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# Witnessing Another, Witnessing Oneself

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Witnessing Another, Witnessing Oneself

Kyra Hess

Submitted in partial completion of the Master of Science Degree  
at Sarah Lawrence College  
May 2018

Dedicated to those who have seen me through it all.

Aubrey, Ashley, Casey, Tom, and Connie.

Thank you for your patience, your honesty, your humor, your gentleness, and your love.

### Abstract

Witnessing is a crucial, defining mechanism of dance/movement therapy that demands physical awareness, emotional recognition, and verbalization with humble honesty. Although witnessing has the potential to arise in nearly all encounters, as dance/movement therapists work directly with multifaceted and complex individuals, there has been a lack of delineating the various elements required to accomplish this task. This thesis is an attempt to begin outlining of the process and elements of witnessing. Beginning with the history of witnessing and its unique features within the field of dance/movement therapy, the author provides the essential qualities to consider in order to witness another individual. Because the process of witnessing has grown since its inception in the field through Authentic Movement, and the avenues to foster characteristics within oneself is a subjective process, the personal experiences of the author are provided and analyzed to shed light on possible avenues for growth. From these explorations, four themes of developing as a witness in dance/movement therapy emerged: awareness; continual self-discovery; subjectivity; bodily involvement.

*Keywords:* dance-movement therapy, witness, authentic movement, mover-witness relationship, internal awareness, growth process

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## Witnessing Oneself, Witnessing Another

**Introduction**

Imagine a forest. It can be easy to see this place as one collective with no differentiation, just a vast expanse of the same. Look closer. See the unique cracks in each trees bark and try to count all of their branches. Each tree is a singular entity, supporting itself and growing upwards from the ground. A strong central core exists in the trunk, built upon a network of supporting roots. Underneath the ground the roots may intertwine, while above the branches expand in all directions. Just as a forest begins, takes root, and grows, so too has the field of dance/movement therapy entered into an age of flourishing. If we imagine the field as a forest, the various mechanisms of the field can each be given a tree. The existence of each particular concept can be traced down to the roots from pioneers such as Marian Chace or Norma Canner; its development and growth can be followed through the branches. While a number of these concepts, like the therapeutic relationship or kinesthetic empathy, have been explored in depth (Fischman, 2016; Levy, 2005; Young, 2017), there is a mechanism that must still be recognized and explored. Witnessing deserves its own tree.

The word *witness* is often used interchangeably with a multitude of other words. We see, we watch, we notice, we observe, we attend, we witness. While similarities exist in the definitions and functions, within the field of dance/movement therapy there is a clear distinction for the use of witness. There is a greater depth to this seemingly simple word than when *see* or *watch* are used. Witnessing is a complex act, calling upon more of an individual than their eyes alone. To witness is to go beyond the action of merely observing movement towards a multifaceted joining with another and with oneself. In order for students to understand how dance/movement therapy is unique, it is of prime importance to fully differentiate this

mechanism of witnessing as one of the most unique and defining traits of the field. Additionally, as this field of therapy continues to expand outwards into more environments that often require quantitative validation, such as hospitals or mental health clinics, delineating concepts appears to be central to furthering the field's legitimacy. The various mechanisms of dance/movement therapy each differentiate the field in a distinctive and beneficial way.

In this paper, the tree of witnessing will be explored in order to concretize what may be seen as an abstract topic. Witnessing begins from Mary Stark Whitehouse's original conception of the term; it subsequently expands through the field of dance/movement therapy in Authentic Movement and body-mind practices, as well as through other creative arts practices. From these foundations, the fundamental elements of witnessing will be outlined: the trunk. While defining can often feel concrete and resolute, it is my intent as an author and a dance/movement therapy student to honor the subjective pathways that can be taken to develop the skills required for witnessing: the branches. It is with this idea in mind, that personal heuristic data of my development as a witness will be provided. Similar to Young's (2012) exploration of using her body to expand her teaching skills, the specific bodily-focused experiences undergone on my journey thus far will be provided to illustrate their function in expanding my own skills as a witness. Inspired by Lenore Wadsworth Hervey's lecture for the Marian Chace Foundation (2014), my "embodied artistic inquiry" (Hervey, 2015, p. 6) as a growing witness will also be organized into themes to develop a working model for dance/movement therapists to understand the development of their own witness.

### **Mary Starks Whitehouse and the Conception/Beginning of Witnessing**

Dance/movement therapy pioneer Mary Starks Whitehouse laid the foundation for witnessing within a therapeutic movement relationship. After distancing herself from the world



of performance dance, Whitehouse studied Jungian analysis (Levy, 2005). Jung created and taught a process called active imagination, incorporating imagery and imagination in a process of deep introspection (Fischman, 2016). Through active imagination, an individual could connect to the “Self,” a transpersonal collectiveness of all human beings in the world that Jung believed guided all people (Whitehouse, 1979). By working towards this elevated level of awareness, individuals could then re-evaluate their self-knowledge and discover how they might exist more harmoniously with events around them (Jung, 1959). It was through studying this field of thought that Whitehouse began to see movement as a new avenue for practicing active imagination; that is, she saw the body as the means of discovering the unconscious, those thoughts and ideas that extend beyond what is immediately accessible to the mind (Whitehouse, 1979). The inherent wholeness of a human being, which Whitehouse believed to always exist, could achieve balance through the movement process she created and, therefore, healing (Levy, 2005; Whitehouse, 1979).

Whitehouse originally outlined her process, called Movement-in-depth, in an interview with Gilda Frantz in 1972 (Frantz, 1999). To tap into the unconscious, the first step was to develop an awareness of being in one’s unique body, now often referred to as kinesthetic awareness (Levy, 2005). While Whitehouse sat and looked on, her students would stand with eyes closed and follow directions to notice the feelings that physical sensations created in their body (Frantz, 1999). This exploration might involve simple movements such as swinging, turning, stretching, or balancing; as movers progressed, any sensations, thoughts, or images that arose were to be noted and investigated for their internal or external origin (Whitehouse, 1958; Levy, 2005). The goal within this was for the mover to note how it felt when instincts were

personal, rather than those influenced by societal expectations (Whitehouse, 1958). When movements became more personal to a mover, further investigation of the self could occur.

Eventually, students could explore with their body through guided movement suggestions from Whitehouse and their own improvisation. By using their developed awareness, Whitehouse believed that her pupils could uncover unconscious material and bring it to consciousness. These unconscious thoughts and beliefs were believed to be carried in the physical body's reactive sensations, postures, and perceptions. Movements that spontaneously arose were viewed as a specific reflection of the unconscious in the present time (Frantz, 1999). As a student's personal material arose and was investigated, the knowledge or insights that were gained could be applied within their lives (Wasson, 2002). To make further sense of their discoveries, Whitehouse stressed the importance of her own role as a constant presence to witness the person's experience.

