

Moving experiences of creative collaboration

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Creativity has an emergent quality: we cannot be sure where it will lead. We, Eleonora (ERH) and Steve (SD), are in a process of creative collaboration. We know when we first met, are less sure of when precisely our agreement to collaborate began, and have no fixed idea of our final destination.



Our creative alliance began with a shared hunch that the deepest of human experiences

cannot be expressed in words, yet they demand to be expressed. With this as our starting point, we set out to explore how physical movement could serve as a means to connect with and express grief. We draw on evolving theories and practices from the living fields of dance, somatic movement, yoga, physical theatre and creative writing, along with thanatology, which is the scientific study of death and practices related to it. We also use our own experience of life as a major underlying source of material to fuel our creativity and to galvanise our trust.

We wish to highlight the foundational importance of trust in creative collaborations. For a creative collaboration to evolve, collaborators must have enough trust to begin the process, and develop increasing trust to allow the direction to emerge. This article focuses on the way that we became aware of our foundation of mutual trust and how our trust has developed - in ourselves, in each other and in the creative process.

Given the highly personal nature of our stories, it is perhaps unsurprising that we identify trust as an essential pre-requisite at the heart of our creative collaboration. Whilst the need for trust is obvious in our own particular collaboration, we suspect that trust is essential in any creative collaboration.

We have had destinations on the way, but there is no ultimate arrival point on our horizon. Despite - or maybe because of - our willingness to allow our destination to have an element of mystery, we have, throughout the process, agreed and met a whole series of short-term goals. We explore these throughout

this article, making comparisons with concepts drawn from the study of play and creativity, using selected inspirational thinkers and practitioners such as Vygotsky (1967/2004) and Gray (2008).

In writing this article we are hoping that our words act as a catalyst - an invitation to readers to bring creativity into their own lives and work. In some cases, it might read as a validation of their current practice.

Keywords

Creativity, creative alliance, emergence, trust, grief, loss, curiosity, movement, play, authenticity, dialogue.

The essence of our moving experience: expressing grief

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

(Extract from Mary Oliver's poem *Wild Geese*)

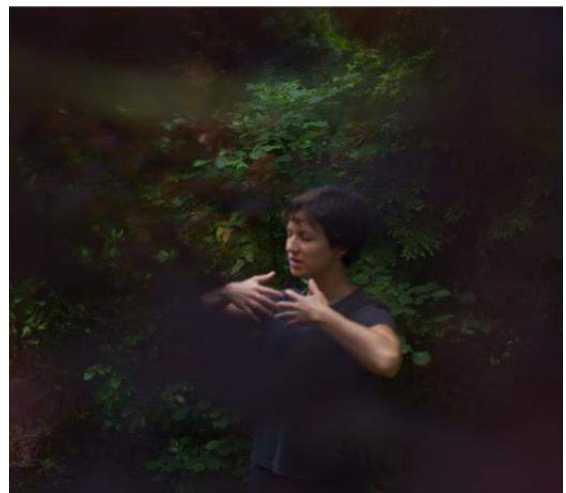
The main starting point for our collaboration was that we wanted to actively explore a mutual curiosity around the possibility that we could connect with and express grief, using physical dance movement. Our own, different yet similar, experiences of grief following the loss of loved ones to death, brought us to this question. To contextualise this further, we offer personal accounts of loss, and of how we each arrived at the decision to use dance movement to express ourselves and to co-create our inquiry.

From Eleonora:

"If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it"

(Isadora Duncan)

The unexpected loss of my father was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The complexity of my response to this life-changing event often left me at the point of frustration and confusion. I did not know how to speak about it, nor could I describe what I felt on the inside, in a way that felt meaningful and did my experience justice. It was a visceral experience that went further than words could reach. Coming from a dance and yoga background, physical movement was the only way that I could personally connect and express, in a genuine and heartfelt way, how I felt 'inside'.



