

First Offerings

Julie Miller

The morning after our annual Winter Authentic Movement retreat in 2025, some members of the Stumps Sprouts Collective were sitting around the kitchen table talking about our experiences of the previous day and someone suggested that we write about our evolution as an ongoing leaderless collective. These offerings flowed from that first conversation as a group of four of us decided to meet once a month and work together on writing. There was a shared interest in exploring how our work had resonated with Janet's idea of the "embodied conscious collective" and we hoped that what emerged might be an offering that would inspire more writing from other long time practitioners and members of ongoing collectives, Thus seeding a project to encourage and gather collaborative writings exploring aspects of the embodied collective consciousness. We share more than 30 years of moving and witnessing each other with the common intention of seeing clearly without judgement, projection or interpretation which created a very safe container for each of us. This allowed the writing to flow more freely – so reminiscent of how good witnessing creates the space for movement to emerge. In fact, the writing process and how these final pieces came together, was much like the experience of moving and witnessing as we 'mucked around' together each month without knowing much about the final outcome- just continuing to refine our thoughts about the work. From this place of "not knowing", we emerged with four pieces which seemed to come together of their own accord to form a collective offering.

We offer this process to other members of long running groups and collectives as a wonderful way to write and hope that it will open the doors to continue to document, ask questions and explore this practice that we hold dear.

Evolution of the Collective Body: The Embodied Conscious Collective

Diana Levy

Through our ongoing conversations as a writing group, Julie Miller, Lisa Tsetse and Sox Sperry and I came to more fully recognize the significant place the early groups studying the Collective Body with Janet Adler, which went on to become collectives, hold in the evolution of the Discipline of Authentic Movement. We imagine that the reflections from members of these collectives would be of interest to Circles of Four learners and graduates, as well as students of the Discipline. This writing offers a brief overview of that period and suggests that Circles of Four seek reflections from those who participated in these groups - most of whom are now in their seventies and eighties.

Each person's developing relationship with themselves and within the collective body, their ongoing embodied practice as movers and witnesses, listeners and speakers, cultivates the inner capacity to contribute to collective life beyond the studio. Within our practice we learn to belong without disappearing as individuals and to participate through sharing in service of the whole. I offer several aspects of practice that have shaped my own capacity for collective participation.

The Emergence of the Collective Body

During the late 1980s and 1990s, Janet Adler's attention turned toward questions concerning the development of consciousness within the collective body. She explored these questions primarily through weeklong residential Authentic Movement retreats with large groups of approximately twenty to twenty-five participants.

While her focus on large-group work shifted by the early twenty-first century, some of these groups continued. Sustained by their devotion to practice, their collaborative relationships, and the land on which they gathered, they evolved into leader-full communities with shared and rotating leadership. Some identified as peer groups; others named themselves as collectives.

Although the Discipline of Authentic Movement became more clearly delineated in subsequent years, the "evolutionary architecture" includes this earlier decade of large-group exploration of the collective body (Morrissey, B. & Sager, P. 2022, p. 109.) Janet's work and writing in this area were deeply informed by her students' lived experience and developing consciousness.

The Initial Collectives

In Northern California, Western Massachusetts, and Europe, participants in Janet's groups, including dancers, therapists, artists, early somatic practitioners, and educators, became immersed in the experience of "conscious membership in the whole." (Morrissey, B. & Sager, P. 2022, p. 114.)

Many of us, myself included, experienced this work as both nourishing and formative in our understanding and experience of embodied consciousness. We shared a commitment to ways of knowing that were rooted in attunement to sensory, and emotional experience while moving and witnessing others. Through sustained participation, we deepened our capacity to hold complex felt experiences of mutuality, interdependence and boundary. We became increasingly attuned to what Janet named "energetic phenomena" and mystical experience. We found "a way to be uniquely ourselves inside a sacred, conscious circle." (Adler, J.1994, p. 150.)

For many of us the quality of these groups and the nature of our participation were quite distinct from other experiences. Bonnie Morrissey and Paula Sager capture the essence of the work "In the studio practice, Janet and her students are "mucking about," as she would often say, slowly discovering a felt sense of belonging to the group, grounded in the embodied and distinct truth of each person. The longing to know oneself as an individual interweaves with the longing to know oneself as part of a whole." (Morrissey, B. & Sager, P. 2022, p.112.)

Why Write?

As a long-time participant in one of these conscious collectives - the Stump Sprouts collective - and a person who has served in many collectively led groups, I am aware of how formative these early groups have been in my developing consciousness and capacity for participating in and sustaining collective leadership processes.

Janet's early work fostered intimate connections and trust in mystery - that which is not yet known and not yet formed. Together, these created a deep foundation for building collectively led communities. As Janet pursued her own evolving interests and stepped away from certain

forms of leadership, her absence and our desire to sustain what had been formed created a generative space for collectives to find their own paths. A thread running through studio work has always been its relevance to life outside of the studio. Working in collectives brings the sacred studio practice into community life.

Documenting the experiences of those who supported the early development of what would become the Discipline of Authentic Movement—and who continue to commit to peer-led circles—is an important aspect of the discipline’s living history. These early students of Janet Adler, their collectives, and the webs extending from them are integral to the lineage, even as their work has evolved in directions different from Adler’s own. In a 1990s interview with Anne Geissinger, Janet reflected:

“One of my greatest joys is to witness some of my most practiced students discover new and suddenly necessary ways of working... and in doing so, taking their turns participating in the development of the discipline” (Geissinger, 1998, p. 168).

By inviting writing from these collectives and peer groups, we recognize that not only individual students, but also the distinct collective bodies that grew from Janet’s circles, are evolving her work into something of their own. These groups function as living laboratories of collective leadership grounded in the practices she developed and taught. The knowledge they have generated over decades offers vital resources for those seeking to teach and sustain this lineage.

Since Janet Adler’s death in July 2023, there is no single leader guiding the development of the Discipline of Authentic Movement. The discipline lives within the collective body of teachers, students, and those preparing to teach. Community development within embodied conscious collectives—however this unfolds—has become essential to sustaining her lineage.

