

Insight Trails

October 12, 2007

Q&A: Dr. George Russell, Healing Body and Soul

By Jon Berry, *Insight Trails*

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, PEOPLE HAVE BELIEVED that to discover our true selves, we need to get free of our physical selves. Dr. George Russell is part of a growing wave of healers who, drawing on forgotten ancient wisdom and modern, scientific research, argue that body and soul are intertwined and need to be addressed *together*. Our bodies are repositories of our experiences. If we want to shed ourselves of memories that hold us back, we need to work on the mind and also the body, “the heavy bear who goes with me,” in the poet Delmore Schwartz’s words. Otherwise, the issues in our tissues – the knot in the back from a long-ago trauma, the stiff neck from a past job – will continue to nag at us, like a bad dream.



Like Joe Kelly, *Insight Trails*’ first interview (see Sept. 10 post), George Russell discovered his talent in the field he is now working early in life. But, like Kelly, he did not pursue this work until midlife. Russell graduated from Wesleyan University with a major in intellectual history and dance; earned a masters degree in movement studies from the same institution; choreographed and danced in modern dance companies in New York; and taught college-level dance courses.

He went back to school for his chiropractic degree in his 30s, graduating summa cum laude from the University of Bridgeport in 2000.

Russell’s practice, based in an airy office off Union Square in New York City, is a hybrid, combining chiropractic, bodywork, and individual counseling, with a goal of promoting not only physical healing for back problems, arthritis, carpal tunnel, and physical ailments, but spiritual growth and a more vibrant overall life. This integrative approach and his enthusiastic, engaged style make Russell a sought-after teacher and mentor. He is an instructor at the Swedish Institute in New York City and the Kripalu yoga center in Lennox, Mass., and is a visiting lecturer at Wesleyan. He is also a guest choreographer and dance master at the De Facto Dance Company in New York City.

I talked with Russell about how he defines spirituality in his work; his approach to his practice; making a career change in midlife; and how he draws on his varied life experiences in his work.

QUESTION: What have you learned about people’s relationships with their bodies since you started doing this work?

GEORGE RUSSELL: I think people are unaware of how much consciousness is physical and embedded in the body. There’s an archeological quality to our bodies. Events are inscribed in our musculature, our posture, and facial expressions. It’s like the rings of a tree. Our body reveals our history. A wince can tell you that a person has a stressful job. Worriers often have a line between their eyes.

“There’s an archeological quality to our bodies. Events are inscribed in our musculature, our posture, and facial expressions. It’s like the rings of a tree.”

And we experience it ourselves. Deeper truths are often accompanied by events in the body, like a gut feeling, a sigh, relaxed breathing, an expansion in the tissue, or sweating, breathing fast, or getting a feeling that something’s wrong or that someone’s not telling the truth.

I think we know all this intuitively. We all pick up information from each others’ body language. But our culture teaches us to not pay attention to this information. The body is presumed to be this unintelligent part of ourselves. It’s not given relevance.

Yet consciousness, intellect, spirit, are all completely present in the body.

Q: How do you see your work as spiritual?

A: I always enter therapeutic relationships with the presumption that the person is always there for a spiritual as well as a physical reason. The spiritual is being expressed through the body. There’s always some deeper energetic equivalent to the

physical pain.

"I always enter therapeutic relationships with the presumption that the person is always there for a spiritual as well as a physical reason."

What I try to do is ferret it out and bring it to expression. Partly that's to make people aware – to focus on the physical sensation inside them. But it's also to encourage them to engage in behaviors that will shake unhealthy patterns out of their body, so that new, healthier patterns can emerge.

The work I do on people's bodies can result in a person having a revelation about their body, their relationship to themselves, or their relationships to other people. It can also offer comfort at a time that it is deeply needed. All of this, I think, is spiritual work.

Q: Can you give me an example?

A: I had a patient come in with Stage IV cancer. She needed a positive experience of her body. Her body, from her perspective, had betrayed her. She was in a lot of pain, and that pain was intolerable. So I put my hands lightly on her body and moved very slowly. At a certain point, I felt her take a deep sigh, and her body moved into the table. It was almost as if her body took my hand. At that moment I knew we could go into a different realm.

"I put my hands lightly on her body and moved very slowly. At a certain point, I felt her take a deep sigh, and her body moved into the table. It was almost as if her body took my hand."

Q: How do you work with patients to get them to that state?

A: Patients often come in scared or tense—sometimes, like this patient, for good reason. They lie on the table as if they are trying to hold their body off the table, like a person walking on ice, afraid it's going to break at any minute. You can't tell someone in that state to relax; it will just make them tenser. So I try to coach them through. Sometimes I'll start with the patient face-down. When you are face-up, you're conscious; your sensory organs are facing the world. When you're face-down, you go into your own world. I'll tell them to feel the support of the table coming up to them, or let their eyes drop into their head like Alka-Seltzer into a glass.

