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Transpersonal Dimensions of Somatic Therapies

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In speaking of the fixation of the body, we are not referring to purely physical attachment—lust, let's say—as a purely physical matter. We are talking about the mind-body situation, the body aspect of our mind, the solidity aspect of it which needs constant feeding, reinforcement. It needs continual reassurance that it is solid. The basic Hinayana practice of simplifying every activity of the mind into just breathing or body movement reduces the intensity of the Rudra of body.

Chogyon Trungpa & Herbert V. Guenther, 1975, p. 9

Transpersonal psychology emerged in the middle of the last century primarily under the impact of widespread experiences that called into question dominant notions of the personal self in Western psychology. The experiences that first shaped the field came out of early contacts with older wisdom traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Access and attraction to these teachings were accelerated by the use of psychoactive substances. More slowly but steadily the earth-centered spiritualities of indigenous peoples have come to play a part in shaping the development of a different notion of the self. Still somewhat on the margins of the field, a wide range of somatic practices developed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries also radically change the mainstream notions of the physical matrix that supports various notions of the self in ways that join with those other movements. After an introductory account of the general territory of body-based transcendence, what follows is an account of how various body-centered practices lead to transpersonal experiences, with implications for a more expansive practice of psychotherapy.

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The Territory

The movement in Life Against Death was certainly moving down into the body and finding the reality to be bodily. But after I had gotten there, another movement set going which might be expressed this way: "but the body when you find it, is not just a body."

(Norman O. Brown, 1970, p. 4)

Norman O. Brown uttered that statement in 1970 in an interview in a Santa Cruz underground newspaper. It was a crystalline expression of what I had been finding in the few years earlier. I had been a member of the Roman Catholic religious order of Jesuits for some ten years, during which we meditated one hour each morning, and for some short periods during the day; each year, we engaged in an 8-day silent retreat; and once I completed a 30-day silent retreat. Of the many different practices we were taught, several involved bodily awareness: breathing, posture, sensory attentions. Despite intense devotion to these practices over a decade, I lived a dissociated life, my consciousness largely living within abstract theological and biblical worlds, with little feeling for my breathing, kneeling, and sitting body nor for the palpable bodies of others.

In 1967 Gia-Fu Feng, a Chinese refugee and Taoist practitioner, invited me and a handful of Jesuit friends to join him in his pre-dawn meditation at his center on the summit of the Santa Cruz mountains just above our theological school. We entered his meditation room looking out over the fog-laced redwoods, and were instructed simply to sit and pay attention to our breath. There was something about the environment and the teaching vocabulary that prompted my sudden direct attunement to my actual breathing. In that hour, all the contents of the previous ten years of meditation—sacred images and phrases, mystical teachings, intellectual meanings—came crashing together. When I found my breathing, I found it was not just breathing.

That door opened to a journey with various methods of body cultivation that took something of this form:

- When I found touch in massage training and Rolfing, I found it was not just touch;
- When I found gestures and movements in working with such practices as Continuum and Body–Mind Centering, I found they were not just gestures and movements;
- When I found postures in Rolfing and Aston-Patterning, I found they were not just postures.

It was a door whose shapes I was able to discern because of my earlier philosophical studies in which I had read Plato, Descartes, Galileo, and Husserl. I could say very clearly what mind-body dualism was, how it came about, and what its implications were for our lives. But until now, I had not directly and consciously

felt it in my being. I knew maps for the territory I would have to traverse from then on.

I was not alone. For only one example, some 50 years earlier, the Tasmanian actor F. Matthias Alexander (1969) wrote a similar passage about his experiments that led to the creation of the Alexander Technique:

I must admit that when I began my investigation, I, in common with most people, conceived of “body” and “mind” as separate parts of the same organism, and consequently believed that human ills, difficulties and shortcomings could be classified as either “mental” or “physical” and dealt with on specifically “mental” or specifically “physical” lines. My practical experiences, however, led me to abandon this point of view and readers of my books will be aware that the technique described in them is based on the opposite conception, namely, that it is impossible to separate “mental” and “physical” processes in any form of human activity. (p. 161)

But as I pursued this journey into the direct experience of the body, I came to realize that my experience was not universal, but radically Western, rooted in the consciousness-shaping forces of classical Greek philosophy, Christian theology, modern Western philosophy, and empirical science. I came to realize that these seemingly abstract ideas were engraved in my neuromuscular pathways by living within the structures of classrooms, exercise, dance, medical practices, and sports, which were peculiar to Western Europe and the United States. I eventually discovered that these practices, which shape the sensibilities of people growing up in this culture, are different from those in other cultures.

