Ilene Serlin

Active Pause March 2010

Ilene Serlin, Ph.D., ADTR is a licensed psychologist and registered dance/movement therapist in practice in San Francisco and Marin county. She is the president of the San Francisco Psychological Association, a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, past-president of the Division of Humanistic Psychology. Ilene Serlin has taught at Saybrook University, Lesley University, UCLA, the NY Gestalt Institute and the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich. She is the editor of *Whole Person Healthcare* (2007, 3 vol., Praeger), over 100 chapters and articles on body, art and psychotherapy, and is on the editorial boards of *PsycCritiques*, the *American Dance Therapy Journal*, the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *Arts & Health: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice*, *Journal.*

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (http://relationalimplicit.com).

The following is a transcript of the original audio. Please note that this conversation was meant to be a spontaneous exchange. For better or worse, the transcript retains the unedited quality of the conversation.

Serge Prengel: I'm with Ilene Serlin. Hi, Ilene.

Ilene Serlin: Hello, Serge, Bonjour.

S P: Bonjour. So how did you get from being a student of Philosophy in France to what you're doing these days?

I S: You had asked me a question about starting a little bit earlier. Let me just say a few words a little bit, earlier, because I think one thing we're looking at is how I came to be so integrative. And so I did say as a child I was a little monkey, so the world of nonverbal communication was very natural for me. I used my body to – I always imitated people. I could tell a lot by the way they walked and carried themselves and used to caricature people as amusement for myself and other people. But I'm always fascinated by the way people move through the world as their signature. It always spoke to me very strongly about who they were and what I could sense. So there was that part, the nonverbal. And I was a tomboy, I liked moving, and it was very easy for me, probably more than verbal; so dance was always easy. And then the same thing with dancing, when I was fourteen in Israel, when I went with a teenage group to Israel, I discovered Israeli folkdance and felt there the power of movement to shape a country, the power of culture to create a sense of purpose and meaning in—
(Serge: Mm-hmm)
—a group of people together. It really focused people's energies and motivated them through song and dance. Many years later, I had the opportunity to talk to some of these pioneers, dance anthropologists, who came to Israel and created a culture, so they understood it, and I felt that at fourteen. I also felt at fourteen the power of dance and movement to bring life to a community. I felt like the suburbs in America were very boring and very disembodied, and teenagers didn't have much to do. But in Israel, I felt that this way of dancing and working the land really carried the ideology and brought groups of people together. And again, many years later as a Dance Therapist, I

found this working in Psychiatric Hospitals, everywhere, the power of movement to really both express the daily life but also to transcend it into some ideal of health or wellness or purpose or meaning—

(Serge: Mm-hmm)

—so all of those I felt early on.

S P: So there's a lot there and maybe to provide some emphasis in the many, many things you say about dance and movement. A part of it is the expressive ability of dance and movement for an individual, something that happens at the level of the group.

(I S: Mm-hmm)

—But, also in your own very early interest in being, as you say, a monkey, a sense of picking up at a very nonverbal level; picking up movement, the transition of movement, the kind of understanding, empathy connection that can exist through movement.

I S: I sent you an article that came out many years later; I think I called Kinesthetic Countertransference.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—Trying to articulate what it is that I'm sensing when I get a feel about someone. And of course you read your own body. Years later, I learned Labanotation and I used some of that to articulate, because it's such a precise language, some of the things I'm feeling. But it's more of an impression when you're feeling it —

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—about what the other person is conveying. And of course you carry that other person in your own body. I know that they joke among Dance Therapists', we're very good at merging and not so good at separating, but I think we do tend to pick up on other people's bodily expressions very quickly in our own bodies and then have to work to sort it all out and understand—

(S P: Yeah)

—what belong to whom and where the boundaries are and all that after the fact.

S P: So as we're talking about Dance Therapy and merging, separating – in a way that dance of merging and separating that takes place, is it okay to talk a little bit about what happens during a session when you do Dance Therapy? A lot of people are familiar with Body Psychotherapy, in which every Body Psychotherapist does something a little different, has different modalities. What is happening in dance; is there really a dance between patient and therapist?

