

**Day 4: The Personal and Collective Burning Wood
A Look Behind the Scenes: A Facilitator's Process
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I woke on Sunday morning alert and calm, ready for the challenge ahead of us. My mood this morning was in sharp contrast to my turmoil of the evening before. This morning I was excited to co-facilitate with my partner Joe Goodbread and go further in my exploration of using the arts in Worldwork situations. We were part of a team of 6 that would facilitate Worldwork London 2008 using the arts to work on oppression. But I'm jumping ahead of myself. First let me tell you about the turmoil of the evening before, a little about the topic of oppression and what we were planning on doing this day.

The Worldwork planners had been unable to book our regular meeting room for the morning's meeting and saw it as an opportunity to divide the 400 attendees into three smaller groups. One group was to explore sound and music with Lukas Hohler and Lily Vassiliou, another was to work with physical theatre with Rhea and Lena Aslanidou, and Joe and I were given the theme of movement and dance. We were charged with using these art forms to work on "wood burning", a Process Work term that describes the process of gaining neutrality and eldership,ⁱ in relationship to oppression and our deepest hurts. Burning the wood that fuels the fire of the emotion around oppression that we have endured can take a lifetime. Getting to the point where there is no more fuel for the fire, even temporarily, provides relief from our suffering and gives us clarity.



We decided to approach the highly charged topic of oppression by looking at the various roles that are consistent to an oppressive system or field. First, there is the role of someone who is the victim of the oppression; second, someone or something that oppresses; and third, a role that is not always seen, someone standing by who knows consciously or unconsciously that something oppressive is happening and could intervene, but often doesn't. The advantage of seeing it as a field is that it allowed us to see the behaviors of these various roles as they move from person to person and to resist the temptation to see only one person as oppressed or oppressive. I will give a more extended example of this later, but for now, let's look at this hypothetical example. Let's say I'm a creative student who likes to explore the area about which I'm learning. I'm also from a poor neighborhood and struggle with belonging. On this day I'm in a class with a teacher who asks me a question that I am unable to answer; I've been exploring the topic in a different way from how I was instructed. The teacher gets annoyed and

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says I'm unprepared for our lesson. I know the answer but not to the question the way that she frames it. I feel oppressed by the teacher's insistence that I focus on our topic the way she wants me to, and humiliated by her annoyance and criticism of me in the classroom.

I sulk and refuse to go along with her in the class. I start to laugh at her behind my hand and the other students start to see me and join me. I feel like I'm starting to belong. To her face I am afraid of her. Now the teacher starts to feel oppressed, I've moved from the role of being oppressed to being oppressive.

The teacher has a story too. She is a beginning teacher with little experience in the classroom. She is struggling under her supervisor who supports a "classical education" that insists that students follow teachers' instructions despite how a person learns, a view that is not necessarily her own but must embrace in order to get her certification.

The supervisor who should have an overview of the situation on behalf of both of us does nothing. She is under the spell of the Board of Education. Both my teacher and I are in the role of being oppressed and being oppressive. We are each unconscious of both our effect on each other and how we flow from one role to another.

Looking at this as a field lets us see that we both fill the role of oppressor and oppressed. This viewpoint can help us become aware of power that we may not be able to use consciously.

As a team, we decided to use this field concept to structure our morning. We would express these roles in movement, sound and theatre and find the deeper intent behind them. We would be guided by ideas for improvisation that Rhea brought with her from her physical theatre experience. In the movement group, Joe came up with the idea of focusing on two aspects of the oppressor role: an inner and an outer oppressor. As Joe and I worked on our own movement that went along with our sense of inner and outer oppression, each had a distinctly different movement pattern. For us the outer oppressor pushed down or pressed away, while the inner oppressor held us back, pulling us away from our goals. One acted on us seemingly from the outside while the other inhibited our impulses and pulled us back from acting.

We intended to ask people to remember an oppressive situation from their own lives and to think of it as though it were a dream. First they would identify the victim in their story and find a movement that expressed their experience of that role. Then they would do the same with the inner oppressor and finally with the outer oppressor. After getting to know those parts and expressing them as fully as possible we were going to explore them further by using the movements corresponding to each person's experience of the roles as the basis for a structured improvisation. Finally we would work with an individual on their situation to take it further. So we had our plan and were ready to go.

But on Saturday evening, the day before our facilitation day, Joe and I were walking to the performance of New York Playback Theatre and I was captured by the most intense sense of dread at having to carry out this plan and facilitate the next day. I was paralyzed as I tried to understand what we were doing. It didn't make sense to me anymore.

