

## THE BODY WE ARE

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I come from the tradition of the martial arts, meditation, competitive athletics, and body-oriented psychology. In these disciplines I learned fundamental principles that profoundly influence my work today. In martial arts dojos, meditation halls, and track stadiums I saw that I am my body and that I am more than my body. In my somatic practice with individuals and groups it was revealed to me that we are a living process in which we are shaped by our experience and that our shape forms our experience. My studies, especially aikido, revealed a world of energy to me. As a young boy when I first saw men in belted *gis* throwing each other over their hips I was caught as if in a spell. It was beauty in much the same way that the poet John Keats spoke of beauty as truth. There was a grace in their throws and redemption in their falls that captured and expanded my imagination. In the directness and simplicity of this discipline I saw that feeling and action live inside a field of energy. This energetic field is potentized by commitment, intention, and relevance. Energy and the body are intimately linked and as a unity they become the cause of our life. This showed me that the body we are *is* the life we live.

We are connected to others and the world through an energetic process that forwards new relationships and ends others. Pulsations, vibrations, streamings, expansions and contractions of one's bodily life builds boundaries, expresses emotions, shapes attitudes, and generates a process for living. Life is formed from life and there are cycles of beginnings, endings, and in-betweens. I learned how to organize this energy, or *ki*, (as the Japanese call it) to build an identity and a structure for taking care of what mattered to me. I also learned how to surrender to this vast, resonating field of excitation and let it organize me. This taught me to trust the territory beyond the self and to dissolve into the yearning that reaches beyond the dominion of the personal "I". This energy simultaneously seeks balance and disruption, homeostasis and growth, becoming and dying. To live in the center of this contradiction is how we continually form, contain, release, and re-form the body we are.

Through these disciplines I also discovered that the body we are goes beyond the physical form. While we are in a living process of becoming different selves and different bodies, there is a parallel process in an entirely different domain. The first time I become experientially aware of this phenomena was when I was running for the United States team in the pre-

Olympic meet in Mexico City in 1967. In one particular race I suddenly found myself above the track watching myself and other competitors in the 200-meter dash. I was both running and watching myself run. A mantle of calm had settled over me and my concerns about competing and winning had completely vanished. While I was seemingly powerless to affect anything, I was powerfully joined to everything by a pulsating, unified field. A few steps past the finish line I re-entered my track body. I was both perplexed and fully refreshed. I could see by the way the judges and other competitors treated me that they were oblivious to my experience. Although there was no one to talk to about this experience it initiated me into an inquiry about expanded states of awareness.

Years later during aikido training a similar episode occurred. I was thrown in an exceptionally fast and powerful throw by my teacher and I again stood apart from my physical body, watching everything with lucidity, including the expressions on the faces of the other students, the teacher's technique, and my body hurling through space. I wasn't afraid and I wasn't concerned, nor was I particularly ecstatic. The personal "I" through which we normally act and perceive simply wasn't present. I felt part of something much larger than what I was normally accustomed. I wasn't bound by the self. In that timeless moment I became a member of a community whose scale diminished vanity and generated unity.

Through these experiences and others that followed I wasn't satisfied with explanations that contrived me to be out of my body. Rather, I conceived that I was simply in another body; a body which has its own organizational structure for perceiving, acting, and feeling. Further experiences in dreams, intuitions, and meditation states supported the existence of a time/space domain that resides beyond the physical form. Our common sense and historical tradition of language hasn't embraced this phenomena, and thus doesn't offer a structure to support it. I believe that not only are we many bodies over a lifetime, and even a day, we also live in bodies that can't be reduced to the traditional criterion of analysis and inspection.

When I speak of the body I'm referring to the shape of our experience; not the collection of fixed, anatomical parts inherited from the Cartesian discourse. The body is not a machine, its boundaries are not clearly defined. Our experience is subjective, self-responsive, and at the same time constantly responding to the world. We are self-contained and we merge with others and the environment. We are our bodies when we're engaged with the air, our neighbors, the landscape, making promises, planning our future, thinking of our loved ones. The body contains and expresses our thinking, actions, emotions, and perceptions.

