

We are the Movement: Continuum Movement as Somatic Psychotherapy



Photo by Mei Lai Swan

By Amber Gray

**“Movement is not something we do.
Movement is who we are.”**

Emilie Conrad

“Where there is suffering there is holy ground”

Oscar Wilde

Emilie Conrad was no stranger to fear and discomfort. Growing up in an abusive household, she suffered traumatic exposures and illnesses. Dance became her salvation. Vaudeville led to Katherine Dunham; Dunham technique led to Haiti, where she lived and danced for five years. Her experiences sparked the question that became her lifelong inquiry and work: Continuum Movement.



It's hard to quantify or categorize Continuum Movement because it's a practice that literally embodies what it preaches: ongoing change, transmutation and innovation, all in service of evolution.

Unlike somatic practices that become theorized, modularized or manualized, Continuum Movement, also called, simply, Continuum, remains a work in progress, and a practice in process. In a world rife with unexpected and shocking stories of mass shootings, tortured children, and horrific warfare, humans have many opportunities to "lock down" in fear. This lock down may feel emotional and may affect our worldview and belief systems; it is actually a core somatic experience that will influence us at all levels. Fear shapes all our movements in the world.

Continuum recognizes that the fundamental movement of life is wave motion. Emilie first noticed this wave motion in the flowing, sensuous movements of Haitian dancers. She recognized the wave in everything that breathes, moves and lives. Her work went on to explore,

describe and create a movement practice based on wave motion as a fundamental healing movement, and as a shape that restores resiliency through connection.

As a practitioner of somatic psychology, dance movement therapy, yoga therapy and Continuum Movement, it seems clear to me that Continuum is truly, at its core, a non-verbal approach to therapeutic intervention. It is difficult to describe this fluid, open-ended movement practice in words. Continuum invites our bodies to move in response to sound (including silence); sound and movement exist on the same continuum; that's why we can hear a hummingbird's flight. Continuum teaches the increasingly valued skill of interoception through a practice called 'open attention'. If one considers that life is embodied and that our human bodies are where we think, feel, act and sense, then it may not seem a stretch to consider that a principle that applies to ultrasound therapy also applies to the broader human embodied experience.

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Continuum movers in the photo are Todd Stone, Lucy May, and Rachel Harris

Photo by Tony Chong

. . . the integration of truly embodied mindful movement practices like Continuum Movement may nudge psychotherapy, and somatic psychotherapy, into even more movement based practices that do not rely solely or significantly on spoken word and verbal narratives.

Introducing sound, which travels in waves and has a particular frequency, into tissue can increase the tissues natural fluid elasticity (we are, after all, approximately 70% water) and change the density of tissue. When tissue density changes, we move differently. When we move differently, we have a greater range of movement, which expands the sphere of our life experience. The greater our movement repertoire, the more possibility we experience emotionally and cognitively. We have more options for self-expression, for communication, and for how we move, behave, act and take our place in the world.

Bruce Perry (2014) states that “movement changes the brain faster than anything else.” Recent research on mindfulness proves that tracking and observing sensation increases mindfulness (Kerr, et al., 2013) and that interoception is not just a brain process, as previously thought. It is a full body process that significantly informs our embodied awareness (Hindi, 2011). Embodied awareness can be described as our somatic awareness (ability to sense inside ourselves, to feel and know ourselves) plus our conceptual awareness (the ability to express or share with others; “languaging” our experience, which promotes integration and provides connection with others) (Siegel, 2012).

As the field of neuroplasticity, which has demonstrated that experience can change the brain through research focused primarily on mindfulness activity, begins to explore mindful movement, Continuum may emerge as a practice that uniquely combines the skills of mindfulness with movement in a way that promotes healing. change and restoration efficiently and perhaps even more quickly than verbal and cognitive therapies. It may also promote a collective awareness about our interconnectedness and role as part of a greater whole.

