

## **The Dance of Dialogue: a father-daughter conversation about body, movement and dance in therapeutic group work**

**Introduction:** This article is a conversation between Ken Speyer and his daughter Sara Boas, two pioneering forces in the therapeutic use of movement and dance. The conversation begins with Sara interviewing Ken about basic concepts and aims of therapy and body therapy. This leads quickly to the issue a discussion of the ethics - in particular the ethics of the client's behaviour. This is followed by some brief but crucial comments on the educational aspect of therapy. The conversation continues with a longer discussion of integration of the 'polymorphous self', focusing on the question of optimal integration and on the integrating function of bodywork, movement and dance. The dialogue turns next to the spiritual dimension, grounding this in a consideration of session process and structure. This introduces themes of form and freedom, therapeutic use of touch, and the role of past, future and present. Wider social and cultural considerations follow, with a discussion of the role of the group and of the 'transcultural' perspective. This provides the ground for a discussion of the role of dance in culture, the distinction between dance and movement, and the healing potential of dance. Finally, the conversation comes full circle to the core aims of the work.

**Sara:** Let's start by asking... what is body psychotherapy, what is dance therapy, movement therapy, what is LIFEdance and... what do you call your work, Dad?

**Ken:** I have never found an adequate name... 'The search for healing truth'? Silent, verbal, through movement, through touch, supporting, challenging, leading, following; shall I not call it: 'Therapy'? 'Therapist' in ancient Greek meant a servant of the same social class. A doctor was a therapist. I am a servant in a particular way. I help a person to become himself. What is the name of someone who helps another to be himself? Gardener? I say simply "Therapist", the wise servant of the client. Or perhaps "Therapeutic Counsellor," emphasising active coaching, more evident now than it was thirty years ago.

**Sara:** How about 'body psychotherapy'? People have different views on what that is.

**Ken:** All therapy is body therapy. We are embodied. The degree to which therapy is 'body psychotherapy' depends first upon the intensity and quality of resonant attention that the therapist, and thus the client, give to the signs and integrity of the body: as source, carrier and focus of emotional knowledge, as subtle expression of inward modalities, forgotten history, present experience, conscious and unconscious, of thoughts and their structure. That is, as a manifestation and

revelation of the unspoken. What “Body Psychotherapy” is depends also, naturally, on how the body is directly or indirectly manipulated, or used; not only heard, but spoken to with word or hand – and directed, as root, stem and fruit of the living soul, to reveal, release and alter emotional life, and thus opened as a door to creative therapeutic dialogue, and strengthened as an underlying matrix of all spiritual, mental, or artistic life.

**Sara:** What is the main aim of your work?

**Ken:** To help a seeking person to find, to realise and be himself, in a profound, truthful and satisfying way, in the context of the society in which he lives.

**Sara:** This brings in the question of what is appropriate in a given social context – the question of ethical relativism.

**Ken:** I have paid heavily in the past for not having had the clarity or the courage to challenge forcefully the behaviour and attitude of some rapacious and unscrupulous clients. I, as therapist, can only, in honesty and in fairness to myself, encourage a way of life which I am willing to support. I am not willing to help people do whatever they want ... To feel whatever they feel? Yes, if they can contain it. To think as they think? Not necessarily. Some ways of thought are too deceptive and destructive. To say what they will? Not always. To do whatever they please? No! A therapist's dilemma!

**Sara:** This makes me think of a common misconception about people who work in business settings, as I do. In my leadership coaching work, I don't help people to do whatever they want to do.

**Ken:** But your clients are serving organisations. What is the organisation doing?

**Sara:** My aim is to help people to find the source of their power – but equally to support and even challenge my clients to use this power wisely, ethically.

**Ken:** I want to help us all to be honest with ourselves, bitterly honest – as much as we can tolerate – and to know and be true to a deeper self than we had hitherto lived. Thus, to live a life more satisfying to ourselves and to others.

**Sara:** To which “others”?

**Ken:** To as many as possible. At least to those about us, to those on whom we exert a direct or powerful influence, and to those we love.

