



**Portrait of my Mother**

Colored Pencil, 1990

**Shelley Tanenbaum**

When I draw intuitively, I feel subtle currents of energy, which express kinesthetically through my hand as precise movements on the page. When drawing, I choose colors by feeling their frequency rather than by seeing them. -S. T. (See interview, page 12.)

## *A Moving Journal*

Ongoing Expressions of Authentic Movement



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# Intuitive Life Movement

## An Interview with Shelley Tanenbaum

By Paula Sager

*Come out of the cell  
Closet mystic.  
There is a feast awaiting your arrival.  
Friends are gathered to celebrate your return.*

*Come out of the cell  
Closet mystic.  
There are colors to touch,  
Movements to dance, and  
Words to be sung.*

*Come out of the cell  
Closet mystic.  
For it is no longer a sacred altar  
Holding a shattered vision.  
Bless this dark place  
And let Light enter.*

Shelley Tanenbaum, 1998

**Paula:** I know that for the past several decades you have been developing Intuitive Life Movement, a form kindred to Authentic Movement. I'd like to explore with you how your work emerged and also your thoughts about the relationship between movement and language. Your poem captures a longing I feel; your words are so welcoming. Would you say something about the poem and how it relates to your work in Intuitive Life Movement?

**Shelley:** This poem came to me like a whisper while preparing for a presentation on the role language has played in my life. I was struggling with the content, which was about how limited I have felt using words to describe what is true for me. The poem actually served as a link to my speaking.

Although the theme, closet mystic, is a personal one, we are all closet mystics. We just don't know it, or are afraid of it. But as we align more deeply with ourselves, we increasingly come to realize that the roots of our very nature are Infinite.

For me, Intuitive Life Movement is my access to that realization. It involves a shift from ordinary consciousness into mindful presence that is organized directly through the body, not through mental processing. When I make that shift I move and relate to life with a precision that is not available when my ego is in

charge. For decades I have asked, "What happens when I shift? What is It that feels so natural, so alive, so precise?" It used to feel other-worldly—as if I was a channel, and I had to get out of the way. I now know that It is not separate from me, and what gets out of the way are my self-limiting beliefs about who I am.

**Paula:** What do you mean by self-limiting beliefs and a "shift" in consciousness?

**Shelley:** Self-limiting beliefs are beliefs about who we are as human beings as determined by our family, peers, religion, and culture. Most of these beliefs are learned in early childhood and exist outside of conscious awareness. In the world of body-mind therapy and research, we have come to know that our entire life experience is imprinted in the body—our structure, muscle tension, movement patterns, and cellular memories. Even our neurophysiology is affected by our individual history. So, we are learning we can use the body to explore the deepest levels of the historical self. But this self is still not the whole story!

The self that is accessed when moving intuitively includes the historical self, but also exists prior to egoic consciousness. This self is beyond identification with our own particular name and form, yet is revealed in every moment that we are present. In Intuitive Life Movement, this sense of self is not just a concept or an

abstraction. It becomes direct Knowing.

**Paula:** I have a lot of questions about the implications of what you're saying and about how you teach this, but first let's talk about how the work came to you.

In 1971 you had some experiences through movement that opened you to a direct knowing of a numinous reality. I imagine this would be unusual for someone without years of committed practice and preparation, and I wonder how those early experiences shaped your work and teaching. Would you speak about that time in your life?

**Shelley:** I was 21 years old and began to move "intuitively" one night. The initial experience, which lasted several months, brought about a way of being that changed my understanding of who I was. It's taken all of my adulthood to grow into it in such a way that it now shapes my actions, my speaking, my relationships, and really, my whole life. When I first began to move, I committed myself to it totally. I would move alone for 12–15 hours a day—waiting until I perceived the next impulse, which sometimes took hours.

**P:** Had something led up to this?

**S:** Yes. When I graduated college, I became aware of a deep emptiness in me, a feeling of disconnection from myself. So, for the first time, I decided to take time off just for me. I wrote a lot of poetry, worked with clay, took long walks, and mostly gave myself permission to be. Paradoxically however, the more I allowed this process to happen, the more disconnected I actually felt from my body and my ability to be productive.

After about six months, I awoke one night, experiencing very strong impulses in my face, which led my face to move and stretch and make strange expressions. I wasn't consciously directing this. I just observed it, letting it happen. After about ten minutes, I began to feel connected to my face in a new way, as if my face was alive and unmasked. It was a curious feeling and I waited to see if anything else would happen. Other parts of my body began to move and I just kept following it.