The late Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa (1987) has written extensively about the different kind of sensibility that is evoked in the shaping practices of China, India, Korea, and Japan—martial arts, meditation, calligraphy, music, and so forth. The core of his work is the argument that sustained attention over a lifetime to the refinement of these practices and their experiential results are essential to the evolution of consciousness itself in the mature adult.

One of the characteristics of Eastern Body–Mind theories is the priority given to the questions, “How does the relationship between the mind and the body come to be (through cultivation)?” or “What does it become?” The traditional issue in Western philosophy, on the other hand is “What is the relationship between the mind-body?” In other words, in the East one starts from the experiential assumption that the mind-body modality changes through the training of the mind and body by means of cultivation or training. Only after assuming this experiential ground does one ask what the mind-body relation is. That is, the mind-body issue is not simply a theoretical speculation but it is originally a practical, lived experience, involving the mustering of one’s whole mind and body. The theoretical is only a reflection on this lived experience. (Yasuo, 1987, p. 18)

Encountering these very different cultural notions of sensibility helped me articulate the meaning and implications of my turn towards the body. What was lacking in both the meditation and academic teachings I received was this Asian notion of

the intellectual and spiritual importance of cultivating one's sensibilities by long-term sustained practice of various bodily potentialities, and that theory depends on the cultivation of lived experience. Although in my Jesuit training we deliberately incorporated shifts of posture from sitting to standing to kneeling, we were not taught to pay intricate attention to what happened in each posture and in the shifts from one to another. When we practiced breathing meditation, our focus was on the words of the mantra (e.g., the Jesus prayer), not the actual experience of breathing itself.

What is given us at birth is the raw material for a human life, literally to be shaped both willy-nilly by parents, caregivers, and the media; sometimes more consciously by taking on practices designed to harmonize the links between body-shaping and the evolution of consciousness. This process of shaping the self and of consciousness itself is not well understood, not simply because of the pervasiveness of dualism, but also because it takes sustained use of specific body practices to make sense of it. It is as if a scholar would claim authority in studying Zen texts without practicing zazen. In the words of Husserl's phenomenological method, one must cultivate the particular attitude that constitutes a particular experiential territory. Within that newly found territory, the reality in question is now available to one who is ready to attend to it.¹ It was my prior studies of Husserl that helped me grasp more clearly what happened to me in Gia-Fu Feng's zendo: when I learned to shift my attention into the intricacies of sitting and breathing, adopting the Zen *Einstellung* or attitude, I found myself in a new experiential realm. And there, right before me, were the vast treasures of the transpersonal realm for which I had been searching for several years.

Marcel Mauss (1973) introduced the phrase "techniques of the body" to designate various body-shaping practices within a culture or particular community. These include the most obvious and deliberate forms of body-shaping present in methods of exercise, dance, sports, physical therapy, and body therapies. But more importantly, they also include everyday, non-thematized practices—infant-holding methods, the use of tools, walking, sitting. He called attention to the obvious but rarely noticed fact that simple activities, which one tends to think of as "natural"—sitting, diving, digging trenches—are highly evolved, culture- and gender-specific ways of shaping individuals according to the peculiar needs and aesthetic of that culture. These techniques accomplish two things. On the objective side, they give habitual shape to the protean bodies of our human birth. On the side of subjectivity, they help create our body-images, our felt sense of self, the body-schema. That body schema locates us within the perceived world; it forms the basis for our sense of our boundaries, where I stop and you begin; how responsive I am to outside information and how permeable to human intercourse. The shaping process is defined and transmitted in our social institutions: religion, the military, fashion and the media, sports, art, medicine. They reflect the tenacious forces of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Styles of shaping bodies parallel other expressions of a society's tastes in such forms as architecture, music, dance, and art.

In the development of a psychotherapist or a spiritual teacher, the shaping involves habituating oneself for listening, intuiting, dreaming, silence, and the range of sensibilities that are essential for these works.