**Sara:** This needs to be stated; otherwise we can fall into a kind of tribalism, where people take care of their own 'others': their own kind, their own family or business, while decimating whole communities. As therapist, as counsellor, as coach, we make choices, consciously and unconsciously, about what we consider ethical or acceptable, and we either encourage our clients to live in the way we think good, or else we try actively to avoid influencing them. There's so much talk about ethics in therapy, but it's almost all about the ethical therapist; much less about the ethics of the client's actions. I think this question touches both of us especially: you in your work with people who indulge in violence, me in my work with business leaders, who have the capacity to commit corporate murder – often, but not always – unwittingly.

**Ken:** It touches all areas of our work... As I said, I do not wish to support any way of life to which I cannot assent. In this sense I am intrusive, perhaps arrogant. A therapist is in loco parentis, is a teacher. It cannot be otherwise, even if we wish it otherwise.

**Sara:** This links to the educational dimension of our work. We've sometimes talked about how contrasting approaches – humanistic, psychodynamic, behaviourist approaches and so on – can work together and complement one another. How both of us combine these different approaches. Our work is both therapeutic and educational; we teach skills for daily living – skills like staying in touch with self while engaging empathically with another, containing one's own emotional reactions, exercising choice about which impulses to act upon, or staying authentic while receiving the attention of a group.

**Ken:** Indeed! I see no fundamental distinction between therapeutic and educational aims. If the work we do in therapy does not change the way someone lives and experiences his or her life – and thus the way he acts upon others – what is it? Not therapy... maybe something between entertainment and prayer. The way we experience and live is formed partly by our ingrained ways of thinking and perceiving. We are determined by all that we have learnt – and must laboriously unlearn in order to be free.

**Sara:** Yes! This is central... and it links to the question of the sense of self. So we move from questions of power, purpose and ethics to questions of identity and integration. It's the way I work in my coaching – first vocation, or calling, then integration of the different 'selves'. We were talking the other day about the 'polymorphous self'; something between a single, fixed identity and the natural ubiquity of multiple personality. I wonder how integration of the polymorphous,

multidimensional self correlates with the density of synaptic connections in the neo-cortex and the between the reptilian, mammalian and the distinctly human, frontal lobe levels of brain function. What is the optimum degree of integration of a person's different identities, selves or sub-personalities? How can we keep the distinct qualities of each – protect the tension – without creating either unnecessary inner conflict or excessive compartmentalisation? It is dangerous when the parts scarcely know one another. But it is equally so when they all merge into one, when that there is no inner tension, no need for doubt, no room for self-questioning, for auto-critique; no striving. This relates to what you once said about your fear of people who behave with sincerity and conviction, but in the absence of self-doubt... the fundamentalist mind. Integration of the polymorphous self is a pre-requisite for aligned, ethical action.

**Ken:** It is necessary for our human voyage – the pilgrim's progress – that our variously constellated selves are in active and productive dialogue with each other. They will never be quite integrated or in harmony with each other; but the price of their ignoring one another is emotional and spiritual stagnation, impotence and ignorance.

**Sara:** Yes. And how do we work with this therapeutically? When I think of this theme in relation to LIFEdance, I see each 'self' having its own posture, gestures, movement... and voice, language, emotion, logic. The dance between these is the dance of integration. A movement that grows organically from deep rest to vibrant rhythm, or melts from power, to passivity, to prayer... These are the dances of the polymorphous self. We dance them in the LIFEdance circle and we dance them in our daily lives.

**Ken:** Well said! Often my first task is to encourage the client to identify with his behaviour, to be able to talk about it, to show it, in the session or in the therapy group, without cutting off from his deeper reality. For example, a benevolent and creative teacher in the school, who at home masturbated compulsively while watching paedophilic pornography on his computer screen. I must first help him to integrate this reality. Not, of course, in the sense of living out or loving his paedophilic fantasies, but in being able to talk about them, without suppressing or dramatising his chaotic feelings. The man felt awful every time he wanked in high excitement, but he was so used to feeling awful, that he no longer knew what it was to feel simply good, except by switching to a "good" self. He found no peace in this split self. And although he gave only his "good" self to his pupils, what he had to give, to them, to others and to himself, was severely limited by this split.

**Sara:** So you work to reduce the splitting of these selves? How do you encourage all the different 'selves' to show up at the therapy session?