The individuals who came to Mary Starks Whitehouse were not simply dancing to impress another teacher or to learn choreography. They came to discover something more. Whitehouse's presence in the room served as "a teacher, a mediator and a leader...the mirror" (Levy, 2005, p. 57); she reflected what was seen in the physical body in front of her and offered suggestions with humility. When beginning their process, some students held little awareness of the impact that unexplored and repressed thoughts may have on their physical body, but they were not shamed for appearing to be less mindful (Whitehouse, 1958). Her attention was constant and open, no matter the degree that she verbally directed her students (Frieder, 2007). There was a reciprocal relationship that developed, in which students were able to openly share their thoughts and bodily reactions as they arose and to think further into their origin (Adler, 1994). From this relationship of equality grew a more codified process involving witnessing called Authentic

Movement, one that has served as a guide for the development of many dance/movement therapists.

### **The Roots: The Continued Development of Witnessing**

#### **Janet Adler and Authentic Movement**

The unique relationship between Whitehouse and her students held a structure involving an aware mover and a willingly present observer. One of Whitehouse's students, Janet Adler, carried the idea of this relationship into her study of Authentic Movement. In its original form, this process involves two or more people in specific roles, a mover and a witness. Before delving into the Authentic Movement experience, a space is closed off to create a sense of safety. In a warm-up, the individuals involved will often follow simple movement directives given by an individual in the room, such as twisting or sliding body parts (Stromsted & Haze, 2007). This guided movement allows for an introduction to movement for those who may not be as comfortable or aware of their body, its anatomy, and its sensations. Additionally, the idea of purposefully and consciously moving the body through the warm-up differentiates how an unconscious sensation or impulse may arise once the experience begins.

Once the process of Authentic Movement begins, Adler (1987) outlined that two separate experiences began: one for the mover and one for the witness. The mover, similar to Whitehouse's process, starts from stillness with their eyes closed. A movement will, ideally, originate from an impulse felt in the moment, whether it is from an image, a thought, a sound, or a memory (Frieder, 2007). To be a mover is to be in a willing relationship with oneself, to close one's eyes and attend to what lies beneath (Musicant, 1994). However, simply moving to whatever ideas arise is not all that there is to Authentic Movement. A mover further understands the presence and impact of previously unexplored or undiscovered thoughts through a

relationship with their witness (Levy, 2005; Adler, 1987). Similar to two lines curving apart and returning back to a shared point, as shown in Figure 1 of the Appendix, the experience of the mover is influenced by the intersecting experience of their witness.

Although typically seated and silent along the side of the space, an Authentic Movement witness has an active and multi-dimensional role (Musicant, 2001). Just as a mover's role involves a number of factors, so too does the role of the witness, as outlined in Figure 1 of the Appendix. The witness "looks on, participating but not directing, cooperating but not choosing," (Levy, 2005, p. 55) so that the impulses of the mover's mind may guide the session. A witness is primarily concerned with actively watching to see the mover's actions. There is a demand on them to observe without judgment (Stromsted & Haze, 2007). This lack of judgment does not imply that a witness must be neutral; they are not simply a blank slate for projection (Wasson, 2002). A witness is human. As they look at the mover, the witness watches as an empathic observer and is encouraged to feel. For a witness, physical and mental responses are brought forth from another and from oneself (Musicant, 1994).

Janet Adler speaks of a surrender where the witness relinquishes judgment and expectation as much as they can, while also having a willingness to follow their reactions. The witness becomes actively aware of their beliefs as they arise, not only allowing their personal inner reactions to come through, but having them guide their personal experience in the room. For instance, a limp arm could be prominently noticeable to the witness. It remains unmoving, hanging despite motion in the mover's torso. A witness sees this motion, feels concern for this body part manifest as tightness in the chest, notes their reaction, and may be reminded of a personal memory. The moment colors the perspective of the witness as the movement

progresses. These physical reactions may guide what is remembered by the witness, almost like recalling the salient points of a dream (Zenoff, 1999).

The end of Authentic Movement can often include a dialogue between the mover and witness regarding their individual experience. Whether the witness speaks at all is a choice that is initially up to the mover, but what is then shared is decided by the witness themselves (Musicant, 2001). It is in speaking after the Authentic Movement that the two meet, coming to new realizations through the sharing of their thoughts, sensations, and emotions (Stromsted & Haze, 2007). Without the presence of a witness certain discoveries could not be made, either because of their lack of meaning to the mover or because movements were not noticed in the first place.

Adler (1987) outlined and further expanded the multilayered dynamics between the mover and the witness through her in-depth exploration of Authentic Movement. In her writings, Adler created several models, similar to a series of continuous loops, to illustrate the separate experiences that the mover and witness have that become united once more through dialogue and sharing (Adler, 1987). Adler related the roles and experiences of each mover and witness in Authentic Movement to those of the psychoanalytic therapist, such as a dance/movement therapist, and a client. Both processes involve the unfolding and unpacking of the ego's material, whether it is accomplished through a body in motion or the verbalizing of the unconscious through free association, and the tremendous impact of transference on the respective relationships (Adler, 1987). Although the roles of a mover in Authentic Movement and a client in psychotherapy were noted as different, the presence of a "nurturing, protective, empathic, and parental," (Adler, 1987, p. 147) witness was referenced as being a necessity for both processes. Because of Adler, witnessing became a codified mechanism within dance/movement therapy,

one that influenced the manner in which the body was seen and related to by dance/movement therapists and creative arts therapists overall.

### **Witnessing in the Arts**

The concept of witnessing is not exclusive to dance/movement therapy, though the core emphasis on the physical body remains constant. A method of art therapy called the Open Studio Process describes a process of witnessing in which the principles of dance/movement therapy can be seen as a main influence. Just as Whitehouse and Adler drew upon Jung's idea of active imagination, the Open Studio Process emphasizes the exploration of sensations as they arise and facilitates this skill's development in a highly structured artmaking process. It begins with breathing and stillness, before a leader invites each person to set an intention for their work. The intentions around the room guide the creation of forming an art piece with various materials (Allen, 2014). The facilitator, too, sets an intention for the entire group to maintain a safe boundary in the space.

After a set amount of time, the therapist signals the end of the art-making period and invites each member to shift their attention back into the physical space. The witnessing then begins. Regardless of whether pieces are finished, the individuals look at the art that they have created. The room is instructed to be still, to return their focus to sensations, and to note what in their artwork instills these various feelings and thoughts. Each person witnesses their own reactions before being invited to freely write in a journal. After writing, any portion of their entries may be shared with the group; however, it is not required, and no one in the group may directly comment on the images afterwards (Allen, 2014). Compassion and empathy are central within the process, in order for each group member to truly attempt to feel and learn another's experience.

