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## Expressive Flamenco: Healing possibilities with the art of Flamenco

Laura Sanchez

Lesley University, lsanche6@lesley.edu

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HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

Flamenco is an art form born of a deep emotion  
facilitating the process of self-knowledge...  
Could it be considered within the expressive arts therapies?

**Laura Sánchez García**

Lesley University

Principles and Practices of Expressive Arts Therapy

Professor Angelica Pinna Perez

August 8, 2017

**ABSTRACT**

This essay is an auto-ethnographic, arts-based research project that explores the healing possibilities of the art of Flamenco. The objective is to analyze the hypothesis that flamenco may be considered an expressive art therapy, since it is an art form that is born of profound emotion, facilitating the process of self-knowledge. We will begin by describing the origins and roots of flamenco to understand the nature of this art and thus demonstrate that its essence has a therapeutic component. Likewise, a first-person experiment will be carried out, in which the potential of flamenco as a tool to facilitate the process of self-knowledge is analyzed, allowing access to deep emotions, transforming them and thus connecting with the true being. Detailed information of the experiment is presented, as well as the first positive results using different artistic elements that facilitate the reader's understanding. At the same time, it is shown that flamenco is already being used as a tool for transformation by experts in the field, and some results experienced in first-person are presented.

## INTRODUCTION

Flamenco is an art born out of necessity. The necessity to express the profound suffering that several heterogeneous ethnic groups —Jews, Moors, Gypsies, Andalusians— were experiencing in Spain during the fifteenth century. All of them shared misery and sorrow, and they met intimately to bring to music the echo of their suffering. With Jewish, and Moorish influences, as well as the assimilation of the Andalusians and gypsies of that time, the first cries begin to emerge, a prelude to what the first *cantes* would be. The poet Manuel Machado said that "*Coplas* are not written, they are felt and sung. They are born from the heart, not from intelligence, and they are made of screams rather than words".

The gypsies needed to ensure their daily bread, so they also promoted a folk and cheerful music that they used to entertain and amuse people. The poet Ricardo Molina said "What flamenco's *cante* expresses are man's radical feelings and intuitions," and adds "it is also a happy expression of joy."

Flamenco begins with *cante* as a form of vocal expression that evolves over the centuries, giving shape to the different *palos* (styles) of flamenco. Each *palo* has its background and origin, and its manner, meaning, and form are characteristic of each geographical area. Fernando Quiñones said, "The *cante* is not understood, it is lived." In the same way, the dance arises spontaneously. Someone must have felt the need to externalize a burden of internal feelings and started to dance (Luis López Ruiz, 2016). The essence of flamenco is improvisation, and that spontaneous creation comes from our deepest being and is immaculately and originally ourselves (Stephen Nachmanovitch, 1990). The gypsies dance by intuition, because they feel it, and that is enough for them.

The essence of flamenco is the improvisation of the *cante*, the dance, and the music, so each piece is unique and unrepeatable. Its spontaneous creation is born of the profound being. As Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) said, "what we have to express is already with us, it is us." Flamenco is an art that is created from the soul, and that connects with the deepest emotions and feelings of those who experience it. It connects with the heart of those who dance, sing or listen to it, and it gives voice to express feelings of anger, frustration or grief as well as of maximum joy. For this reason, flamenco could be considered within the arts that give meaning to the concept of creative connection described by Levine, S. and Levine,

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

E. (Eds.) (1999) "Any art form that comes from an emotional depth provides a process of self-discovery. We express inner feelings by creating outer forms". Flamenco facilitates a way of expressing emotions from within, creating art to project it outwards. Flamenco in its origins does not give importance to the beauty of the movement, but to the ability to express and free itself from deep emotions and feelings.

In my personal perspective, dancing flamenco has always been a source of energy to release stress, sadness or anxiety, and at the same time, it has given me some of the happiest moments I can remember. When I started dancing, I thought it was just a hobby that helped me to disconnect from the issues of adolescence. Little by little, it got me hooked, penetrating my body and gaining a part of my soul that grew every day. There was something special about this art form that made me experience unique moments of pleasure, making me feel happy and connected. At that time, I was not able to understand the reason behind it, I just let it penetrate my heart.

