

15th European Congress of Body Psychotherapy

The Embodied Self in a dis-Embodied Society

A Review

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It's been said that the power of dance is beyond words. For many, dance constitutes a ritual, a core element of religion, as well as part of celebrations honoring all that encompasses our lives. From our earliest beginnings dance has symbolized the conscientious presence of life—people have danced their way through war and peace, through marriage and separation, through the annual planting and reaping of the harvest.

In ancient Greece dance was considered a sacred activity of great importance, even the stars and planets were said to perform a cosmic dance of their own. To dance, together, in circles, symbolized the cohesion of the community.

This tradition of dance—the embodiment of culture, tradition, unity and community—symbolized the 15th European Congress of Body Psychotherapy in Athens, Greece.

Throughout the week-long event (counting two pre-conference and one post-conference days), dance punctuated important moments of connection offering comradery, integrity, and at times levity. Celebration and honor, gratitude and acknowledgment, connection to self and with others were all part of the dance. Professional differences were even bridged as a room designed for a capacity of 50 bulged with more than 150 rambunctious participants there to learn traditional Greek dances; the circles interwove so close many a toe was stomped by mistake with apologies and hugs flowing freely. People left with a sense of community.

The Congress not only signaled the sharing of theoretical and scientific considerations and methodological explorations and expansions, it also heralded the General Assembly vote and public acceptance of a new EABP Board of directors with Carmen Joanne Ablack now president, Sladjana Djordjevic General Secretary, Thomas Riepenhausen Treasurer, and David Trotzig joining the Ethics Committee.

Outgoing EABP President, Lidy Evertsen, opened the congress. She welcomed not only some 500 participants (who traveled from as far away as Uganda, Pakistan, Iran, the United States of America and Canada and included 300 non-EABP members), but also Greece's Minister of Health who came because of his interest in body psychotherapy and how it contributed to psychotherapy in Greece, in general. The number of Greek participants was simply overwhelming; this conference earned the record for the largest number of local attendees.

The Congress Committee's Herculean efforts to present this year's event during a time of intense financial crisis and immigrant chaos even included emailing the Greek Air Traffic Controllers Association, as its members had threatened a multi-day strike that in

turn threatened attendance at the conference—no planes would mean no people. Sofia Petridou, Chair of the Congress Organizational Committee and Chair of the Greek Association for Body Psychotherapy (PESOPS) personally wrote the email explaining potential ramifications not only to the conference but to all community members in Athens and beyond. The strike was averted and an air traffic controller representative offered a gracious response to Petridou's email. Petridou also stepped beyond the basics and contacted a wealthy Greek patron-of-the-arts, who in turn donated funds for the opening night cocktail party that highlighted traditional music and cultural dancing along with Greek libations. The sense of offering, of giving of the self to better society was felt in many ways throughout the conference. Even the Congress advertising materials—images used for posters, handbook covers and so forth—involved a search for imagery to best reflect ancient Greece and its culture of the body, how embodiment was expressed through statues during the Hellenistic period. Visiting the National Archaeological Museum for inspiration, Petridou saw Poseidon, noted his posture and his role of governor of the unconscious but then she saw Aphrodite and Hermes. The two statues faced each other, leaned in toward each other, offered both the Hellenistic and Roman eras—different energies were represented while the statues were placed to allow dialogue and connection. The choice was made.

As for dialogue, Greek history is noted for orators who made the most of their creative skills within the concept of dialogue. To further support conference dialogues, translators worked in soundproof booths at the back of the room, translating on the spot. Multiple languages were offered so participants could hear the address or offer their voice in their primary language. A robust round of applause for the translators enthused the conference closure.

It felt as if the Congress committee's positive and supportive energies infused participants with the same sense of presence and opening. Whereas at Congresses in the past, where road blocks were common place, where separation and individuation were at times maddeningly apparent, the overarching feeling during Keynote speeches, pull-out sessions, roundtable discussions and outside seminars felt support--presenters mentioned one another's work--and peaceful, as if olive branches cloistered the rooms indicating acceptance and surrender. One flare-up between two roundtable participants on the use of the word 'intervention' to describe the work body psychotherapists do was tempered as Gill Westland, founding director of Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre and author of *Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication in Body Psychotherapy*, stood and offered: "The words we use have enormously different meanings that have an impact. We have to be careful how we use them. We need to unpack the words, see what individuals mean. Otherwise, things get charged without understanding." The energy shifted in the room, the process back to productivity rather than two men going to wits over a word.