This is an initial offering from several members of one of these collectives—the Stump Sprouts Collective—which has held yearly autumn retreats and winter weekends since 1992. The authors have participated continuously since its inception by Janet. Rooted in mover/witness consciousness within Authentic Movement and the Discipline of Authentic Movement, they bring their understanding of embodied collective consciousness, collaborative process, and consensus-building into leadership across the arts, education, community service, mental health, peace and justice, and religious organizations.

Embodied Practices That Support Participation in Collective Life

My ongoing practice - moving and witnessing, listening and speaking – developed, and continues to develop, my capacity to participate in collective life with embodied consciousness. Each individual’s developing embodied consciousness strengthens the collective. I describe here several aspects that have been central to my own development outside the studio as examples of how individual practice impacts the whole, .

A Circle of Movers

We enter as individuals. We enter as one circle. Each of us and all of us, standing at the edge of a moving circle, holding our own not knowing and the empty, spaciousness around us.

I never know how or when I will begin. Again and again, something significant has emerged from that not knowing. When I can remember to embrace a path of “not knowing,” this profound teaching supports my openness to “what is.” This strengthens my sense of possibility and conscious participation in “community development.” Remembering I am part of a whole helps me to listen more deeply, trust timing and recognize the necessity of each contribution.

Moving Practice

Studio practice as a mover within a collective body, develops our capacity for embodied inner listening. We can attune to sensation, emotion, energetic shifts and discern next steps. We learn to trust a receptive process. A compassionate inner witness who accompanies us matures.

My developing capacity to recognize, sustain awareness, and trust my non-verbal experience was central in my evolving participation in collective life. Learning to accompany myself and others with compassion has been essential. I offer the following moving experience as an example of a mover’s transforming experience and learning within a collective.

I am tired and moving near the wall with closed eyes. I allow myself to feel the stable support the wall offers. My back muscles soften, my spine elongates, something in me is quieting from the support of the wall, from allowing myself to be where I need to be. My breath deepens. I feel my gratitude for the support of the practice and my sense of spaciousness increases.

I hear the foot steps of another stamping. I had not noticed it, but now it becomes more insistent, repeated, again and again. From the rhythm it seems that now others have joined in. More and more noise. I so long for quiet, and I am becoming agitated. I contain my impulse to scream “BE QUIET!”

I am turned toward the wall, moved into a corner. I experience greater darkness, find more of me in contact with the support of walls, floor and into myself. I wrap my shawl around my head, my shoulders. The sound grows louder and I become more irritable with the sense of intrusion. My body is withdrawing, each part moving further inward toward center. My hands become fists that are pounding, my knees are bending and now my feet stomp rhythmically. In that transforming body energy, I find my pelvis and my spine aligning and supporting, I find myself moving away from the wall, the stomp in my own feet now connecting and enlivening and traveling. The feeling of agitation and irritability have transformed into the enjoyment of my own mobilization. I sense myself traveling through the space with ease, surrounded by and participating with others.

What began as tiredness, and then agitation, became enlivenment. Had I been moving alone, this transformation might not have occurred. The other mover’s stomp and my commitment to stay with myself, transformed my experience. Containing my words and receiving my non-verbal experience allowed my inner witness and the collective energy to bring me into mobilization and participation.

In collective leadership, similar moments arise. Another’s energy may disrupt my own rhythm. Irritation, withdrawal, or resistance surface. The practice teaches me not to react impulsively but

to stay with my embodied experience long enough for transformation to occur. What initially feels like interference may become the very force that mobilizes the whole.

Collectives are rarely straightforward. They bring gifts and frustration. Just when resolution seems near, another perspective arises. Participation in collective leadership requires tolerating ambiguity, welcoming multiple paths forward, and recognizing that timing is often not predictable. The improvisational consciousness cultivated in practice supports us to give ideas and decisions the time and space they need to emerge and ripen. It supports us as we find our footing in a moving, shifting, evolving context.

Our collective is a living, transforming body. “Not yet knowing” is a vital thread in our shared work and connection. Seemingly disparate contributions may hold invisible connections that, over time, broaden awareness and deepen alignment. We are changed through the collective process.

Speaking /Listening Practice

In the speaking /listening practice, we articulate our experience and listen deeply. We stay present to what arises within as we listen, learning to trust that we can speak without fully knowing what we will say. Listening for my own truth, making space for it within myself, and daring to share it has strengthened my confidence within the collective. Equally essential has been learning to trust my silence and containment, both fundamental within the practice.

Within both studio practice and collective process, recognizing where another’s words resonate within us, and where they do not, builds connection inwardly and outwardly. Echoing - reflecting particular words - is a powerful way to receive another and communicate that they have been received. While voicing appreciation creates connection, we know from our practice that reflecting specific words or gestures conveys a deeper, more embodied acknowledgment.

Participants develop the capacity to hold their embodied truth alongside the needs of others and of the whole. Naming a place in our movement practice, and inviting each person to offer their unique witnessing, welcomes multiple realities, builds connection and deepens intimacy. Curiosity and asking for clarification are essential aspects of witnessing. Thoughtful questions help orient us within our shared and separate realities.

What we share - and where we differ - matter. Each contribution is essential. No single voice carries the whole, yet each voice carries a necessary thread. The complexity of human experience resides within each of us: today it may be my turn to hold a particular thread; tomorrow it may be yours. In a conscious collective, we commit to the challenging and essential task of practicing discernment. When do I offer a differing perspective? How can I remain genuinely curious about another’s perspective? What is my part to contribute at this moment?

Listening deeply, reflecting connections, being curious about another’s point of view, and speaking when perspectives differ are all acts of care for the whole. The conscious collective becomes a laboratory, a canvas, a home for braiding together our individual and collective energy.

Geissinger, Annie. "Toward The Unknown: An Interview with Janet Adler." A Moving Journal. Fall-Winter 1998.

Morrissey, B. & Sager, P. (Eds.), *Intimacy in Emptiness: An Evolution of Embodied Consciousness, Collected Writings of Janet Adler*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2022

**Open Letter to Janet Adler re: Collective
Winter Solstice December 2025**

Lisa Tsetse

Dear Janet,

I write to you today using this precious form of letter writing that you initiated as a primary means of communication for Circles of Four. This form has been meaningful for many of us as a way to share aspects of our inner lives and of our practice with one another on an ongoing basis. I begin with gratitude for your offering of this art of letter writing as a means for connections of the heart.