I S: Oh yeah, and of course every Dance Therapist will say that same thing: every Dance therapist works probably somewhat differently. There are different schools of Dance Therapy. Some is when you're working with someone and you never move with them; you sit still, and it's all an inner communication, but you don't have overt movements. And others, you really move with the person to use their own body and energy to amplify or exaggerate or dialogue with the other person at a certain point of the process.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—Again for me, I cannot stay in any one camp; it always depends on the moment whether I sit still or move with someone and in what way.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—I can't make a prescription out of it, but you'll find people saying all variations. I think some of the biggest differences for me between the Somatic Therapies, I'm imaging that you describe, and what

I'm imagining I do in a session is number one. Most Dance Therapists don't start with a problem to be fixed.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—Somatic is more that you have a pain and you have something that calls attention—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—to a specific problem. Dance Therapy is much more like improvisation. I think the problem emerges often in the course of the moving or the issue.

(S P: So...)

—I always start with some type of warm up. I kind of assume when people come in, often, we're all a little deadened, unable to feel. It's in the course of the warm up and the moving that you start feeling yourself and your issues start feeling again. So you don't always come in clear knowing what you want to work on.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—Improvisation is such a big part of Dance Therapy in that you're always tracking the images and the themes as they begin to clarify themselves in the movement.

(S P: Yeah)

—The role of the Dance Therapist is generally not prescriptive; you're not trying to fix something. You're trying to help clarify it, which sometimes means exaggerating it and amplifying it, focusing it.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—But you don't want to impose. It's very process oriented. Mostly you don't try to impose your own sense on it, what it is, what it means. You try to help guide the person so they come to their own clarity.

S P: So for instance, the person, the client is entering your office without necessarily a very clear idea of a specific concern or issue or topic. And in that hypothetical case there's a little bit of a warm up where you go into some kind of movement.

Ilene: Yeah. It's kind of a paradox. I had a women come in once who was just on the easy kind of agitated, didn't know what the problem was, but as she moved she began to look more clear—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—sort of a sense of discovery, she was finding it, finding it. And then, all of a sudden, there's sort of an "aha!" moment when it comes to consciousness what the movements were about or what the theme is. You can see it settling in the whole body that Eugene Gendlin calls it the "felt sense."

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—I worked with him, he worked with me, and that moment where that felt sense comes into clarity, the whole body sort of settles into an "ah."You know it feels like something has settled into place. And what she said, the big insight that she said was "Ah! I'm confused."

(S P: Laughs)

—That sounds kind of silly, but that was really what was bothering her and—

(S P: Yeah)

—once you got a handle of the problem, she could start figuring out how to go about working on that issue. So it doesn't have to be that you fix the confusion it's just that you get clarity about what is out of balance or what is out of sorts.

(S P: Right that she had clarity about being confused)

—That leads you down a path to an expression of the problem.

S P: So that happened as she actually was in the process of following the movement, the dance and that brought up what was stored inside maybe? It helped to used Gendlin's wording, to carry it forward.

(I S: Yes, yes, exactly.)

—So Ilene you talk about narrative in terms of describing your work and what you do with clients. And narrative is something that many of us strongly associate with words and talk. How do you see the narrative unfolding in dance and movement?

I S: Ah, let me go to the end of the question for a second because as you're talking, I'm thinking again about the Paris Opera Ballet, a performance I just told you about. It's such an exquisite representation of nonverbal narrative. They use words at times, but when the Ballet Master is coaching them, the Ballet Master will say something like, "When you put your foot down at the end of the jump, linger a little bit, stretch out time or attack the position, think of attacking…" they use words like urgency. And all of a sudden you can see the quality of the movement change.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—So the end point that I want to get to and this gets back to the point of integration. When you see the dancer's whole movement change, very subtly, around one subtle point, you can see how exquisite it is when mind and body are moving together. That's what I call embodied thought.

(S P: Embodied thought, yeah)

