

An Embodied Psychology: Using your Body and the Arts to Support the Creation of a Sacred Relationship

Experiences of Unconditional love through the arts and body at the Clínica Universitaria Bolivariana (Medellín, Colombia)

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Introduction

This document is directed at people who are interested in widening their knowledge of the relationship between psychology, the body and the arts. In order to spark people's interest on the subject, we present this work done with mothers or primary caregivers who have children with weak health conditions and are treated at the Unidad Materno Infantil of the Clínica Universitaria Bolivariana (Medellín, Colombia). This work was conducted between February and June of 2012 and was centered on the approach of movement based expressive arts therapy (Halprin, 2003).

The therapeutic approach which orientates this work was originated in the 1950's by Anna Halprin, pioneer in the use of movement as a healing and transformative art. In the 1970's, Daria Halprin articulates in a fascinating and creative way the worlds of psychology, the body and the arts, giving continuity and developing the work that was initiated by Anna. This work is characteristic of the Tamalpa Institute, leader teaching the Life/Art Process, an original approach that integrates movement/dance, visual arts, performance techniques, and therapeutic practices.

As a member of the guest faculty of this institute, it is important to highlight the work of Jamie McHugh who develops a work called Somatic Expression, an innovative orientation to somatic education, expressive arts therapy, and body/mind integration. He uses in a sensitive and inspirational way, breath, vocalization, physical contact, movement and stillness, as technologies or natural mediums for healing and developing human potential. This therapeutic model together with the Life/Art Process are the main sources that nurture the execution of the work which is going to be presented in this document.

While presenting this work we will highlight and expand upon the guiding principles of this approach, as well as the adaptation of this therapy within the personal and collective context of the therapist as well as the mothers or primary caregivers.

In keeping with these ideas, we will adhere to the following intentions:

- Contextualize the work with mothers or primary caregivers of children with weak health conditions while making explicit the pertinence of this work from the viewpoint of movement based expressive arts therapy.
- To introduce the reader to the therapeutic experiences that the participants had and expose the guiding philosophy behind these experiences as well as the achievements that emerged in the process.
- To raise questions for reflection and the possibility of discussion that will stimulate the development of more works like this whether it will be with participants who are mothers or anyone who wishes to be enriched with these experiences based on the body and expressive arts.

The Value of an Embodied Psychology for the Miracle of Life

“ Recovering the body as the part of us that holds, contains, and takes care of all our other energies. It is our earth principle, our mother figure. If we care for it and live within it and in accordance with its needs, we heal both ourselves and the world”. (Coldwell, C., 1997, p. 5).

The experiences of unconditional love that inspired this document are motivated and supported by Milagros de Vida Foundation. This foundation was conceived to contribute to the defense of life from the time of conception. For this reason, they want to support the development of early childhood aged children with weak health conditions who are served at Unidad Materno Infantil of Clínica Universitaria Bolivariana (Medellín, Colombia). Through this mission, the foundation puts together and offers group therapy guided by the principles of movement based expressive arts therapy, in the hopes that mothers or primary caregivers of children with weak health will identify and develop the mental, emotional, spiritual and physical resources needed to encourage in a positive and healthy way the miracle of life of their kids.

It is important to highlight here that one of the guiding principles of the foundation and the therapy groups is that of the importance of the mother child relationship throughout the early childhood years. So that it is believed that one of the ways to respond to the needs of a child that is born with weak health is to build a healthy and accessible relationship with their mother that provides the child with a sense of security and safety. A child who knows that their caregiver is accessible and sensitive to their needs has strong and penetrating feelings of security and safety, and feels stimulated to value and continue that relationship (Bowlby, 1979).

For the construction of this stimulating relationship, it is considered fundamental that the mothers who participate in group therapy strengthen and develop the amazing capacity that a mother has of identifying with

her baby and meeting their basic needs, as well as establishing a human bond that will aid in the development of the child. The main focus of this work is that through the discovery of their own bodies through expressive arts the participating mothers will find the resources to create a sacred relationship with their children. The mother's body is in essence the main resource and is that in which the mother and child will find support or a fertile ground where emotions can emerge with images and answers to physical needs that propel the miracle of life.