**Ken:** By challenges, enticements and satisfactions. For example, an exercise in which two people move their hands closer to each other slowly, slowly, without touching, in a dance of hands, in which every tiny movement, spontaneous or willed, of every finger, is visible and counts. This can create an experience of deep and mysterious connection without physical touch, of being in connection with another human being and with oneself.

**Sara:** Maybe this links to the question of what guides our clients' – and our own – decisions and behaviour. You once told me that 'hierarchy' first meant the power and priority of the sacred, of the angels and high priests. I strive to restore the natural hierarchy by giving power to the sacred within our clients, within ourselves. Giving power to spirit, letting spirit set the direction, the purpose, the one-pointedness of life, then working down through the more personal and concrete levels.

**Ken:** How?

**Sara:** When our consciousness works at the transcendent level, the level of spirit, we find natural unity, oneness. There is no split at that level – although the spiritual level may of course be split off from the other levels.

**Ken:** And so often is...alack!

**Sara:** Then we have the challenge of integration of the self-concept or identity. This theme of integration seems closely linked to adulthood, learning to be 'good-enough'... perhaps a resolution of the idealised and the demonised selves...

**Ken:** To be adult is to allow a free interaction, confined by the requisite form, between the still central source, and the moving periphery interwoven with the world.

**Sara:** Once there is some integration at the various levels – not unification, but this mutual awareness, complementarity, harmony, synergy, communication; the inner dialogue or dance of which we have been speaking – then we can help the clients to align this with and through the varied roles and concrete actions of everyday life. Overly rigid integration within the polymorphous self leads to fundamentalism, self-righteousness, tyranny; while lack of integration leads to erratic, unpredictable behaviour, internal conflict, vacillation, or even multiple personality. This is why

even pragmatically focused leadership coaching has to engage the whole person, not just the job role and responsibilities. In any kind of personal development, it's not enough to engage with one role, one sub-personality ...

**Ken:** Otherwise the other sub-personalities exert a distorting and strongly conservative influence on the developing self; or it encapsulates itself, in order to survive, which then leads to self-contradictory perception and behaviour, often unconscious, erratic and seemingly inexplicable...

**Sara:** Leading to actions which are unethical... Let's talk a bit more specifically about how we approach these issues in practice. What is your typical session structure? How do you start?

**Ken:** With the state, pre-occupations and tensions of the client.

**Sara:** And how do you end?

**Ken:** With insight and its incorporation.

**Sara:** What about the balance of form and freedom... We've talked in the past about how structure and directive instructions are in tension with – and yet create the conditions for – improvisation and authentic, inner-directed experience and expression.

**Ken:** The containing boundaries and intense concentration of the session encourage insight and a fruitful freedom. General and specific therapeutic directions give the client permission to overstep and observe his usual inhibitions of perception and expression. Empty, undirected time and the unwavering attention of the therapist or group invite the unconscious to rise and frightened holding to relax. . The supportive containment of a group can give room for and encourage reflection – reflection which I might not allow myself in the dubiety of pure freedom.

**Sara:** How do you see the role of touch?

**Ken:** There are many forms of touch: healing touch, bonding touch, touch which provokes and touch which soothes. Touch which draws forth latent aggression, or establishes boundaries, or encourages yielding. Touch which awakens childhood, or strengthens adulthood... the touch of hands, of bodies, of eyes... touch to awaken a body-part, to evoke a memory, or an earlier stage of life, to relax into truth, to give what was always needed, so that the client be freed from obsessive yearning, in order to go on towards maturation, or to bring the client into his present and adult

strength. Touch may be factual or emotional; penetrating or receiving, quick or slow or still. It may connect body parts, or free them from one another, be painful or pleasant. It is always a dialogue with both body and soul.

**Sara:** What about stillness? Silence?

**Ken:** No words, no movement, should disturb the deep silence of our soul. Even in noise and action, the inner silence should be present, be heard.

**Sara:** Is your work oriented to the past, the future? Being here now?

**Ken:** All my work concentrates on the ability to be present, with reflections of the spectral past and future. Our past is our future: we carry it with us as memory and as structure. It tends to repeat itself. The greatest part of what we will live tomorrow is what we lived yesterday. To be able to learn from the past, to prepare for the future, while living in, drinking deeply from the present: that is the work.