Beyond my relationship with dance and yoga, both as a learner and as a professional, I deeply believe that our body is integral to our lived experience. What happens to us is not only stored as a separate mental construct, but continues to live on, inside our physical bodies (Van der Kolk, 2014). Our body is not separate from ourselves, but part of who we are, and each body carries its own “body narrative”, (Snowber, 2002: 23). The story of our body deserves to be expressed when words are not adequate to capture our internal landscape of felt and lived experiences. In those instances, dance/movement can serve as a creative portal through which the person dancing can express whatever has been left unsaid - that which cannot be articulated in words. This is what I set myself out to explore.

From Steve:

“Having a dialogue with what I cannot understand”

(Crystal Pite)



Losing a child is the worst fear of most parents – until it happens. When reality strikes, fear dissipates, and is replaced by something more nebulous. The deaths of my sons Ian (33) and Martin (30), within a 15-month period, followed the discovery that they harboured mitochondrial disease, a ruthless genetic idiosyncrasy.

As a parent, I managed this reality (what choice did I have?), though I can't describe how. I work in the domain of words, helping colleagues to reflect on their practice, within various health and social care organisations including end of life care. This professional knowledge of the field, that I now found myself personally adrift within, did not help me.

In attempting to express my own experience, I become lost in my head and learned how to sideline my feelings. Like many professional helpers, I do not readily accept help. I avoided counselling, as I knew that I would recognise and guard against the techniques.

I know very little about dance! I dimly recall how my body moved spontaneously to music as a child. My inner Billy Elliott was discouraged at that time. As a young adult/parent, I remember with painful clarity my hapless attempts to dance. After accompanying my small daughter onto the dance-floor, I recall her response to the mocking laughter of her siblings, as she defended me: “*Don't laugh – Dad is trying his best*”. I hung up my dancing shoes on being damned by such faint praise.

Meeting Ellie, in early 2018, was like a door opening. I found a kindred spirit who wanted to experiment with the use of movement as expression. This work has called me to make real contact with a deep part of my being, and to grow through the use of a different approach to engaging with my natural grief.

I am watchful over my use of my personal experience in my work, such as in writing this article. In this respect I was both encouraged and cautioned by the words of artist and writer Jonathan Young when working with the choreographer Crystal Pite:

“How close can I get to turning what happened in my life into art without feeling like I am using it?”

Creativity, imagination and play

Our collaboration can best be described as a series of unfolding events that all spring from the source of creativity and trust. Through our experience of working together, we believe that these two sources go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. According to Vygotsky (1967/2004), creativity can be seen as an act of constructing something new that is based on, draws upon, alters or combines already existing realities in order to create new realities. This could take the form of something physical/ material, as well as something within our minds and behaviours.

The creations that unfolded on our journey were at first sparked by our imagination. We planted imaginary seeds of ideas that later grew and manifested into a new reality. This reflects the notion that

at the heart of creativity lies imagination (ibid). As we embarked on our creative collaboration, we quickly discovered a process which naturally motivated us, and also required us to become more receptive to our imagination and to where it may take us. We were able and willing to draw from past experiences, while being open to imagining new possibilities and creating pathways to where we wanted to go and what we wanted to do. We held these ideas softly, to ensure that they remained malleable and open to change and development. Throughout this process of imagination and creation, we were always accompanied by a sense of wonder and curiosity of where this would take us and what would emerge on the way.

Imagination and play

We believe that imagination is something inherent in all human beings. How we choose to convey our imagination and use it as a springboard for creation, is up to each individual's need and unique expression. Our source of imagination is developed and expressed in early childhood through play (Vygotsky, 1967/2004; Ayman-Nolley, 1992). The definition of play, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is to:

“Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose”

(Lexico Online Dictionary, accessed 30 July 2019).

Additionally, according to Gray (2008), play combines with other motives such as responsibility and collaborative skills. Gray (ibid) identifies the main characteristic of play as an activity that is self-chosen and self-directed, i.e. the player does what they want to do and therefore the player is free to leave anytime. This freedom contributes to a deep sense of play.