Following these ideas, it is important to highlight that another guiding principle of the therapeutic encounters mentioned is that "the way the mother relates to the body of her child is of the utmost importance for the development of that child" (Warja, M., en Levine, S. & Levine, E., 1999, p. 171). As a result, it is considered that allowing the mother to have experiences that will facilitate the connection and consciousness with her own body within the context of a resource oriented therapy, the mother will have the opportunity and the capacity to create experiences that can build upon the body of her child.

In the words of Coldwell, C. (1997), "the ways in which we interact with the bodies of our infants form their first experiences of love and belonging. Love blooms first and foremost of a physical interaction". So that, the experiences that we call unconditional love in this document and that will be exposed later, are experiences where the body takes a starring role because of its surprising capacity to create bonds of love.

It is crucial to consider that from the therapeutic approach that is being exposed here, movement is the primary expressive art. The art of movement occupies a central role and this art is conducive to the exposure of emotions and images that will help to guide mothers in the building of loving bonds with their children. Also, it will come together with other forms of artistic expression such as drawing and poetic dialogues, facilitating the straightening of the mother and child relationship. This way, they may vibrate and honor the miracle that is life.

This work, centered in the body and supported by the expressive arts, is oriented mainly by the next guiding principles (Halprin, 2003):

- Our bodies are our vehicles to awareness.
- There is a relation between our physical body, our emotions, and our thoughts.
- The sensations of the body, its postures and gestures, reflect our history and our actual ways of being.
- When we involve ourselves in expressive movement, the themes and patterns of our life are revealed.
- When we bring sound to our movement, we give voice to our emotions and stories.
- When we work in our art we are working on something in our lives.
- The symbols we create in our art have valuable messages that speak to the circumstances of our life.
- The ways we work as artists teach us about the way we relate with ourselves, others, and the world.
- When we represent positive visions through our art, we create images and models that can be guiding forces for us.
- When we learn how to work with the principles of creativity and the art practice, we can become experts in how to apply them in every aspect of our life, including the challenges we face.

Dances of Unconditional Love: Building a Sacred Relationship

Presentation

As we listen to the mothers or primary caregivers of children with weak health from Unidad Materno Infantil de Clínica Universitaria Bolivariana, it is possible to identify two central needs that must be met in order to have therapeutic experiences based on movement: Their need to understand what is happening to their child and how

they can influence their health, and their profound desire to establish contact with their child in order to transmit their infinite love and welcome them to the world.

You will see two dances of unconditional love that emerged from the mothers needs and that took place in group therapy at the Milagros de Vida Foundation. At one session of group therapy the following intentions were established:

- To create with the moms a warm, safe and accepting space that allowed us to come together and connect with their moment of life through movement based expressive arts therapy.
- To discover who the mothers are and where they are in their life process.

In the second group we will present, there were also two main intentions:

- To allow the participating mothers the possibility of connecting with and developing a consciousness of their own bodies through movement and of the possibility to create sound.
- To allow the mothers and children encounter, using their imagination, breath and sound.

Unconditional Love, Here and Now



In a therapy group at the Milagros de Vida Foundation, an unconditional love dance generally begins with a check in circle, in which the members of the circle are allowed to share as they think about their thoughts, their feelings and emotions and any physical sensations that we may feel in our bodies. From welcoming this moment we move on to the encounter of the body through movement which can be done as we rest on the floor, check our breathing, feel the movement of our chest and our abdomen, and stimulate and maintain our awareness of ourselves while coming together with our own ideas and our mental images with as well as our emotions and physical processes.

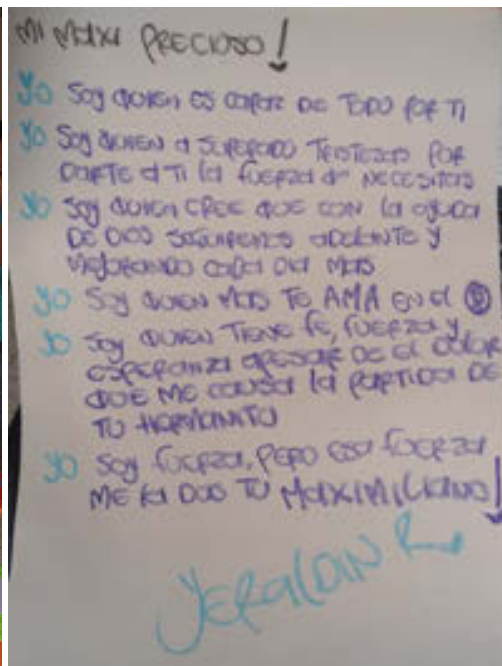
From this initial encounter with the body, the participants get involved on a trajectory through the body, in which they give space to each main part of the body: Spine; neck, head and face; shoulders, arms and hands; rib cage; abdomen and pelvis; legs and feet. These parts of the body receive the participating mothers attention, and have the opportunity to express through the art of movement, following guiding and inspirational questions like ¿Which are the movements that your spine needs in order to feel taken care? ¿How does your pelvis need to move to give health to herself? ¿How is the dance of care and affection that your entire body wants to explore in this moment?