I begin this letter filled with the depth of your presence in my life, in our lives. I am with all that I learned from you, with you, and all that I continue to learn in the container of collective practice. I focus this writing on working collaboratively within your lineage of the practice you named the "Discipline of Authentic Movement."

I vividly remember our shared curiosity, and wonder when you asked Diana Levy and me in 2019 to participate in a process for Circles of Four to move from the initial two guiding circles, to a larger entity that could be co-created and sustained collectively.

You invited us at that time toward an understanding that the emergence of a conscious collective requires the commitment of each individual to be in a clear, present relationship to their inner witness. In your words, "I strongly agree with Thich Nhat Hanh when he says the next Buddha will be the Sangha - the community of practitioners. We don't need more gods. We need elders and guides, teachers and therapists and witnesses, rabbis and priests, to help us find the gods within ourselves as we journey toward conscious participation in the collective body." *

Beginning in the early 1990s, you planted some of the earliest seeds of collective possibility in your Stump Sprout's Retreats in Hawley, Massachusetts, as you singularly envisioned and created each retreat year after year. You guided us through the generosity of your experience as you impeccably tracked your relationship to the whole, simultaneously supporting the development of each individual's inner witness in service to what you later understood and named an *evolving conscious collective*.

You helped us to know and to embody the knowing that the Discipline of Authentic Movement will continue to organically evolve within each individual, and at the same time, within the evolving wholeness of our shared moving and witnessing experiences.

When you formally closed your holding of Stump Sprout's retreats in 1996, we continued to find and co-create our way together as a collective. Step by step, year after year, we consciously and steadfastly tracked ourselves in our moving and witnessing of each other. We simultaneously experienced and tracked the emerging of as a leaderless-leaderful group with many deeply shared intentions and values, and a vital commitment to staying together in study and practice.

From the time of your leaving these Massachusetts retreats to this present moment, we continue to weave and interweave our unique oneness with our wholeness. As we sustain trust in relationship to our own inner witnesses, and in relationship to each other's inner witnesses, we deepen dedication to individual and shared practice, within a community practice of embodying who we are as a conscious collective.

You formed Stump Sprout's retreats by intuitively bringing together a group of individuals, some of whom had already been working for a number of years in collective structures within the fields of dance and somatic arts, education, non-violence, somatic health, ecological and social justice work.

The individuals of the Stump Sprout collective continue to be individually dedicated to and immersed in meaningful communal structures and practices such as Quaker meetings, Buddhist practices, Jewish mysticism, alternative education, art and ritual experiences. We practice together and work consensually to hold space, inner and outer, personal and collective, for what we each most want to learn, equally honoring and moving more deeply into the knowns and unknowns of our many years together.

Through many decades of participation in Stump Sprout's retreats and equal years of study and practice with you and now within the Circles of Four collective, my understanding of what it means to be a collective member has become more firmly rooted in relationship to the practice of the Discipline of Authentic Movement.

In my experience as an individual within the each collective, I recognize that we are all individuals with varying degrees of shared commitment, intention and for many, devotion to the practice. In both groups, we share an understanding that we are a part of structures that we must continue to collectively build and sustain together at the same time that we that we are needing to work, stumble and grow within them. We are basically learning how to learn together, in the midst of shared values, personal differences and understandings, and what has become, for some of us, sacred agreements over these many years.

As we move and learn together on the ground of your lineage, individually and collectively we:

- refine ways of practicing together,
- are fiercely and gently independent, fiercely and gently interdependent
- stay present to what arises within each of us
- stay present to what emerges within the whole
- create our own way(s) of teaching and sharing the discipline, in studios, small workshops and retreat settings;

In the practice within each group, we begin in relationship to each other, and to the space itself. Sitting or standing side-by-side in a circle, our awareness extends to include the space which surrounds and moves through us. As we witness the emptiness, we embody intention toward consciousness, trusting in what will arise, as we hold the time and timelessness of all that has come before and all that is yet to be. We begin with and within the body, holding the possibility that *seeing* is a profound invitation toward the possibility of *becoming* etheric bridges of connection for the emergence of collective experience.

We begin as individuals within personal experiences, and as we meet and receive each other, we become a part of a collective experience that mysteriously emerges on its own, a collective *presence* that may, in essence, enter us. We begin with commitment to presence, intimacy, and trust within our own body. We honor that each time we begin, we will be in relationship to our own truth(s) within our body as we practice staying in relationship to that which emerges within the collective body.

We learned with you in many seminar settings, that questions will arise, and may at times offer collective teachings in themselves. Such questions are generative, not meant to be finalized with answers, rather, they lead us through discernment to the next inquiry. At times, our questions move directly into practice. The question that is most evocative for me at this time of my study and one that continues to arise in my experiences in both of my collective retreats is: "*What is present within our bodies and in the 'energetic field' when we practice with intention toward a conscious collective?*" I hold and carry this question with me in study, practice, and in the reflections that I bring to this letter.

I close as I began this letter with gratitude for your offering for us to come together as individuals within a conscious collective. In this collective coming together, we may find ourselves at the far end of the arc of the Mandorla, emptying and being emptied into clear, silent awareness. I continue to re-member and learn anew that awareness itself may dissolve, becoming a part of the river of consciousness where the individual and the collective are not separate but one. Perhaps this is the place where *you and I and we* will meet again, dear Janet, this place of nothing and all.

With reverence for the infinite journey,
Lisa

<https://www.threestonestudio.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Toward-the-Unknown.pdf>
Geissinger, Annie. "Toward The Unknown: An Interview with Janet Adler." A Moving Journal. Fall-Winter 1998.