Several years later, I was going through a period of significant transition in my life which brought to light many fears and insecurities with the result of an almost-constant state of anxiety and frustration. This permanent state of anger was negatively impacting my personal and professional life, as well as transforming my personality. I had forgotten my true self by giving up on my principles to adapt to the situation. I was immersed in a loop where I could not see any light. I needed to take action and control of the situation to be able to transform my life. At that time, I started to study the application of dance and other creative arts to therapy which awoke my need of searching for my true self. This search has not only helped me to access areas of my subconscious that I was not aware of, but also understand the reasons behind my deep connection with flamenco.

The first step to becoming aware of my situation starts by taking Dr. Pinna Pérez's class "Principles and Practices of Expressive Arts Therapy." Applying different artistic therapies to myself awakes areas of my brain that were asleep. As part of an exercise, we need to put words into an emotion. This makes me visualize each emotion and feel it in my own body, allowing me to express it through movement. While doing the exercise, I realize how painful it is for me to embody "grief". I strongly avoid getting into that emotion because I don't want to remember the pain I went through when my grandmother died. The combination of this movement practice with the use of storytelling "All the ways you can go," activates

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

in me emotions of loneliness, fear, and sadness. I realize that there are paths that I must inevitably travel alone, which reminds me how much I suffered when she left me.

That feeling of loneliness terrifies me, although I face it when Dr. Pinna Pérez asks us to work alone for an hour to create a piece of art using a paper bag. I don't even know where to start. I only feel anxiety, stress, and sadness. As a dancer, my primary resource is music, so I decide to use it to get inspired. Few weeks earlier, I attended a flamenco workshop with world renowned dancer Belén Maya, and the music we used comes to mind. It is a piece of *tientos*. The name *tientos* comes from tempting, testing, in the sense of venturing or provoking someone. It is a deep, dramatic, and solemn dance that allows individuals to access a state of deep sadness. This music connects with my current situation, and it becomes my source of inspiration. The paper bag becomes my instrument, my dance partner, and the tool that allows me to explore the emotion of sadness in my own body. The paper helps me to squeeze all those feelings out, and it takes away all the negative emotions running through my body. I feel somewhat liberated yet confused, since fear and anxiety are still present.

A few days later, I share with my dance therapist the experience lived in class, and she suggests to listen to that piece of music again. I'm so emotionally blocked that I can barely hear the lyrics. I feel like in a bubble, moving senselessly until suddenly something activates my mind. I clearly hear a concise phrase "Y aquí estoy, acordandome de ti", (And here I am, remembering you)." I unexpectedly start crying, remembering my grandmother Sacramento. Suddenly it feels that all the points that have been activated during the class, are now connected. Accessing that emotion, feeling it, and dancing it helps me to let it go. I feel inner peace, I am calm.

From that moment, whenever I feel anxiety or frustration, I unconsciously turn to listen to the *tientos*. In a matter of seconds I access that emotion and listen to my body: I cry, scream or dance until I let it go. After this exercise, I feel a relief that cleanse my mind of those negative emotions. Now I am able to make decisions with greater clarity. After several days resorting to this flamenco tool by intuition, I decided to start a conscious experiment, in which I use my own body as a tool to analyze the impact that flamenco has on me.

## METHOD

The experiment consists of listening and dancing to the same piece of *tientos* and record it every day for seven days. At the same time, using other creative elements as drawing and writing to express what this experience makes me feel. This research is based on some of the principles of Carls Rogers' person-centered approach, based on the premise that “the human being is basically a trustworthy organism, capable of evaluation the outer an inner situation, understanding himself in its context, making constructive choices as to the next step in life, acting on those choices “ (Togers 1977, pp.14-15) He also states that the emotions of anger, pain, fear, ecstasy, and desire are the tunnel we must go through to become fully self-aware and understand ourselves. These emotions are energy channeled into art to transform it. In my case, this art is Flamenco.

Below, the process of seven days of transformation is detailed, in which the results are presented as different expressive art forms. The initial state is described, images and videos of the therapeutic process are shown, as well as a drawing at the end of each day, accompanied by a few words describing the feeling and emotions of the experience.

