

WhatSustainsMe.com

Al Pesso

**Moving
Into Meaning**

Foreword from the Editor

The following is a chapter from an upcoming book, *What Sustains Me*. It is a collaborative book. Each chapter is written by a different author, stands on its own, and is released independently. When all chapters are ready, the book will be published as a regular book as well as an e-book.

The central question in this project is: *What sustains you?*

More specifically: *What gives you a sense of peace, meaning and purpose in everyday life? What keeps you going when times are tough? What gives you the strength to face moments of crisis or despair?*

The book's topic could be described as an 'existential quest' or a 'spiritual quest'. We are consciously avoiding these phrases because they can be misleading. For instance, 'spiritual quest' often conveys the sense of a search for outside resources, beyond the realm of the physical world. Such a definition would exclude experiences that involve inner resources.

Our focus is on describing what we experience, as opposed to the philosophical or religious terms under which these experiences are usually framed. We are not describing a specific path, a 'right way' to do things, or a 'correct' narrative of how it all works out. To the

contrary, we are coming at it from different approaches and belief systems, including agnostic and atheist perspectives.

A key characteristic of this project is that each author is writing in a personal and experiential manner. The key word here is 'experience'. We hope that, by talking in terms of experiences rather than beliefs, we can find a bridge whereby people who come from different traditions or beliefs can be nourished by each other's experiences.

You can follow the progress of this project at <http://WhatSustainsMe.com>

Serge Prengel

Moving Into Meaning

Al Pessó

Based on a conversation
with Serge Prengel
edited by Nancy Eichorn

© Copyright 2016 Al Pessó

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Active Pause

I was raised in a very, very orthodox family, and I'm so glad that with that upbringing came ritual rather than dogma. Perhaps I shouldn't be saying this but I can't stand the dogma of fundamental thinking of any kind. A part of me had to move away from dogma. I married someone who wasn't Jewish, my daughter is Buddhist. I don't want the singularity of one simple religion, where their belief, their 'God' has to be the one and only. I want universal things. For me, with ritual, there's a moment of sacredness in the present moment.

I think some of these feelings came from being in the synagogue with my father. Every Friday and Saturday he took me with him. He had six children and I was the littlest one. Our weekly trips to the synagogue were the only relationship we had. He never spoke; we never had any conversation really. But I'd be sitting in the synagogue and there was something about the tonality of the rabbinical singing and the Sephardic sound, which is very different than the Ashkenazi sound. In those moments, they followed a preparatory ritual for the Torah. First there was the movement of opening the cabinet, the sense of now we're going to open absoluteness. The sense that here is value, here is meaning, here is the sacred. What I saw in all of this was that now they're going to present the ineffable, and I connected with the experience of waiting for the ineffable and preparing for it. Then there was the movement of touching it, opening it. Then they carried the sacred object in a ritual ceremony around the synagogue. And every now and then, my father would

arrange that I carried the little Torah. So I was carrying this truth in a way. That's eerily a conscious sacred thing.

And there's something about immanence I want to put in that has to do with what people call spirituality. I don't believe in spirituality as something separate from the body; rather, it's the emergence of something. And that immanence is an emergence of part of the self, a quality that has to do with the ultimate meaning of existence or something in that moment where you're still very much in touch with who you are in a physical way, but at the same time there's an experience of something emerging that has a sacred quality.

Now, thank goodness, I don't believe what's written in the Torah is absolute. When I began to learn what was in it, I said, "What the heck? Thank God I was born a man and not a woman? God gets angry, then he punishes?" It's a lot of nonsense to me. But when I was young, I connected with the sacredness of the moment, of entering that space. I guess I began to see ritual dance at that point. When you move with it and make a ritual with it, it changes life.