**From Leaderless Group to Leaderful Collective:
The intersection of Authentic Movement and Collective Action**
Julie Miller

In 1991 I had the great good fortune of becoming a member of one of Janet Adler's training groups in Western Massachusetts. After many years of learning and practicing Authentic Movement with Janet Adler, our retreat group learned that Janet would be closing her work on the East Coast in 1996 and moving back to the West (and eventually Canada). Our large group (24 members at that point) had been working together for many years and had developed strong relationships with each other. We had a desire to continue on as a leaderless group and Janet had also expressed her hopes that we would do so. The task of moving from a teacher-led experience, in which all the major planning and organization was created by Janet, to a leader-full group that was agile enough to manage the scheduling and organizational details of a four-day retreat was daunting. It entailed undertaking what Janet referred to as "Community Development" as well as developing the structures, the questions and the learning opportunities to explore those questions, as Janet had brought to each year's retreat. Though we shared a common understanding of and commitment to the practice of Authentic Movement, it wasn't clear how many were committed to practicing in this way and of course, there were twenty-four separate ideas of how to do so. We needed a process and a framework to help us develop as a leader-full group.

We were not the only group to make the transition from having a single leader, to leading itself. In the Spring of 1994, for the first issue of *A Moving Journal*, Diana Levy and Valerie Angeloro wrote eloquently about how the Authentic Movement Group led by Diana, transitioned to a "community" led group led by all of its members. They articulated many of the same experiences and reliance on the form itself to help them move through that transition.

It took us a number of years of learning and honing the skills we needed, to begin to fully appreciate the ways in which becoming an Authentic Movement collective was more than just figuring out how to practice together. In the first few years, we struggled to find a way to make decisions on everything we needed to do; to negotiate planning in more agile ways and to manage interpersonal conflict that inevitably arose during the course of attempting the first two tasks. Two of our members, Sox Sperry and Lisa Tsetse, had come from long-time practices of working in Collectives with both social justice activists and artists immersed in community multicultural services with youth and adults. They became our guides in collective decision-making processes, helping to co-create the necessary structures that would enable us to move forward both in our Authentic Movement practice and as a continuing group. This process had a profound impact on me in terms of how I engaged in other relationships, as a member of other groups, and in the world. This writing is an attempt to understand more fully how the integration of these two deep processes: Authentic Movement and Collective Leadership, inform each other and contribute to the development of both consciousness and presence in relationship.

Through our shared practice of Authentic Movement, we had already developed many common understandings that helped in this process. First and foremost, our history of moving and witnessing had laid the foundation of safety and trust so necessary to accommodate the awkward fits and starts of trying something new. It provided a sufficient holding environment for the

inevitable conflicts and discomfort that arose as we struggled to find our path together. In addition, we utilized a “Listening Circle”, a half-hour session held in the studio, twice over the course of a retreat weekend. Sox Sperry recounts that sometime during our first year of meeting without Janet, a conflict arose between two members that felt challenging to manage as a leaderless group. At that time, he suggested that we adapt a process that was practiced at the Center for Nonviolence in Ft. Wayne, Indiana to allow for “speaking the truth in ways that minimize harm” (Sox Sperry – personal communication). It had, in turn, been adapted from what was called a “Samoan Circle” which is defined as “a structured, leaderless meeting technique designed for large groups to discuss, explore, and share perspectives on complex or controversial issues. The process was developed as a way to allow multiple sides of a dispute to be heard without a central moderator and the goal was to exchange knowledge and opinions on contentious topics, not necessarily to reach a decision or resolve conflict. (AI). In our Listening Circle, collective members were invited to speak about anything they would like – whether that be an issue with another individual, the group at large or a reflection of how they were experiencing a particular retreat or aspect of it. Other members might then speak about their own experiences in regards to the issue that was shared or share something else, but all statements were simply reflections of each member’s experience and not up for discussion. We were simply listening deeply to each other.

Although the Listening Circle has its roots in the development of collective process; for our group it was also an outgrowth of our work with Janet on Collective moving and witnessing. As Diana Levy notes:

“In our offering circles, we practiced speaking and listening to each individual's experience while moving or witnessing. At that time, what we spoke were offerings arising from within the collective body rather than personal witnessing of movers by witnesses. Hearing each participant's' personal truth within the collective body contributed to our sense of belonging and participation. We experienced how fully silence, rather than verbal exchange, could receive these offerings. Our practice gave us a foundation for being together within our collective body and for building community through individual and shared truth. The listening circle became a way to move our practice off the cushion and into our lives.”

(D. Levy-private communication)

The basic tenets of the ground form: deep listening, making eye contact, embodied knowing, witnessing another’s movement without projection, judgement or analysis; allowed us to communicate more carefully, with respect for each other, despite differences of opinion in how to proceed. Most importantly, the developmental process of connecting to and strengthening ‘inner witness’ contributed greatly to the strengthening of each group member’s ability to hold his or her own experience when strong feelings arose. That shared sense of psychological safety is completely dependent on each member’s ability to safely contain and express their own feelings in the presence of others, thus creating sufficient “good enough” inner witnessing within the group.

During most of the last years that this group worked with Janet at Stump Sprouts, her focus and interest was in collective moving and witnessing. This too provided a framework and built skills necessary to the development of a leader-full group. Becoming a witness of the collective imparted deeper knowledge of the parts within the whole. As well as seeing the journey of each individual, there was a building sense of the "resonance of the whole". Often collective stories centered around a village or community in which various individual events transpired. Though our focus on collective witnessing has diminished in recent years, the awareness of being a part of a 'whole' has been helpful in becoming a "conscious collective". We have held strong adherence to individual voices, even those that were contrary, because Authentic Movement teaches us that within the circle, there must be space for every voice, every experience. I remember clearly one session in which a story about a 'village shawl' emerged with many members chiming in about the 'shawl' until one member said "What shawl? I don't see any shawl". This was such a clear reminder about how collective witnessing might become "group mind" as in "The Emperor's New Clothes". In the development of a "conscious collective" there is space for each individual's perceptions to be present and accounted for. Collective moving and witnessing itself was a preparation for becoming a collective, as we witnessed how each individual's movement experience became a part of the 'collective story'. Thus, it expanded consciousness of the valuable interaction between the personal and the collective experience.

Most importantly the practices of discernment and distilled speaking which were introduced early in the development of collective moving and witnessing, helped to contain communication to that which is necessary to the collective process. I remember a time, close to the end of our work with Janet, in which she asked us to discern whether we were choosing to go in to move "in order to be seen, to belong or to participate". At that point, our group had been immersed in questions around collective moving and witnessing. I understood this directive to arise as a developmental imperative. We were all long-time movers who had experienced the ground form for many years (being seen by a compassionate, non-judgmental witness while moving one's own inner truth which supports the development of one's own, non-judgmental inner witness). Thus, we were all able to hold our own experience, discerning what pieces to share while being aware of the needs of the collective.