**P:** How did you know to keep following the movement?

**S:** I didn't know, but it felt absolutely trustworthy. The first phase, which lasted several months, was a period of physical unwinding and included much emotional release. My body became softer, more open, more flexible, more connected. I felt more alive.

In the second phase I began to draw. A large drawing of the sun became another kind of movement experience that went on most of every day for almost two weeks. There was no effort. My whole body was mov-



ing in order to draw. And I was witnessing always, aware that I could stop at any time. And I chose not to.

The third phase asked me to trust the process more deeply and leave behind my ordinary way of seeing, hearing, and orienting to my world. It was about moving out of the safety of my room, and being in the world in an altered state of consciousness. I experienced a sense of wholeness and joy in Being that I had never known. After almost four months of allowing every waking moment to be guided—one impulse at a time—trusting the Truth of my innermost being, I was not prepared for the response of the world I met—a world that did not understand and soon tried to "cure" me.

After several weeks I came to realize it was unsafe to continue. So I put on "the old clothes" and appeared to be who I was before. I was back, but not really, because there was this other reality and infusion of life energy that could never quite be put away again.

**P:** Do you think it would have been different if you'd had a witness or some form of structure that could have supported you?

**S:** Yes and no. Remember, it was 1971—so for me at that time, there was no form to hold it. I don't doubt it had to happen as it did. There was a great degree of perfection in it, which included the shattering of all that I had believed. I really did feel I had a Witness and I trusted I was being guided Home, every impulse



way. At the same time I had friends who were supportive. One friend in particular was present sometimes when I moved, as well as many of the in-between times. This experience was my lifeline to myself and as a result, I feel I can ease that passage for others.

**P:** Would you describe what happened when you returned to “normal” life?

**S:** For the next eleven years, my intuitive movements found expression only in my art, drawings done primarily through subtle kinesthetic impulses. Living a “normal” life, I completed a masters degree and taught children and adults with developmental disabilities, especially autism; got married; traveled in India where I met Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was a major teacher in my life; opened a yoga studio; became a mother; and trained as a Hakomi therapist.

Then in October 1982, I was burned in a bizarre explosion in a restaurant. Sitting in the burn unit, I suddenly began to move intuitively again. Whether it was because I could have died from my injury or because I could not have prevented it, this “accident” was an opening. I knew when I was well enough, I would have to find a way to bring this way of moving—bring my Self—into the world. Scary!

The following year, I brought together three friends who wanted to explore movement with me. Initially the instructions were to get quiet, and just allow movement to come, without an agenda. After a year and a half, one of my friends had an experience that changed everything. With shock and a little fear, she came to me and said, “I just moved but it was not me moving.” Instantly I knew she got it—and if she could, so could others! Until that moment, I did not know if anyone could do what I had done all those

months alone. It was a profound revelation. When my friend left, I sat alone on the steps of the church where we moved. Suddenly, I got an insight into how to teach people to move intuitively. The words that came to me were, *differentiate intuitive movements from other kinds of movements: habitual, consciously-directed, creative, and free flow*. While the method appears simple, after twenty years of teaching, I am still refining how to teach it!

**P:** By differentiating ways of moving, you’re really talking about making distinctions of intention and even consciousness.

**S:** Absolutely. These are not only ways of moving, but ways of being.

**P:** Shelley, would you elaborate on this?

**S:** *Habitual movement* is the movement of everyday life—being “on automatic.” It is usually predictable, repeatable, and goal-directed. In habitual movement, the sense of “I” reacts to world and identifies with experience.

*Consciously-directed movement* engages increased awareness of goal-oriented movement and the kinesthetic sense. Activities of everyday life can be consciously-directed as well. In consciously-directed movement the sense of “I” intentionally directs, repeats, or alters experience.

*Creative movement* (also called expressive movement) expands movement possibilities. In creative movement, the sense of “I” intentionally creates and explores movement experiences.

*Free flow movement* is a type of expressive movement that may be confused with Intuitive Life Movement because it seems to have a life of its own. Free flow movement can help one to free up habitual patterns of movement and thought.

These kinds of movements are familiar to us. While each has unique characteristics, what they share is the sense that “I am the doer,” which is expressed as “I will,” “I create,” “I carry out my intention.”

In contrast, intuitive movements are experienced as subtle and precise kinesthetic cues or currents of energy that anchor attention to the body’s consciousness. When moving intuitively, the sense of “I” is not only the doer—but also the receiver and the internal witness, three interconnected aspects of embodied consciousness.



**P:** I want to be sure I understand how you guide a mover to move intuitively. Are you saying that you bring the internal witness to the forefront at the beginning level?