### **Day 1: Chaos transforms me.**

**Initial state:** *I feel anxious and want to cry. I have a mental block and a headache. I feel small. I don't want to talk about it. I feel rage and anger. I have pain in my upper body, and it's mostly concentrated in the throat.*

### **Movement process and visual art:**



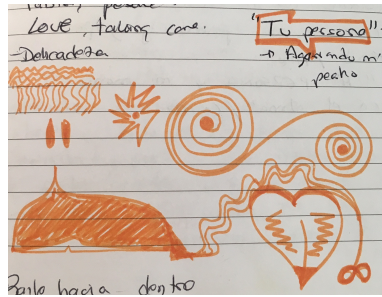
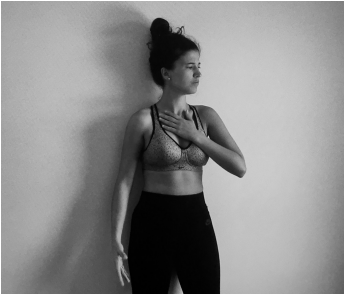
**Process' analysis:** *Through movement, I am able to access and release my deepest emotions, as well as transform my energy to end up feeling joy and pleasure. I feel liberated. Now I can breathe. I am happy.*

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

### Day 2: Your persona

**Initial state:** *I have a terrible backache. I am tired, apathetic, with tension and anxiety in the chest area, and my energy level is low.*

#### **Movement process and visual art:**

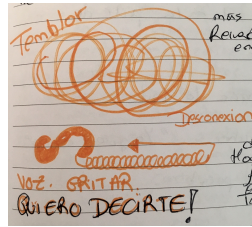


**Process' analysis:** *I feel heavy, slow, and making small movements. I can not deal with my body today. I feel pain in my back at the beginning that gets alleviated during the process. I can listen to my aches and access them with delicacy. When I finish, I feel connected to my persona.*

### Day 3: I want to tell you

**Initial state:** *Last night I suffered a panic attack that caused trembling in my arms, tension in my hands and an accumulation of uncontrollable energy in the upper area of my body. Today I am tired, without strength and keeping that tension in my arms and hands.*

#### **Movement process and visual art:**



**Process' analysis:** *My hands tremble as I dance and I feel the energy running through my arms. I still remember in my body the power generated by the circular movements of my hands. I am less present and connected to my soul than other days. Today, I can connect with my body, but I cannot connect with my inner self. For the first time, my voice comes to light and I speak up.*



**Day 4: Dancing with the sun**

**Initial state:** *I have spent all day on the beach with my family. I am rested, free of tensions, and happy. I do not feel like dancing the "tientos" because I do not want to change my mood.*

**Movement process and visual art:**



**Process' analysis:** *I start to move, and I feel the heat of the sun coming in through the window. I am grateful to have been able to enjoy this wonderful day in the sun. I am astonished by my own shadow and play with it. Suddenly, I find myself "dancing with the sun." I can not connect with the feeling of sorrow and sadness that the "tientos" inspire me but I allow myself to create and enjoy.*

**Day 5: F. You!**

**Initial state:** *I feel rage, anger, and frustration. I am furious and discouraged. I can not take it anymore. I do not want this. I'm tired of being treated like this. I'm desperate.*

**Movement process and visual art:**



**Process' analysis:** *I can not stop thinking about the situations and people that made me feel that way during the day, and I hate them. I feel a lot of stress and anger which I need to let go. Hitting the ground soothes me. I feel blocked, with a lot of pressure but with little strength to move my body. I can only feel frustration and despair. Hate and rage invade my body. In the end, I feel calm. The storm has passed.*

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

### **Day 6: The real ME**

**Initial state:** *In the last week, I make an effort to change my attitude. I am more positive, motivated, and eager to change my situation. This positive emotion has made me evade the moment of entering the studio and listening to the "tientos." I made excuses to myself every day until I realized that I was afraid to come in and return to the state of anxiety I was coming from. Today I feel good, calm, relaxed, and eager to create. I am happy and comfortable with myself.*