I started moving my body—doing specific body exercise—on my own when I was five years old, maybe even before that. Nobody told me, "Do it." I had four older brothers who couldn't pay attention to me and didn't give a damn what I did. My father had no idea what I was doing. My early experiences lead me to body building with Dan Laurie. I was in his gymnasium for years. Out of that came my experiences with dance and

my focus on the quality of movement. You see, I wasn't just dancing. When I danced, I lived it. Wherever the source of that motion, there was an expression of some kind, a sense of meaning and rightness rather than an opening. I'm not dealing with something from the inside. I'm dealing with the quality that's making that movement. It's not a by-product, but rather an expression of what's inside. Nor do I try to follow. I don't try to follow it at all. I'm just being it, and I'm being it knowing I'm observing it. So I'm the observer of it, the liver of it, and the deliverer of it.

And I'm expressing with my body what could also be expressed in words, but has a totally different quality when bodily expressed. The resonance now is the resonance with the inner quality that produced the movement. My body is resonating with the quality I wanted it to express. But when I'm saying something, if I go: Yes... Yes... Yes... [in a slower, reflective tone]... each moment of that is an absolute expression of what I feel inside, and I'm communicating it, and now I'm hearing my voice is doing the same thing.

My connection with Martha Graham and her dance and movement process didn't have to do with exhibitionism, it had to do with ritual re-drama, a combination of spirituality, without dogma, but with ritual, and how to make a moment in the present have a profound influence, even though it's only an hour. Which is the kind of thing where a moment in the present becomes a long-term memory rather than just a short-term memory.

What comes up in my mind now is the very first time I saw a live theater. It was breathtaking. I was quite young. We must have gone into town to see one in New York City, Manhattan. The color and the motion, it just dazzled me. I don't mean for exhibitionism. You know that it's just on the stage but it awakens something in your heart and in your brain that is so different than something that's just simply put on the stage—the stage in the brain—and that changes everything enormously.

Leaving dance and leaving New York City and the goals I had created when I was older resulted in seven years of anxiety and panic—the most miserable years of my life. I think what sustains me is to know that I could be that miserable for that long and not give up, and have the world absolutely change. At that time, I felt like the world had no meaning. I was just a zombie. Not that I stopped working. I never stopped teaching a day or stopped working, but the fact that it could change so radically after being so bad so long lets you hold on and not quit, and know that something absolutely unexpected can come. In the middle of all that misery were parts of myself that had not come alive in the work I had chosen. So there's something to learn out of the misery. There's something in the qualities of the misery that has the unborn self in it, and I think it pushed me to find the whole system of PBSP. The lifetime's work has been to understand myself and to understand human beings.

When I'm in a leadership place in a group, I feel that I'm in a ritual setting. I'm very careful with what I say

and what I do. But I'm not being careful in a sense that I'm elaborately putting together words and what not. I'm not just talking about movement and meaning in the abstract. I'm talking about movement and meaning connected to the experience of what I call the 'theater in the mind' and connected to the experience of the ritual space. I'm moving in a space that's not ordinary or mindless space but a space that's structured by connection and attunement.

When I run a workshop, one of the things participants talk about is how I am with each person. That I'm really there. They say every move I make is there with that person, and they feel connected. Some people call that my 'presence' but it's not just about being present, I'm resonating and I'm really being there in the relationship. When I work with people, the words I use, the movements and gestures fit them, and they connect with it. But I don't do it to think I'm dancing. When I'm doing that, I'm totally unconscious. When I'm with people and doing the work, there is resonance going on. I pick up what's happening in the relationship. There's the attunement, a moment-by-moment connection of paying attention to the details. As I enter into that space, there is the connection that happens through the engagement. And at a much larger level, there is a sense of being part of this process of enrichment and opening up and growth. And that's what life is all about, you sense, 'I'm truly alive'. I don't try to be in that space. I don't get a signal like 'Ah, now I'm in that space'. It isn't quite like that. I think there's

been a part of me that's had for one reason or another, the sense of the sacred from the beginning of time. I think I have been weaving in and out of that without naming it as a little boy, through school, body building, dance, life.

I had that same sense of sacred when I watched Martha Graham do her movements. Just the way her body moved from an inner impulse, not from a volitional. In ballet, the movements are choreographed—you put your arms here, your feet there—but every bit of Martha's movement came from an inner state. When we developed PBSP, we broke movement into three modalities: reflexive, voluntary, and emotional. And the basic part of PBSP is to let out what wants to come, without modulation, and that's what Martha was doing. Maybe there was some modulation, but she stayed right with the inner quality of it, rather than simply saying, "I'm going to make a pretty movement, looking good from the outside." The movement rose out of an inner state, and Martha had that, and it absolutely drew me. She worked with fundamental human meaning.