The intention of moving in "in order to participate" is central to the development of collective consciousness. It is what differentiates a group with an individual or co-leader, from a leader-full collective. It is also an apt metaphoric guideline for how to both become more conscious and how to be part of a conscious collective. Of course, we all want to be seen, to belong and to participate; probably every communication contains all three longings. But in the service of holding discussions or making decisions within a large leaderless group, the focus on contributing what is essential to the discussion at hand means strong focus on participation rather than speaking in order to be heard. This brings me to look at what aspects of our development as a collective have impacted our work in Authentic Movement, the most important being the difference in meaning between 'group' and 'collective'.

A collective is described as a group of people that share or are motivated by at least one common issue or interest or work together to achieve a common objective. Collectives are characterized by attempts to share leadership and to make decisions on a consensus-driven and egalitarian basis. While leadership emerges due to personal attributes and proclivities of particular

members, *formal* leadership is shared between the members; it may be designated on a rotating basis or may be shared in other ways. In our Authentic Movement collective, someone volunteers to lead the community meeting; a rotating group plans the annual retreat and leads the movement sessions; other tasks like managing financial transactions, communicating with the group and arranging for space are done by different members on a rotating basis. What differentiates a collective from a group in part, is the shared responsibility for leadership: each member is tasked with being fully present and engaged with the collective management process. This doesn't mean that every member must do every task. But they must be actively engaged in the decisions around who will do which tasks. Full presence requires a number of qualities: active listening, openness and respect for all communications; willingness to risk and address conflict in a meaningful way and holding oneself accountable to be part of the resolution. As in Janet's statement, the focus is on 'participating' rather than 'being seen'.

One of the most important distinctions between a collective and a group is the focus on collaboration rather than majority rule in decision making. Incorporating input from everyone in the collective creates richer and more multi-faceted ideas, plans and decisions. Being egalitarian and inclusive and striving for greater consensus supports all members of the collective feeling seen and heard. Of course, achieving consensus in such a large group is hard and can be very time consuming. Most of the decision making was done in "Community Meetings" which were scheduled at night during the four-day retreat which added to the challenge. One of the most valuable things that we learned and incorporated into our process from Sox and Lisa, was the "Four Finger Sounding" process that allowed for more agile decision making. In this process, as it was adopted and practiced at our retreats, when a new idea or proposal is introduced at the community meeting, we take an initial "sounding" by having each member hold up a number of fingers. Four fingers mean that the member wholeheartedly supports the proposal or idea and has no reservations. Three fingers mean support for the idea but some reservations. Two fingers indicate significant reservations in regard to the idea; and one finger means completely against it. Once the initial sounding is taken, those who have one, two (and sometimes three fingers) up, voice their objections or reservations about the proposal. They are then encouraged to make amendments that would bring them up to a three or four. In this way, we are able to go directly to the process of exploring the ramifications of a particular plan. As members identify reservations, perhaps the idea gets revised in response to those reservations, which leads to a stronger idea or plan. The most important aspect of this process is that it affords, or even demands, that each member really listen to each other. In other groups or organizational meetings, rather than listening to each other, people are often just waiting for a turn to speak and decisions are made by a majority vote. While both processes culminate in a decision or action; the latter is less thoughtful, inclusive and fair. Often, when engaged in this process, I allowed myself to really hear what someone else's objections were. They may have voiced something that I was not yet aware of myself or they may have identified an unseen consequence of a particular action that was not clear to me. I appreciated the chance to expand my own vision of what needed to happen in light of another's voiced concerns.

Harking back to Janet's idea of 'going in to participate' brings me to the cultivation of personal responsibility within the collective. If a leader-full collective is going to succeed, each member must commit: to show up, to stay present, to listen and respond thoughtfully to the discussion. Although some members of our collective are more comfortable speaking up in the group

meetings, there is a sense that everyone is there- following the discussion, thinking and feeling in response to what is being said and participating, each in their own way. Of course, there are downsides to this way of “governance”. First and foremost, it takes more time to come to a decision or plan of action. With one leader, decision making is streamlined. In the case of our Authentic Movement group, Janet planned the retreats, decided on the focus of the work and led each session. We (the members of the group) simply showed up to move, witness, learn and be part of the ongoing exploration process. Within that paradigm, the members of the group allowed the leader to take full responsibility for determining what questions will be explored and how, i.e. dyads, small groups, long circles, etc. This is restful for the members who are only tasked with engaging in their own personal work within the pre-determined format. But it too, has its downsides. It is only the teachers’ or leaders’ questions that can then be explored. With the introduction of the Collective, there is room for all members to explore their own questions. For example, as we moved into collective functioning after Janet left, we gravitated towards dyad work and away from community long circles. There was a hunger for returning to the ground form of dyad work. This was always noted and communicated to the subsequent Retreat planning group who incorporated it into the schedule. By hindsight, this longing to return to “seeing and being seen” by one member of the group ultimately created opportunities to get to know each other better as movers and witnesses and strengthened the level of trust and intimacy within the group as a whole. This is an example of collective wisdom leading the way to making positive change within the process. Having the opportunity to plan the retreat in small geographically located groups meant that we, as larger group members could shape the work to explore our own questions.

In *Intimacy in Emptiness*, Janet Adler, described the evolution of the Circles of Four by saying: “We can now perceive the wholeness of the complex and liberating journey of an individual’s development into membership in an embodied conscious collective” (p 331). Here she is describing the long, slow, developmental process that we have all taken from our first Authentic Movement experience as movers; to learning to witness an individual and then a group through to the present moment in which we find ourselves engaging with each other and the work in new and different ways.