**Sara:** Is your focus the individual client? The group? The wider society?

**Ken:** The embedded individual. The therapeutic group is the representative of all societies and sub-societies. And the individual is himself a society...

**Sara:** Yes! A democracy, or a tyrannical dictatorship, or sheer anarchy... I wonder how the idea of 'the society within' relates to the way we work in different cultures and different kinds of social structure.

**Ken:** Let's talk about that; to what extent and in what way is your LIFEdance work transcultural?

**Sara:** For anything to be transcultural, it has to have flexibility built into it – to have a generic structure or process which actively makes space for specific cultural conditions. It must appeal to that in us which is simply human. Language is simply human. Love is simply human. Death is simply human. The forms of these are culturally determined and enormously diverse. So it is with dance. To dance is simply human. In this sense, LIFEdance is transcultural. This is also why it does not prescribe specific moves, but creates space for people to bring their own cultural movement, their own cultural embodiment, into the LIFEdance circle. When we enter a dance circle we enter a primeval cultural form – a transcultural form. We bring to this our personal and our social histories. Some are conscious, many are unconscious. Part of the fascination of working with movement is that the body speaks its mind. We find ourselves expressing what we knew – but knew not that

we knew. Our own movement, in the LIFEdance circle, witnessed by the fellow dancers, can be a mirror. Just as the drawings we make during LIFEdance are mirrors. Knowing we are seen, we see ourselves in new ways. Sometimes we see the hidden depths of our own culture. Like an iceberg, most of culture lies below the water line, hidden and often dangerous.

**Ken:** I like what you say... When we go to the roots of feeling and insight, we go beyond their specific cultural expression. To that extent, our work is always at best transcultural.

**Sara:** Through dance, we can connect to the transcendent, to the divine, the eternal, to God, to spirit... different cultures have different languages for this connection to essence, to nature. We may articulate it in different ways, but the experience is available to all human beings.

**Ken:** And is both cultural and transcultural...

**Sara:** Exactly!

**Ken:** In many societies, dance is socially, cognitively, spiritually embedded. It has consequences for the daily life of the people.

**Sara:** I have always felt glad that dance was so much part of our family culture – and frustrated that dance is generally so marginalised in Western society. The very idea of dance seems to scare some people. How do you view the distinction between dance and movement?

**Ken:** Dance is always embodiment and expression; movement may or may not be. In our society dance is chiefly to give and have pleasure; sometimes to communicate self; seldom to invoke the spiritual world, the godly source.

**Sara:** I think it is like the distinction between poetry and prose; it's not a hard line, but we know the difference. Dance is a poetic language: movement is body prose; dance is body poetry.

**Ken:** Both poetry and dance imply – rather than say – the unsayable. Both are patterned, both use rhythm, an essence of all life. In poetry each word, in dance each movement or position, as in sculpture, has a manifold symbolic import, beyond literal meaning or use, which, as intuitive meaning, at once more finely delineated and more general than the prosaic, remains in memory. Dance is meant

to communicate to self and others, or to the gods, a deeper and more concentrated relevance than simply movement.

**Sara:** You and I love to dance and we both dance with our clients, or have our clients dance during sessions. Yet I feel that my specialised dance skills are central to my work... my ability to create beauty in movement, to make art with my body... even technical skills themselves. A dancer has a much broader movement vocabulary than most people and can accompany the client more precisely... the form and the discipline give us freedom and a complex, subtle awareness of movement in self and other. I wonder, how does your love of and sensitivity to dance inform your therapeutic work? How is this different from my work, as a dancer?

**Ken:** You know much more about dance than I do. But I am accustomed, through years as therapist and through concentrated love of the embodied arts: dance, sculpture, theatre, to resonate and respond to the finest signs of the body. Furthermore, I have always loved my own body and the bodies of others. Thus in my work the natural movements of the body, through appropriate repetition, are transformed into dance; their meaning reveals itself; they touch the soul and are retained.

**Sara:** I am sure that dance is inherently healing; we certainly see instances of this through history and across cultures... shamanic dance, the dancer embodying the animal, the anima, the spirit...

