

Dancing with Swan and Phoenix: a healing journey through archetypal medicine

Abstract Early Career Workshop on Ethnographies and Health

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Some of the healing experiences related to me during my PhD fieldwork on dance, as well as some I experienced myself, cannot be understood through the lens of the biomedical paradigm and its views on health. My research gave rise to understanding health in terms of a *process* rather than a state, which ties in with a recent definition of health as the *ability* to adapt and to self-manage (Huber et al., 2011), and Antonovsky's theory of sense of coherence (1993). This raises questions such as: what do health and healing constitute of, and how can circumstances be created which are supportive and conducive of good health?

In this article I will discuss some explanatory models from shamanic traditions (in particular concepts such as soul retrieval and power animal medicine) as well as use analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) as a specific methodology to explore different assumptions of health and wellbeing, what conditions might need healing, and what 'treatments' could be applied.

My personal dance training in two distinct types of dance will serve as a case study, comparing an 8-year training as professional dancer (ballet and contemporary) and my subsequent 10-year training to becoming a Movement Medicine teacher. This is an improvised practice, informed by shamanism and ecstatic dance (Kieft, 2014). In particular I will address a healing ritual for soul

retrieval. This process, done repeatedly, intimately introduced me to the archetypes of Swan and Phoenix, respectively reflecting my training as professional dancer and my shamanic dance training. It allowed me to integrate the benefits of both types of dance training, while letting go of any unhealthy assumptions they had created in me – the second being a ‘cure’ for the first, but not without its own challenges.

Extrapolating my personal experiences to the symbolism of these two birds in art, mythology and contemporary culture, I will then reflect on themes such as the cyclical nature of life, death and transformation (including our own mortality), our relationship to education and authority, and views on personal empowerment. Bringing together the power of symbols, stories, imagination and the transformative and healing properties of improvised ritualised dance, I will discuss the meaning and necessity of such individual journeys for health, well-being, and self-confidence in contemporary Western culture, by creating ‘an internal narrative of restoration and healing, built from imagery which reiterated messages of wholeness and integration’ (Samuel, 2008, in Samuel, 2010).

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