—And you see the thought change the quality of the movement and the movement was expressing that thought perfectly.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—To be in the state where you body is expressing the thought and fantasies, is the height of being a conscious body, mind and spirit. And being integrated at the moment.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—And sometimes Dance Therapists will say that the problem that we work with, in a very general sense, is a disconnect between thought, fantasy, emotion, and behavior. Most people are hiding; either they think one thing but they act a different way, or they feel something that's disconnected. To bring all of those into a perfect harmony is very, very rare. But it's sort of a concept of health, and you can see in the dancer. It's like a platonic ideal of this perfection of mind and body together. And when you're moving it's a beautiful harmony where there's no shadow. It's what Laban used to call "shadow energies" where there's a block, incomplete, where you're not using all of yourself. Part of you is split off; part of you is hidden. And you can see that in movement, hear it in speech. So back to your question about narrative, to me the most perfect narrative is that moment that I was seeing in the ballet, where it was all together. Now that was nonverbal, but some dancers add words. Some Dance Therapists say that the original art forms were not separated. It was like oral poetry—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—where the words were not discursive words. They were not to do check lists of our day-to-day. Even words can be disconnected from affects and fantasies, so part of what Dance Therapists try to do is to bring expression into all the dimensions together. I often start with movements and the words that come from the movement are coming more from the heart or the center of the body – somewhere from the soul, then just from the mind.

(S P: So…)

—So a narrative is really all of it, I think. Together, they tell the story but the story speaks in one piece, and all the elements are working together.

S P: So in a way what you're doing is promoting integration because at that moment what's happening is that you no longer have the disconnect between different ways of expressing or different ways of healing or different ways of knowing.

I S: Exactly, to me that's aesthetic. It's like a moment of perfect truth, perfect harmony that's rarely achieved. But when it does, you want more of it, because it feels so good.

S P: So there is something very nice about using the words aesthetics, because aesthetics is going to evoke the word harmony, to evoke something that feels right, something that feels good – some sense of vibrations, some instinctive nonintellectual sense that things are right.

I S: I do have a feeling the more and more I practice psychotherapy, I find practically speaking, I find that by observing how I work and how people are responding, I feel that a certain amount of expressive therapists. There are some clichés, like "the body never lies"—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—and there is another cliché, "expression brings healing". I think those are very important first steps, but I don't think that they're the whole process. I think that as we move towards this like a continuum of expression, the first step is to help people unblock blocks, and then you get energy flowing and expression flowing. It may be what some psychoanalysts have called, a little bit dismissively, just mere catharsis.

(S P: laughs)

—I do agree with them, that that alone is not the full spectrum of healing. It's an important part of it, but I don't think it's enough.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—I think as you move along a road of higher consciousness, of more discrimination, you get to see what we saw in the ballet dancers. It's what Jung calls "the transcendent function," and Jung is very clear that this is where healing happens – in the authentic movements where the unconscious is flowing freely but the conscious, watcher part, is very active but not inhibiting the expression—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—so there is a disconnect between conscious and unconscious or the mover and the watcher. Now that's true in authentic movement. I do other things though as integrative as other psychologists. Now this question of confused, it may be that I'm almost like cognitive therapy and say "would you like a homework assignment" but this more comes out of Gestalt training.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—To make everything an experiment, so you're working collaboratively and you would say "Would you just like meditating on that word 'confused' all week; keep a journal see what comes up around the word." I believe in taking it into the week and making it very practical. If I'm working with a couple, I'll say, "Pay attention to those moments where this issue has come up, where one stops paying attention to the other, or where such and such," and then you bring that into the next session. So the narrative continues week by week, and you're building a story of what's working and what's not working in somebody's life. You're looking at movement as exemplifying all those very subtle but very embodied moments in a life.

S P: So I just want to stop for a moment here. A minute ago, you said something about building a story, paying attention to what's working and not working, and I think that gives us a context for what's happening that's a little different from, say, doing a homework assignment in a sense of doing work and homework; but there is an experimental quality of the work of observing moment by moment what's happening and that total awareness, not just in terms of thoughts and ideas, but in

the kinesthetic awareness that is very much about being observing but also ready to make experiments. Isn't there?

I S: Yes, oh absolutely. Is there a question there? (Laughs)

S P: Well, I'm just curious in a sense of how that is related to narrative— the sense that I have is, as I'm listening to you, that narrative is not just about telling a story that is a past, but a sense of telling the story as it is happening, as it is unfolding and creating meaning as you're telling the story, so something that is similar to a sacred ritual.