Somatic Transpersonal Dimensions

To introduce a modicum of clarity into these complex issues, I am going to weave analyses of different kinds of transformative body practices into three strands of the transpersonal dimension, showing the relation of embodiment to each:

- 1 the dissolution of the fixity of the “I,” the illusion that it is a thing;
- 2 affecting the neuromuscular barriers that keep one from a full and direct encounter with present reality;
- 3 the transcendence of ordinary awareness.

This is, needless to say, an artificial division, since the transcendence of the rigidly personal entails the whole package. But it helps as a way of articulating how various kinds of transformative body practices facilitate the crossover to the transpersonal and the therapeutic values inherent in that move.

Neuromuscular Fixities

Ida Rolf's (1977) work is often situated within the realm of physical therapy or alternative medicine even though she always rejected that interpretation. The goal of her intricate system of manipulations was to reduce the many ways in which an individual's body fights the field of gravity instead of harmonizing with it. In that fight, it builds up a network of hardened connective tissues (fascia, ligaments, tendons) that over time create an illusory sense of being a hardened object, a machine with pulleys and levers, or a computer.

Let me reiterate what I have often said before: I am not primarily interested in the relief of symptoms, either physical or mental. I personally am interested in the potential of humans, and human potential *per se* neither includes nor excludes the palliation of symptoms. The question remains: to what extent could Rolfers create a small population able to live within the gravity field without an on-going, everlasting war, without the constant expenditure of precious human energy merely to carry on life within the gravity field? If we could create such a population, what would be its characteristics? (Rolf, 1977, p. 3)

It was the cessation of that “ongoing, everlasting war” with the earth's field that originally drew so many, including myself, to this practice—the surprising feeling of gliding together through the world, suddenly uncluttered. Time and again over several decades, I have left Rolfing sessions with that intensely pleasurable feeling of just being here as I stand and move, with my attention freed of the pushes and pulls that so often occupy me; I am in a spacious and fresh world of consciousness.

Ida Rolf's (1977) work emerged out of the pre-medicalized field of osteopathy, an intricate system of connective tissue manipulation developed in the 19th century by Andrew Still and William Sutherland. Sutherland considered that this work of enhancing the link between one's body and the energy forces of the cosmos was carrying on older esoteric European traditions. The key to that link for him is the cerebrospinal fluid, whose pulses throughout the body reflect our relationship with

the larger fields of the universe. A handful of practitioners managed to carry forward the original genius of the founders despite the colonization of the field by mainstream medicine—Elliott Blackman, Viola Frymann, John Upledger (Upledger & Vredevoog, 1983), Fritz Smith, Michael Shea (2007), Hugh Milne (1995), Harold I. Magoun (1983). They have managed to train large populations of young practitioners to do this remarkable work. It involves the cultivation of the circulation of the cerebrospinal fluid and its awareness, resulting in profound experiences of harmony with the ancient fields of bioenergies. It is an indescribably luscious experience to feel the utter peace and freedom from the daily hassles of embodiment when one of these practitioners guides one into what they often call a still point, an experience exactly like ones that emerge in sustained meditation.

Naked Awareness

In the 1930s, Charlotte Selver (1977) and Carola Speads brought to New York a radical method for cultivating the senses, which was originally developed by Elsa Gindler in Berlin. The work is deceptively simple: spending hours over years exploring the sensations of the simplest activities: sitting, standing up, reaching, touching, tasting. Alan Watts in California happened upon it and saw it as a Western version of Zen. He invited Selver to visit California where her work was enthusiastically embraced by Suzuki Roshi, founder of San Francisco Zen Center and Michael Murphy the founder of Esalen Institute. She had a quiet but enormous impact on the founders of humanistic psychology, most of whom studied her work. She wrote little and spoke with great care. In this passage, she addressed her spare version of the transpersonal theme:

What people call “mystic”—the experiences one has, for instance in breathing, in balance, or whatever it is, on contact with another person—this can be very clearly experienced and yet experienced as a wonder, too. In other words, I feel it would be marvelous if one could work to pinpoint certain very clear revelations, which come out of experience and which in themselves are astonishing. The revelations can come from the very smallest experience. For instance, eating. (Selver, 1977, p. 17)

Another student of Gindler's, Lily Ehrenfried (1956), escaped to France where she taught until her death in her late 90s. She wrote a beautiful book on the spiritual dimensions of working over time to awakening the fullest ranges of our human sensory capacities. Its title summarizes the transpersonal relevance of this work: *From the Education of the Body to Spiritual Balance* (Ehrenfried, 1956).

