

2009 Marian Chace Annual Lecture

A Witness to a Conscious Death

Janet Adler

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I dedicate my essay to my two sons, Joshua and Paul. I am grateful to Sharon Chaiklin for her gracious invitation on behalf of the Marian Chace Foundation and to Patrizia Pallaro for her generous words of introduction as well as her two volumes of work concerning Authentic Movement, making possible not only the publication of my own papers concerning my experience of the discipline, but the papers of my teacher, my colleagues, and my students.

In my college years, my Mother sent me a magazine article about Marian Chace and dance therapy. This was when I consciously, enthusiastically, turned toward the profession. My Mother was present with me at the national dance/movement therapy conference in San Francisco, and years later, at the international conference on the grounds of Nervenlinik Spandau, a mental hospital in Berlin, Germany. Throughout her adult life, perhaps partly because her own Mother was mentally ill, she offered strong leadership as a volunteer in the Mental Health Association, participating in changing laws related to the dignity of people who are mentally ill.

For personal and professional reasons, I have chosen not to publish my original address to the 44th National ADTA conference on October 10, 2009, in Portland, Oregon, at this time in the AJDT. Here is the essence of my offering about witnessing my ninety-year old Mother's fast into death.

J. Adler (✉)
British Columbia, Canada
e-mail: janetroslynadler@gmail.com



Janet with her Mother, Posy Adler, at the First International Conference on Dance/movement Therapy *The Language of Movement*, Berlin, Germany, 1994

My Mother's life was very full, especially in her relationships and in her work as a visual artist. She was a pioneer in an organization called *Compassion and Choices*, participating in educational programs supporting people who are clear about the way they wish to exit their lives. The doctor who supervised Mother's fasting was also an active member of this group, working to inform people of their choices, which are legal and dignified. One month before Mother began her fast, his colleague, Dr. Stanley Terman (2007), published the first book in the United States about dying with dignity by refusal of food and water.

Mother's strong beliefs in conscious choice supported and prepared her as she committed to her own death. I completely trusted her. For decades together, we had explored many questions: If one has the privilege to choose, how does such a decision get made? Who chooses when, how, where: the mighty unreachable God, the loving God, or the indwelling God, the doctor, rabbi, or priest, the clear Self or the inner witness? Who decides?

After the last Thanksgiving leftovers were gone, Mother began her journey. She was the mover and I was a witness. As I do with my students, in honoring their truth as movers, I committed to her and to her commitment to this process, with careful inquiry into any judgment, projection, or interpretation I might have had regarding her choice. I discovered no inner obstacles, no hint of confusion about what she told me. And paradoxically, I was acutely aware of the impossibility of even imagining

what my experience would be once she was gone, learning how to live with the absence of her presence.

As I speak to my audience, I name a central aspect of the discipline of Authentic Movement, which concerns the invitation to movers and witnesses to work with the practice of discernment, choosing after their movement to not speak the whole story of their journey, but instead to try to choose only one gesture or a short series of gestures within one pool of experience. Rarely a mover chooses to make an exception, speaking the entire sequence. In my address, I make that exception and choose to tell “the whole story” of my experience as witness of my Mother’s eight day fast into death.

Witnessing a parent’s death and witnessing a mover in my kiva studio are profoundly different. I name my awareness of stories in the lives of those present in the audience, which concern dying parents or loved ones. I ask: What choices will we make when it is our turn to die? Will we be able to choose the best way for us?

The heart of my address is when I speak directly of my experience as Mother’s witness. I recall many aspects of our preparation together as a family as well as Mother’s personal preparation. I remember her humor, her thoughtfulness concerning our comfort in saying good-bye, and her sweetness, her patience. I repeat some of what she says to me, because it moves me so. I share some images of hers that she shares with me and some of mine that I experience as her witness. I name the depth of my despair, my own needs to not leave her bedside, and my learning moment by moment from her resoluteness, her clarity, her sense of adventure.

The eight days evolve one by one, becoming no time at all, as she receives less and less of life, of its nourishment, its light, until she takes her last breath.

I close with this poem from the Bengali poet, Tagore (Tagore 1999, p. 42):

When I was born and saw the light
I was no stranger in this world
Something inscrutable shapeless, and without words
Appeared in the form of my mother.

So when I die, the same unknown will appear again
As ever known to me,
And because I love this life
I will love death as well.

References

- Tagore, R. (1999). *On the shores of eternity: Poems from Tagore on immortality and beyond* (D. Chopra, Trans.). New York: Harmony Books (Tagore’s own English translation from the Bengali was published as *Gitanjali* in 1911).
- Terman, S. A. (2007). *The best way to say good-bye: A legal peaceful choice*. Carlsbad, CA: Life Transitions Publications.

Author Biography

Janet Adler, PhD, BC-DMT

A long-time ADTA member, she first presented her classic film *Looking for me*, showing her work with autistic children, at the ADTA conference in 1969. Her documentary was developed in relation to her Master's degree in Child Development from the University of Pittsburgh Medical School, while she worked as a dance/movement therapist at the Child Guidance Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh.

She continued her training with Dr. John Weir in somatic epistemology and Mary Starks Whitehouse in authentic movement. She was the founder and director of the Mary Starks Whitehouse Institute in Northampton, MA, from 1981 to 1985, the first school providing an in-depth study of Authentic Movement. Making use of her knowledge and experience, she received her doctorate from The Union Institute in the field of Religion, in 1992.

She has continually been teaching as faculty and guest teacher at many institutions and private settings both nationally and internationally. Additionally, she has made numerous presentations at conferences in the US and abroad. Her expertise in Authentic Movement led her to create another film, *Still looking*, a visual description of the discipline. Her first book, *Arching backward: The mystical initiation of a contemporary woman*, was followed by *Offering from the conscious body: The discipline of Authentic Movement*. Her ideas and work have also been included in two volumes on Authentic Movement, edited by Patrizia Pallaro.

Janet continues to offer ongoing group and individual retreats in the discipline of Authentic Movement. As a chaplain, she directs a new volunteer hospice program in her community in British Columbia, Canada.