**Ken:** Therapeutic dance is interactive, visible, intentional, basically social; both consciously and unconsciously symbolic. It is readable. At the same time spontaneous and a language, a unique, largely invented, freshly and ever newly-invented language, it helps to approach the impossible fusion of being true to oneself, and at the same time, with the same élan, being a flowing, creative part of a community, living one's bodily impulses without damaging others or falling into isolation... rather, becoming a living part of a living social organism.

**Sara:** Dance may be a bridge between expression and communication, experience and meaning, body and language. In dance gestures are words. One develops a kind of vocabulary of movement, including the full range of possibilities from inchoate utterances, through clear signs to symbols rich in layer upon layer of unnameable meaning.

**Ken:** We all too often neglect this potency of dance in our work. I had a session about 35 years ago with Glynn Seaborne-Jones. The session consisted of my lying

spread-eagled for about an hour and a half, no words or signs having been exchanged, absolutely still, but very much in my body, and he silent and intensely present. Then I slowly got up and began to dance, and he danced with me, a slow mirroring dance. It is impossible for me to put into words all that it meant to me, but it was one of the crucial sessions of my life: a completely wordless session, in which the dance, first still and then moving, and his attentive presence and response, carried revelation. Sometimes the language of the body is not – cannot be – verbalised; and so retains its pristine form and gives forth its meaning life-long.

**Sara:** I love this idea; this is so important in the work. In LIFEdance we develop ‘power moves’ – anything from a tiny gesture to a great sweeping full-bodied statement – which incorporate and symbolise something important for the client. Each one is developed by and for the individual; I guide the process but don’t prescribe the movement. I often use this at the end of the session and they take it with them into the theatre of life. It is part of what you call the crystallisation. It doesn’t have to be a movement, it could be a poem, a drawing... a symbolisation of what has been discovered, in a way that’s memorable and that – as you said – keeps giving forth its meaning.

**Ken:** This is essential... to find a container for insight. Otherwise it’s like trying to take baggage on the plane, without a suitcase. Sometimes in humanistic psychotherapy people grab an armful of experiences and rush out of the door. Then they wonder why the learning does not arrive in their life. Our work has roots in the dialogues of Plato, of Boethius, of Petrarch, the Upanishads, the Tantric dialogues. These are only some of the remaining traces of transformative dialogue as it was used down the ages. It has been preserved primarily in words. But what do we know of transformative dialogue that was primarily somatic? There are, of course, the mudras of India and non-verbal sacred languages elsewhere. T.S. Eliot said that the feeling is re-evoked in the word. In your LIFEdance “power moves”, the feeling is re-evoked in the gesture... the feeling and the insight that first gave rise to the gesture are re-evoked when you make the gesture.

**Sara:** Exactly. It’s the importance of making a memorable, whole, symbol. This relates to the role of art-making and performance, the being seen, being witnessed.

**Ken:** Well, some of the most important moments in my own therapy were not seen by anyone. I went out, into another room, to experience the intolerable... but it was always a being unseen, or being seen, in the social context of the group. The containment of the group leads to reflection... the therapist and the other group

members may be quite unaware of a person's most important themes, but they provide the social context for these realisations.

**Sara:** It often seems important for people to *dare* to be seen.

**Ken:** Yes, almost not daring, and then opening and finding acceptance and appreciation. How hard to believe!

**Sara:** We dance ourselves and our world into being.

**Ken:** Yes, indeed! Is this what you mean by the motto of LIFEdance: 'live your dance, dance your life'?

**Sara:** I believe that we are born to dance, just as we are born to talk, walk, love, work, sing. To dance is a birthright. Yet many people today – perhaps especially in the West, do not dance freely. The invitation to live your dance is an invitation to allow your own creative, spirited movement – to move fully, freely and with awareness. When we speak of dance, this can mean many things, such as making the body an instrument, subjugating it to the will of the dancer or choreographer. That's not what I have in mind at all. Live your dance means dancing with consciousness, experiencing your own organic vitality in and through the dance. It means making space for and giving form to the multitude of thoughts, experiences, images and impressions – past and present – which make up the story of a life. It means embodying your self in movement, finding your place and taking your space in the dance circle. It means seeing and being seen. Living your dance in the LIFEdance session means: being in your powers, fully alive, part of the group, in touch with those around you, attentive to the stirrings of your own inner world and one with spirit. It is not always graceful, but it always has its beauty. It is not always lively, but it is always alive. Now, this is not hard to experience – with the right facilitation. The harder question is how do you dance your life? In other words, how can life have the qualities of dance, so that you enter more fully into the dance of your life and into the dance of life? By dance your life I mean living from day to day with the presence, awareness, focus, rhythm and fluidity of your dancing self. I mean living artfully, creatively, responsively. I mean living with a sense of direction, of rhythm, of form, as these emerge from moment to moment. In the dance, every gesture has presence, a place in the whole. To dance your life is to know this sense of the whole, the poetry of the whole, in every moment, every act. I suppose the key to the effectiveness of LIFEdance is the translation, the continuity, between the dance in the monthly LIFEdance session and the dance of daily life.