#### **Movement process and visual art:**



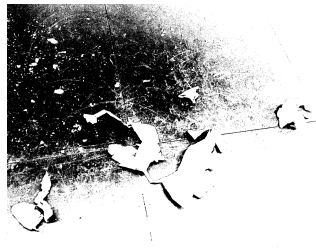
**Process' analysis:** *I do not feel connected to the music and I can not, nor do I want to enter that inner voice. I do not feel my truth in the dance. However, there is a moment when my body accesses that movement of my right hand that escapes my control. It fascinates me because it is an authentic movement that leaves my body without any conscious direction from my mind. This movement is born naturally from my body and it's repeated almost every day. When I finish, I don't feel that the process has been completed. It is not enough, I need something different. I change the piece of music to play some "tangos de Triana," one of the most cheerful and festive pieces in flamenco. With this music, I feel connected. It is an injection of energy, optimism, and fun. I let myself go and dance without control enjoying the moment. I do not think about anything, I just dance and enjoy the piece. I am happy, grateful, and my energy level rises.*

### **Day 7: My paper instrument**

**Initial state:** *Today I am angry, especially with myself. I can not identify what has happened to me during the day that has radically changed my mood and made me feel this way. Unfairly, I take it out on my husband. I feel sorry to the point of hating myself for taking my frustration out on others. I know I'm not right and blame myself for it. I decide to use a paper bag as a creative tool to relive the exercise of Dr. Pinna Pérez's class.*

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

### Movement process and visual art:



**Process' analysis:** *The paper bag allows me to explore new movements, sounds, and textures against my skin. I focus on it, and that allows me to be present. Hitting the bag on the ground makes a noise that reminds me of a whip, and it helps me release the anger and hatred that I feel. When I look into my eyes in the mirror, I see it as a punishment for reacting this way. A "you deserve it" thought is what comes to mind. Moving abruptly, hitting the ground, and looking into my eyes in the mirror while hitting the bag "against me" help me release this feeling. Little by little, and with the change of music, I feel calmer. Again the unconscious movement of my right hand—in this case shaking the paper—appears. When this happens, there is a special connection that makes me evade myself entirely. There is nothing else at that moment than the beauty of that movement.*

The studio becomes my transformation chamber. It's like entering a car wash, where water and energy eliminates all the dirt and stains that cover my vehicle. After an intense wash reaching the deepest places, the car regains its colors, its light, and it's completely renovated. In my car wash, the energy and strength of flamenco clean the dirt of stress, anger, and frustration. At the same time, flamenco intensifies my energy and positive emotions.

The use of a video camera allows me to witness the creation of the movements in each unique piece of improvisation. For the first time in my life, I can look at myself with compassion. I can even get connected to the person who is dancing. I identify her, I recognize her, it is ME. Although I do not understand the meaning of some movements, seeing them with the eyes of a third person helps me to just feel them, observe them and not judge them. I understand that there is no good or bad move, but that every movement

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

simply is. I get acceptance of my body, my persona, and my emotions. It's a feeling of deep and true self-connection that I've never felt before.

After analyzing the event in the studio from my own experience, and at the same time being a witness of my movements through the video, I can assure that the state of mind with which I start conditions my ability to create and connect with my emotions. The *tientos* piece seems to work when my mood is low, and I feel sorrow, anger, or frustration. However, when I feel happy, confident and secure, I need a cheerful piece like tangos to be able to connect. It has been important for me to adapt the tools and elements used in the state of mind to get the most out of my process of self-knowledge.

Through this process, I have been capable of connecting with the two personalities that form my persona and that manifest themselves very differently in my body. Through the distinct *palos* of flamenco, I can access both of them to advance my process of self-knowledge. The essence of the *tientos*, its intensity, strength, and dramatic nature, connect with the version of me that has fears, frustrations, anguish, anger, and rage and feels that she does not deserve love. That version that prevents me from enjoying the pleasures of life, who requires me to be the best in everything because she thinks this is how she will get the affection from those around her. That person who is afraid of being left alone yet disregards the people she loves by taking her frustration out on them. Through movement, I allow myself to acknowledge her, feel her, and let her go.

Flamenco enables me to transform that negative version of myself into one that gives me peace and happiness. It allows me to access that other version of me that I love so much. That person who believes in me, who loves me, respects me, values my work, has more love that she can give, cares about others, is creative, loves life, enjoys life and is calm and at peace. That's the person I connect with when I dance *palos* that evoke joy. Dancing those pieces intensifies my positive emotion, reminding me who I truly am after getting rid of that layer of fears and limiting beliefs. My positive energy grows inside me, and I feel strength, confidence, pleasure, and completeness. That is the person I want to be, that is my true identity, and the only one who will allow me to be happy.