The movement that comes from our body, comes from our emotional state. And while the body should be the expression of that, there also has to be a counter-shape and a response to it. So it isn't a matter of simply doing. It's that, when we let something out, there has to be an answer from the outside, of satisfying the expression. In PBSP then, it isn't just letting it go, it's having an answer.

When I'm doing movements, they're connected to my feelings inside. When I see my wife or people I love, there's a feeling of being connected to them. When I look at my wife, or touch my wife, or I feel her touch, some connection with that quality comes in again. It might not be in movement; it might just be in seeing. Just on the sight, something happens in the heart where there's a connection going on without literally touching. As in my relationship with existence, here, inside of me, is the whole quality of existence. Something is happening in the movement itself, where it's visible, and in seeing, too. There's a sense of perceiving the relationship that happens or exists between us. Immediately, I think of my wife, I think of all my friends and my family, and all the people I work with. The love of humanity, of life, of believing this, the dearness and sweetness of that, that sustains me.

And if connection is the word, then we're all connected, and we're connected to everything that is. I feel connected to all that is; matter is divine. And in that light, everything that is, is divine. I don't think that the divine stuff exists separate from matter. There's living matter and so called inert matter, but inert matter interacts with other so-called inert matter, so reactivity is already the beginning of aliveness, even materially. Everything is, in a sense, alive. We're all part of a totality, not a fragmentation. We're all part of the same stuff. We're all part of material. As a human being, I'm fortunate enough to be able to be conscious and to experience it.

There is an is-ness, which means an existence that is not just dead matter. That, in matter, is an is-ness. We're part of a huge singularity, which is the cosmos itself. There's a wonder in that. When I say wonder, two things happen. One is the tone and the other is the voice. It's Aah as is awe, the sense of awe. It is breath-taking. Aah. It isn't the Aaah of pleasure where you get a warmth and you go Aaah. It's Aah. Almost wordless wonder. When I say 'wonder' [pronounced one-der], I hear the 'one' of it, that we are winners, that we are alive, so there's that wonder.

And then there's the awe of speechlessness that is a so beyond comprehension that the wonder of existence is beyond human capacity to embrace it. The cosmos is so enormous and so complex we can only be speechless in the face of it. Anyway, that's the Aah, Ooh. And I think that some of the chanting carries that. The Om. The infinite quality in that. In all kinds of Buddhist chanting, or Indian chanting, it all carries that sense of wonder.

And then in a way, connection leads to that sense of wonder and the sense of being connected to ultimate reality. When I'm finished leading a workshop, I'm not exhausted. In fact, I'm enlivened. I end the workshop being more vivid and alive because I was part of furthering each of their individual lives. We all participated in the act of becoming the next part of the self or becoming another step in the realization of the self, which is endless. And the sense of meaning and

that life has meaning and connection. And there's meaningfulness in human interaction.

About the author



Together with his wife, Diane Boyden-Pesso, Albert Pessso was the co-founder of PBSP (Pesso Boyden System Psychomotor), a widely respected interactive technique that helps clients create new memories to compensate for emotional deficits in the past. He was called one of the 3 living masters of body-based psychotherapy and was chosen in 2012 to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award by the U.S. Assoc. for Body Psychotherapy. Considered a uniquely gifted “therapists’ therapist” Al helped thousands of clients to achieve lives of greater happiness, satisfaction, & meaning. He established PBSP training centers around the world. It brought Al & Diane deep gratification in their final days to know that they left had their life’s work in capable hands. Like his wife, Al had a deeply compassionate wish to heal all the wounds of the world. Diane Boyden Pessso died on March 4, 2016. Al died soon thereafter on May 19, 2016.

What Sustains Me is a project of *Active Pause*:

<http://ActivePause.com>

Subscribe to our newsletter:

<http://ActivePause.com/newsletter/>