The way we expand towards warmth and recoil from pain is too complex to understand in a diagram or mathematical formula. Moreover, our bodies produce a language and a thinking by which we coordinate with others to build a mutually committed future, or not. When we allow

ourselves to be touched by the rhythm of life, by sensations, streamings, waves of excitation, and fields of energy, we grasp the possibility of becoming self-healing, self-educating, and self-generating.

The Rationalistic tradition that portrays the body as a machine is the foundation for the present day psychological language of insight. This way of thinking reduces embodiment to understanding, which relies on gathering information. In addition, the body as machine metaphor is currently extended to equate the mind with a computer, another machine. When this machine metaphor determines our life, we feed ourselves information in order to form a theory about living and acting. Our decisions and choices, then, are based on this theory, not from the embodiment of our ethics, values, and our stand in life. To its credit we owe much of our advances, thus far, in science and technology to this way thinking. I say 'thus far' because it is now producing more breakdowns than breakthroughs in our capacity to take meaningful action in our lives. The vast amounts of information we have access to has not made us more fulfilled, effective, or peaceful. For all of our understanding we still live in fear, anxiety and uncertainty. Our labor saving devices and material wealth hasn't salvaged the wounds in our families or communities, nor has it evolved us to a more satisfying way of being. How can a machine live the richness of an incarnate spiritual life?

To highlight this distinction between information and embodied knowledge consider this example: I'm in Latin America having a conversation with two friends from North America. There's a disagreement about the meaning of a particular Spanish word. Dictionaries and phrase books are brought out. One is adamant about his position and gains ground in his claim by repeatedly referring to the texts. The other, who has been working in this country, is not convinced but is acquiescing under the weight of the other's argument. Unexpectedly the doorbell rings and a man says something to us in Spanish. The friend who is academically knowledgeable in the language shrugs unknowingly. The other friend replies in Spanish. There's a brief conversation in which directions are given, the Latino thanks him and exits.

Embodied knowledge is the skill to act appropriately at the appropriate time. Embodied knowledge has a historical and rigorous formal training behind it. It lives in present time in its immediacy, availability, and directness. It anticipates and corrects for breakdowns in the future. Skillful performers such as athletes, dancers, equestrians, teachers, musicians, and pilots are exemplars of embodied knowledge. The man who helped the Latino at the door was the embodiment of knowledge. He was an actor in the world in his capacity to engage and respond.

Information is not instantaneous. It's formless until organized. While embodiment is alive, information is static. Information is stored in computers, books, fiber optics and theories. It is

not interactive, self-forming, or responsive. You program and access information. Embodied knowledge acts to take care of the concerns of living.

The difference between information and embodied knowledge, we might say, is like the difference between knowing a word in a Spanish/English dictionary and speaking Spanish. This point was consistently and faithfully brought home to me in the many dojos, schoolyards and playing fields where I was schooled. When a newcomer, for example, would show up at the dojo bragging about his prowess or why something we were doing wouldn't work, somebody, in due time, would offer, "Put it on the mat. Let's see what works." Inevitably, the pretense of the boaster would fall short of the embodied expertise of the trained athlete.

Don't mistake this example as an endorsement for physical strength or machismo. Often the winner was smaller, not particularly strong, and perhaps even younger. The difference was that he had been training rigorously with equally rigorous training partners under a qualified teacher. This person embodied a certain domain of knowledge. The other, was a repository of information for this domain.

Where I'm leading is that if you want to produce new behaviors or competencies—in short, if you want to evolve or improve yourself—it isn't sufficient to be only cognitively knowledgeable about a subject. It is necessary, however, to have a teacher, to commit to a practice, and to practice and study with a community of learners. This notion shifts learning from understanding information to embodying actions.