When I realize this, I understand the importance of knowing oneself to be happy. This experiment is changing not only the way I see myself but also how I perceive my own life and that of others. It is making

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

me understand that I have to get rid of those fears and frustrations to access my true self. If I want to be happy and make others happy, I have to achieve been that unique person.

Although this experiment is my first approach to validate my hypothesis that flamenco can be a vehicle for self-knowledge, the concept of flamenco as a transformation tool is currently being used by a global reference in flamenco, Belén Maya. She combines different therapies with flamenco with the objective of creating a transformation process through movement. Flamenco goes from being an art to becoming a tool for change. Her workshop was born as a result of her own change and transformation process after a painful separation. As of today, this course has meant a personal change for its participants. Some of them share their experience:

*“What I felt through the four elements, water, earth, fire and air, was so intense that it made me reflect on who I am”*

*“Thanks to this workshop, I discovered how dance could be what healed me, what made me the happiest, and at the same time what caused me the most suffering and frustration”*

*"It is about establishing ourselves internally, trying to unite the physical with the mind so that it connects us with the soul, there is where transformation awaits us, the birth of art. For this trip Belén Maya leads us through the five elements and the connection with our vital organs, to allow us to know and conduct ourselves. I still can't really explain the experience. When your work is "to remain" and not "to be," there are no words that can describe what I have lived." Dancer, workshop's participant.*

Personally, I had the opportunity to attend one of her workshops: “Flamenco as a tool for transformation and creation”. The objective at the end of it is to create a choreography born from our essence, and that tells a story. The utilized methodology follows the steps defined by Levine, S and Levine, E (1999) in the theory of movement as an integrating process shown below:

1. **Identifying a life's theme to be used as a metaphor through movement:** I decide to tell my personal story in relation to dance and the different states in which I have been, am, and will be.

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

- 2. Selecting different graphic elements that can represent those states:** I choose two images of myself, one from the moment I discovered that dance was my passion, and another of my current personal situation. I also take somebody else's photo that represents my future.



- 3. Focusing on each image to access an emotion and transform it into movement:** When I visualize myself in the present or the past, I can express an emotion since I recognize the feeling that this state produces in me because I have already been there. However, when I have to represent the future, I have to imagine how I want that future to be and express how I feel in that hypothetical state. Thinking about a future of peace, tranquility, and security relieves me.
- 4. Creating a drawing in response to movement:** In this case, this step transformed into creating a performance in front of the group sharing the feeling. We have to connect the movements of each state to create a unique story. Dancing the story from beginning to end allows me to recognize the course of my path. To be able to feel in my body the story of my life through movement. I feel that I own my life, I can control it, and this empowers me to adapt it or change it my way.
- 5. Creating of the script:** We have to create a story based on the artistic experience we lived. I decide to use a third person as the protagonist of the story, which allows me to be more honest and objective. As I do not tell it in the first person, I can create any story I want, since it is only a tale. This gives me the freedom to share the story with my classmates without shame or fear of what they might think. After all, it is the story of another person. However, when I am reading it, I get emotional when I see the reality behind it. It is the truth of my own history, and I feel compassion and proximity to the character which allows me to connect with it. Unconsciously, I am connecting with my own being, with my truth, and I am giving myself the freedom to write the end of that story as my heart feels it. When I hear the ending, I calm down. The anguish and frustration of my present vanish because there is light in the way, "If Alma could do it, maybe I could too"

## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

*The dream of Alma.*

Deleted: "A

*Alma is a 7-year-old girl, a blonde with dark skin who dreams of being an artist. She sings and dances from the moment she gets up, when she plays, and even while she sleeps. Time passes, and Alma leaves aside her dream because she is too concerned about growing up. Unexpectedly, years later dancing reappears in her life, and her inner light starts to shine and grow at a speed that is difficult to control. Her dream is reborn, and she goes to bed every day with the hope that it can come true. Every day she sees it closer, and her eyes light up when she thinks about it. She is closer than ever when an unfortunate accident paralyzes her and prevents her from continuing to dance. Alma is devastated, feels anger, frustration and sorrow to think that her dreams have vanished. Her inner strength helps her to continue with her life even though her soul is asleep. Other loves arrive, but her heart forgets the true love of her life.*

