In Memoriam: Norma G. Canner, 1918–2012

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I used to think that only special people had talent and the need to explore their creative feelings. I didn't know that a large group of people could dance together and feel as one or that you could dance alone and still feel part of a group.... When Barbara (*Mettler, creative movement pioneer*) said that everybody had talent and everybody was creative, she just turned my mind around, upside-down. She taught me a huge lesson that literally changed my life, and my idea and conception of who people were and the creative power in each human being, and it was all in how it was presented. (Norma, from the film *"A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner"* BTI Films, 2000)

Norma came to creative dance in the 1940s from the competitive world of the New York theater where she had been an actress. Her experience there was tempered by her involvement in the left-wing plays of the 1930s where she added to her ability to be fully in the moment, in a highly sensitized and disciplined way, by learning what it meant to build a community of shared experience through work and relationships based on principles of mutual respect and support. From Mettler she learned the art of creative body movement: a whole vocabulary of natural movement and a way of working improvisationally within a specific structure or problem: a dance focusing on hands, for example, in which, as her teacher would say, "You move the way you want to, according to your feelings, discovering for yourself your own form of expression." Both the movement vocabulary and the improvisational style were key to Norma's way of working in the evolving field of dance therapy in particular and the expressive therapies in general.

When, in the 1950s, Norma's husband moved the family from Boston, MA to Toledo, Ohio, Mettler suggested she could teach there. Although Norma had never thought of herself as a teacher, she offered a course for children at the local Y and—having learned her lesson—said on a TV program that "anyone can dance." Confronted in her first class with a child with cerebral palsy and full leg braces, she found a way to include her

through dances built around body parts the child could move. This led Norma to work in hospitals where she encouraged children to move and be creative, focusing on what they could, rather than what they couldn't, do. When she began to give workshops, people would ask, "Can you work with deaf children, or blind, or retarded children?" and she would answer, "I don't know, but I could try," and she did.

Norma and her family returned to Boston in the 1960s just at the time the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health was establishing a pilot pre-kindergarten program for children with disabilities. She was hired by Director Louis Klebanoff because, as he said, "We were looking for people who knew early childhood, not retarded, and who would approach these children as children rather than patients." His principal, Dorothy Tucker, pointed out that at that time people weren't so interested in helping children, especially children with disabilities, experience their lives, but rather in molding them according to preconceived ideas. Klebanoff and Tucker knew that teachers concentrated on instructing children to learn; they were looking for someone who would help them "experience" by claiming what they did, and thought, and felt, as their own. As Tucker said, "You can't own something if it's pushed on you or if you don't have to use yourself to do it. The way Norma worked, anything the child did, the child owned." Soon there were over a hundred such schools in Massachusetts which became the model for what is now known as early intervention. During this time, Norma taught in many different college and university programs around Boston which led her to write her book, *"...and a time to dance,"* exploring how creative dance can enrich the lives of children with special needs. She also worked with children in ghetto neighborhoods in the north and south of America in Head Start programs.

"The making of something," working towards the expression of health and wholeness through the creative impulse, and dealing with feelings head-on, in the moment, became hallmarks of Norma's work. Not only was there no failure in creative dance; the ability both to express and to safely contain volatile, even violent feelings within these improvisational structures caused Dr. William C. Freeman, BC-DMT, movement educator and associate member of the IAVMT, to remark that "If people, including children with disabilities, were allowed to express themselves

fully, within safe structures, they wouldn't need to act out later on, and many crises and hours of therapy could be prevented.”

The ability Norma had to sense what these children were feeling carried over into her work with adults. In 1974, she was invited to begin the Dance Therapy department at Lesley University, where she taught for 14 years while also expanding her work through programs in Israel, Switzerland, and various parts of the US. Beginning in the 1980s, she traveled annually to Kansas where she worked with Dr. Freeman at Accessible Arts, teaching teachers, paraprofessionals and parents to use the Expressive Arts with children and youth with disabilities. From the mid-1980s into the early twenty-first century, she maintained a private practice with adults, combining dance and movement with imagery, enactment, sound, and voice to encourage expression and integration of the self. Norma considered sound, especially human sound, to be one of the basic materials of dance, “the kinesthetic made audible,” and adored the singing voice in all its forms. After being introduced to the new discipline of voice movement therapy in 1994 by Anne Brownell, Norma became supervisor and visiting teacher on the Foundation Training in Voice Movement Therapy: *The Voice Unchained*. The Norma G. Canner Foundation for Voice Movement Therapy was established in her honor.

One of the ways Norma worked with adults was by connecting them back to the child within through creative movement which rekindled nonverbal memories and provided an opportunity to access the creative spontaneity of childhood. “The body has a memory and if you're working in therapy and you move, it will just come out and you can work with it and it begins to heal. You can't defend that place the way you can in verbal therapy.” But you could, she realized, transform it by working with it creatively as well as therapeutically. Norma would initiate and guide a person through deep life issues, using movement and sound to access memories locked in the body either prior to the acquisition of language or because the nature of an experience had made words inaccessible or inadequate, and then she would encourage the client to express and shape these memories in new and creative ways, which would help change the feelings associated with them.