**S:** Yes. From the outset, I teach students to shift from ordinary consciousness into the internal witness—mindful awareness—which is open, receptive, and non-judgmental. We then use mindfulness to align with our innate body intelligence—our life force, which is always present but rarely brought into the foreground of our attention. Moving this way is exquisitely precise, like following a golden thread or resonating at a particular frequency.

**P:** This sense of precision that you're describing is something that I generally come to when I do Authentic Movement, but I don't always begin with it. I'm curious about this.

**S:** My relationship to that precision comes from how I entered into this work and where it led me. Right from the beginning, I was the mover and the witness and both were happening simultaneously. I witnessed an unfolding within myself of such detail that I immediately experienced any deviation from it as a departure.

**P:** Aligning with the intuitive from the beginning is different from my experience of Authentic Movement, where there is more emphasis on a developmental relationship between a mover and an external witness. Within this developmental context there is a lot of permission for the mover to be with whatever arises in their experience. There is a lot of support for the mover to strengthen their own inner witness, their own ability to discern choices at the level of impulse. Can beginning students engage with their own movement experience and sustain this shift to an integrated mover/witness consciousness?

**S:** This is a wonderful and complex question to answer. A beginning student can indeed enter the movement with a conscious relationship to their own internal witness. That is because the internal witness is already present—it is not something we learn, it is who we are already. The tricky part is cleaving our conscious minds to it, anchoring there, moment to moment. Similar to meditation practice, there is discipline required—a faithfulness to return again and again, as our thoughts and feelings draw our attention elsewhere. Unlike formal meditation practice, however, once someone is “on-line,” so to speak, the mover fol-

lows a felt sense of inner guidance through the precision of movement—a “choiceless choice” in movement. In my teaching, most beginning movers start to connect with this level within a few hours. Trusting it, sustaining it, deriving meaning from it, integrating it into life, or realizing the implications of it takes a lot longer and is a lifelong developmental process.

**P:** What about allowing oneself to be held, in consciousness by another, in order to go more deeply into one's unconscious or emerging experience? I know there have been times in Authentic Movement when I've needed, to some degree, to let my inner witness go and trust in the presence of the external witness.

**S:** I agree. The very presence of an external witness helps to contain, focus, and deepen our experience. There are also students who will not make the shift to the internal witness without an external one—even when they are quite adept at inner witnessing. The external witness does serve an important function in Intuitive Life Movement, but my emphasis has been on teaching students to shift consciousness and align with their own inner source of movement.

**P:** It seems that you are asking your students to express a particular way of being as movers.

**S:** When I first began to teach I was hesitant to demand this of my students. They were having valuable experiences, and I questioned whether I should ask them to be that rigorous. For example, if a student had an impulse to leap across the room, she could do that, right? Instead I was asking her to return to her body and find out how her body would do it . . . which meant letting go of the goal. Maybe she would never get there! I was limiting personal spontaneity in order to cultivate a different kind of freedom.

**P:** I think your example describes a common perception that some people may have about Authentic Movement—that it is an invitation to follow an impulse without necessarily acknowledging the relationship to self-witnessing or an external witness. There is a range in how Authentic Movement is practiced, from one person to the next, even from one moment to the next. I find myself more and more wanting to be met in the particular way that you are talking about, *and* I certainly have experienced this in Authentic Movement contexts where there is a strong commitment to witness practice.



**S:** For me this is an issue of commitment and self-authority. I learned that the more I asked for precision, and the more I held that frequency myself, the sooner students could “get it”—at least that initial shift from which the rest follows. I want to be clear, my emphasis on precision is not about students being right or wrong. It is about distinguishing among the types of movement we spoke about earlier. So, if a student leaps across the room, I want her to know whether her movement is habitual, consciously-directed, or intuitive.

Let me give you another example. Years ago, a student was led intuitively to stand in the middle of the room with her eyes open and tongue out. She felt silly and wanted to leave that place, but staying true to the movement impulse (or lack of), she waited and waited. After about five minutes, she was flooded with a wonderful memory of being a little girl in her grandmother’s garden catching raindrops with her tongue! Her willingness to tolerate the discomfort, to trust the precision of body-based guidance, and to open to the unknown allowed her to receive something that wanted to emerge.

**P:** That is a beautiful example of a strong enough inner witness, one that has the capacity to wait without knowing what will happen next. Trusting the unknown is one of the great gifts I’ve received from Authentic Movement.

We’ve spoken a lot about individuals’ experience. What happens between movers?

**S:** In Intuitive Life Movement, there are interactions that occur naturally with movers, and there are interactions, practiced with intention, that serve to deepen mindful witnessing and precision. We explore precision when moving in relationship to each other because it’s so easy to get lost in relationship to another person. So we work on energetic alignment that is both vertical (self in relationship to Self) and horizontal (Self in relationship to Other), the vertical being primary.