I started debating with myself, asking if tomorrow's plan was the right thing to do and the right way to do it. "Of course it was a good plan," I reassured myself. I argued from one side and before I could get the thought finished, I was arguing from the other. I felt more and more lost and despondent about being able to represent the most basic premise of what we were planning to do. In my normal state I know that stepping into the energy of the various roles brings the roles to life, so we can interact with their energies in order to demystify and neutralize our fears about them and be able to use the power behind them in a way that enriches us. But something made me doubt everything I know and to act only from my linear and rational understanding. My basic experience of "knowing" that includes movement was being called into question by a logical and oppressive ghost.

In my distress I was in turn becoming oppressive to Joe who had started out simply walking with me to a performance. He was trying his best to follow me and help me with my state and eventually unfold and work on it. By this time we had missed the performance and were walking on a deserted street amongst tall glass and steel office buildings. I imagined that the citizens that worked in those buildings were at home or out enjoying their Saturday evening with friends and family. We were miserable, left with the ghosts of these offices and what I project on to them, a cold linearity, interested only in the bottom line. As he worked with me Joe saw the two sides, one that believed in movement and the one that I was lost in, that pressed for linear understanding; inner oppression. He suggested that I move. I couldn't. I saw a movement, I tried to move, but I felt tied down, paralyzed by the weight of having to justify what I know. I was suffering from an inner oppressor, how could I move?

As we walked we came to a little brick building. It looked like part of a church. I hung my purse on the wrought iron fence that surrounded it and we stood under a tree that courageously grew through the sidewalk. Right there on that street Joe helped me work on what was oppressing me. The part of me that I was not in touch with was someone who could just move, for whom movement was the natural thing to do, the informative thing to do. I was oppressing that by demanding linear understanding, but miserably identifying with the part that was oppressed. I stood there frozen, feeling the pressure of trying to justify what I was about to do. I couldn't even use the tools we were going to present since I couldn't move!



If neither of us did something we were in danger of becoming the silent bystander. Instead we started to experiment with filling roles that were not filled, like the part of me which knows through moving. Joe asked me what the movement was like that I was seeing inside my head. I said jumping and turning. Suddenly he was looking back at me from halfway down the block, arms and legs in the air in a joyful leap saying, "Like this?" I wept when I saw that. I felt seen.

He had joined me in my very private world – the part of my experience that helps me make sense of the world and of myself. Instead of the oppressive power of demanding linearity, here

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was a power that reminds me of my connection to something other than my everyday glass and steel reality. He was now there with me, telling me I have to live that world to express the things that are in me. They are part of my own private culture and deepest self that need to be lived. It felt so good to be seen and supported in this part of myself.

My tears made me feel how alone I felt in this world of movement and the meaning that I find there. How much this is not only a personal issue, but a collective one. The challenge I was encountering was the path to getting to know and claiming my personal culture and sharing it in the world. It made me happy that we were given this chance to work as a group in a new way. Now that I was in touch with that I was ready to go to meet the group that we were going to work with.

Joe and I were assigned to a room outside of the usual Worldwork meeting area in a different building several blocks from the hotel in which the rest of the conference was held. It was a large classroom set up with rows of chairs arranged in a circle with an open space in the center. Space is such a big part of movement, space to allow the blossoming of what's happening and time to find another time sense in which the mysterious can unfold. People were arriving. Some were friends and familiar faces, some were new acquaintances. We were setting up the sound system when I felt the space and remembered the indigenous leaders who had performed rituals for the large group earlier in the seminar and how for me, they prepared the space, brought in new consciousness, sensitized my awareness, and reminded me of other kinds of reality. They had brought in movement and mystery and set the stage that made a container for what had happened there.

I longed for an elder who could help us with a ritual that would transform this classroom into a place where deep experience could happen. I thought that it was something I would have to do myself. We would have to make do with what I came up with; I was going to have to use my new-found power. We announced to the group that I was going to begin by performing a ritual.