This way the participating mom focus her attention and care to herself, and finds a group of movements or a posture that she feels specially refreshing. This is how the physical body gives a concrete resource, on which difficult and uncomfortable feelings or emotions discover a shelter, and negative or limiting ideas and images start to lose strength, guided by a body that found relaxation and relieve.

Within this therapeutic work we make contact with our body and support ourselves through the art of movement, where we use and strengthen our ability to be *present* and to identify and deepen what is happening in the here and now. For our participating moms this can mean confronting emotions such as guilt: “I could have done something to prevent my child’s poor health”. Or Impotence: “There is nothing that I can do”. Or Sacrifice: “I am willing to take on the pain and suffering in the place of my child”.

This is the confrontation we try to attend to, contain, accept and dance. So, it is possible that important discoveries emerge and we realize as do the mothers who are participating that: "Sometimes the heart has to be broken open to be free, and the process can feel like a huge confusing, frightening mess...The key is to take refuge in presence over and over, with tremendous self-compassion. The more you turn toward presence, the more you trust the process...the more fully you will discover an inner sanctuary of peace and freedom" (Brach, T.).

One of the dances of unconditional love that can emerge is: the dance that shows us as vulnerable human beings here and now. When a dance like this takes place, the mothers can unburden themselves and let go of feelings and obstacles that are considered for them a hindrance to the building of healthy relationships with their children. They can allow themselves to experiment with the arts of drawing and writing, creating guiding images and words to strengthen the bonds of affection with their children. Here are a few examples of the art of participants in group therapy:



Poem 1:

My dear Maxi,

I am who is capable of everything for you

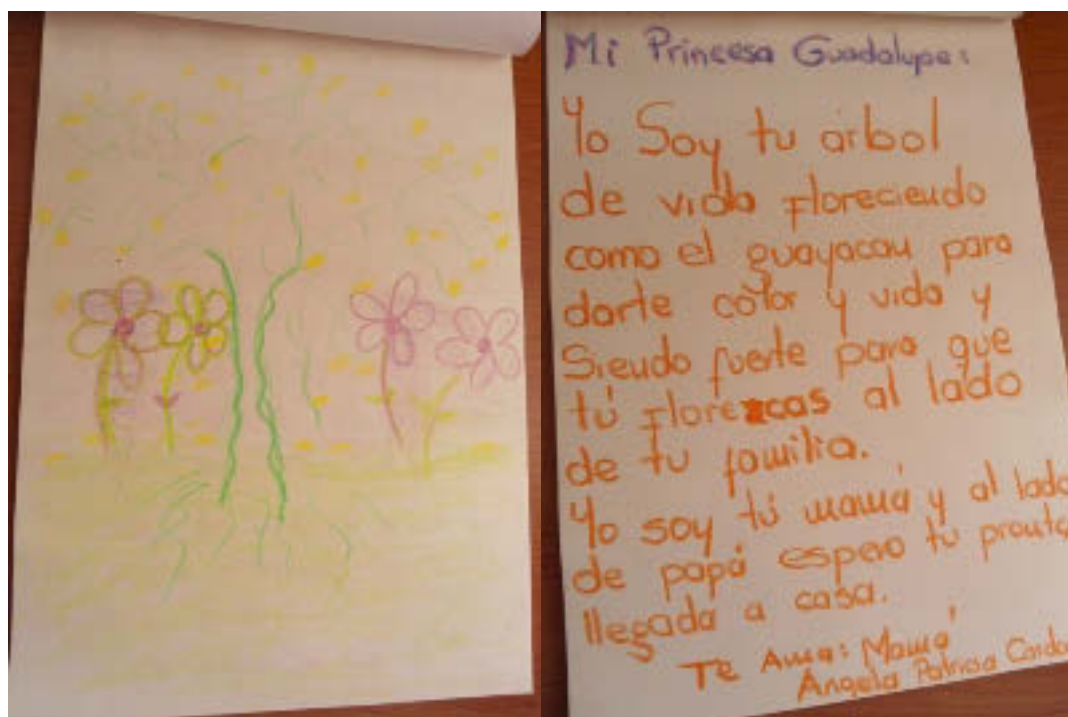
I am who has suffered sadness giving you the forces you are needing

I am who believe that with the help of God we can keep going, getting better each day

I am who love you the most in the world

I am who have faith, strenght and hope, even though we are facing the death of your little twin brother

I am your strenght, and you are giving me this strenght.