**P:** Would you say more about what you mean by “ver-

tical”?

**S:** When I speak of “the vertical,” I am referring to a process that facilitates the alignment of the finite, egoic self and the infinite Self—what some might call our Soul, or our Being. This kind of alignment is transformative, and opens possibilities not only within ourselves but potentially within our relationships and communities.



**P:** When I think about relationships and community, the question of language comes up for me. Let’s talk more about what it’s like to find language for experiences that are fundamentally non-verbal.

**S:** This is a very big question with a lot of layers to it. You’re asking about the language of body-based experience, and I think it’s important to acknowledge that there are different avenues and reasons for that language to be expressed. For example, we can explore language that reports and deepens present experience, language that helps others to access the experience for themselves, and language that arises between people who are being present to themselves with each other. This last example opens up a whole new way for people to

be in connection through their speaking.

**P:** Yes, it’s about speaking from the place of integration, so that you’re not speaking *about* the work, you’re not teaching *about* it, you’re *being* it.

I’m remembering how you used the word self-authority earlier, and I’m reminded of the Quaker phrase, Speaking Truth to Power. Understanding the difference between an external authority and an internal one seems especially critical at this time. We so readily and unthinkingly allow external authorities to determine so many aspects of our lives. Consciously claiming our own internal authority is, I think, an important part of why embodied practices are necessary.

**S:** I agree. The body can serve as an anchor to our



**P:** As you say this, something feels different. I feel myself slowing down, a shifting in the quality of my attention.

*Note: What follows is a brief example of shifting into mindful presence. We invite the reader to slow down also and enter the conversation as we experienced it.*

**S:** Me too. Right now I'm noticing our willingness to make this shift. For me, it's about trust . . . surrender to not knowing . . . vulnerability . . . contact . . . love . . . and the willingness to be responsible to myself—to not project what *you'll* be thinking nor how *I* need to be in order to be safe and acceptable.

**P:** Yes, and I find myself listening differently. I can hear and feel more contour around each word you speak.

**S:** I feel like I'm coming into more of the non-verbal life beneath the words. There's a rhythm to it. There's a pulse here.

**P:** There's an invitation. I am drawn to *hear into* the words spoken, not just my preconception of their meaning.

**S:** It requires presence. Listening into what *Is* and what is *Becoming*.

**P:** I'm aware of myself as a *listening body*. This part feels so essential, if I just go to you, to hear you, I leave myself, and there's a disconnection.

**S:** We're listening for the other!

**P:** Right. That captures two parts of it. I listen *for* you, meaning I am the witness in service to you the speaker. And I listen *for you*, meaning I am curious and interested in you, the speaker, as a uniquely individual expression of life. But I'm also staying with an openness, an attentiveness to my own experience. If I stay with myself and in relationship to you, a space is created.

**S:** Listening into that space, the words are like markers within the space, but there's so much more. And the words give. . .

**P:** . . . a texture.

**S:** The words are attempting to link to a central truth that's still emerging. The very speaking itself begins to effect what is understood. When you witness your speech, something different emerges, different from the voice of everyday life.

**P:** How is it like witnessing movement?

**S:** It takes language out of the realm of automatic and

brings a quality or texture of authenticity.

**P:** You paused when you said "authenticity." Is that the word you want to use here?

**S:** Well, when you're completely present to a movement, that movement is fully alive. Language similarly comes alive when you're fully present to it. So maybe the word is *aliveness*.

**P:** Yes! That word *is* more descriptive. I feel the aliveness when you say it.

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In your teaching, do you approach language with the same degree of precision that you do movement?

**S:** Not at the beginning. To speak with that degree of alignment and precision is a very high level of this work. It's a personal edge for me as well.

**P:** I think that for many people who study and practice Authentic Movement, there comes a time of asking, "How do I live this way of being and knowing?" Speaking for myself, I know there are still fears and doubts about really being this way in life. This question seems to have been with you from the beginning.

**S:** Oooh—that's a whole other article! Living this means taking the risk to be different in the world—to experience life in a new way. Being fully present and consciously embodied—is both completely natural and totally evolutionary!

For me, learning to teach students how to move intuitively has been one way of normalizing this way of being for myself as well as others. I think the key to the work we all do is creating a safe space of empathy and acceptance—so that we can be fully ourselves as individuals and in relationship. Ultimately, this work is not "work"; it's about being truly *Alive*. And being that alive is truly pleasurable!

You know, when I first started teaching yoga thirty years ago people would say, "What's that? Yogurt?" Now yoga is a household word! So why not this too? ☺

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