Empathy is also emphasized when exploring the use of witnessing within Person-centered Expressive Arts Therapy (Rogers, 1999). Similar to the Open Studio Process, various art and writing materials are offered for the group to utilize to visually express their emotions, along with the invitation to explore with movement and sound (Rogers, 1999). The group is given time to write about whatever may come up for them without censoring before sharing verbally with the group. The premise within these processes is that inhibition will decrease as the process continues, so that a person can rediscover their own identity (Rogers, 1999). When given compassionate and understanding responses, a person can feel that their existence is in harmony with the world around them. In speaking about an experience, a person can feel more balanced as a whole being. An external witness who is empathic and understanding is essential to this process; this individual conveys that the emotions of the mover are received and that they are held safely (Rogers, 1999).

### **The Trunk of the Tree: The Core Elements of Witnessing**

The concepts within witnessing are invaluable to any practitioner in the field, allowing for a more personal and aware relationship with others and with oneself. Through the early work of Mary Stark Whitehouse and Janet Adler, the therapeutic movement relationship that was originally outlined by Marian Chace was given a different perspective. Relationships had the potential to be guided by clients in a new approach. Rather than joining and mirroring the movement qualities of clients, the concept of the dance/movement therapist becoming a witness became a consideration (Levy, 2005). In its original approach, witnessing offered an avenue for an observer to be fully present, in both body and mind (Adler, 1987). For dance/movement therapists, learning to witness has now been cited as an essential mechanism of the practice,

perhaps referencing that deep connections with others should be a primary goal in order to promote healing (Young, 2017).

What follows is an attempt to outline essential elements involved in this multifaceted process of witnessing: the trunk of the tree. Illustrated in Figure 2 of the Appendix, these fundamental aspects of witnessing can be viewed as the rings of a tree that grow together around a central core. They often intersect and can feel so similar that they become indistinguishable. In organizing the elements of witnessing, it is important to note that there are many times when one element may rise to the forefront due to the needs of the specific mover. Because of this consideration, ranking the elements of witnessing feels unfair or unnecessary. When you climb a tree or lean against it, you rely on the entire trunk that is joined together to achieve your end goal.

### **Safety**

Truly witnessing begins with a safe and personal environment created for all individuals involved. Safety can decrease inhibition and anxiety in the mover, which allows for the impulses to be accessed. If a goal of the mover is the tap into their unconscious, this feature is critical for creating a sense of comfort in order to then find greater clarity through the body (Holifield, 1998). Within the original Authentic Movement process, safety allowed for this goal to be achieved by maintaining a distinct order and a distinct mechanism, such as a bell, to signal from the start to finish (Stromsted & Haze, 2007). Although the goals of dance/movement therapy sessions go beyond the singular idea of accessing the unconscious, creating a structure for the group members can provide a sense of security before further exploration is made. This creation of safety can also include keeping the session as closed as possible; the knowledge that no one will walk into the room during this process allows for fear to be allayed. Safety is found in the



physical structure of the space that can act as a barrier from the influence of the outside world; it is also found from those within the session. Whether sitting as an onlooker or physically moving with someone else, a witness is called to hold safety for a mover, accepting them wherever they are.

### **Acceptance and Choice**

Not only is the past of a witness important; a witness enters into the relationship as a fellow human being in the present. Recognizing one's current physical and emotional states, combined with the capacity to readily attend to the task of witnessing, must be considered. The ability to witness relies upon a person's ability to initially note any distractions for themselves, as this could impact their attention in the moment. Accepting that one's own attention may not always be perfect can also aid in accepting where another person is, rather than feeling the need to impose one's own wants onto the mover. Whitehouse (1979) defined this concept of witnessing as being willing to first become anonymous and give the freedom of choice to the mover.

This release of control is beneficial for both the mover and witness. For a mover, it allows them to understand what it is like to choose instead of just being told what to do (Whitehouse, 1979). For a witness, giving up choice imposes a risk of not knowing what will happen; however, it lends itself to being more fully present with the mover in that moment. Accepting whatever will arise and having to react to it in that moment calls for another multifaceted skill of witnessing: attention.

### **External Attention**

A witness has been described as being an actively attentive and present observer of another's movements in their external environment (Adler, 1987; Musicant, 2001). The level of

attention here is what initially sets witnessing in dance/movement therapy apart from other fields, such as a witness in the court of law. Witnessing in dance/movement therapy requires that one makes a choice to sit and watch another with intention. A witness pays mindful attention by being “deeply observant” (Musicant, 2001, p. 25) and allowing for others to guide their own movements, rather than telling them what to explore. With this attention to another person, a witness enters into several relationships at once: a relationship with the other person; a relationship with their own body in the present moment; and a relationship with their own assumptions, expectations, and experiences. To navigate and balance these relationships, a witness may observe and share the physical reactions and mental processes that arise for them internally when attending to another.

### **Internal Attention**

Perhaps one of the most important skills of witnessing to develop pertains to inner recognition of sensation and reaction. This aspect of witnessing was clearly described by Janet Adler as being a lifelong process (1987). A person is first seen by another, similar to a child being held as an infant, and, through this interaction, begins to see and learn about oneself. After self-awareness begins developing in a person, they are able to understand others more. Though it may not progress in such a linear fashion, an inner witness is continually evolving and shifting for the person to understand oneself and subsequently relate to others (Adler, 1987; Musicant, 1994). Within dance/movement therapy, the ongoing awareness of one’s own reactions directly pertains to the recognition of their origin in the body (Musicant, 2001). The premise of having kinesthetic awareness of one’s own body deepens when witnessing; a witness notes these reactions and their origin in relationship with another person. The bodily feedback that a witness receives may impact the way that they subsequently view the individual in front of them,

possibly relating this person to someone else in their life and then reacting from the related emotions.

Witnessing does not entail that one leaves behind themselves, rather the entire person is invited into the present experience (Adler, 1987). Through the process of inner witnessing, the witness becomes aware of their own reactions to the mover (Musicant, 2001). This level of witnessing arises from the external witnessing of another body moving. A witness brings their “total being and total attention” (Zenoff, 1986, p. 223) as they are in order to see how their own imaginings can also impact the way that they view a mover’s actions. From this awareness, a witness may later reflect their physical and emotional responses back to the mover (Musicant, 2001). As one person continues to witness another and allows them to grow in their self-realization, they can also further their own self-knowledge through the relationship that is formed (Musicant, 1994).