I S: I think there are two things that I'd like to add to this definition of narrative. One is not only is it not just happening in the past but it's happening in the present. So I see narrative as a way in which we move through the world. That may mean everything from how we organize our time or how we keep our friendships connected. It forms a tapestry over time that is about the way we. If we were a ballet, the way we move through the world could be seen on stage. We are enacting that all the time; we just don't see ourselves. So I do see narratives unfolding over time. There are two elements that I think of narratives which makes it healing, that I don't often hear talked about. One is, as I was saying, narrative gets better. What I mean by that is that it gets more functional, it gets more integrated, it gets more directed towards the meaning and purpose you want it to be, the person wants it to be. So I'm talking about change over time. So again, it's not just repeating the story of, let's say, my narrative is I'm a victim, so if I'm going to tell that story over and over. I think it can change. I think that part of narrative is that it does change, hopefully. We don't want to get stuck in a narrative. So it's both finding the turning points in the narrative that can keep it moving. I think that's part of the job – to make narratives explicit, not to just get it out once and freeze it.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—The other part of narrative that I don't hear talked about very much, though it's very much part of my many years of Buddhist training; is not to hang on to the narrative, not to get too identified, or as they say philosophically, not to deify the narrative, or make it too solid. I see it all the time: I am my narrative, let me tell you my story. There is too much ego in that. There is too much appropriation, too much ownership of it. There is a certain point in which you let go of your narrative, and you are more than your narrative, other than your narrative, or your narrative doesn't define everything of who you are. So a lot of the narratives that I see, to me, doesn't get to that next point, which of course I think of the beauty of the Tibetan Monks doing sand paintings. You know they can spend days or weeks making this very beautiful painting and then they just blow it all away.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—And that's the final part of the narrative: not to put a frame on it and put it in a museum once the painting is done, which we do in the West so much. We get caught in our narratives. So it's to help surface the narrative, see what it is, get it moving, get it unstuck, help it change, and then let go of it. Share it and let go of it, so it lives in other people to and not just in us too.

S P: So can you give an example of how this happens in the course of a session? Of an individual client's therapy?

I S: I think that the most common one that is coming to mind is that you do see that as people who have really identify themselves as their narratives as one of having been a victim begin to shift that. I'm thinking more of groups here, where I teach in Israel, and I hate to say it but that's part of the cultural narrative of having to been victimized, traumatized and you don't get over that. But it does shift to let's say taking more personal power for yourself and a group—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—taking more initiative, ways in which you can begin to shift that, some "stuckness," around that narrative.

S P: So how do you notice it? How do you see it happening in the course of movement?

I S: What came to mind when you asked that question was a group of women with breast cancer, where one of the woman without speaking she—this group was with newly diagnosed women so they were often still in shock— was pretty much hiding in the corner for the pretty much whole time of the group—

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—she didn't particularly want to share drawing or move with other people or things like that. But by the end of the group, she was literally in the center of the circle, kind of the one to take down everyone's phone number, and promised to stay in touch, she had taken on leadership roles. And so you could literally see her moving from outside the circle to a central position.

S P: And what had happened in between?

I S: A number of things. This is all group processed stuff. One is that she was given permission to be where she was; nobody said she had to change or come join the circle. One is being allowed to express, and that is the power of working with images. Once you let people own their images, make them explicit, they can then start changing and moving. Once it was okay to be there she didn't have to defend against anything, she didn't have any more stake in having to be there anymore, she could start getting interested in what other people are doing.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—I saw that a lot, by the way, when I worked in Psychiatric Hospitals with back ward patients who had spent a lifetime of saying no: "No, I won't join this society; No, I'm going to march to my own drum; No, I'm not going to be a good boy or good girl; No, I have nothing more to lose because I'm in here anyway and you can't threaten me or cajole me or tempt me with anything or reinforce my behavior or anything, because I have nothing more to lose, and I'll live in whatever world makes sense to me, and it's not your world." So if you come up to some of those people in Dance Therapy sessions – this was back when psychiatric hospitals were really awful places and people were put there when they were young and had nervous breakdowns and had been on that backboards for thirty-forty years and had really become—

(S P: Uh-huh)

—patients in the sense of becoming frozen into those roles—

(S P: Yeah)

—if you just put on music and go up to one of them and ask, "Would you like to dance with us?" ninety-nine percent you're going to get an answer "no" of course. But I learned that if you just put on music and you, very indirectly, create a a flow in the room, you're consciously being indirect. You kind of swirl around people with energy and you create an ease of energy, get some music going that carries makes the holding environment of the whole room, but you're not focusing on just any one person.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—So you don't focus on them, and you often pretend to ignore them and you turn your back and go on. They're not being put on the spot and will often start coming forward and wanting to join, just because it's seductive.