In my opinion one of the failures of contemporary psychology is that it doesn't provide practices that lead to fulfillment, new competencies, and the satisfaction of taking on that which is difficult. Most talking therapies offer insight, which can be valuable for orienting historically to our present day situation, but they often drive us inward, away from a larger world of social sensibility, the politics of care, and stewardship of the natural world. Its reductionistic bias has a tendency to rigidify and fortify a self that ultimately becomes isolated from others and the environment. This, of course, can also be present in somatic therapies, but dressed in a different cloak.

Many somatic therapies emphasize feeling states that are disconnected to any meaningful activity. While it can be meaningful to expand one's capacity to sense and feel, I believe it's a beginning point, and not the conclusion for living a life that embodies actions for taking care. Acting only from sensation, or stories that orient around ourselves, we remove ourselves from membership in the larger community of humans, animals, and landscape. If we don't outgrow a self that is defined only by how we feel or what we want, we become part of the narcissistic plague that is now a national epidemic.

Human beings live in bodies and they live in language. When I work with someone, then, I look to see how and where life has been lived in their bodies, and where life has been shut down. I listen to how they live the stories they tell themselves, or how they live in a gap between their stories and their actions. I look how they have allowed their energy to express aliveness and where they are rigid and lifeless. I listen to the stories they tell about their life and I listen to how these stories live in their body. I'm interested in how they've shaped themselves around their stories and how this shaping brings them satisfaction or puts them in an unhappy relationship with themselves.

Listening to people this way is to include their past, present and future. We embody a history that is constantly influencing us; we act, feel, and perceive only in the present; and we are like a radar screen that is invariably scanning for the best future we can imagine. I don't see minds, bodies and spirits. I see identities, biology, history, a certain bearing, and a future-forming language that expresses a unique quality of aliveness we call the self. I see a life of becoming that is formed by a process of intertwined events, images, actions, emotions, and a thrusting into the future.

I am alert to what wants to come to life in the person; that which has been long buried. For some this may be withheld grief, for others rage, perhaps the capacity to declare their mission in the world, or it might be the yearning to freely receive and express love. Whatever it is, I am interested in *how* it is withheld, both in their body and in the story they have about their life. I work with their resistance and their becoming through touch, movement, breath, expression, and practices that support a new way of being. The following study exemplifies this approach.

Carol came to see me at a transition point in her life. She had just turned thirty-three and was recently promoted at work. In her new position as a supervisor she was being asked to manage people for the first time. She had been divorced for over a year and after dating for a while she was just now beginning to open to the possibility of being in a long-term relationship. She found herself trapped in ways of being that were no longer useful to her in her new professional and personal identities. She "understood" cognitively what was happening, but found herself helpless to take new actions.

As we began working Carol quickly assured me that she had taken care of most of her "stuff". When I inquired about this she informed me that she was in AA and through that process had set her life in order. She was there to see me because recently she had been give to inexplicable bursts of anger at work. These incidents had increased over the past few months and had now been showing up in her relationships with the men she dated. Her boss, who knew me through a course I presented on embodied learning in the workplace, recommended that she see me. This produced a certain degree of trust in me as she trusted her boss; at the

same time she made it clear that she wasn't interested in therapy. For Carol this meant not engaging at an emotional or intimate level. There was something she wanted to understand so she could fix it. When I asked her if what we did together was successful how would she know, she replied that she wanted to be effective at work without having to be angry and that she wanted to be in an intimate, committed relationship.

Carol was a warm, out-going, person who expressed vibrancy and aliveness in her face and gestures. She considered herself a "people-person" and enjoyed the company of others. Because she had always thought of herself as having a cheerful, positive outlook on life she was disturbed by her recent outbursts of anger. Her eyes reflected a warm, receptive style of relating. Yet her buoyancy appeared forced and unrelenting as though she were trying to convince others that she was an "up" person. Behind a smile that seemed permanently fixed on her face was a tightly held jaw.