### **A Reciprocal Relationship**

Witnessing began as a two-way reciprocal relationship and has continued to be referenced as such. The mover and the witness are both entrusted with specific roles (Adler, 1987, 1996; Musicant, 1994, 2001). Each individual becomes a part of a relationship of sharing, opening up to find support and, potentially, growth. In some structures, a witness speaks with intention regarding the precise movements that were seen and the reminders that were instilled by them. The willingness of a witness to be with another can aid in deepening relationships; the two experiences, when shared, can often merge to create a new meaning despite the individuals still having their own experiences (Adler, 1987; Wasson, 2002). Being able to watch another and relate back a reflective, care-filled response indicates to the mover that they are being truly seen (Wasson, 2002). Having a dialogue in which the witness can share their observations and

reactions with any discoveries of the mover is an opportunity for all people in the relationship to uncover realizations and feel accepted for them.

### **Transference and Projection**

Wasson (2002) emphasized and encouraged the witness to be a full participant and bring their personal projections and realities into the process. A witness, or any person for that matter, will never be able to consciously stop projecting one's own qualities or life experiences onto the person they are sharing space with (Whitehouse, 1977). They may see the actions of another as being inherent to who that person "is," as opposed to recognizing that their personal perspective colors how they view their surroundings. For the relationship of the mover and witness to flourish, observations and the discourse of discoveries must be recognized as belonging to whomever provided them. This honest reflection and awareness of the influences on the perspectives shared can give space for the each to discover how they are seen by others, or to reject the information shared. Through the relationship, the identities of the mover and witness must be honored and retained.

### **Empathy, Honesty, and Openness**

Honesty, empathy, and understanding are crucial in a witness (Musicant, 2001). The ability to articulate one's observations as a witness coincides with the ability to concede that a single perspective is not the only one, highlighting the importance of humility (Wasson, 2002). Movers should not feel that they are going to be judged when entering into this relationship, while also not relying on the witness to magically solve all of their dilemmas. A witness opens themselves to the physical experience of the mover, whether by sitting and taking on the breath patterns of the mover or by standing and joining them in their movement. Through their kinesthetic understanding, the witness can gain a deeper understanding of what the mover is

going through. For this experience to begin at all, a witness must be open to their sensations, first recognizing and then relinquishing their own expectations for what they believe should happen. Empathy and openness here intertwine with kinesthetic awareness, as well as external attention. The fundamentals involved in witnessing are often called upon simultaneously, which could be overwhelming if an individual has not explored the elements outside of the specific experience of witnessing. It seems that there is a need for the witness to understand themselves prior to entering into such a demanding responsibility. How they choose to accomplish this task can be informed by the physical processes described by theorists in a range of fields.

### **The Branches of Others**

Individuals often enter into therapy seeking to pursue a goal or searching for clarity and expect a therapist to be ready to guide them on this journey. When considering witnessing within the context of dance/movement therapy, the therapist will often be the witness for the moving client, regardless of where they are in terms of self-awareness and discovery. The development of a therapist's witnessing skills must be continually revisited, as their own experiences are influencing them each day. If a dance/movement therapist does not attend to these forces of countertransference, it may hinder their ability to see someone with fewer biases and less judgment, which is one of the main functions of a witness. How, then, might a dance/movement therapist, who both lives and works in the body, focus on the constantly changing physical and mental circumstances that impact their skills as a witness and a practitioner? In considering how witnessing might be observed, fostered, and understood, turning to previously outlined frameworks can provide ideas for creative avenues of self-exploration.

### **The Growth of Witnessing: Creativity from Childhood On**

Winnicott (1971) posits a necessary activity for therapists to engage in, in order to relate to their clients: playing. His approach includes a requirement that the therapist should be able to play in order to be able to start working with clients (Winnicott, 1971). It is particularly helpful for creative arts therapist to draw upon more imaginative methods, such as playing, to grow and thrive. Playing offers the opportunity to be creative. For dance/movement therapists, who are inherently asking their clients to be creative by asking them to move rather than merely speak, recognizing creativity in another person requires exploring it for oneself first (Winnicott, 1971). Creative endeavors provide a vast amount of opportunity for different choices to be considered, so that one's approaches do not become rigid or stale, but also show a therapist's willingness to grow and develop throughout their work.

In the search and maintenance of this creative self, Winnicott (1971) outlined several conditions to keep in mind. In order for creativity to be fostered, a process must involve relaxation, trust, and acceptance; there is not a demand for continuity in whatever arises. Rather, playing can be viewed as another form of free association. The person makes whatever choices feel right for them in the moment, letting them blend and flow together. These choices contain a creative impulse, which Winnicott (1971) says permeates every aspect of life.

Tortora (2006) describes a progression of movement-based tools to use with children that provide concrete ways to explore Winnicott's theory of play. Movement improvisation is once again described as a tool, highlighting that open-ended movement exploration can aid in the discovery and expression of a child's needs and experiences (Tortora, 2006). On occasion, these improvisations can become a composition. Noting repetition and themes, as well as emotional associations, the creation of an individual dance offers ownership of a meaningful end product (Tortora, 2006). Utilizing pantomime to create dramas and stories allows for extended

exploration over time, in which the fictional story changes alongside the real-world basis of it (Tortora, 2006). These movement processes can also open the door for therapists to explore either their own needs or the needs of their clients.

The reminder that individuals are uniquely creative serves as a starting point for the therapist to discover what could be new for each client. When working with a client, taking into account their environment and restrictions allows for even the simplest movements to be utilized. If the therapist is continually creative, even the smallest, most fleeting movements can be used to make a connection or to build a dance (Winnicott, 1971). This mindset can be beneficial for the development of a dance/movement therapist's relationship with their client. Clients can begin to feel recognized and seen. Creativity through play provides therapists with a multitude of avenues to approach their work with clients, as well as discovering more about themselves too.

For a dance/movement therapist, engaging in play offers a different avenue in which to explore oneself. Schoop, in particular, described the value of playful exploration for dance/movement therapists (Chodorow, 2016). Known for her humor, Schoop would utilize pantomime and the exploration of polarities in movement, often demonstrating the exaggerations that she asked from her clients in her own body first (Levy, 2005). By joining her patients in what could be seen as overwhelming or intimidating tasks for the body, Schoop was able to offer her own experience with humorous comments to ease the discomfort felt by her clients.

**Self-Knowledge through narrative.** Another way in which the self can be discovered and expanded, which can sometimes be accomplished through play, is through the use of narrative. Santanaya (as cited in Wahman, 2003) explored how self-knowledge benefits organisms, and asserted that narrative is one of the best ways in which to achieve a new level of consciousness (Wahman, 2003). Narrative allows individuals to create a cohesive picture of themselves,

functioning as a strategy to cope in the greater scheme of society. The process of creating a narrative allows an individual to go beyond mere insight about their identity and discover a broader view of oneself within greater society. Santanaya emphasizes that narrative may not be discovered, or even possible, by merely writing; instead the exploration can be found through “playful fantasy,” (Wahman, 2003, p. 173) as well as other creative avenues such as the arts.