I stood in the middle of the room intending to move through the main axis of space that we live in: up down, left, right, and forward and back. I reached up and followed that direction up with my body until I could go no further. Suddenly I felt as if I was reaching beyond the boundaries of the room, traveling through the stratosphere past the moon's orbit to a place beyond the Universe. I went down, reaching into the Earth, finding stability and a sense of home. I felt the earth where we were standing and

a sense of the history and the ancestors that came before us. I reached across myself to my left toward the people sitting there. It seemed like I reached past them through the city of London, across the ocean, around the Earth's surface, connecting back to myself, the Earth in my embrace. As I reached toward the right and the people sitting there, I felt a connection to

the immediate situation and the thing we were to explore together. Reaching in front of me I found people who have traveled the path before me. I felt myself stepping into the world, standing among the group and honoring how we each step into the world. And then I went backwards. I felt the relief of moving into myself, reconnecting with my core. Behind me I found my past, where I come from. I remembered my teachers, family and Joe, supporting me from behind, literally there at my back. My movement began to acquire a more complex relationship to space. Where I was first reaching into space to points that extended from "me" outward, I now set out to connect up the spaces between the points. I wanted to touch the whole of space, give it an invitation to "light up" and be included in what we were doing. Space is alive. I wanted to bring that life into our work this day. I was guided by my studies of space harmony, the work that movement innovator, Rudolf Laban, derived from sacred geometry, a study of how geometric forms relate to the mysteries of life.ⁱⁱ

I used space to support movement that was suspended, off center, and mobile. Finally I quietly finished, feeling the space enlivened. Not only did my experience of the space begin to change but, I had arrived. I no longer felt at odds with this classroom.

The group wanted to try what I had done, so we did it together. Slowly we moved from up to down, side to side and forward to back, bringing heightened awareness to our experience, discovering the mystery of it. I was touched by the attention that people brought to the directions that we moved in. Although we didn't talk about my experience of their nature, I saw the depth of their experiences reflected in people's faces.

I was touched that what touched me was meaningful for others as well. I had been called on to be an elder of this situation, to reveal my private world that Joe had supported me with on that street the evening before; to use it to help facilitate the creation of a group culture that included movement. I was that elder that I was looking for, using my indigenous culture and hopefully helping people find theirs.



After presenting our ideas about the structure of oppression, we each found our movements for the various roles in the field of oppression. We divided the group into two parts, one witnessing the other, then switching roles as we moved and deepened our experiences. There were dramas played out. As groups of movers developed in different parts of the room, their movement morphed into something new. Movement that started as confrontation developed into expressions of the deepest powers within. Out of a whimpering, hopeless and wounded-looking and sounding group came a powerful wailing that eventually turned into an expression of an unstoppable essence that was no longer in reaction to something else, but standing as, what looked to me, like a sacred power. We saw urgency, power, anger, hopelessness, helplessness, tension and release expressed in movement, sound, and rhythm until it found its

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own completion and resolution. As people were moving, I was standing on a chair to be able to see and make sure that people were safe. As I watched I was in awe of the authenticity and depth to which people went. I turned to one man and told him what a joy it was to watch him and he told me later that that moment was like breaking a spell. He had been hurt by a teacher who told him he couldn't move well and had avoided it for most of his life. Another man told us that he realized that a long-term conflict was partly caused by his inner oppression – something holding him back – that he saw only as the other person. When he looked at the situation without seeing his opponent as his oppressor but an inner oppressor that he could choose not to follow, he had new hope for resolving the conflict. He and his friend saw a change in their relationship after that morning. Many people commented on how refreshing it was to take a different approach to Worldwork, to express their personal worlds fully, vocally, and, physically and to be touched by others.

As for me, I started to understand and to be able to live my inner culture better as I bring it out into the world. This unexpected challenge led me beyond what I knew I could do. I learned that our selves and our inner culture is what each of us has to offer to the world. And we sometimes need to be seen and to have support for finding ways to bring it out. But for me, it's mostly moving through parts of the field, feeling them, giving them space, time and life, and carefully extracting the essence that is useful.

I left feeling enriched by so many experiences that I had at Worldwork 2008. I am grateful to Amy and Arny Mindell for starting the Worldwork seminars and to those who have continued to make them happen over many years. And especially to those whose hard work and courage made Worldwork 2008 in London a reality and a success.

ⁱ Eldership is what elders do. An elder is a person who can care for a situation. Someone who has been through enough in her life and can use that experience to help a situation unfold. She follows events with awareness and "honors the direction of a mysterious and unknown river." Mindell, Arnold. *Sitting in the Fire*. Portland: Lao Tse Press 2000 p. 184.

ⁱⁱ Sacred geometry may be understood as a worldview of pattern recognition, a complex system of religious symbols and structures involving space, time and form. According to this view the basic patterns of existence are perceived as sacred. By connecting with these, a believer contemplates the *Mysterium Magnum*, and the Great Design. By studying the nature of these patterns, forms and relationships and their connections, insight may be gained into the mysteries – the laws and lore of the Universe.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_geometry

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