Book Review


Claire Schmais has dedicated her book, *The Journey of a Dance Therapy Teacher: Capturing the Essence of Chace* to her friend, colleague and creative collaborator of 40 years, Elissa White. Creativity experts frequently discuss the value of creative partnerships. Through brainstorming, and providing a sounding board and validation, the companion assists in the creative process. For educators, students, and therapists in the dance/movement therapy and allied fields who are not so fortunate to have a collaborative partnership like Schmais’ and White’s, Schmais’ new publication may become a creative companion.

I think of Dr. Schmais as one of the mothers of dance/movement therapy education in the United States. She founded the first dance therapy graduate program in an institution of higher learning at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Schmais, along with Elissa White, received a grant from the National Institute for Mental Health to begin the program in 1971. Schmais directed and taught in the Hunter program for 25 years.

*The Journey of a Dance Therapy Teacher: Capturing the Essence of Chace* provides a window on to Schmais’ journey while teaching two dance therapy theory and practice courses during the academic year of 1978. The place, as previously mentioned, was Hunter College in New York City. It is important to note that this year, like every year, stood alone. One year would not look like another year, since individual classes were rarely the same or pre-planned. Schmais’ goals were consistent from semester to semester, but the route to get there would be different. This is because Schmais’ philosophy of teaching included working with the student from where they were. Elissa White described Schmais’ teaching in the preface of the book; “In some respects, Schmais’ teaching
is very much akin to all that goes into being an experienced dance therapist in the sense that she uses all of her intuition, senses and thoughts simultaneously” (2004, p. vi). Schmais explained that; “What I presented to the students in this class each day was determined by the nature of the group, their previous experience, their educational needs, and the prevailing emotional climate” (p. 5). An example of Schmais’ student-centered approach is presented in the book during Class 8, “Our bodies – our selves.” Schmais described;

(When I entered the gym today I overheard a number of the women students talking about their fat hips.)

Exercise One.

Purpose: To have students become aware of their attitudes toward their bodies. Instructions: Close your eyes and focus on the body part that you dislike the most. Give that body part a voice, have it talk to you. Write down what it says. (p. 17)

“Complex skills were broken down into teachable units and framed so that students could support each other as they learned”, says Schmais (2004, p. 3). The book is written with this philosophy in mind. Schmais presents the teachable units from Semester One: “Learning to be a Dance Therapist: The Beginning Experience” without lecture or discussion. She divides the first semester exercise classes into readable units designated as: purpose, instruction, and student comments. The experiential exercises become more understandable for the reader in the section titled “Discussion – Semester One.” Here we learn that Schmais’ consistent goals for the first semester included: (1) increased awareness of personal style, (2) understanding defenses and (3) engaging in the therapeutic relationship.

Training in Laban Movement Analysis assisted the students at Hunter College in attaining the goals previously listed. “Our teaching integrated Chace’s way of working with Rudolph Laban’s way of observing and analyzing movement” (2004, p. 1). There is strong evidence throughout Schmais’ book of the solid understanding of Laban principles and their integration into Chace’s core concepts. Current trends in dance/movement therapy education indicate a struggle in some schools to integrate the two. In reading this book, you recognize that significant training in both Laban theory and the Chace approach are essential in becoming a competent dance/movement therapist.

Breaking down ideas into parts/units before addressing the whole was a pattern in Schmais’ style of teaching as well as her writing. She had the students first work individually, then in pairs, small groups, and even-