### **Meditation and Mindfulness**

Active awareness in the present moment is a crucial component of witnessing. Not only does a witness become aware of another individual, they become aware of themselves. The traditional Buddhist Meditation called *Vipassana* can supply a foundation for this skill (Fritsche, 2014). Within *Vipassana* is the idea of *Sati*, also known as mindfulness or true attention (Fritsche, 2014). The attention in this form of meditation turns to the sensations of the body as they occur in the present moment. All reactions are seen as a reaction to the sensations within one’s own body, rather than to the outside environment. Whatever occurs in the environment triggers a bodily sensation that then causes a subjective reaction (Fritsche, 2014). The goal of *Vipassana* Meditation is to release the attachment that is contained within the subjective reactions (Fritsche, 2014). Through practice, all reactions become equal and are observed as they arise without any judgment or lingering on them.

Though meditation can carry many connotations, due to its rising prevalence in mainstream Western society, at its foundation lies a practice of simply being present to oneself and being nonjudgmental (Fristche, 2014). Yao (2016) offers several experiments related to present-moment awareness in the modern era. Yao (2016) suggests that awareness can begin by noting the smallest details throughout the day; for those who struggle with technology, navigating with just a pen and pad of paper is suggested to highlight how many individuals carry



out their day only by looking to the future. The focus also turns towards the physical body and becoming aware of it sporadically throughout the day. While standing in line, one might note how their weight is distributed or how clothes feel upon the body (Yao, 2016). Following the philosophy of *Vipassana*, these exercises are not intended to shame a person or have them shift the way that their body is. It is simply to notice and become more aware of one's attention and bodily state in a single, brief moment.

### **Body-Mind Centering**

Learning to see another person as they are moving in their body, a crucial skill of witnessing, begins with an understanding of one's own. Through a practice called Body-Mind Centering, movers are able to explore and understand how their body is a uniquely unified and complete system of nature (Cohen, 2017; Hartley, 1995). The process calls for a revitalization of awareness of the body's systems, activated through "quiet sensing work, our breath, and the use of guided imagery," (Hartley, 1995, p. xxxi).

Body-Mind Centering focuses around the premise that the molecular body, down to individual tissues, learns from one's subjective experience (Cohen, 2017; Hartley, 1995). The various systems that compose the human body are seen as having their own "mind," that influence one's movement qualities (Hartley, 1995). When Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen first outlined Body-Mind Centering, she worked through the physical anatomy of the body and its development. For instance, the skin, the skeletal system, and the muscular systems of the body are outlined as being a part of the container of the body that gives us structure (Hartley, 1995). After a lesson describes the anatomy and functions of each system, various exercises involving touching the joints and simple floor motions are provided. These exercises are given so that a mover can feel and explore what movement qualities are most natural for that bodily system,

getting closer to discovering the unique character of it (Hartley, 1995). Patterns and preferences in movement can be explored and sometimes changed to promote the healthiest, most organic expression for various systems within a person.

Body-Mind Centering posits that exerting change directly in the physical human body will impact the mind (Cohen, 2017). By exploring the systems of the body, a person can ascertain their mental state, as well as discover how their attention, feelings, and perceptions can be influenced by more anatomically appropriate movement (Hartley, 1995). The process requires active attention from those taking part in it, as they are called to sense various bodily systems and those individual personalities within them (Hartley, 1995). Practicing a return to the body and recognizing its inherent motion, even in stillness, allows for movers to explore how the outside world impacts it (Tomich, 2002). Loosening previous conceptions of the body induced from society is an important step within this process in order to realize what naturally occurs for oneself (Cohen, 2017; Hartley, 1995). Balance in the body's physical systems will support healing for both the body and the mind (Cohen, 2017).

### **Continuing to Grow**

In encountering the concept of witnessing as a new dance/movement therapist, I found myself feeling a bit lost. I read about the role of a witness within several articles that revolved around Authentic Movement, thinking that the information could be applicable to dance/movement therapy as a whole (Adler, 1987, Musicant, 1994; 2001; Wasson, 2002). I noted the term being used in classes and writings without a clear definition of what exactly was meant. I wanted to outline a concrete, well-formulated definition, along with set of steps to represent the process to develop as a witness within dance/movement therapy. As I delved further into my research, as I have presented it above, it became apparent to me that there are countless ways in

which to cultivate one's skills as a witness, so much so that a single model initially seemed to be unable to encapsulate each individual's process of learning to witness. There are countless times in which we need to develop our witnessing further; initially, this takes an awareness of one's current ability to witness, followed by an understanding of what skills must be developed more. It sounds so simple, yet oftentimes can be difficult to turn the attention towards oneself.

Attention can be pulled in multiple directions because of time constraints, outside influences, or personal readiness. We come from where we are, who we are, and how we are in each session.

Witnessing requires an openness to discovering one's self, in all of our strengths and weaknesses. It is clearly a personal and demanding process. When we make the choice to become a dance/movement therapist, which we do each and every day that we step into our practice, we enter a commitment to come as we are in order to see others as they are as well. It is not magic, nor is witnessing simply a skill confined to psychoanalytic theories. Witnessing is arising to see others with compassion, humility, creativity, sympathy, empathy, understanding, and curiosity. Witnessing is personal. There are times when witnessing ourselves must take priority, so that we can later re-enter our work with clients cognizant of what may influence us.

To grow in all aspects of being a witness, a dance/movement therapist can reference Mary Starks Whitehouse and fully immerse themselves in the personal discovery that they are asking clients to do (Sherman, 1999). As the range of options for personal growth continue to increase, it is central to highlight that Authentic Movement may not be the only avenue for dance/movement therapists to develop their skills as a witness. Though I know that my own journey is neither comprehensive nor complete, I will present the primary instances and modalities in which I, as a budding dance/movement therapist, was impacted in the way that I witness. The experiences have been organized into the following categories: my classroom

experiences at Sarah Lawrence College; my body-based experiences; my exploration through clinical practice; my physical nature; the awareness of my mind/body connection. Each occasion allowed me to grow as a witness, constantly drawing upon the sensations of my body and the relationships to myself and others.

### **My Methods, My Branches**

#### **Classroom Experiences: An Unknown Beginning**

As a student, oftentimes I wonder when and where my interest in witnessing arose. I didn't enter graduate school to study dance/movement therapy simply to learn how to become a witness. However, I believe that my experiences while studying this unique field impacted both my philosophy as a dance/movement therapist and my decision to explore witnessing as fully as possible. My journey towards this endeavor began, unbeknownst to me, in my first year when I experienced a debilitating panic attack while sitting in class. I felt my heart hammering, my ears ringing, my vision blur and shimmer, and I couldn't breathe. My eyes teared and I was called out to by our instructor, asking if I was okay. I sat and heaved, crying from the stress of being in a particularly tense class period. And I sat. And heaved. Unmoving. Unbreathing. Until it passed. I kept my gaze down.