When I feel them relax, I'll say, "I don't know what you just did, but something changed in the last 30 seconds. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it. You're doing great." Often, patients don't know there's been a change. Telling them "bookmarks" the sensation, like on a computer, so they can return to it in the future.

Q: How do you know what to do?

A: One of my mentors, Irene Dowd, said that, whenever you're touching someone, they're touching you back. Touch is never subject-object. You never touch someone and make a change in them without them touching you and making a change in you. So the first thing, when I touch someone, is to make that contact *consciously*, listening to what they're communicating to me, and taking in information on many levels: their words, the symptoms they describe, their body language and posture. Sometimes the pain is one place, but there's an anomaly in their body posture somewhere else that needs to be addressed for the person to heal. Sometimes I just get an intuitive feeling coming from a patient.

I had a patient who had been coming to see me every week for years. One day, when he came in and lay on the table, I saw that his hands were tense. So I started by taking his hands, very consciously, the way you would take a hand if you were going to shake hands. And then I passed my other hand over it. I'm not sure why I did it. He immediately burst into tears. For the entire half-hour he was with me, he was crying. Toward the end of the time, I said, our session will be over in a few minutes. He grieved more deeply. And then he came out of it, and he turned to me and said, "You know I wasn't expecting that to happen." He walked out of the office very light.

"For the entire half-hour he was with me, he was crying.... He turned to me and said, 'You know I wasn't expecting that to happen.'"

Q: What's that kind of experience like for you?



A: I feel totally blessed to be part of an event like that. It's deeply fulfilling. To be able to sit with someone while they're having a profound experience, and to have the possibility of being a catalyst for that experience through working on a muscle, or joint, or just listening, is amazing.

Q: Did you go into this work expecting this kind of experience?

A: No! When it first started to happen, I was afraid of it. I would try to stop it, back off, switch speeds, or do something that would distract the patient from that experience. I didn't know what it was and I didn't know how to deal with it.

In time, I learned to just follow the patient. I had a client once who would writhe, and form twisting, torturous shapes in her body while I was working with her. I had no idea what was going on. But instead of trying to control it – which I really couldn't anyway – I decided to just follow her lead, and say, "I'm right here with you," and keep a hand on her, and be with her.

Today I come into a session not expecting something like that to happen, but not expecting it won't, either. I'm not as surprised by what occurs.

Q: How did you get into this work?

A: I always knew how to do bodywork. I was always aware that people have emotions while they are being worked on. I knew where to touch people, and where the next spot was that I was supposed to touch.

Q: Always being...high school?

A: More like age 4 or 5. I would touch my mother's back, and could feel something. I became more aware of it when I was in college. We'd give each other backrubs in my dorm at the end of the day. I became aware that I was really sensitive to other people's touch. I discovered that I could do things that other people couldn't do. I knew where to touch people but moreover felt their brokenness, where they were sad, tense, or weak, and how it expressed itself physically. I wanted to be able to correct that or make it better. I also could sense where people felt strong, and how to amplify that.

"I always knew how to do bodywork... I knew where to touch people but moreover felt their brokenness, where they were sad, tense, or weak."

When I became a dancer, I would do bodywork on other dancers – dancers always have some part of their body they need work on. Eventually people started *asking* me to work on them. And they started *giving* me money. Literally, that's how it happened. I was still a dancer. I had no formal training in bodywork. But people just started asking me to work on them and paying me for it. They would give me money, and say "I want you to have this."

So I started putting out the word that I was willing to give people bodywork. But I realized there were areas I didn't know, couldn't treat, and needed to learn about. I wanted to learn the names of things. I wanted to learn anatomy and kinesiology. I wanted to learn where my boundaries should be.

Q: So what did you do?

A: It didn't make sense for me to go to massage school. I knew how to do massage. I thought of becoming an osteopath but I didn't want to do surgery or pharmacology. I wasn't very interested in the traditional medical model. I believe in science, and



I use it. But I wanted to operate on many levels. I was very interested in anatomy and kinesiology. But I didn't believe that they're the predominant mode that heals people. I really think the main thing that heals people is energetic and spiritual – what's going on inside. You have to look at different levels of perception all the time. You can't rely on just one.

Q: Was it hard to leave professional dance?

A: Every dancer knows they are going to have two or three careers. I had reached an end of the line. I was in an unpopular art form, modern dance, which was not lucrative. I hadn't achieved all my goals. But I'd had a good performing career. I had performed my own work. But, as a modern dancer, I'd never really made any money. I was working a full-time job to support my career. I'd never saved any money. I didn't really believe I could get grants. By the time I was 34 I realized that, more than nurturing my inner child, I needed to nurture my inner senior citizen.

