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Building Bridges of Understanding that help people feel real and that they matter: Dance Movement Therapy & Dementia Re-visited

This offering is my journey from practice beginnings in the mid-1980s to now. It charts how I built "bridges of understanding" (Coaten, 2009) and how those bridges built me. I want to inspire more DMTs and others to work in a field that desperately needs more of you and now. It may not make you financially rich, but it will fundamentally change you and how you practice in other areas and make you physically, emotionally and psychologically enlivened. This talk demonstrates that in essence this work is not about you, it's about how you're able to get your own 'ego' out of the way in order that the people you work with can feel real and that they matter and are valued and can value themselves (Verde cited in Greenblat, 2011:88). This fundamentally changes the practitioner and helps reveal a buried humanity or as mentor, friend & colleague Michael Verde from the U.S. and the Memory Bridge Foundation says: "We are deep in the dusk; it is a dementia of the spirit's memory of Being. What a ripe time for the dawning of a new awareness to live by" (2015), personal comms.

Does use of the term dementia help people feel real? No, it does not. It is a stupid and meaningless word that brings stigma, isolation & loneliness in its wake. How can one be "De" or (out of) one's "Mensis" (mind) when no philosopher in the history of that subject, to the best of my knowledge, has ever defined what it actually means to be, "In -Mensis" or in-mind? And why might helping people feel real & that they matter be the key to making a difference in the care and treatment of people living with dementia & their carers, both formal & informal? Because in addition to whatever climate crisis we have to contend with and going forward, global populations have to get to grips with demographic ageing regarding the increased proportion of older people, perhaps the most serious and enduring challenge for welfare systems, coping with rapidly rising demand and expenditure on health and social care for that population (Kolarić et al., 2020; Hinrichs, 2021).

There will be more and more people living with neuro-degenerative conditions and up to press the pharmaceutical companies have failed in their quest to create a 'magic pill' that will cure the condition having spent millions trying over the past years to find one! Something has to be done that changes the ongoing negative narrative on the subject, that empowers and enables rather than disempowers, isolates and de-humanises whether openly or inadvertently.

This talk re-visits my own journey about how embodied & other arts-based practices such as DMT offer hope, meaningfulness & more by focusing on what can still be danced, re-membered, recalled, felt and celebrated. Re-visited, because after using movement & dance with seniors for the past 40 years it's time to take a new and hopefully inspiring look at how my DMT journey helped me understand its power as a fundamental resource for expression, resilience and feeling 'real' in the context of all that might deliver the opposite (Coaten, 1993, 1994, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

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