Though witnessing had not been introduced to me, in this experience I was only noticing myself. I did not look up to find a gaze, nor I did not feel truly seen. I sat alone in a chair, with no words shared with me. In looking back on this experience, I find that I can almost perfectly envision the patterned carpet where I kept my gaze. I can feel the shadow of crackling nerves extending from my sternum. Such a strong physical experience left a lasting impact on my memory. Perhaps it was because of this experience in which I felt so alone that when the time

came to learn about being explicitly, fully devoted to the presence of another, I became committed to continually understanding it.

### **Classroom Experiences: Authentic Movement**

My singular interest in witnessing began in this first year of graduate school. As our group journeyed through lessons on the various pioneers and their influences within dance/movement therapy, we were assigned several readings on Authentic Movement. It was littered with heavily psychoanalytic and spiritual language. Having come from a large research university, I barely made it through all of the readings and hoped that there would be even a glimpse of clarity once we began our class. The idea of Authentic Movement intrigued me, but I couldn't tell why through the mysticism that seemed to go along with it. I wanted an answer. I wanted cognitive, behavioral, affective solutions to this idea of the unconscious rising up through an individual. Slight skepticism and uncertainty littered my thoughts as I approached the classroom that morning. I wondered what I was walking into; several other class members left the room before we began. As I sat and watched them go, I yearned to follow them while simultaneously wanting to stay. I felt that there was so much to discover as my instructor described what our process would be.

And then I stood up. Silence surrounded me as I closed my eyes. I felt my feet, covered in socks, supporting my weight. My knees were not locked, a habit from my childhood that I broke several years ago, but they did not feel unsteady. The air around me pressed against my body, with the stale and musty smell of our studio keeping me in the room. Somehow, keeping me in the room. Thoughts swirled through my consciousness that I initially tried to let go. I simply stood. As I heard those around me moving, the fabric of their clothing reminding me of their presence, I saw only the blackness of my eyelids swirling around me. I felt an impulse, almost

like a tingling in my arms, and bent my arm at the elbow upwards towards my face. My hand brushed against my throat; feeling the tension in my throat extend through my entire body and out into the environment, tears began to flow silently down my face. I let them flow, keeping my hand in place while I began to slowly sway side to side. The motions of those around me continued to gently brush in my ears as I saw myself in the moment: lacking in motion, yet filled with emotion.

I was seen, truly witnessed, in this experience. When the movement experience ceased, a group of individuals sat around me, noting that they had seen someone touch their throat. That tears began to flow. No names were used and the entire group was addressed; however, I felt that I had been witnessed. I did not feel ashamed, nor did I feel that I had taken the focus away from the group as a whole. It felt balanced; others in the room could see and feel a common experience with me. We had all shed tears in our lives. I felt more understood by my classmates than I had previously. This experience directly introduced me to witnessing, which felt drastically different than studying the elements of specific movement profiles.

Witnessing felt simpler and far more complex. There was a balance between what I felt, what was seen, and what was shared. This way of using the eyes was with openness and empathy, rather than anxiety over noting the correct movement qualities and terminology that other courses demanded. I was able and encouraged to simply be present as an empathic, attentive individual. To me, it seemed as though I had just discovered a core element of what makes dance/movement therapy unique. Movement came from within and without; effort came from the intent to remain in the room; shape came from space that separated me from my seated classmates while I stood before them. I yearned to know more about how to let the body's impulses inform my movements. Though I was not solely focused on this goal, I began to expand

my own movement practices. I began to move much more regularly, an attempt to more easily access the explorative and mindful state of movement that I had felt in this experience.

### **Dance/Movement Exploration: Gaga Classes**

A dance technique that began as one Israeli man's exploration of his movements following a severe back injury, Gaga dance has grown into an established art form. I stumbled into Gaga dance following the recommendation from my improvisation mentor and a classmate. I had been curious to continue exploring how my own body moved to imagery. I was told Gaga could be just what I needed. The premise of Gaga dance is to explore how movement feels pleasurable and enjoyable to one's own body, while still pushing physical limits and maintaining attention in space. If someone could somehow look in on a class, though the doors and windows are drawn, the space may look chaotic. Dancers hurl themselves around the room to the point of falling, moving every part of their bodies around the focal point of the moving teacher.

Being in the room, the imagery provided is simple, yet rich; there is a different interpretation made by each person in the room that influences their body. In the realm of Gaga dance, I learned to witness myself with wonder, appreciation, curiosity, and compassion. In moving with vigorous full-bodied shakes, I found that my body could move in ways I never knew. The feeling of curiosity led me to push my physical limits more than twelve years of competitive dancing ever had. At the same time, I found how to listen to my body's internal reactions and react to them in the moment, rather than brushing them aside and pushing myself into an injury. My body became my guide in how to navigate through the internal and external, bodily and mental demands of my world. My skills as internal witness grew, aided by the suggestions of others. I yearned to discover if I could continue this growth on my own. Janet Adler (1987) said self-witnessing could not be taught; I was beginning to wonder if it could.

**Dance/Movement Exploration: Daily Movement Project**

The feelings that I experienced in my undergraduate dance improvisation and composition courses continued with my newly discovered passion for Gaga dance. They led me to want to move as often as possible. Movement let me feel how my body, though similar in daily appearance, could drastically change in the span of one week. Whether it was from a panic attack in class or a tense phone call made to home, my body held their impact.

A classmate of mine told me of a project that they had begun. It was referred to as a daily movement practice. Whatever inspired, arose, or disappeared could be used as inspiration in moving each day, or not. There were no prescribed rules, you could just move. Separate social media accounts were made by several of my classmates, with the intention to use them both to share our movements and keep ourselves accountable. For myself, I wanted to explore how my mood showed in my body. I've never liked mirrors, as they made me self-conscious of my less-than-proportional-or-ideal-ballerina frame. But a video felt different. No one was watching me, calling out corrections or critiques. I didn't have to face the phone or even look at it after beginning to record. The recorder was a companion that allowed me to view myself later on and wonder where movements originated.

When I edited lengthy clips down to one minute, trying to capture the essence of that time, I looked with open-mindedness. Acceptance of myself grew, allowing me to drop in and access my internal awareness with more ease. In these collections of my daily practice, I witnessed myself. I discovered that to do this act first required that I become acutely observant of my mood, physical feelings, and my mind while moving. My attention while moving left an imprint on my body, thereby impacting my memory. Even now I don't just watch. I look back on past



clips and feel the shadows of the emotions that I felt on those hard days; I smile longingly with calm, deep breaths for the time spent dancing on a deck in the Ohio sun.