Poem 2:

Princess Guadalupe:

I am your tree of life blossoming like the Guayacan, giving you color and life, and being strong so you can flower beside your family.

I am your mother and beside your dad, I am waiting your prompt return home.

With love,

Mom



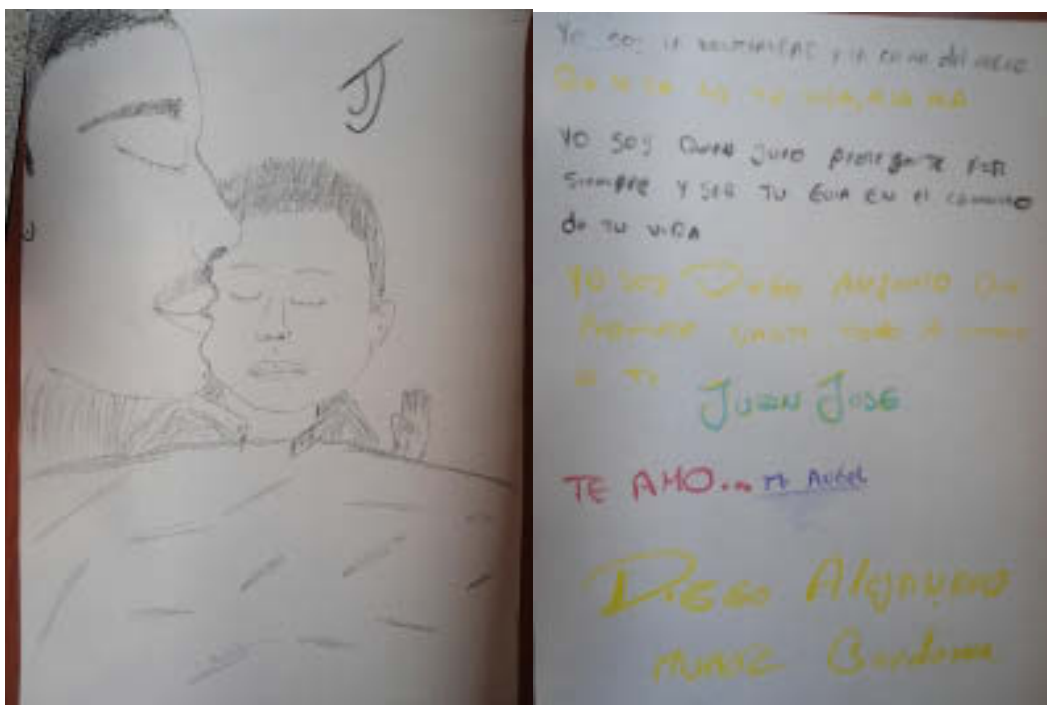
Poem 3:

I am happiness, joy and love

I only have beautiful and happy memories

I am good fortune and plenitude

You are my beautiful sky



Unconditional Love Breaking Barriers

Just as movement based expressive arts therapy opens an extraordinary path that allows one to profoundly and creatively live the present moment, it also offers infinite alternatives to create possible realities. The guiding principle of this practice we are following here is to represent positive visions through our art, so the images or models we create, can be guiding forces for us. The participating mothers can imagine being with their children, and this vision that comes through art becomes a positive symbol that can guide them to the moment where they can actually make contact with their children.

In another group we can observe some of the mothers resting on the floor with their eyes closed, their hands on their chests, making different sounds. They are making one of their biggest dreams come true: for the first time after their children emerge from the womb quickly and abruptly, they can embrace them and put them against their chests and sing them an improvised lullaby. They lay on mats imagining that they are holding their children's bodies with their own body, allowing them to feel their breathing and the vibrations of sound that their thorax is making, letting out the songs of their souls: Their desires to be mothers, hugging their children and willing them to fight for their lives.