One framework that Continuum posits and explores involves anatomies: The Social or Cultural Anatomy; the Primordial Anatomy; and the Cosmic Anatomy. The Social/Cultural

Anatomy is our everyday body; the body that is shaped by social constraints, norms and the messages and inputs we “exteroceptively” receive from family and community, and the environment we live and dwell in. Our primordial anatomy is our evolutionary body; the echo of our other species ancestors such as fish, amphibians and reptiles that are reflected in the developmental movement patterns and progression of infants and toddlers (Bainbridge Cohen, 2012). Our Cosmic Anatomy relates to the understanding of the human body as a whole system, and as a system that is also part of a larger whole; this anatomy draws from David Bohm’s work, as well as other theorists from the field of physics and chaos theory.



Photo of Emilie Conrad
by Jo Ann Eisenberg

It also acknowledges many ancient traditional spiritual practices and belief systems in sociocentric cultures where shamanistic approaches to healing are honored and respected.

Continuum is not traditionally considered a psychotherapy, though the changes that occur when we intervene at the level of tissue and movement are now known to be more “permanent” than those that occur cognitively, without a link or connection to the body. Much of the current research and theory emerging from neuroscientific research supports this notion of change (Begley, 2007; Porges, 2011; van der Kolk, 2014). As this same research endorses the use of nonverbal therapies for survivors of trauma, the integration of truly embodied mindful movement practices like Continuum Movement may nudge psychotherapy, and somatic psychotherapy, into even more movement based practices that do not rely solely or significantly on spoken word and verbal narratives.

Our bodies are the site of our personal and collective history; if biology is our earliest imprint, culture is the layer that shapes and “dresses up” how we move, express, share and connect to the world. When all is well, our movement is a primary language that non-verbally reflects our inner state to the world. When fear is imposed on these layers of influence, the natural shape and motion of our bio-cultural body is affected and we express patterns and imprints of fear and trauma. Our body narrative becomes one of disconnect and isolation. Our movement will change; it will be less fluid and more fragmented. Movement reflects inner states such as fear-based arousal, vigilance and anxiety, or shut down and depressed states, in ways we can see in ourselves or our clients. Fragmented, choppy, non-sequential movement, slouched over and compressed body postures, individuals who cannot sit still or who are constantly moving a limb nervously; these are all cues that the natural, inherent wave motion of our individual body may be disturbed, compressed or broken. With Continuum, a simple sound such as an O can begin to calm the nervous system, quiet the exteroceptive input and invite a sense of coherency and organization to a person’s internal, embodied experience.

To try this, sit on the edge of your chair with feet firmly planted on the floor, and feel the contact between your body and the chair. Sit in a relaxed alert posture, neither rigidly contracting your muscles nor slumping. If you perch your “SITZ” bones on the edge of the chair, you can achieve this relaxed alert posture. Inhale and on the exhale make an O sound (if you have ever said AUM or OM in a yoga class, it’s like the OM without an M) and feel the effect of the sound inside your body, as well as in the

space around you. Do this several times or for several minutes, and then sit quietly and allow your body to respond (this is the interoceptive practice of open attention). You may notice sensations that you were not aware of previously; you may sense a change in your feeling state; you may notice little micro movements and larger wave like pulsations or movements that naturally want to express themselves in gradually bigger gestures and movement sequences.

Allowing this movement is the practice of Continuum; this is what restores a sense of wholeness to our bodies through the reconnection to our wave motion and the enhancement of our interoceptive awareness and abilities. There are many sounds that have different influences on the body, because they represent different frequencies, or waves, and there are many ways to practice them. The possibilities are as endless as the potential for the human body to change, adapt and restore itself after suffering, pain and loss. Continuum Movement may be one of the waves of the future of somatic psychotherapy.

Amber has been an authorized Continuum Movement teacher in Santa Fe, NM, since 2006. In 2010, with Emilie Conrad’s blessing, she established Continuum Movement in Australia where she teaches regularly. She is an award winning dance movement therapist; a licensed psychotherapist and internationally recognized somatic trauma therapist who has been a champion and a pioneer for the use of somatic psychology, dance movement therapy and Continuum Movement with survivors of war and torture in the U.S., and in complex humanitarian emergency and post- disaster contexts. Amber teaches regularly in Haiti, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Lebanon. Amber is also a yoga teacher, bodyworker, cranial sacral therapist, and a humanitarian. With thirty years as a practitioner and teacher of practices for well-being, she integrates these practices and many years of study with medicine people in Haiti, Sámi land and Aboriginal Australia; an open heart; and a curious mind, into her global outreach and healing work.

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