My creativity grew as well. I played with the idea of moving only my knees. I moved in response to the brushing of the wind on my thin sweater. I stood, knowing even in this stillness there was movement. As I came to explore what movement meant to me and feel its impact, I was able to then witness others with more acceptance and clarity to see whatever arose.

### **Exploration in Clinical Practice**

One specific instance in my growth as a witness that has constantly stood out to me occurred at my clinical internship in my second year of graduate school. I worked with several clients individually. One of these individuals was almost always interested in moving, possibly because English was her second language and movement required very few words, if any at all. When we began our work, I saw that she moved very stiffly, with her upper and lower halves of her body appearing disconnected, and almost always in near and mid reach. I was unsure of how to allow her to speak or move out the strong emotions she said that she felt. I allowed her to lead our movements together, until one day I let her guide my body instead.

I told her that I was going to be clay. I was clay and she was the sculptor. Whatever she felt, however she wanted to convey what she described as simply “mad,” she could do through my mobile, loose body. I asked if she would like to try. She nodded yes. She walked around me, looking at me from my head to toes, and stopped to take my wrists. My hands were taken up to rest my palms on each side of my head. She gently tilted my chin up, taking a moment to look at me. Then, she pushed on my shoulders, pointing down, and pushed me until I was squatting on the floor. She took my head and changed its tilt to look down.

In this fleeting moment, I found myself witnessing my own bodily reaction to this progression. My heart had begun pounding, my chest ached from being confined. My legs felt stuck, I was trapped down. I was strikingly aware that the position of my body was not indicative of my body alone. I was holding shape for my client, who was physically and verbally unable to convey this feeling herself.

As I thought, my body changed. My client raised me up to my original pose, before pushing me back down. As I came back up, I wanted to allow her to see the entire picture of what she had chosen. It intuitively felt as though she should witness her choices. I completed the progression she had lead me through moment ago, sharing my reactions with pauses and questions to see if these were accurate. To each question, my client nodded and vocalized her assent. Her body appeared less tense, possibly from being understood. Following the session, I knew that I needed to find a way to bring myself back to my own body's perception and mood after such a strong experience of taking on that of another. I found this grounding, once again, in the physical experience of my body.

### **Bodily Exploration: Returning to Physicality**

Elaine Siegel (1984) suggested that after a strong experience with a client, like I had with mine, therapists should get in tune with their own body again through simple exercises. For me, this idea became weightlifting. I had been a runner for many years, though I never truly paid much attention to my bodily experience while doing it; repeated stress fractures now saliently highlight my lack of awareness. I stretched beforehand and felt the pain in my knees afterwards, however my main focus while running was simply keeping a steady pace.

Weightlifting and strength training provided me with an opportunity to apply my undergraduate studies in kinesiology and anatomy firsthand. These exercises held a requirement

to focus on my body's posture, musculature, and physical capabilities in a way that running had not. I could reconnect with my physical body, while growing more confident in it as well. My body told me of my limits, taking the time to listen and respect them came to fruition in the small gym nestled on our college campus. From within those walls came another moment of witnessing myself, in which I was able to discover the vast impact that my mind had upon my physical being. My body carried the direct impact of my thoughts and emotions. The process of witnessing truly became a cyclical process, involving an ongoing interplay between my soma and my psyche.

### **Growth of My Mind/Body Connection**

The winter of 2017 was a tumultuous period with my time in graduate school. As a semester wore down, my mental and physical health went with it. Support systems fell away as stress rose. Days shortened and my attention and interest did as well. The semester ended, friends went their way, roommates departed, and I was left alone. Perhaps it is because of my training and studies, or perhaps it was because of this very paper, but I found myself feeling and recognizing that I was sinking into a low point. My body gave me the evidence I needed; if I had not been aware of it and investigating it for this project, I may have not have recognized my need to seek the aid of others and swiftly resolved it.

I felt an ache in my chest. My eyes stayed in a constant state of swollenness. My newly found muscular strength vanished as my weight plummeted. And somehow, I still danced. Lying in bed, my right hip began to throb with sciatic nerve pain. My back ached. So I stood, barely able to do so, and I moved. In the gym, I had discovered my mind's ability to deplete my body of its strength; in this moment, my inner witness re-awoke. My mind and body joined together. My

mind affirmed that I was struggling, something that I had not previously thought was important to change. My body gave a different answer. Move, it said. Heal.

### **Discoveries from My Branches**

My body became my greatest teacher. The experiences that I shaped, discovered, or stumbled upon became informative for me every day. I found myself imitating my client's movement in my own movement practice. I felt the tension of school in my body as I worked my deltoids at the gym. Each occurrence became interrelated, weaving around each other and occasionally colliding, like the branches of a tree. They all came back to the core idea that I was learning to witness, for my own understanding and for the service of those that I was working with. I learned to see how my outward appearance reflected what was felt internally. In this discovery, I found that I was able to shift my own awareness or attitude to meet the needs of the people before me.

Growing in self-awareness, witnessing my own emotions, sensations, and responses has given me the capacity to give space for my clients to do so. I am able to empathize with their strong feelings and grow together in a therapeutic relationship when I share my bodily-felt responses to their expression. Seeing myself made me grow in empathy and acceptance. I may never move in the way that others do, yet I still move how I can and how it works for me. I can acknowledge this and, by doing so, allow space for my clients to move however they need. If they feel and cannot express it, we can explore a pathway toward expression together. I can retain my identity within the process.

### **Discovering Your Branches**

Witnessing and its elements require attention, first in delineating and understanding what they are. However, merely reading about them on a page is not enough. Dance/movement

therapy is a treatment that demands understanding through one's own subjective, physical experience. In analyzing the aspects of witnessing in combination with my own heuristic data, there are four common themes that arise.

The first theme revolves around the idea of awareness and responsibility. It is imperative to understand what witnessing is and the skills required for it because the work inherently carries a demand for sensitivity. Dance/movement therapists are working with people. We're working with people who are often at their most vulnerable. Through witnessing, we can allow for them to discover that someone else is there for them. That is a crucial part of what witnessing is. Witnessing is being present, humble, attentive, and open to another person's experience for their evolution, alongside one's own. Because of this duality, and by the very nature of the human body, there's constantly growth that needs to happen; it begins with this awareness. It is the first step.

The human body, as a collection of cells, grows from birth onward. As conscious beings, humans simultaneously navigate through their surrounding world, causing further change. This idea leads to the second theme, which is that witnessing is a continual self-discovery process. This skill and its parts have to be constantly revisited and rediscovered. We are constantly growing and developing. Through every interaction and every experience that we have, particularly in witnessing another person, we grow. The ability to witness may become easier over time, but it may not always be so simple. If we feel we have a mastery of the skills, we must remember that we are people too. We're human. A witness is human. We come into a relationship with all of our past and our present, with our goals for the future, and we are impacted in every moment by these. We can grow, or we can be hindered by our experiences.