Rules

There is a paradox here, in that play still includes rules that have been agreed upon by all the players involved. Thus, there is structure to this play, which requires us to behave in accordance to these self-created and accepted rules, in the context of our environment and relationships. Play includes self-control, agreeing to the guidelines that are deemed appropriate by everyone involved (ibid). For us, this means that play also requires and contributes to building trust, whereby we choose to trust that our playmates, including ourselves, will respect the rules.

Setting goals

Play can also include various forms of setting goals. These develop some sense of organised structure and consequently to the creation of a space to develop whatever it is that we have set out to do. Gray (ibid) refers to this as a form of constructive goal setting which arises from enjoying the process of creating and moving towards the goal. Interestingly the goal remains less important and the motivation that comes with this is intrinsic. Play is thus enjoyable from the inside out, and not solely for the extrinsic rewards that may result from doing it.

Unfolding our imagination

Imagination is something that alters its expression and meaning for us as we grow up, whilst remaining an inherently important activity for expressing and developing our relation to ourselves and the world, no matter what chronological age we happen to be. For example, children who use imagination in play as an informal creative act, do so in more intense and emotional excitable ways than how adults typically do. According to Vygotsky (1967/2004: 34),

“the child can imagine vastly less than the adult, but he [she] has greater faith in the products of his [her] imagination and controls them less, and thus imagination, in the everyday, vulgar sense of this word, that is, what is unreal and made up, is of course greater in the child than in the adult”.

Learning to faithfully trust that our imagination would lead the way has been of central importance to our creative collaboration. An open mind with a healthy dose of courage served as our channels for unfolding our imagination as adults. New pathways can thus be created if we, as adults, can learn to trust our imagination to a greater extent, like we did as children. It is from that trust that creativity can emerge.

Being authentic with the process

To maintain a sustainable and authentic collaboration, we felt, from the start, that the driving force behind our work must stem from our mutual interest in the ‘research question’. We gave ourselves permission to allow our intrinsic motivation and curiosity to bring us closer to understanding, and connecting with, what we are genuinely interested in, and then integrated this into our research.

These words, by Cole & Knowles (2001: 60), eloquently capture our approach:

“If we operate on the principle of authenticity, we cannot follow a recipe or prescription. In saying this we are not suggesting a laissez-faire approach to the conceptualising and planning of a research project; on the contrary, what we are advocating requires a lot of effort, thought, imagination, self-awareness, and disciplinary knowledge”.

And herein lies the assimilation of the principles of creativity, imagination and play into the rigour of inquiry. Furthermore, our integration of these principles with our inquiry was cloaked in the essential blanket of trust. The authenticity of our research design reflects a set of guiding values and assumptions that has to be understood and agreed upon by all the players in our creative collaboration.

Trust: the essential ingredient in creative collaboration

There have been a whole series of steps that we have taken to develop trust. We summarise this process here, drawing from and building on what we have written so far.

At the outset, there was a reason to make contact that sprang from the suggestion, made by a mutual friend, who sensed that an introductory email to us both might be of interest. Goodness she was right!

The introductory email sparked enough curiosity to encourage us to make time to speak, initially on Skype. First contact led very quickly to an agreement for more. At this stage a common starting point emerged, with lots of maybes to consider. Our commitment was low-risk in terms of time and energy. We shared our experience of loss, the deaths of close relatives, in an attentive atmosphere in which speaking, listening, hearing and understanding enveloped our mutually respectful conversation.

We began with our shared interest in expressions of grief, and soon realised that we both wished to explore it more deeply. We thus agreed to make, initially small and then increasing, investments of time and energy that steadily built, without feeling burdensome.

We gradually realised that our conversation was reaching deeper parts of ourselves than either of us had anticipated. We were onto something ... which may be that, in matters of humanity, the deeper we go, the safer it gets. In common with many others who have passed along the road of grief, we knew, and did not have to explain to each other, that we couldn't 'get over' the loss. We increasingly articulated this, sharing a feeling of dissatisfaction with models of grief that suggest, unintentionally we suspect, that there are stages that must be followed, and then grief is done.