Creative Scheduling

The layout for the conference proper was creatively composed. Wake-up sessions—e.g. body awakening, Tai Chi, Energy Dance—were offered on the roof of the Titania hotel, with 360 panoramic views of Athens, including the Acropolis (which, at night, when the Parthenon and the Temple of Athena Nike were lit up, well the view was stunning). In this same vein, mini-sessions for body connection and movement were guided by congress volunteers throughout the main addresses (idea-wise good, in function, a bit chaotic as

people left the room and others coming in resulted in, resulting in discord in an otherwise smoothly flowing program). The morning keynote addresses stood solo while after lunch there were auditorium presentations and workshops. A buffet was included for two days that allowed participants to use the time to network rather than scramble to find sustenance. The Scientific and Research Symposium and the Psychotherapy and Politics Symposium took place on Saturday with workshops offered as well. If the quality of the workshops presented matched those given by Christina Bader-Johansson (Embodiment—BPT for Beginners), Stig A. Hjelland (Mindful Authentic Movement), and Noa Oster and Shinar Pinkas (Soul Retrieval), then it is safe to say the materials informed, enlightened, and awakened an embodied presence in those in attendance.

To try and describe every keynote, every symposium, even some of the workshops is beyond the scope of this conference review. Suffice it to say that in reflection on this year's keynote addresses, those who used lots of big words that: (a) needed to be defined; (b) were used to differentiate one's process rather than to create a foundation for commonality and understanding; and (c) who wrote a paper then stood behind the podium reading at a quick clip with either an occasional reference to a Powerpoint or even read aloud what was on the screen, missed the opportunity to engage and interact with their audience.

Some speakers, however, stood out. Maxine Sheets Johnstone emphasized that we enter this life moving (*we, who are alive, are not 'still' born*) and even in silence there is movement not stillness. Genovino Ferri clearly owned his topic; his passion vibrant as he walked about the front of the auditorium. And Judyth O. Weaver stressed the importance of bringing prenatal and perinatal experiences into “body” psychotherapy—we can't leave out the importance of early (even preconception) imprints when supporting our clients' growth and healing. Christine Caldwell, PhD, founder and former director of the Somatic Counseling Psychology Program and Dean of Graduate Education at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, USA, and innovator of somatic work she calls moving cycles, stood with the audience, in front of the tables, the podium, the stage. She paced her voice, her words easy to follow as she offered new ideas and challenged existing paradigms. She even earned an appreciative applause when tears welled in her voice and in her eyes as she said, “Terrible things are happening in this world (*today*) obscuring the fact that racism is a visceral experience we must not look away from.” She spoke of the importance of moving out loud, of the body speaking, narrating its story and not being interfered with by the violence of an interpretation (from the therapist). That is, letting the body sequence its story on its own terms . . . not say this is about, not create a restricted or oppressive verbal narrative on top of it. She noted an important sense of agency and ownership—my body is moving versus I am moving my body, to reconfigure the body narrative in relational aspect in therapy. Further, the energy during the round tables on *The Female Body in Society and Psychotherapy*, the *Concept of Energy in the Process of Embodiment: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Francois Lewin drew a hearty round of applause) and *Common Ground in Body Psychotherapy* kept participants engaged (and in the room) while other presentations had fewer people; with other workshops juxtaposed during this time, it was not surprising.

During the closing ceremony, Petridou noted that attendance exceeded their anticipations and that “we all know nothing can be perfect in this life” as the rooms were often filled beyond capacity and presenters made due without the necessary technical equipment. Then, she stepped out of her own patterning and said, “For the first time in my life, I will do something different. I always leave myself back. This time I would like to thank ‘little Sofia’

NANCY EICHHORN

for her enthusiasm and love for fellowship as well as others who supported her by all means. I also thank my husband who, for the past two years, without protest, accepted my absence, supported my efforts.”

With plaques, flowers, paintings, kind and gracious words, and much applause, the conference closed. Pantagiotis Stamboils, Chair of the Congress Scientific Committee summed up the finale succinctly, humorously, “This,” he said, “is gratitude therapy.” And then, of course, people started to dance.

The German Association announced the 16th European Congress of Body Psychotherapy in Berlin Germany, September 6-9, 2018 entitled: Body Psychotherapy and Challenges of Today: Alienation—Vitality—Flow.

BIOGRAPHY

Nancy Elizabeth Eichhorn, PhD is a writer, investigative journalist, and a credentialed educator with degrees in clinical psychology with a somatic psychology specialization, education and creative nonfiction writing. Nancy is the founding editor of Somatic Psychotherapy Today and a peer reviewer for several journals. She currently teaches and works as a writing coach, an editor and ghostwriter. Her writing resume includes over 5,000 newspaper and magazine articles, chapters in professional anthologies, including *When Hurt Remains: Relational Perspectives on Therapeutic Failure*, *About Relational Body Psychotherapy* and *The Body in Relationship: Self-Other-Society*.
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