Norma was always playful. “Play is the way children learn and it’s a thing adults have forgotten and that gives us our spirit and wonderment. We need to play all our lives and for children, it’s their way of learning to be social creatures.” It is also a way of re-socializing people who have been held back in their development by childhood issues. It could be said that art is the highest form of play, and Norma had the ability to access all those dark and scary places, the monsters really, and helping the client transform them by re-experiencing and then expressing them as characters, songs, and dances: a part of oneself, but not the only part. I came to work with Norma because I knew I had somehow to connect my mind to my body, to my whole feeling self, and that changed my life.

Barbara Mettler would say, “Let the movements grow out of each other, with your whole self in it, and the more your mind, your body, your spirit are integrated in it, the more meaning it will have, the more alive it will be.” Norma said, “That’s why I love dance and creative movement so much, because it employs the whole self, not just part of the self. If we don’t know something with our whole selves, we don’t really know it. We need to reconnect with that childlike sense of discovery, because ultimately that’s how we learn and grow. Movement takes us to deep places and it’s vital to create a sense of community and trust to contain them.”

And so it is passed on, this gift of doing, of making beauty: in creating a dance or a song, in rebuilding a life. Norma’s fifty-years-plus commitment to dance/movement therapy and the expressive arts was documented in the film *A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner*, by Ian Brownell and Webb Wilcoxon, as a testament to the power of the expressive therapies.

To say Norma will be sorely missed, both by those who knew her for years and those who came into contact with her only briefly, is an understatement. Her compassion, respect for each individual, reverence for nature, artistry, and ability to reach out to those most cut off from social interaction will never be forgotten (Dennis Livingston, composer and Norma’s son-in-law).

“I think the power and the magic of Norma has to do with her ability to see the spirit and the love inside of someone and connect it with her own energy. We can help nurture that spirit in others by the medicine of who we are. The greatest therapeutic medicine is another human being” (Stan Strickland, jazz musician, dancer, teacher). The theater honed Norma’s feeling for character and motivation; Mettler’s creative movement gave her the essential tools for her work, and she combined them with her own faith and belief in what she called “an empathetic love for the client.” As Mettler was an artist of aesthetic individual and communal dance, so Norma was an artist of human relationships who exemplified the Zuni quote which hung in Mettler’s studio: “We dance for ourselves and for the good of the city.” The “city”—all of us in our various places around the world whose lives Norma touched—feel an emptiness, an absence, because a wonderful, unforgettable, greatly loving person has “moved over.” At the same time, we are aware of a richness which remains in what she taught us and the gift her work and her presence brought. Let us remember her when we dance.

When It's Time
By Norma Canner
Winter 2004

Wounded souls lined up like crows
Marcelled curls, snow cropped
and bald
Sitting on chairs with wheels
Pushed, pulled or rolled
By clipped winged arm
Or hand that cannot clap
For one alone cannot make
a sound.
When it's time to take the spade
With your cold blue hand
Who will slide me into place?
Who will come, who will hear?
No bed pans, bells, moaning
groaning, whining calls for help.
Come fly with the flock
into the wind.
Floating, dipping into the currents

into the crest
to the orgasmic treetop
where we can rest.

Author Biography

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is director of the Norma G. Canner Foundation for Voice Movement Therapy and teaches and supervises on the Foundation Training in Voice Movement Therapy: The Voice Unchained. After studying and working in the Expressive Therapies with pioneer dance therapist Norma Canner and noted clinician and author Penny Lewis, Anne's search for the vocal component for a movement oriented therapy led her to be the first American to train in VMT with founder Paul Newham in London; to teach and supervise with him on trainings in both England and America; and to establish her own training program, first in the United States, with Christine Isherwood, VMTR (4 trainings), and then in South Africa with Hennie Pienaar, VMTR, where they are currently completing their second program. Anne has also acted as a VMT consultant for schools, working with children experiencing developmental and language delays; taught the first for-credit graduate course in VMT, for Castleton College, Vermont; conducted a private practice and supervision; and presented at conferences here and abroad. Prior experience includes working in early intervention programs, supervising graduate students in dance/movement therapy on the therapeutic use of the voice, and conducting music and movement groups for previously homeless and substance abused people with HIV and AIDS. Anne has served as scriptwriter and executive producer on several films on the expressive therapies, most notably *A Time to Dance: The Life and Work of Norma Canner* and *Going to the Source: A Study of Group Process in the Natural World*. Her CD, *A Journey in Song*, illustrates a range of possibilities inherent in a single human voice, and she delights in performing songs in different genres and sounds. Visit www.vmtusa.com for more information.