The Healing Dance: The Life and Practice of an Expressive Arts Therapist

Kathleen Rea, Author
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Reviewed by, Tawnya D. Smith

Kathleen Rea has written a powerful book full of wisdom from her practice and her life. She weaves personal narrative and accounts of her clients together with descriptions of what happens in the healing process. Drawing upon emerging research in neuroscience and her years of working with clients, Rea offers several frameworks for approaching and understanding the therapeutic process.

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Rea begins by sharing her intimate life story through her accounts of being a classically trained dancer, choreographer, and her struggle with bulimia and body image issues related to personal trauma and professional pressures. A deeply moving story, Kathleen demonstrates how navigating her own healing journey uniquely prepared her for becoming a therapist.

In the second chapter, Rea offers the reader a "Map of Human Experience." This map consists of three parts: body-based wisdom, the self in relation to the world, and wellness and dysfunction. Six forms of body-based wisdom are described and offered as a possible framework to better understand and work with the felt experience of the body. In discussing the second part, the author invites the reader to consider the self's relationship with the world as a type of dance where the self tunes into sensory input and takes action simultaneously.

In the third part, Rea challenges the conventional view that the achievement of a state of balance is the hallmark of wellness. She also offers a framework of four categories for classifying dysfunction.

The third chapter provides the reader with examples of how healing may occur through the arts in six potential ways. Rea shares a compelling account of her client "Allen" as he travels through therapy as a way to provide clear examples of these areas of healing. The fourth chapter contains Rea's personal narrative of grief. It is a story of the creation of the choreography for a dance piece depicting a father-daughter relationship at the end of the father's life. The created dance piece was performed as the time her own father's end of life journey. This chapter depicts and describes how creating art facilitates the grieving process for Rea and one of the dancers in her company. Chapter Five outlines a six-step method for working with inner body sensation and the arts, and brings together countless examples depicted in the book in a concise and clear manner.

Overall, this book is an excellent read for those interested in becoming more aware of their own felt sensations and how to honor the messages that those sensations convey. Expressive arts therapists looking to deepen and expand their understandings will appreciate both the frameworks and vibrant descriptions of therapy sessions. Rea generously shares her life and practice in an open and honest way, exposing her vulnerabilities and humbly offering personal and professional wisdom.