my mom and my dad. I couldn’t change what was happening to my family, but I could ensure that my stuffed animals were not lonely like me. In order to give equal snuggling time and love to each, I slept with them on a rotating schedule. Taking care of them helped heal my sad heart.

Art Can Hold Like a Mother’s Hug

After my dad left, my mom found a job and went back to school to get her master’s degree because she wanted to build a career that would support us. She left so early in the morning that by the time I awoke, she was gone. Not wanting my sister and me to feel abandoned, my mom drew whimsical cartoons in which our favourite stuffed animals went on magical adventures. Each morning we would find a new in-

stallment by our breakfast bowls. As I sat eating my cereal, I watched Brownie and Sleeky sail across the world in their magical boat, and I learned how a drawing could hold like a mother's arms.

Play Heals

The chaos of the divorce receded and life continued, only with two distinct households. My mom and new stepdad were thoughtful parents who encouraged our creativity. On the weekends, they spent hours helping my sister and me with art projects. They even let us design our own playhouse. There was no TV, just a playroom full of simple toys. My sister and I didn't need much. Mostly we played with dress-up clothes and paper dolls, as well as entertaining ourselves for hours playing with buttons as if they were kings and queens fighting epic battles.

We stayed with our dad every other weekend. There were no toys at his place, but that didn't matter, because Dad was one big fun-machine who played "silly" with us like he was a child himself. He read bedtime stories that he acted out like a play. He took us on rock-climbing adventures, which my mom would never dream of letting us do.

I learned that play can heal a broken heart.

Perfectionism

My sister was born with feet that pointed inward. Our family doctor said ballet classes would straighten them out. My mom didn't have time to drive both my sister and me to separate activities, so we were both enrolled.

My sister's prescription for pink tights and leotards became my joy. Noticing my aptitude and love of dance, my teacher suggested that I audition for the National Ballet School of Canada. At the age of ten, I was accepted into their rigorous eight-year training program, which combined classical dance with academics. I went to school from nine in the morning until six at night, dancing three to five hours a day. Every student there worked towards transcending the limitations of the body through discipline and control. We were all drawn to the thrill of becoming the "perfect dancer."

My attraction to ballet did not just evolve out of a love of dance, but out of my desire to feel that I had control over my life. The strict rules

instantly resonated with me because they provided a set of ideals to reach for, a magical recipe that, if followed, promised to make me “perfect.”

This started an internal battle of expression versus perfection. In the world of perfect *pliés* and pretty *pirouettes*, was there room for me, the individual? What about the wild swan girl who danced so freely in her living room? Ultimately, the drive to conform to the ballet ideal overtook me and the memory of the wild swan girl dimmed.

Shame

His hand touched me. I didn’t understand what was happening. I trusted him. My family trusted him. I didn’t know his hands weren’t supposed to touch in those places, in that way. When I began to understand, I shrank inward from shame. I learned to sneak into bed early. I shut my door tight in the hopes I would get no goodnight kisses. A secret kept; a silent imprint upon my body.

The Pain of Not Fitting In

I came home from school crying and my mom wrapped me in her arms. It was re-audition time at the ballet school. Every spring, a panel of teachers scrutinized our dancing; weeks later, we all received a letter either inviting us back for another year or “un-accepting” (i.e., dumping) us. It had been a tough year in other ways. With my new glasses, braces, and horrible headgear contraption to pull my bite forward, I felt like a dork. We were all expected to look like pretty ballerinas; instead, I was a bull’s-eye for teasing. Much of the year my classmates had called me fat and retarded, following me around and copying every movement I made. Even my best friend switched camps and joined in.

“You don’t have to go back there,” my mom said. “You can quit and go to a regular school. It’s such a hard thing you’ve chosen. I know you love to dance, but are you sure it’s worth it?”

There was never a choice for me. It was a dream I could not give up.