What is an “embodied conscious collective”? And, what is collective consciousness”? Emile Durkheim described collective consciousness as the shared beliefs, morals, and attitudes that bind a society, creating a sense of unity and identity. There are three profound differences between Durkheim’s formulation and the way in which Janet used the term. First, is the inclusion of some of Jung’s ideas on the collective unconscious, referring to the universal, inherited layer of the unconscious mind, shared by all humans - a reservoir of instincts and universal symbols, distinct from the personal unconscious. It is this awareness of what it means to be alive with all of its attendant joys and suffering that allows us to connect to collective consciousness as a group. Second – it is the shared understanding of how the collective can contain, respect and coordinate many disparate individual voices using a framework that allows each voice to be heard and accepted equally. And third, it is the direct experience of this phenomenon, occurring primarily in the body that contributes to the development of embodied consciousness. And so, the idea of an ‘embodied conscious collective’ comes to mean a group of individuals who share this direct embodied sensitivity to and compassion for all living things as part of the unknowable process that we recognize as life. This embodied recognition of one’s

self as part of the fabric of all living things with different and sometimes competing needs, is to me so important both as a member of an ongoing collective and a denizen of a shared planet.

Janet's idea of an embodied conscious collective presents a challenge not only to our group but to the world and as such is aspirational. However, the practice of Authentic Movement has provided us with a path towards meeting that challenge. Through the direct experience of being witnessed well enough by a compassionate witness, the intention to see another without judgement or criticism; and participation in an ongoing large group authentic movement process which calls each of us to discern how to be in correct relationship with ourselves and with each other; we have emerged to embrace the learnings about building collectives from the world of community organization to become a functioning leader-full Authentic Movement group. As such, the skills of deep listening, staying present in the body, discernment in speaking and strong inner witnessing can, hopefully, help us move closer to becoming an embodied conscious collective.

Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. London, George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1915

Morrissey, B. & Sager, P. (Eds.), *Intimacy in Emptiness: An Evolution of Embodied Consciousness, Collected Writings of Janet Adler*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2022

**We Witness and Move in a World of Change:
The Evolution of the Community Long Circle**
Sox Sperry

*"It's essential that we turn more and more from that place of energy
toward the collective, not just the collective body in our studio practices,
which has been our teacher, but the collective in our world at this unprecedented time. "*
(Adler, NYPL Interview, 2019)

When Janet spoke these words in 2019 the urgency of turning toward the collective in our world was apparent. Her message remains true today, perhaps even to a greater degree. I offer this story from three decades ago as one way, among so many others, of turning toward the world as a collective, with the discipline of authentic movement as our guide.

WE BEGIN

In the summer of 1997 Lisa Tsetse and I travelled to Janet Adler's home studio in Sebastopol California to envision together how we might take authentic movement practice into the commons of our communities as a way to move and witness what it is to be human within the continuum of suffering and joy, pain and blessings. This collaboration with Janet gave birth to the community long circle, an open expanded form of a community mover and witness circle supporting participants to hold a common concern within a public sphere. Between the spring of 1998 and the fall of 2003 we held these circles five times – twice in Fort Wayne and once each in Berkeley, Boulder and Bellingham.

At the time we met with Janet, Lisa and I had been working with her in different settings for the previous 10 years. In the years prior to this time of counsel with Janet, we had become members

of the Stump Sprouts group (now a three decade long leaderful collective) which she had convened in 1990. At one point in time during our years at Stump Sprouts Janet spoke with us of her imaginings to call together an authentic movement caravan that would move and witness from community to community along the Pacific coast. Her imaginings resonated with our own experiences working with nonviolent collective action and community arts installations and performances while working at the Center For Nonviolence and the Fort Wayne Dance Collective. As members of solidarity brigades to Nicaragua in the 1980s, we understood the need for embodied social justice practice.

Our time in council with our teacher gave rise to these questions:

How can we see that which is felt but not visible?

How can we speak that which is heard but not understood?

How can we stand by those who are in distress but not honored?

Janet said, “There are three legs to the stool on which we sit. One leg is the practice of authentic movement. A second leg is the individuals and the moment in which we move. The third leg is the collective that arises when we come together. No one leg provides greater support than another. They are all needed to balance our seat.”

As we worked with Janet we understood that this new structure would challenge established understandings and trust in our previous practice of the form. We would move outdoors. We would move in a public space. There would be no designated leader. Teachers would move with their students. We would enter the circle with an intention articulated in the form of a common question.

As we contemplated how to create a safe container to move and witness a collective need within the community Janet offered these reflections:

- *Put the practice first, before any content.*
- *Be vigilant in our practice. Don't allow sloppiness to erode the form.*
- *Honor the discipline itself as a bridge of connection.*
- *Understand that riding chaos is an essential part of the emerging form.*
- *Allow the absence of a teacher to be a strength.*
- *When in doubt, return to the ground form.*
- *When I am in relationship with my internal witness the collective is strengthened.*

From this collaboration we defined the core structures for the community long circle. It includes

- an inner open circle of witnesses and movers who hold intention to a common question as they move between seeing and eyes-closed moving;
- a second outer circle of common witnesses who witness the inner circle and the world beyond at the same time;
- keepers, individuals who keep connection between the community long circle and the wider community, sharing information about the intent and the form and engaging in dialogue with those in the public who might choose to become community witnesses;
- flyers, distributed by the keepers, that explain briefly the form of authentic movement, the structure and intention of the community long circle, the common question with

which we move, why we chose this particular site and our request for how community members might become community witnesses;

- community witnesses, those members of the public who choose to spend time seeing the community long circle and, if they want, engaging in verbal sharing during the time of offerings.

With Janet's recommendation and an invitation by Neala Haze of the Authentic Movement Institute, we held a community long circle in Cesar Chavez Park in Berkeley in the spring of 1998. Our article entitled, "*The Community Long Circle: Authentic Movement as Nonviolent Community Action*," was published in the fall 1998 edition of *A Moving Journal* devoted to "The Collective." This gave rise to an invitation to offer another community circle through the Naropa Institute in Eben FINE Park, Boulder in the summer of 2002. We recounted this experience in a second article, "*Self and Other: The Practice of the Community Long Circle*," published in the spring 2003 edition of *A Moving Journal*.

I quote extensively from this article here to share one account of the embodied experience of this form as it moved into the world in that particular time and place.

