Dance/Movement Therapy:
A Holistic Approach To Working With The Elderly

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The purpose of this paper is to examine dance/movement therapy as a holistic approach for working with the elderly. The premise is that dance/movement therapy can play a vital role in the prevention and treatment of illness with the elderly and act as a motivating force for maximizing lifelong growth potential. Therapeutic approaches to physically, emotionally, and intellectually disabled elderly are discussed. The paper concludes that dance/movement therapy with the elderly can be an enlightening experience which can inspire the therapist and clients to face life and death with love and energy.

Paramount to an understanding of the aging process is the ability to view aging as the culmination of an evolving continuum. Growth and maturation occur throughout the entire course of a lifetime. The manner in which individuals conduct themselves during the stages of life preceding old age may have a significant effect on the relative state of their health in later life. Health behaviors related to diet, amount of exercise, and smoking may influence the prognosis for healthy aging. The ability to respond and adapt to environmental change can also be an important determinant of functioning in later life.

How an individual approaches old age is contingent on a wide range of factors: physical health, personality, level of intellectual functioning, the availability of support systems, the adequacy of economic resources, and the possibility of fulfilling social roles. These systems engage in dynamic interaction, contributing to the whole functioning of the individual.

Old age may be a unique opportunity to undertake creative pursuits which provide the means for self-expression and self-satisfaction. Learning and growth as intrinsic lifelong processes may be fostered for maximizing motivation. Several theorists support the possibility of old age as a positive culmination experience. Erikson (1963) discussed the final phase of "ego integrity vs. despair."
describing ego integrity as:

the ego's accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning . . . (that) implies an emotional integration which permits participation by followship as well as acceptance of the responsibility of leadership. (p. 268-269)

Jung (Von Franz, 1975) described the path to maturity as an individuation process in which the individual experiences:

... an inner certainty, peace and sense of meaning and fulfillment, in the presence of which he can accept himself... instead of being a fragmented person who has to cling to collective supports, he now becomes a self-reliant whole human being who no longer needs to live like a parasite of his collective environment, but who enriches it and strengthens it by his presence. (p. 74)

Implicit in the notion of aging as part of a developmental cycle is the concept of change. A Zen view of life expresses this philosophy aptly: "If we do not change, we are lifeless. We grow and age because we are alive" (Kapleau, 1971, p. 8).

Change means movement, a progression from one phase of existence to the next. Often when working with the aged, Newton's laws of physics come to mind, that is, a body at rest remains at rest, and once in motion, a body remains in motion. Motion and dynamic changes in movement are motivated by energy, probably the most basic life force and certainly a fundamental component of dance/movement therapy.

Physical involvement on the part of the aged is of utmost importance. A complex set of internal systems function to maintain the homeostasis of the individual. As we grow older, more effort is required for the body to return to normal after periods of stress and exertion (DeVries, 1979).

Dance/movement therapy provides an accessible and highly suitable channel for consistent physical involvement for the elderly. It can facilitate increased mobility of body parts and help to maintain the level of activity. It can broaden and deepen self-awareness and aid in developing a realistic body image, thus providing a physical basis for identity. It may also offer some corrective measures in structural body alignment and alleviate the pain of stress points where chronic tensions and improper weight distribution have been concentrated. Dance/movement therapy may stimulate the functioning of the respiratory, circulatory, and skeletal systems and enhance sensory perceptions. It can also promote and maintain muscle tone, balance and coordination, and spatial orientation. Finally, it provides