*Her passion for dance is so strong that after a while it reappears again entering her heart. This time more carefully, slowly, and with more fears than ever. Little by little the light from her soul begins to bloom as if it were an iris. When music travels through her body there is nothing else, her soul is alive, and her heart is filled with so much love that she feels like it can get out of her chest. However, her fears, frustrations, beliefs, and prejudices limit her and prevent her from moving forward. She lives in a constant struggle between her feeling and your reasoning..*

*It is a constant battle between what her mind thinks it "should be" and what her heart feels. Her future is uncertain although she is hopeful and trusts that one day she could look back and feel proud that finally, the love of her soul won the war."*

As Levine, S and Levine, E (1999) advocates, our body contains the history of our lives and has an organic ability to heal us. The use of images and movement's metaphors allows us to unlock some doors to our inner power to work consciously and creatively with our individual potential. Through this flamenco workshop, I have been able to experience this process in my own body. Creating and moving around my own story has allowed me to connect with myself and access my fears, giving them the opportunity to disappear transforming themselves into a happy ending.

## DISCUSSION

After analyzing the origins and roots of flamenco, the results of my own experiment, as well as the creation experience lived in the 'flamenco for transformation' workshop; I can say that I have found the reason why I feel so connected with flamenco. In flamenco, I have found my place, my space. A space in which I can be myself and feel free to express my emotions without fear of being judged. That unique area in which I can connect with my real being and feel happy and at peace. When I dance flamenco, there is a deep connection with my soul and essence. It is my truth. The truth that comes to light because it is my soul the one that moves. There is something special about flamenco that enables that connection with the interior. Its music, the guitar playing, the purity of the *cante* born from the core, and the strength of the dance that make me connect with my true self.

Through flamenco, I get that absolute concentration that Buddhists define as *samadhi*. I get lost in my own heart's voice, and the fascination of my being absorbs me. When I dance, I feel like a baby in its state of maximum happiness, relaxed, focused, and free since it is my true being expressing itself. I get to experience the *sama* state—which means to dance being myself until the ecstasy. It is a state in which body and mind are so intensely occupied with activity, that the usual self disappears allowing access to a state of higher consciousness (Stephen Nachmanovitch, 1990). That state of awareness about my persona.

Dancing flamenco I found the voice of my heart, and I learned how to express it. Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990). When I allow myself to listen to my inner voice with sincerity and to let myself be carried away by the emotions of my soul, a deep connection with my true self occurs. There is a transferring to a state of freedom and honesty, where there is a spiritual connection that goes beyond my being. This connection could be compared to what Alexander Lowen defines as "state of grace," that harmony between body, mind, and emotions that connects us with our true self. When that elevated state of emotion, expression, and authenticity arises, it is when appears what I understand as DUENDE. The *duende* is the spirit of evocation. It is born from within as a physical and emotional response to art. It is what makes you smile or cry as a corporal reaction to an artistic performance that is particularly expressive. In flamenco, the appearance of that *duende* is essential. However, there is no clear definition of it. According to Federico García Lorca is that "mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher can explain."



## HEALING POSSIBILITIES WITH ART OF FLAMENCO

For a long time, my teachers told me that *duende* is not something that one can work on, it is a talent that one either has or doesn't. Many times they said to me "you have *duende*" and I thought I was lucky to have that gift. However, as I get to know more about myself, I begin to wonder if the appearance of what others call *duende* is not a talent, but the visual form that the divine connection with my true self takes. In the same way, I begin to wonder if the claim that only a few have access to *duende* it's true.

My hypothesis evolves to think that we all have access to that *duende* and that the way to get to it is through self-knowledge. If we unlock the barriers that prevent us from accessing that inner zone, we can achieve that divine connection, enabling us to show our true essence. "We have to let ourselves disappear, to let art appear" (Stephen Nachmanovitch, 1990). If I have found a way to disappear through flamenco, maybe I can help other people do the same so they connect with their true essence.

**Flamenco, by nature, is a tool for self-knowledge, for creation, and for transformation.**

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