The ability to witness must be assessed throughout our daily work as dance/movement therapists. How we choose to do so is not as prescribed, which leads to the third theme.

Witnessing is a constant. Since its beginning, witnessing has been based upon two or more unique individuals sharing their presence with one another and attempting to find a shared experience; however, this mechanism has grown since its original inception. Developing as a witness has no concrete formula to go through in order to achieve a fixed or high level of expertise. The growth of these skills is subjective. It is a continual choice for each person. There are countless options. Not everyone will be interested in Gaga dance or in recording themselves in a daily movement project. Not everyone will find a narrative to their experience in poetry or in creating a work of art. Not everyone is interested in or even able to lift weights. The pathways that are taken are our own, but they need to be taken. They must be discovered and addressed so that we can better serve the people that we work with.

The final theme, with these choices, brings some direction. There is one prescription in this mechanism that constantly calls for individual choice within its growth process. There should be movement. The body should be involved. Dance/movement therapy is a body-based therapy. It is an approach that is scary at points, for the mover and also for the witness. We carry our experiences in our bodies and this impacts our growth and our work in relationships with others. To be able to witness someone else's real, authentic bodily experience within dance/movement therapy, we need to be able to go there and drop in with them. Whether it is through moving around the kitchen while cooking every day or taking five minutes to sit in the quiet movement of stillness, the body should be involved. The body should be honored. This is the core of witnessing, and truly the core of dance/movement therapy.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that art, whether dance, drama, visual, or music, allows for a chance to see and understand various parts of one's own self. This self-recognition allows therapists to connect with others in a different way than talking. Using the medium of one's passion serves as both a relational guide to know another, as well as being a recuperative modality for oneself. In the Appendix, I have provided my initial models to illustrate several of the tenets provided in this paper; however, this process is not finalized. There is a need for further research to outline the unique mechanisms of dance/movement therapy, such as witnessing, for both the clarity within the field and in working with other professionals. Working with others in such a personalized and embodied healing process impacts a dance/movement therapist's body and thoughts in a similar way that a witness and mover influence each other. It is imperative that we begin to recognize, assess, and understand how this impacts both the work done in therapy and the therapist as well.

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## Appendix

Figure 1:  
 Intersecting Experiences of Mover and Witness  
 Incorporating the Elements and Themes of Witnessing

Janet Adler's original figure looked similar to the one below, with two intersecting lines for the mover and witness. These lines intersected when the mover and witness came together, separating when the two parties had their own unique experiences. They came together again when the parties would share their experiences and journeys. Similar to how a thread is made of smaller pieces, there are distinctive influences that factor into the witness' experience.

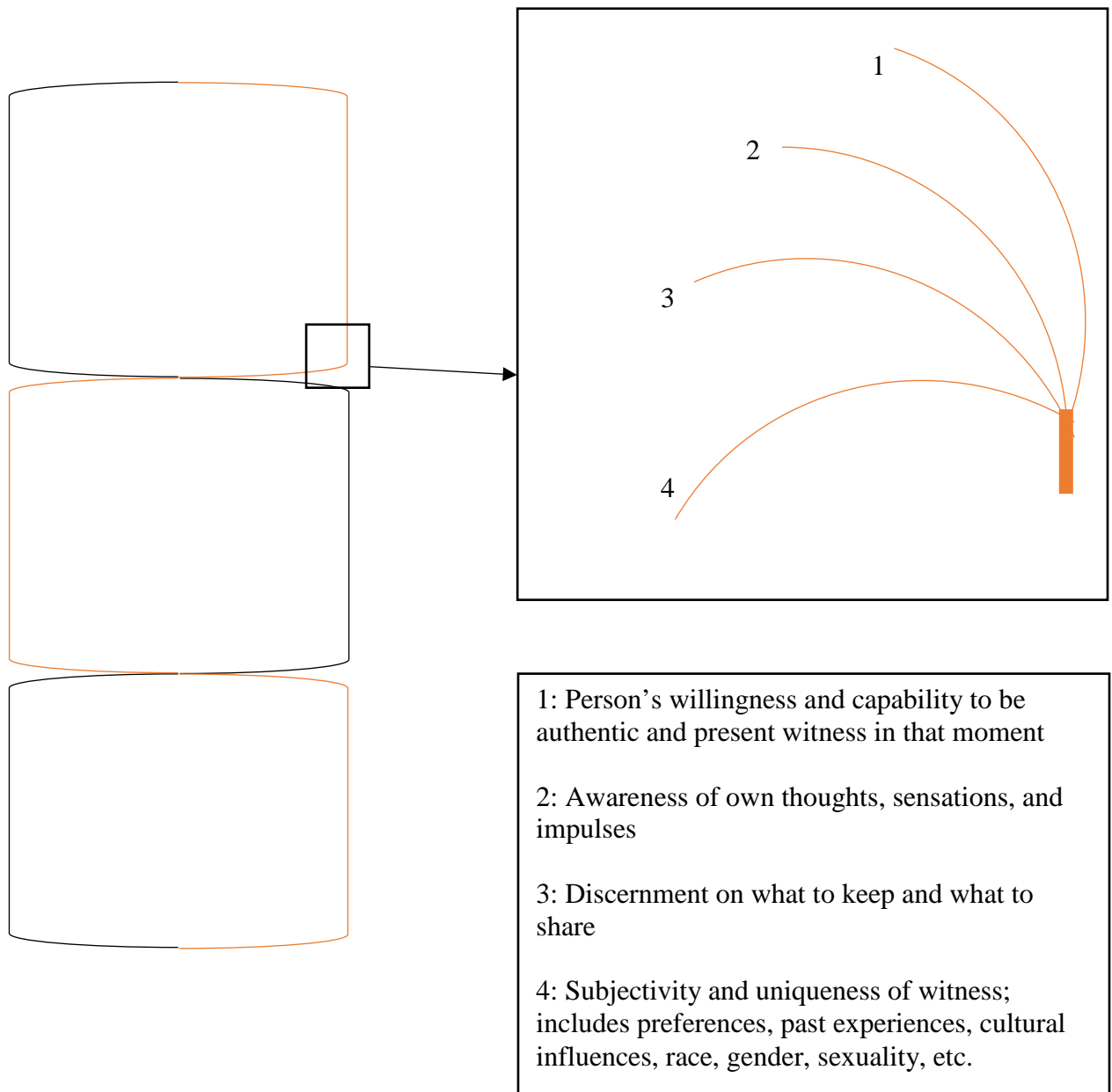


Figure 2:  
The Trunk: Elements of witnessing