WE ENTER

As the workshop participants checked in, sat in a central circle, and reviewed procedures, a keeper noticed a young man holding a husky on a tight leash enter through the eastern opening and stand just outside the seated circle. The keeper rose to greet this man who appeared to have spent the night in the park. His long dark hair was matted, and his blue eyes were deeply intense, much darker than the worn blue shirt he had on. The beer can in his free hand explained the strong smell and unsteady stance. "I'm just trying to hear what they're saying," he said in a loud whisper. The keeper told him that this was a community long circle and that he was welcome to listen and to participate in the speaking that would occur after the moving circle finished.

The keeper invited the young man to look at the community circle board that explained our intent that day. The young man looked with suspicion out the corner of his eye, as his body continued to face the circle of people seated on the ground a few feet away. "You know, when I first saw this circle, I wanted to bust right through it. I can be mean sometimes. I interrupt. I trample on people. Most people are scared of me." The keeper stood quietly, listening and nodding as the man spoke, his words sharp and quick. "But I decided that that would be wrong, so I just came in quietly through this entrance. I'm just trying to hear what they're sayin'." The keeper replied, "I noticed how quiet and patient you were when I saw you standing here." "Yeah, I pulled my dog in close on a tight leash 'cause I didn't want him running through everyone like he does sometimes." The dog circled the keeper's legs, wrapping him in the circle of leash and limbs..

The man in the blue shirt followed the keeper as he slowly left the ribboned gate and walked toward the community circle board some ten yards away by the sidewalk and bike path. "This is the question we are thinking about as we begin this circle today," explained the keeper.

*From the temples to the towers
From the fire across the mountain to the house next door
From my head to my heart
How can I see myself in the other?
How can I know the other in myself?*

Reading the first few lines the young man motioned to the keeper to come close. "I know what this is about. I died when I was two years and eight months old and they brought me back. Here, look." He pulled down the collar of his blue shirt to show the headwaters of a deep scar at the base of his neck. "It runs right down my body. That's how I know what all this is about. I've been there and back, man."

After talking together for several minutes the keeper said that he had to get back to the circle. He invited the man to return at 11:30 A.M. for the beginning of the circle and to stay for the community speaking that would happen after. They parted with a handshake, hands clasped by thumbs, knuckles touching in parting.

Ten minutes later the members of our group were gathered outside the gate, ready to begin. As the convener was explaining the process of entry, a tall young man, bare-chested and wearing only shorts and a leather choker around his neck, suddenly ran from the north with the husky that

the other young man had held on a leash. He loped quickly toward the ribbon and leapt over it, the dog running beneath, leash trailing. As he ran across the circle in silence, he grabbed the leash. As he approached the far side of the circle, the husky running beneath the ribbon, he bent and slipped beneath the ribbon himself, holding onto the leash. They ran off together across the park, leaving the group wondering what had just happened.

A group member said quietly to the convener, "I think our circle was just opened." The procession then began towards the center. We spread our arms, "sprouting" as a full group. Then the inner circle of movers and witnesses was invited into the center to place their rocks and totems on the earth. They sprouted together in an inner circle as the rest of the group sprouted around them. The common witnesses and keepers then followed this same process.

As the keepers bent down to place their rocks to the earth, a loud voice rose behind them. "Concentrate! Concentrate!" It was the same bare-chested man who had just run across the circle, now sitting peacefully with the dog on the slight rise behind the circle, unexpectedly offering this invocation prior to the convener's recitation of our question:

*How can I see myself in the other?
How can I know the other in myself?*

At the sound of a bell, the inner circle of twelve witnesses and movers all waited in place, witnessing the open empty space from which we always begin, to which we always return. One witness closed her eyes, leaned forward off her cushion, and the moving continued. Each member listened for their way into and out of the moving circle, palms, knees and soles of feet moving onto the parched summer ground. Beneath the gentle canopy of long willow fingers swaying with the wind, in the wildfire smoke above, the community long circle is born.

The circle of four common witnesses held steady in their places just behind the inner circle at the cardinal directions, seeking to witness clearly the movers and witnesses within the circle as well as those in the world beyond: the creek and its kayakers and tubers, the highway beyond with its Harleys and RVs, the side-walk that circled us with bikers and roller bladers, the trees and bushes with their bird song and leaf laughter, the earth and the world so close by in this morning circle.

The keepers moved outside the ribbon with simple fliers describing the practice and our question, ready to make a connection with any who might be curious about our place in the park this morning. The young man in the blue shirt returned with a message for the keeper he had spoken with earlier. "You know my friends in the van are watching you guys." The keeper looked over to the parking lot a few steps away and noticed a van with tinted windows. The young man took a drink from the beer can in his right hand. "Yeah, they said I should go bust up your circle, 'cause they know that's how I can be sometimes. But I told them that that's not what this is about. I told them I didn't need to do that. I'm not always that way." The keeper said that he remembered how patient and respectful the young man was when he first entered the circle.

Just then the bare-chested young man appeared, striding quickly toward the keeper and the man in the blue shirt. "What is this shit anyway?" he demanded. His voice carried into the circle and

to the group of community witnesses beyond who had chosen to view the community long circle. The keeper greeted the bare-chested man, as did the young man in blue. "This is a community long circle. We're here today to bring our question into the world." "I don't need a circle to tell me where I can go. I go anywhere I want. I am wild. I went right across your circle with my dog. I go everywhere." "I saw how you opened our circle with your dog and I noticed that you were careful not to pull the circle down. You could have easily taken the whole ribbon down if you hadn't gone under when you left." "Yeah, I was trying to make a point. I don't need some circle to keep me safe. But I didn't want to mess up your thing. I was making my own point." "I appreciate the way you did that," said the keeper. "All right," said the bare-chested man and extended his hand to the keeper.

At this point the young man in blue jumped in. "Hey, we don't need this circle to be out here but they do and that's cool. They're just doing it their way." There followed a long conversation among the three men. Personal history, philosophy, theology, and curiosity interwoven in a quiet trio as the moving and witnessing circle continued in the background. "My grandparents are scared of me. I don't want 'em to be, but they are. It was even worse when I was living at their house and trying to stay sober."

"I was adopted at six months by my father. He was a minister and marched with Martin Luther King. He is a good man. I won't ever disrespect him. But he kept me from my people until I was eighteen. So when I finally got the chance to go I went. I went everywhere. The reservation, the streets, the mountains. Here. There. Everywhere. I'm wild, man. I go everywhere."