Here, the body is the star and the art of sound is a limitless extension of the body as it connects to our inner selves and also with others. Again, it is important to point out the power of the body and the arts, in this case sound, in order to build a bridge towards communication with ourselves and others. In the case of the participant mothers, the opportunity to break through barriers that they feel as limitations for a warm and loving exchange with their children.

“Art that arises from and is connected to the real and compelling circumstances of our lives can illuminate the darkness. Then we can say that our art is healing” (Halprin, D., 2003, p. 32). The dance of unconditional love breaking barriers is just that: an invitation for mothers to face reality and break through the present they are

living in order to get the results they want. They can bring to light the hard conditions that they are facing in relation to their kids and learn to help themselves and their kids to have extraordinary experiences that can nurture their day to day in the process of building a sacred relationship with the potential of also motivating life and the develop of their child.

From this kind of dance the mothers learn simple techniques such as offering their bodies and voices as a support for their children to nurture the relationship. They start to put into practice ideas such as those of Tomatis, A. (1991): "the vocal nutrition that a mother gives her child through her voice is as important to a child's development as mother's milk" (cited by Newham, P., en Levine, S. & Levine, E., 1999, p. 94).

Life and Art

As a psychologist of Milagros de Vida Foundation and as a human being, I feel confronted with the unconditional love experiences I share with the participating mothers when we have our therapeutic groups. I remembered when I was pregnant of my son Mateo, almost three years ago; in the process of being aware that I was already a mom, that I treasured a life inside my womb, I felt different emotions: Illusion, peace, gratefulness; and also uncertainty, anxiety, and doubt. I was preparing my body for a natural delivery, one with no pain, one with no complications.

Mateo was born when we had 40 weeks of pregnancy, and we had the fortune that after the delivery we keep the best health conditions. The delivery though, from the beginning through the end developed in a very different way from the one I had in mind: I did not have the capacity to tolerate the pain, we could not have a vaginal delivery even though we tried for 32 hours, so after lots of failed tries, the specialists helped us giving birth trough a cesarean.

I share this brief story of my experience to point out that being a mother is a constant challenge where different kinds of situations develop in ways we did not plan. It was this way the day my son Mateo was born, and this is how we share lots of days as mother and son: "Out of plan". To me these kind of situations are difficult to experience, one part of myself prefer to live under the illusion of control, of the possibility of life developing exactly the way I want and plan. Even though, I have managed to learn to hold the uncomfortable, and the unbalance that I find when I experience emotions like uncertainty, anxiety and doubt.

It is about following the example of the participant mothers; in the face of the present vital circumstances, identify awaken thoughts, images, feelings and physical reactions; diving in to them, allowing them to inspired our creative processes, our artistic expressions, showing us resources and opening us ways to confront and transcend them. In this way, we integrate our life situations in to our creative processes, and our creative processes can facilitate and drive us in to the depths of our life experiences.

This path that we call Life/Art Process can lead us to embrace ourselves as totalities. It offers the alternative of accepting and valuing the idea of programming and controlling where sometimes we need to rest on; and also the idea of welcoming the unexpected, and even the unwanted, with compassion and consent. It is this learning process the way we connect with life and our humanity, as Chodron, P. highlights: "It is useful to realize that this body we possess that is here and now with its pleasure and pain, is precisely what makes us totally human and allows us to be totally awake and alive" (cited by Kornfield, J., 2001, p. 211).

In this way, through the meeting of human beings with the arts we discover and understand what is pointed out by Eliade (1963): "Life cannot be repair, it can only be recreated" (cited in Chodorow, J., 1991, p. 107). This is how in the case of the participant mothers we can find an opportunity to recreate life. When the participant mothers embrace the different circumstances rounding their lives, and the weak health conditions of their children, and take the decision of breaking through barriers, and imagine and create for themselves and their children dreamed experiences, using their personal resources and their imaginative and creative capacity, they show us one of the ways human beings could follow...

What I imagine in this road is a dance: I see open arms, a left arm and hand in stillness, their posture reminds me the capacity of hugging and containing, of being patient and wait, of giving space... A right arm and hand moving actively; up, down, to one side, to the other, on circles... I fantasize these arm and hand are drawing hundreds of figures, multiple possibilities, it seems they adventure to a powerful search, an even though it seems they don't know where are they going, they continue unconcerned, moving, always moving, they know sometimes miracles happened and they arrive where they wanted to...



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