The aliveness in the upper part of her body did not have a place in her pelvis and legs. When she stood her legs were stiff and immobile, like wooden posts on which her torso precariously balanced. Her pelvis was pulled back like a cocked trigger and the tissues in her hips and lower abdomen were dense and unyielding. While her hands moved gracefully and flirtatiously, her walk was heavy and plodding. The life in the upper half of her body had no correspondence with the lower half. It was as if they expressed two different views of the world. Her torso was a request for contact and acceptance; her pelvis and legs were guarded and unresponsive, declining intimacy. Her belly, which separated the top and bottom, was like putty, unformed and childlike. It was a no-woman's land in which there was little possibility for coordination between the two halves.

In our initial sessions the work centered around Carol directing her attention to where and how she held herself. As she sat, stood, or walked I would tell her what I saw and would ask her to describe what she felt in that area. She had no criterion in which to feel sensation and much of our early work was educating her in this domain. From the beginning it was clear that she had little feeling in the lower half of her body and while there was the capacity to feel in the chest and face there was a rigidity there.

In one of these sessions I pointed out that when she spoke to me she never looked directly at me, but rather angled her head off to the side. In this position she looked at me out of the side of her eyes. She was unaware of this and when I positioned her head so she looked straight at me she blushed and her head automatically rotated away. She told me she felt too vulnerable in this position; that people would be able to look straight through her.

At this stage of our work I gave her two practices. The first was to set aside some time every day simply to feel the sensations in her body. We folded this practice into the daily walks she took through a park near her office. Her original motive for walking was to lose weight. It was a rather mindless activity in which she sped along in much the same way she drove herself in

life. I suggested she could do the same walk, but to now pay attention to the sensations of weight, temperature, contraction, and movement in her body. The second practice was to notice the position of her head and eyes as she spoke to people; and to then bring her head back to center when she observed she was angling away.

Her initial reports on these practices were that she had a difficult time remembering to attend to her body and posture in this way. This made her realize how much she was in her head and that when she did feel her body she immediately became uncomfortable and sometimes frightened. As she continued, however, her capacity for being with the life of her body increased. She could make new distinctions of warmth, stiffness, openness, and contraction. In the practice of directly facing someone she began to see her mistrust and guarded-ness. This produced a gap between her perceived image of being open and how she was actually protecting herself in relationships.

We added to this practice by teaching her how to center. This is a practice appropriated from aikido, without the martial context. It produces the distinctions of being aware in the moment, present to others, and connected to the body. We did this by having her balance and align along the somatic dimensions of length, width and depth, and then drop her attention to her center of gravity. It's a practice in which she was learning to be straight without being rigid and relaxed without being slack. She reported this produced a stronger presence and deeper calm at work. In addition she saw it was a place from which she could more easily observe her reactions to people and events.

It was still difficult for her to stay with the sensations in her pelvis but she had more resolve and less fear. As she became more aware of her body through our sessions, and the practices in daily life, a pattern of behavior began to unfold. It became apparent how difficult it was for her to make a clear request. She could clearly formulate it in her head, but when it came time to speak her body simply wouldn't do it. She understood the importance of asking for what she wanted, but she wasn't able to embody it. She hadn't developed the body for making a request. The result of this is that Carol took on the work that she should be delegating to her subordinates. In addition, she never told her boyfriend what her concerns were and what she wanted. This made her resigned and resentful. As the frustration escalated she would reach a point where she could no longer contain herself and would suddenly lash out angrily at those close to her.

