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Dance/movement therapy as a creative arts therapy approach in prison to the treatment of violence

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Introduction

It is the fall of the year 2001—a serious time for this country and for those of us who live here. The reality of violence is something none of us can avoid thinking about at a time like this. Its consequences in the lives of people are apparent all around us. Its effects on the collective psyche of this country—so vividly reflected in multiple scenes of grief, terror, immobilization and disorientation after September 11—are paralleled in the lives and minds of countless individual citizens, old and young. The phenomenon of violence in this country did not begin on September 11, however. It has been increasingly in our lives in a multitude of forms whether we have wanted to look at it or not. So this horrible event presents an ironic opportunity. It forces us all to face the fact of violence, its many forms and its multi-layered effects, and to think creatively about how we can in different ways address, treat and prevent violence in individuals and society.

The issue of violence within our own society and the questions of prevention and treatment have been the subject of ongoing debates for many years. There have been different perspectives and approaches advocated in the face of what has seemed at times to be an epidemic of increasing violence in our country. One major way America has responded to this reality in the more recent years has been in fact to become the world's leading jailer. As of the year 2000, our jails and prisons held over 2 million prisoners, more than any other country in the world. While the population

of the United States represents only 5% of the world's population, we house over 25% of the world's prisoner population. This number has doubled only in the last 10 years (Wynn, 2001). In short, our society has chosen to use prison as an almost universal response to violence prevention. If we are making prison the only option for so many people who have had violent backgrounds, what are we doing about treatment or rehabilitation within these settings? And what do we, as creative arts therapists, have to offer this overwhelmingly huge population. What are the possibilities for bringing the arts into prisons and using them as vehicles for positive change in the treatment of violence?

As it turns out, people have been bringing the arts into prisons for a long time. Practicing artists, poets, creative writers, dancers, actors and others—all have participated in bringing their crafts into prison settings and using them as vehicles to help prisoners find that creative and healthy part of themselves and to give it form and expression (Hillman quoted by Durland, 1996; Kornfeld, 1997; Tannenbaum, 2000). This practice is based on the knowledge that engaging in the creative process is a deeply healing experience, one that can lead the individual toward new and profoundly different ways of expressing their innermost feelings of rage, frustration, confusion and alienation. It is based on the belief that within the context of a creative process we will be able to look directly at the realities of violence, its horror and its consequences, and find a way, in image and art making, dance or theater, words or music, to transform it and heal from it. This thinking closely resembles the approach of creative arts therapists in other settings. While there is little to be found in the literature written by creative arts therapists working in prisons we

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can learn much from the narratives and studies done as a result of the experiences of these artists who have been working in correctional settings.

What does this work look like in actual terms? How does it work and how can we tell about it in ways that make the argument for the creative arts and creative arts therapies being seen as a logical and compelling approach to decreasing violent behavior both inside and outside prisons? There are studies and statistics that testify to the effectiveness of arts programs in the reduction of violent behavior in prisons and to a decrease in the recidivism rate as a result of involvement in such programs. In a 7-year recidivist rate study in California, inmates who had participated in arts programs had dramatically lower recidivism (27%) compared to the general population ([Criminal Justice Funding Report, 1999](#); Hillman, 1996). The Arts in Corrections (AIC) program that has been operating in California prisons since 1980 has generated studies on the effects of arts programming on violent behavior within the prison. It has documented that for prisoners involved in the AIC program, there was a 75% decrease in disciplinary problems ([Criminal Justice Funding Report, 1999](#)). These studies show a reduction in the rate of violent incidents that correlated with the introduction of arts in the prison programs studied.

Prison officials and those within the industry realize that funding art is a relatively inexpensive way to keep the peace. Many prisoners are finding something to believe in called self worth. Some will never walk out of prison, but they may pass along their humanity to those who do.

But quantitative data, numbers and facts, don't do justice to this; they don't tell the real story; they don't bring alive the moments shared as part of this process, and the experience of watching and facilitating true transformation in people who have been shut away, forgotten, made invisible, people who are finding their way back into a healthy world by being willing to believe in their own ability to be creative and to engage in a creative process. When given the opportunity, these prisoners, who have lost their right to be free, reclaim their right to remember what freedom of expression can feel like within the context and transformative container of an art form. It is truly a privilege to be able to watch this, to be a witness and facilitator in such a process.

Therapeutic application

I am a newcomer to prisons. As a dance/movement therapist I have recently begun offering dance/movement therapy as a component within an

ongoing addictions' recovery program in a jail near my home. I offer here my observations that arise as a result of this first exposure—not of extended experience in this type of setting. Nonetheless I have come to feel that my first experiences doing this work are as compelling as almost any I have encountered in my years of working in other settings and thus are important to record and share in order for others to understand the power and potential of bringing arts therapies into prison settings. Specifically the arts therapies (and in this case dance/movement) can be used as powerful methods in the treatment of those who have had violence in their past and in the prevention of future violent behavior.

Like most people who have an idea that they have not tested, I didn't know if my version of a dance/movement therapy experience could be usefully translated into the jail addictions' program that I had become involved with. I do believe that this is an approach that can be an integral part of addictions' programs on the 'outside' given the physical opportunities for practice of impulse control, self-regulation, and appropriate tension release and group interaction ([Milliken, 1990](#)). But I had never even been inside a prison, knew little of the particulars of the system and the rules, and had little sense of what was allowed and not allowed or expected of therapists and group participants in this prison.

The addictions' program in this jail has an intensive aftercare component. Inmates who have gone through the first 10 weeks of a 12-step recovery program then, can become part of this intensive aftercare group work. They meet three times a week in a verbal group that includes education, support, confrontation and exchange on issues concerning their recovery. Because of the time and commitment they put into this program, if they make it to aftercare they form a cohesive group with active peer leadership. The group is run by a licensed addictions' counselor who wanted to have dance/movement therapy introduced experimentally into the group as one option for working with the issues of self-esteem and recovery.

In my experience as a leader of dance/movement therapy groups, there are a few ingredients that help people overcome resistance to the idea of such a group and to feel able to join in a meaningful way. These include a space that is big enough, a limit on number of participants so that the group is not too large, good music that fit the needs of the particular population, and an understanding on my part of the greater context into which this group would fit. In my first group at this prison, I had none of these. The room I was ushered into for the first group was a small, low-ceiling, windowless space. How many people I wondered could manage to move around in this space? Within minutes the group members

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