For a time, I thought about going into academia and becoming a professor. But my experience of teaching on a college level was that the college environment was more of a mind-centered institution. Intellectual faculties were prized over experiences of the body, and dance was implicitly denigrated because it was viewed as something “not of the mind.” It wasn’t an environment that I wanted to be in. Plus, I liked the idea of achieving something practical. In bodywork, I know at the end of the half hour that something has happened. I can tell whether a person is feeling better or not. I like that.

Q: Did you have any “oh, no!” moments when you were making your career change, times when you were convinced “I can’t do this. I don’t belong”?

A: Absolutely. If you had asked me what are the two things I would never ever do in my life I would say, “Be a scientist and run a small business.” I had to learn them how you would learn a foreign language. I had no aptitude for them. God has a sense of humor. In order to do this thing that was my dream, I had to do things that were completely counter-character-logical and counter-intuitive.

“God has a sense of humor. In order to do this thing that was my dream, I had to do things that were completely counter-character-logical and counter-intuitive.”

Q: How did you get through that?

A: I went to friends for support. They reminded me that I could do what I was doing. Still, it wasn’t easy. My original goal was to go to medical school. I needed to take organic chemistry, biology, and physics. It was really hard. But my back was to the wall.

I needed A’s in the classes to get into medical school. And, in the end, I got B’s, not A’s. And I didn’t like it. I changed my mind and enrolled in chiropractic school. I was disappointed. But I was pragmatic. I was in my mid-30s. I didn’t have the time to take another year to retake the classes and get better grades, and then start medical school. Chiropractic school had rolling admissions, so I could go right away.

Looking back, I’m glad it worked out the way it did. The schooling I got to become a chiropractor was much more focused on neurology, anatomy, and the physical body, which is where my interests were. I wanted to assist people’s healing with my hands, my heart, and my mind. I think chiropractic school prepared me much more for the kind of work I wanted to do than medical school would have. You go to a doctor and they don’t touch you; they send you for diagnostic imaging. It’s a very different way of gathering information and a very different model.

Q: Why does that distinction matter?

A: Let’s say you have a herniated disc in your back. A doctor will go in and do an operation to fuse the vertebrae and take the disc out. It fixes the problem. But if you don’t change how you move, you’re likely going to end up back in the same situation, with an adjacent disc herniated.

In order to heal and stay healed, people have to change their habits. Injury is the intersection of a long-held habit with an unfortunate event. You can’t just be patched and continue the way you are going. You have to change. I don’t think people are aware how much their body is ruled by habit. Often, you have to change on very deep levels. Habits are as much defined by your psychology and spirituality – how you look at life – as by physical behaviors. All those things go together.

“In order to heal and stay healed, people have to change their habits.... Often, you have to change on very deep levels. Habits are as much defined by your psychology and spirituality – how you look at life – by as physical behaviors.”

Q: How do you not absorb patients’ emotions?

A: Sometimes it’s really hard. I try to not think of their energy stopping in my body, but going through me, into the ground. But that’s not always possible. When it does happen – that I take it on – I try to write about it, or talk about it, or some other conscious process.

Q: What’s your hardest challenge now?

A: One is balancing work with rest. I've asked my receptionist to start writing breaks into the schedule, so I can have down time, for myself. That's a big change. Two years ago, I would fill every day with appointments. My work is time-intensive. I have to be there physically and emotionally. And I enjoy what I do. So it's easy to get involved to the extent that I'm answering an email from a client at 3:30 in the morning.

Q: Is where you've wound up where you thought you'd be?

A: Absolutely not. What I do now is not what chiropractors do, and it's not what body workers do, and it's not what movement specialists do. It's a hybrid of lots of different things. It's not something I thought I would ever get the chance to do. I didn't know there was a field where you could do this.

"What I do now is not what chiropractors do, and it's not what body workers do, and it's not what movement specialists do. It's a hybrid of lots of different things. It's not something I thought I would ever get the chance to do."

I think improvisational dance helped me get here. In dance, you're moving across a room with other people in unison and suddenly you feel it's not just you moving, it's a whole bunch of people moving together. The event stops being a series of individual movements piled together and becomes a transcendent experience.

I suppose that's why I'm doing now, improvisational dance – a series of interactive movements that go on back and forth between me and the other person, hopefully resulting in a feeling of transcendence and communion, that invokes a power that's greater than either of us and feeds us both...and then they pay me!

That's It.!

You can learn more about George Russell and his practice from his website, www.georgerusselldc.com

Posted at 09:34 AM in [Career Change](#), [Entrepreneurs](#), [Healing](#), [Q&A](#) | [Permalink](#)

Comments

The comments to this entry are closed.