**Ken:** “Live your dance, dance your life.” I find these good – in that order. The first in the studio: live your dance – and the other in the world: dance your life. In all therapy, whether verbal or not, with movement or not, we are observed. As a result, we observe ourselves. This observation enhances consciousness. There arises a commitment that makes every movement into a statement. A bit like the way people used to feel: God is watching. In the dance studio, in the therapy space, the group becomes a new super-ego; a new judgmental environment, less devastating, more accepting, than the old internal judgement. It can replace family, childhood, or contemporary environment. Alone, we each live with the ghosts of our past. The group – at least temporarily – provides a freedom which our internalised past inhibits. The therapist is a permissive super-ego.

**Sara:** Yes, this describes exactly my view of the LIFEdance group.

**Ken:** But the old, inhibiting super-ego often returns in the following days. To combat that, which cannot be quite excluded, the social climate of the group has got to live on, to become anchored within the inner substance of the client.

**Sara:** ‘Anchored’ – how?

**Ken:** Through repetition. Through the memorable forms that we find. Through the conscious integration of the experience in the therapy session with other levels of experience, and its necessary confrontation with our past. Gerda Boyesen used to say to us implicitly “It’s good to be as you are.” Her words have remained with me, allowing certain things, hindering others. Naturally, I have had to be my own super-ego, my own censoring, filtering self. But she “overwrote” my mother in some respects, and has given me more freedom to choose. Because we are social animals, we work largely through the introjected other. As long as the general says ‘It is okay to kill’, quite ordinary people kill, even when the general is not present on the battle field. This alteration is often transitory. Students often seemed transformed during the five-year trainings I gave; but a couple of years later, back in the pressures of a more conservative society, many returned to the more conventional values of their parents. Freedom requires a sustaining environment. The supportive containment of a group can give room for and encourage reflection – reflection which I might not allow myself in the dubiety of pure freedom. As if the group were silently saying ‘it’s okay to say that, it’s okay to feel that’. Society and the group have a censoring, but also a freeing function.

**Sara:** And the role of the witness is essential to freedom.

**Ken:** The witness is consciousness; being seen can strengthen consciousness.

**Sara:** Strengthening one's own inner witnessing...

**Ken:** My understanding of the human soul is largely based in Indian thought. All therapy is meditative and all therapists are meditative teachers, whether they know it or not. As in Vipassana meditation. At first you deny your emotional, perceptual and behavioural reality, do not recognise it. Then you begin to see it. You acknowledge it; you take possession of it. Then you identify with it... Over-identify! Then at last you realise that it's not you. That you live beyond that which you 'are'. A process that grows from denial, to acknowledgement, to identification... to dis-identification with the seen, through identification with the witness, as we said before. This is, of course, different from schizoid dis-identification, in which feeling is denied.

**Sara:** It's a clear and yet mysterious process.

**Ken:** We are always walking backwards into the darkness. Things appear, aspects of self... then we realise that we exist, independent of all that appears. The knower is not the known, and can never be known. This meditative aspect is perhaps more hidden in behavioural than in psychodynamic work. But it is the same: he who commands behaviour is not the one who behaves, nor the behaviour itself.

**Sara:** So our focus is on awareness and disciplined action. This requires compassion, insight, peaceful courage and fierce patience. I see this in terms of spiritual practice – the basis of a refined and embodied consciousness.

**Ken:** The spiritual dimension: this is the implicit centre of our work, without which all satisfaction is limited and all truth meaningless.