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—And they don't have any stake in saying "no" anymore, and often by the end of the hour, you'll have a circle going just by having to create a center of gravity in the middle of the room and among people. That makes it hard to resist. And it's the same thing about most of us, you want to be invited in, and you don't want to be put on the spot and have to repeat your old pattern of saying "no," or "this is the only way I know how to assert my individuality," or "as you say a I'm going to say b" … whatever things we've been stuck in so long, you don't want to replicate that, so you want to find something different that creates an opening and that will allow people to shift or be different.

S P: Yeah so that sense of creating the conditions for the flow, the respect for what's keeping people stuck, but creating the conditions for the flow.

I S: That's right, yeah.

S P: So as we talk about this, as things come very strongly from the many things you say, many desire not to simply be somebody who is doing movement for all that you're interested in movement, but somebody who is first and foremost interested in integration.—
(I S: Yes)
—So sometimes it must be a little frustrating to not have a simple label to put on what you do.

I S: Well that's just what I was about to say, Serge. Thank you for putting some words on this. Yes, it's always a problem with me, when people ask me what I do. And I wish I had a formula or I belong to a club, or that I'm this kind of therapist or that. You asked me what led to it, you know back to my childhood or something; I think that it was my learning style. That is what happened when I was in an Honors Program in Psychology at the university; it was all very exciting and I'd say, "Well, what about movement; where's the body?" And then I found Anna Halprin, went off studying with Anna, and then became a Dance Therapist. And then I would say "What about philosophy; what about more advanced clinical training?" Gestalt was quite integrative for me then, but I remember with Laura Perls was kind of an atheist and I would say, "Where is the spiritual part?" I needed to account for my Buddhism and roots in Judaism. Laura had some of that, but I found that Jungian took me deeper to areas of the sacred that I then didn't find in Gestalt. So there was always a difficulty in learning style of being in one place and always seeing what's missing and then signing up for another community of theorists and learners, learning a lot there, and then when I saw that it became a church or dogma or not complete for me, I'd go somewhere else.

(S P: Mm-hmm, Mm-hmm)

—It's never been easy, but that kind of how I've learned through my life.

S P: Yeah so that sense of the journey to expand, wanting more, other sides, other perspectives.

I S: You say expand and I'm chuckling, thinking now I'm trying to get better at, as you see, technology, putting myself on Google and finding key words and ad words.

(S P: laughs)

—I'm not even a baby at this but I see all the young people doing as we older therapists watch the market place change. And it's such a struggle and the whole trend, at least in psychology today, is towards niche marks, niche marketing, niche, niche, niche, you know keywords and focusing down, specialization and fragmentation. Exactly the opposite of what has been my own life's work and it's very frustrating.

S P: The question that comes to mind is how does one maintain a sense of wholeness in an increasingly fragmented world?

I S: Is that the question for me, for our day, for a therapist, for you? Yeah it's a very good question.

S P: Yeah, that was almost my sense of that was the question you implied in what you were saying.

I S: Yeah I was talking about me at the moment, how to practice professionally

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—and some kind of integrity. The problem with the word expansion is that it becomes a jack of all trades or a master of none. There are people who are very diffuse and that's not good either. I think about that with Dance Therapy training now, because I do want to get back to it, whether I'm an expressive therapist because I use art and I do track images and I do believe in a certain amount of multimodal trend and crossing boundaries. But there are some things I got from the depth of training in just dance, since I spent ten-fifteen years just focusing on just dance. I won't have begun to get to the bottom of what I could learn from the discipline. So you know one doesn't want to spread oneself too thin either and know where your home base is. That, I think, is the tension for me, is having the home base

(S P: Mm-hmm)

—but also being a person knowing where your home is and being a citizen of the world at the same time, but you do need a home base.

(S P: Yes)

—That is a really uneasy balance to keep finding.

S P: Finding an easy balance or creative tension?

—A creative tension in today's world. It's much more complex in today's world.

(S P: Yeah)

I S: But I think just biologically we ad human beings, we need a home base, we need a nest, we need an identity, we need to attach somewhere; we can't just float.

This conversation was transcribed by Alev Ildiz.

© 2010. All rights reserved. *Active Pause* and its web address (activepause.com) should be properly cited when these contents are used in any form.