Over the next few months, we shared time, in person and through Skype, and allowed our conversations to focus on how we might work creatively together and explore grief through movement of the body. This theme was important; it became the glue that bound our growing collaboration to a shared desire to create something. Nonetheless we remained happy as that 'something' continued to be undefined.



Our increasing, yet manageable, commitment allowed the process time to grow and unfold. What started as conversations over email, Skype and cups of tea, gradually moved into the dance studio, where we explored different movement possibilities and expressive exercises in both dance and physical theatre. We moved to music and to silence – and in between the movement exercises we contemplated either in written or spoken word what our experience was. These contemplations further dovetailed into new dance movement and a felt need to express and explore some more.

Our experience of moving

Bessel Van der Kolk (2014), introduces a whole series of strategies to help people to listen to their body and use what is heard. Commenting on one approach, Albert Pesso's psychomotor therapy, he says that it:

“... allows you to feel what you felt back then, to visualise what you saw, and to say what you could not say when it actually happened.”

Van der Kolk (2014: 299)

This quote rings true with what we both experienced during the movement sessions.

From Steve:

... As a complete dancing novice I was surprised by the freedom that I quickly developed to locate, and then intensify, particular sensations in my body that had a movement attached to them. After taking time to share simple relaxation and breathing exercises, we began with experimenting with movements at different levels. Levels in the sense of laid down, on hands and knees, stooping and eventually fully standing.



We experimented with the use of space, beginning with moving 'on-the-spot' we gradually increased and expanded our movement until we were using the whole of the 'studio space'.

Most importantly, after warming up with the breathing, relaxation and moving we then found a particular movement, emanating from the body, that was linked to a particular part of our emotional story. It was at this point that our moving experience reached a crescendo. I started with a simple movement that seemed to arrive with little prompting. When this movement was established Ellie encouraged me to develop the intensity of that movement. Starting at level one and gradually increasing the intensity to level ten I witnessed and felt myself changing from a fairly static position, for example gently waving an arm to and fro, to something that more resembled an impression of a chaotic, and out of control, windmill. I suspect that I resembled a whirling dervish.

My experience of these moving experiences was a sense of liberation, a connection with feelings that I knew were there but that remained unexpressed and a sense of relief that I am still trying to fully articulate. I now feel more able to talk about and, more importantly, from, my experience. Mine is not a story to tell but an experience that I can, and wish to, share.

From Eleonora:

I wish to highlight two important points. One that considers my role, and the second considers my own experience of exploring dance movement as expression.

Even though our movement sessions often consisted of me guiding Steve through a range of movement tasks, I also, at times, participated in some of the exercises either on my own or side-

by-side with Steve. I never felt as if I was the sole instructor where I was “doing something to” Steve. Although my role was different from his in the dance studio, we still felt equal in our collaboration. After each movement task we would often stop to reflect, talk and ask each other questions about what the experience was like for both Steve and me. More so, our collaboration was not limited to the dance studio, it stretched much further than that. We continuously brought our personal experience to the drawing table and contributed to the collaboration in our own unique ways. My experience of dance and movement became my main contribution to our work. It stemmed from my love for dance, and my desire to utilise dance in a way that is not only performance based.

When I did participate in the exercises as a “moving explorer”, rather than as a guide, it awoke memories and brought forth physical sensations and waves of emotion in me that felt genuine in that present moment. It did not feel staged or forced, nor did I feel like a tape recorder repeating a storyline of events in a dissociated way - instead it felt raw and real. It felt good to cry, it felt good to laugh, it felt good to talk, because it all felt real and natural.

From Steve:

I remember nervously asking Ellie if I should find a dance course to prepare for our work in the studio. Her soothing, humorous, and common-sense reply reminded me of the difference between dance and what we were attempting. She asked, “Do you know how to move?” ... and continued, “Well, that is what we will be doing.”

