

An Unexpected Collaboration

When Deb Riley of Deborah Riley Dance Project attended a weekend workshop on transitions for women over 50, she was “feeling stuck” in her creative life as a dancer and choreographer.

“Retirement, or what next?” was exactly the question Deb was asking herself, and an upcoming workshop presented a timely opportunity to explore possibilities she hoped existed but were not yet known to her.

“Retirement” or WHAT NEXT™ is a partnership developed in 1996 by two psychotherapists with a special interest in the development of women, particularly in their later years. In both the two-day weekends and the six-week discussion groups, the intention is to give women a clearer sense of where they are in their life’s journey and to help them explore the possibilities for the future. The facilitators create a confidential and trusting environment, conducive to forming a sense of community, which counteracts the isolation many women feel at mid-life. Through writing and through listening to music, to poetry and to each other, the women explore both unique and universal issues. They identify what obstacles stand in the way of more fulfillment and work through a process of change in order to make room for new possibilities.

Along with nine other women, Deb arrived the first morning and found herself immediately soothed by soft music playing in the background. Over the course of the weekend, she had the opportunity to listen to others and to speak about her own struggles and wishes. The experience was both interactive and individualized, with a balance between discussion and quiet contemplation. It felt good to Deb to share, to clarify and to do some personal writing.

During the final expressive activity on Sunday afternoon, Deb felt some sort of inner shift. She had created a collage of color, paper and line. Presenting it to the group, she found herself unable to describe what she had put together, but she knew something had coalesced. One of the women in the group remarked that Deb’s visual representation struck her as the choreography of a dance, and Deb mused about the suggestion.

Several months later, Deb’s collage became the creative catalyst for a dance about transitions, stemming from her experience at the weekend workshop. The dance, called “Perfectly Unknown,” began with a dancer standing still, alone on stage having difficulty moving, and then transitioned to other dancers and movements all over the stage. It was a remarkable translation to a dance performance of the experience of being stuck, a lovely unexpected collaboration and a wonderful counterpoint to Deb’s earlier weekend experience.

The psychotherapists and group facilitators of “Retirement”



or WHAT NEXT™ were gratified to see a concrete, albeit fleeting, manifestation of Deb’s work. The dancer/choreographer created and

performed the dance in the moment—and from moment to moment—to be seen and experienced. Deb’s dance was a gift to the audience—and to the facilitators of the group workshop.

Letting go of ways of thinking and doing is essential to truly being in transition. Walking, falling or stumbling into “Not Knowing,” uncomfortable as it may be, is necessary for beginning the process of becoming unstuck. It is precisely in the unknown where creativity is born and can thrive. Workshops rely on this predictable magic, and Deb’s dance allowed viewers to see the magic at work.

Ruth Neubauer, MSW, and Karen Van Allen, MSW, can be reached at 301-951-8630 or 240-893-2410.