"I come from the Midwest. I've never been here to Boulder. The first time I ever saw your park was two days ago. We're here today trying to think about these questions. Trying to figure out how to see each other without hurting one another."

After thirty minutes of sharing, the trio broke up, the keeper inviting the men to join the community circle for sharing at 12:45. At 12:30 the convener closed the moving circle and invited participants to reflect on their individual experience for ten minutes of silent transition. Then all community long circle participants and community witnesses were invited to join together in the center of the circle for verbal sharing.

The inner circles of witnesses, movers, and common witnesses began the offerings. "As mover I felt the earth solid beneath my feet. The wind above my back. I could hear the trees moving above me. It felt like home." "As a witness I could see movers entering alone, then called to earth and to one another, coming together. I felt less alone." "As a common witness I could move my neck just slightly and shift my vision from a mover touching the earth to a child crossing the field with flippers on her feet. From the top of the head of a witness to the traffic on the highway beyond." "As witness and mover I felt as though this must be what heaven is like. Truly."

The keeper noticed in the distance that the man in blue had returned to the community circle board. He was carefully putting something on the board. A man on a mountain bike stopped to ask the young man a question. It appeared that the young man was explaining to the biker what the community circle was about as he gestured with his hand toward the board and then toward

the seated circle. They parted with a handshake and the young man moved toward the sharing circle.

Movers and witnesses continued to speak as the keeper rose to greet the young man and invite him to sit near him. "I'm only going to speak if I feel called to speak," the young man whispered. He sat sipping his beer and rolling a cigarette as participants spoke of their experience, occasionally leaning to the keeper and saying, "That's deep," and "She's right."

Not long after the man had entered the circle the convener invited members of the community to speak if they chose to. Almost before the invitation was completed the young man spoke up: "As witness I bring you gifts from my friends for your circle." He placed a yellow hardhat filled with small items in front of him and pushed it toward the center. In the hardhat were a small box of tea candles, some moisturizing cream, a small can of mace, a large, fat pencil with a stubby end and a tube of theatrical "Vampire Blood." "At first I almost went through your ribbon. I didn't know what you were doing here. Now I thank you for letting me join your circle."

Several other community members and keepers chose to speak. During their offerings the bare-chested young man walked quietly up with his dog as others made space for them to enter. He listened to others speak for a minute or two and then he spoke. "As mover I want to apologize to each of you for running through your circle before. It was rude but I meant to do it. I thought, this is my place. I have the right to go everywhere. I got this dog. You got to be lucky to have a dog like this." At this, the dog began to howl and her companion howled along with her. "I've lived a lot of places in my life. This is my park too. Now I'm here with you. We're all here. I don't know why but there is probably a reason."

A mover who had already spoken gestured to speak again. "I thank you for the gift of coming across our circle as you did. As you ran across I thought, 'Where is the part of me that can run where I want, just like you?' You helped me wake up. Thank you."

In closing all hands go to the earth, with gratitude to the sky and to the trees. As the keepers thanked the young men for their part in the circle, the young man in blue said, "Don't forget." "What?" said the keeper. "Don't be afraid...Be afraid." The keeper looked at him and repeated. "Don't be afraid...Be afraid." The young man lifted his thumb and smiled.

*How can I see myself in the other?
How can I know the other in myself?*

WE MAKE THE CIRCLE A SPIRAL

Spiraling, we return to the questions that arose when we first worked with Janet to conceive the community long circle three decades ago.

How can we see that which is felt but not visible?

By imagining and inviting circles of movers and witnesses to gather, feet to earth, in keeping with ancient practices of listening, embodiment and presence.

How can we speak that which is heard but not understood?

By knowing that stillness and mutual respect provide a container for holding what must be offered into the unfolding present moment.

How can we stand by those who are in distress but not honored?

By remembering that each place is always inhabited by beings who are not “the other.” Each one is welcomed within the circle of all our relations.

Janet Adler Interview, Dance Oral History Project, NY Public Library, 2019

Lisa Tsetse & Sox Sperry. “*The Community Long Circle: Authentic Movement as Nonviolent Community Action.*” *A Moving Journal*. Fall 1998.

Lisa Tsetse & Sox Sperry. “*Self and Other: The Practice of the Community Long Circle.*” *A Moving Journal*. Spring 2003.

Additional writings by Lisa and Sox on authentic movement and the community long circle and nonviolent action can be found on Lisa’s website, <https://www.lisatsetse.org>

COMMUNITY LONG CIRCLE ORGANIZERS

Neala Haze, Authentic Movement Institute, Berkeley

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Diana Levy, LMSW, is a long time teacher of the Discipline of Authentic Movement and a member of the Circles of Four Faculty. She has been a clinician and administrator in mental health and educational settings. Her writing **Evolution of the Collective Body: The Embodied Conscious Collective** introduces the evolution of Janet’s teachings and practices into the embodied conscious collectives that her students formed.

Julie Miller is a dance therapist, educator and academic administrator. All of these roles have been deeply informed by her practices as a collective member. Her introduction to this collection **First Offerings** and her article **From Leaderless Group to Leaderful Collective: The intersection of Authentic Movement and Collective Action** traces the evolution of the Stump Sprouts Collective.

Sox Sperry, a member of the Stump Sprouts collective and one of Adler’s earliest students, worked in consultation with Janet and in collaboration with **Lisa Tsetse** developing Community Long Circles. As an educator, peace activist, and community organizer seeking alternatives to patriarchy and militarism and studying indigenous ways of knowing, Sperry recognized that

witness consciousness and embodied practices—particularly for men—support relational responsibility and presence. Collective participation, in this view, offers an alternative to entitlement and conquest. His article, **We Witness and Move in a World of Change: The Evolution of the Community Long Circle**, shares his experience bringing an Authentic Movement circle into a community park.

Lisa Tsetse is a veteran teacher, mentor and practitioner of the Discipline of Authentic Movement and a somatic arts educator across diverse disciplines. She is a founding member of the Circles of Four Faculty as well as the Fort Wayne Dance Collective (1979). Her **Open letter to Janet Adler re: Collective Winter Solstice December 2025** continues decades of conversations she had with Janet regarding the evolving collective body, and extends her gratitude for the depth of these teachings.