Involving others

The way in which we co-created ‘playing rules’ was matched by an openness to being flexible enough to change them if we felt the need to do so. Throughout the process we have been willing to engage with whatever arose, regularly bringing ideas to the drawing table and jointly deciding on what was worth keeping. Attention to chance and tangential thinking stimulated our mutual permission to experiment. We often heard ourselves saying, *‘let’s try this and see how it goes’*.

As we progressed within our dyadic conversations, the possibility - and need - to involve others in the



process became clearer. We invited two film-makers to our movement sessions, and later we invited a photographer. One of the film-makers was particularly interested in creating a moving image of what we were doing and he came to a later event, with two colleagues, to do just that. In the event, we had a talented, skilful and responsive film crew working with us.

The photographer was there for part of the filming, and then came along to a later session and took photographs of us working in a friend's garden. We've featured several of these images in this article. When we needed outside help and influence, we followed an instinctive willingness to reach out to our contacts. This instigated a chain of extended trust, *'I trust x, because x was introduced to me by z whom I trust and know'*. Whoever we invited came along as observer participants and collaborators. Their views and insights were welcome and forthcoming. We fully embraced these people as they came alongside, with their trusted, specialist skills. They left their contributions behind for us to decipher and decide how to use. Repeatedly, we've been struck by the importance of trusting relationships in our creative collaboration, and in the next section, we discuss this insight in a little more detail.

Three dimensions of trust

As previously signalled, we want to emphasise the importance of trust in creative collaborations. We remain with this theme here through a deeper explication of three dimensions of trust. These dimensions are:

1. Trust in Self
2. Trust in Other
3. Trust in the Process of Synchronicity

We now explore these dimensions in turn.

1. Trust in Self

Trust in self can be a fragile thing. To have trust in self may mean overcoming some degree of *'impostor syndrome'* (Clance and Imes, 1978), developing an ability to firmly handle one's inner critic and being willing enough to go public with what may feel unique and intimate. On the latter point, we wonder whether the most private is in fact the most universal. Further exploration of this conjecture merits another article.

2. Trust in Other

Trust between people is an intimate thing. It requires a degree of friendship, or at least friendliness - i.e. having a good-natured attitude towards others. In this, there is an implicit element of risk that should not be taken for granted. No-one can be completely trusted; it is too much to handle. High pedestals are for saints; most of us are merely human, and therefore given to errors of understanding and judgement, to vicissitudes of mood change and all manner of psychological and emotional turbulence. Trust needs to be realistic and within sensible boundaries, including attention to respecting privacy.

In our creative collaboration, our attention to each other, as human beings, has been a highlight, manifesting in the way that we have listened to each other with sensitivity. This has been supported by respecting each

other's privacy and not overstepping personal boundaries with intrusive questions. We have maintained our ongoing freedom to leave, and close the process.

In the light of the above, we realised that trust does not need to be constantly tested. Instead, we developed a relaxed acceptance that the other(s) are heading in the same direction – paradoxically even when the direction is not firmly set.

3. Trust in the process of synchronicity

“Synchronicity: the cubic centimetre of chance.”

(Jaworski, 1996:84)

Trusting the process is not simply an arithmetic combination of 1) and 2) to make this 3). Beyond this, the process will develop in unanticipated ways. That is why it is called creative.

We have detected a series of ‘meaningful coincidences’ in our period of collaboration. Writing this article makes us speculate that such synchronicities are typical of creative processes.

External synchronicity

We note how a mutual friend introduced us to each other. Possibly more surprisingly, the fact that we very easily found time to speak, meet and work together came in the context of our equally busy diaries, both us regularly moving across different countries. We also found ready support from colleagues who became our temporary creative partners and were able to find venues to meet, move and be filmed with consummate ease, and within the minimal budget that we set as our investment in the unknown.

Internal synchronicity

Whilst we do not claim to have had the same thoughts, we have noticed how our differences always resonated. Sometimes this was simply that our ideas were complementary, at other times the sum of our separate ideas provided a third, and better option.

From Eleonora:

Steve and I have approached our collaboration in a way that I wish to approach all aspects of my life. From a place of trust and curiosity. This has truly been an inspiring learning experience, not only for me as a researcher, but also as a human being.