In the next phase of our work we uncovered Carol's embodied story of being the good girl, the pleaser. Raised in a fundamentalist family by an authoritarian father and submissive mother Carol learned to do the right thing to gain approval and love. The right thing in this case was not asking for too much, if anything at all. It meant always having a smile on your face and

being grateful for what you did have. There was no room for desire, for exploring new ground, or for expressing pleasure and joy. She was never given the permission to ask for what she wanted. She became permissive and let men use her. Her pliancy was a way to appease others and distance herself from her concerns and desires. This narrative lived in Carol's body as a deadening in her legs and pelvis, and an over bounded-ness in her chest that restricted her from expressing any emotion other than a superficial mood of gaiety. Now that she was managing people and seeking a committed relationship she was having to face her inability to make personal and professional requests. The more she faced this the more she touched the years of anger that had been held under the surface. And below this was a deeply held grief at never allowing herself to fully experience satisfaction and intimacy.

Uncovering this allowed us to invent practices for her to develop a body for making requests. As we began she saw the commitment involved in making a request. There was the commitment to be sincere in what she asked for and the commitment to the other in her listening of their ability to fulfill on the request. In this commitment there was an intimacy that she both feared and longed for. In learning to ask for what she wanted she had to look at what mattered to her. She also had to face her fear of rejection. In the beginning this was daunting to her and she would collapse in despair. She was unable to contain the excitement of this newly forming self. As her excitement increased she was unable to hold and allow it to come to form. It was like blowing up a balloon halfway and then letting it go. It was important to mobilize the energy of her anger to fuel the newly forming self that was learning commitment.

At this point I had Carol lie down and breathe in a way that increased sensation in her body. We did this in order for her to expand her capacity for being with and containing her excitement. She began to see how she ran from feeling. She saw that she lived in a story that feeling was dangerous. She believed that if she allowed feeling she would lose control, look foolish and be rejected. In one particular session her legs began to move, as if they wanted to run. Carol reported there was a prickly feeling in her thighs that made her uncomfortable. I asked her to engage with the sensation that she felt. With encouragement she allowed the warmth to move through her pelvis and into her legs. Her legs began to push and I offered resistance at her feet. As the pushing increased her entire body became involved. She began to kick, pound with her fists, and spontaneously shout, "Get off of me!" After a while her excitement naturally subsided and she reported that she felt warm and alive. She had some



concern about the negative judgments I might have about her anger. This was cleared between us and she allowed herself to experience the satisfaction of being deeply relaxed and alert. Her chest had opened to deeper breaths, there was the flush of aliveness in her legs, and her face had taken on a completely different countenance. In this session

Carol opened to the possibility of being someone who could shape her future through taking authentic action.

During the course of our work together I tried to show Carol that knowing something and embodying new actions were not the same thing. I revealed that it was necessary to commit to practices in order to embody new actions. We discovered that there's a plasticity about the body which allows us to transform and be different observers of ourselves and the world. I tried to show her the link between our behaviors and the stories we have about our life. Carol saw she could partner with her excitement instead of defending against it. Working with her excitement Carol became more assertive and more relaxed. In her new capacity for being self-generating she overcame her pattern of acquiescence. In her new way of being in the world she fell deeply in love and advanced in her career path.

My study of somatics has been guided by a number of remarkable teachers. Maharaj Charan Singh, my spiritual teacher, exemplified the enduring power of love. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan meditation master, demonstrated the relationship between emptiness and the form. Dr. Randolph Stone, the founder of Polarity Therapy, revealed the power of presence and the life we live as an energy field. Saotome Sensei, my aikido sensei, taught me how to stand and interact in the world. Doris Breyer and Al Bauman, both students of Wilhelm Reich, introduced me to the interface of breath, energy, and emotional states. Magda Proskauer, who was a student of Elsa Gindler, showed me the relationship between the breath and the psyche. Tom Hanna and Eleanor Criswell mentored me through my Ph.D. and were important supporters of my somatic vision at a crucial point in my life. My partnership with Robert Hall at the Lomi School, and Wendy Palmer and George Leonard at Tamalpais Aikido Dojo enabled me to explore and bring these ideas to fruition.

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