Conclusion

Throughout our creative collaboration, we seem to have developed a useful (possibly essential) ability to let go of attachments to a pre-determined, specified outcome, and instead to trust our ability to steer the process towards an unknown place which eventually will show itself in some way or form.

For us, trust is the missing ingredient in letting go of attachment to the outcome of our endeavours. Trust means letting go of our need for control, but it is not about losing control completely. We need to trust that the process of creativity will, eventually, reveal outcomes that we may never have imagined at the outset.

We did not set out to reach a particular goal, yet several tangible artefacts have emerged and continue to show up as possibilities:

A film - as this article goes to print, we are awaiting the outcome of the filming of our moving experience. The final result will be a documentary-type short film

A photography book - that shows a series of stills accompanied by prose and poems; we are in the planning stage for this artefact

This article – through which we wish to offer you some insight into our creative collaboration that we hope may validate your own process, and/or spark some inspiration to how you wish to explore and develop on your own way of working.

Developing and facilitating workshops for groups of people – we have submitted a proposal to a retreat centre that specialises in depth-ful human gatherings.

Moving to becoming a spectator in our creative collaboration

The emergence of these artefacts allows us to move from the role of creator to spectator. We are currently enjoying two particularly obvious examples of this in that the photographs taken in the garden arrived recently, followed closely by the first edit of our eventual film.

The shift to the spectator position is interesting and pleasantly surprising as we begin to see what others may eventually see. Maybe it goes without saying that it is easier for Steve to see images of Ellie and vice versa. On a practical level this has helped us to select the images that we wish to use and those to reject. On an emotional level this part of the process is helping us to prepare for our very personal work to leave the safety of our private collaboration and for us to risk allowing a wider world to see what we have done. After all, our intention in capturing our work on film and photo (and in writing) has been to offer further insight into the work that we have been exploring to both ourselves on replaying and reviewing, and to a larger audience, who could also perhaps find this meaningful for themselves.

We have had feedback as we have gone along in that the film crew and photographer have remarked on their sense of witnessing something authentic, natural and beautiful. This unsolicited feedback has galvanised our intention to take our work as far as we feel that we can. We are doing something that errs towards the poetic and away from a logical thesis. We wonder if it will make sense to any future spectators, and hope that it allows for enough explicitness for them to make their own sense. The process of writing this article which has given us access to the skilled and sensitive editing provided by Louise and Bob has also helped us to navigate this transition.

Our sense of freedom in the process, our enjoyment of working together, and the fact that we are following agreements that we accept as our own, would have been difficult to achieve without trust. Our deep level of trust emanated from the genuine and personal interest in the topic that we are exploring. We did not feel pressure to look at things in the same way or think the same thoughts. Instead our trusting collaboration is

about feeling confident and safe enough. More generally, we believe that each person must give themselves permission to bring different components to the “drawing table”, and then all parties work towards integrating these components in ways that feel coherent for everyone involved.

This ongoing dialogue, checking in with each other, discovering what we want, and mutually designing our research project, is integral to the co-inquiry. Thus, trust lies not only in each other as collaborators, but also in the process of co-creation.

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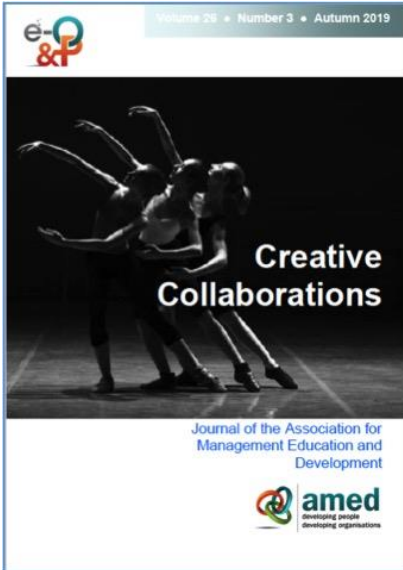
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