Judith Aston created a method of working with the body using both movement instructions, guided touch, and manipulation of connective tissues with the goal of helping a person gain access to what she has sometimes called a neutral space, a configuration of the body in which the pulls and collapses due to many causes are largely put out of play.

“Neutral” means your available optimal alignment for now. It's a position that creates the least stress and the most support for your body. Finding your Neutral is about honoring who you are at any given time.

Your Neutral will be unique to your body, mind and spirit. Your joints, history, surgeries, limitations, fears, successes, emotions and thoughts all make up one person, you, in this present moment. Your Neutral will take into account everything about you and it will change as you do. So if you are grieving the loss of a loved one, your Neutral will reflect that feeling at that particular time, as it would reflect joy at other times. (Aston, Ross, & Bridgeman, 2007, pp. 16–17)²

Using hands and carefully crafted words, the method helps one to arrive right here, neither tensed for action or contracting in fear, but just alive for the now. Her formulation is an embodied version of a widely recognized transpersonal notion of presence, where the inner conversations, with their floodings of memories and images, lose their power and a person is simply available for what is here now. Her formulation articulates the somatic dimension of this notion, expressing how the intricate matrices of muscle, bone, and connective tissues add to the mental detritus to pull one away from the currently real. Under the impact of her teaching, it is shocking to realize how much useless, self-defeating bodily actions one brings to the simplest events of life—sitting at a computer, in conversation with friends, driving a car. As one learns how to do just what one is doing and no more, there is a delicious feeling of emptiness, an absence of the dispersal of self that so typically clouds our perceptions of the real. In her recognition of this transpersonal aspect of her work, she introduced her book with this quote from Pema Chodron (2007): “Pleasant happens. Unpleasant happens. Neutral happens. What we gradually learn is to not move away from being fully present” (p. 78).

Beyond the Ordinary

Emilie Conrad Da’Oud’s “Continuum” is a method of conscious body movement that helps one discover dimensions of embodied consciousness that are in the far-reaches of conventional thinking (Conrad, 2007). It involves long sustained periods of noticing, and sometimes initiating the most minute kinds of movement in the manner, she has said, of dropping a petal in a pond and watching the ripples radiate. She came to her work out of an early history as a New York dancer and a four-year stay in Haiti where she studied African dance and spirituality.

As I let myself become increasingly anguished by the limits humans unknowingly agree to, I also began to see something else. I intuited that at an organismic level of pulsating life force, human being were interacting among species and environments that our more conventional selves were unaware of.

I began to see human beings as biomorphic—we include all life forms. The movements of these forms went far beyond my dance classes, my nationality, gender, and species description. I had been searching for these “unqualified” movements all of my life.

What is it to join life in this way? What is it to magnify the subtle worlds of movement that silently flicker and pulsate inside of us? What is it to feel movement as a cosmic play in which form becomes mutable? These are the inquiries we make in Continuum. (Conrad, 1997, p. 62)

What originally struck me about entering this method was its almost luscious disruption of what I thought of as the basic framework of bodily movement. She likened that conventional framework to industrial age metaphors, pulley and levers, up-down-out. The movements triggered by her directions put me in a completely unfamiliar world of creatures—sea anemones, slime molds, centipedes, seaweeds waving in the tides. Not grid-bound, not Cartesian coordinates. The consciousness that I found emerging from this work is indeed cosmic, although not in the more ethereal use of this term, but in a radically embodied sense of being within the ever-moving fluids, air, energetic pulsations of the earth, its beings, and the larger cosmic attractors.

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's (2008) *Body-Mind Centering* is similar to "Continuum" in its evoking unfamiliar states of body-embedded consciousness that link individuals to the vast worlds of living beings (Hartley, 1989). She has a genius at guiding people into a variety of unique kinds of consciousness that are different from one another depending on

- where they originate: from situating one's awareness in, for example, the bones, the lymph glands, the blood, the muscles; or
- what kind of sensibility is in play: touch, seeing, voicing; or
- what kind of overall body state is attended to: feeling, sensing, emoting, thinking.

It is almost a miraculous feeling to sense the precise discriminations of changes of consciousness as she evokes one sense of being in one's fluids, then one's bones, then one's muscles. With the familiar language of Western culture, it is very difficult to express such experiences.

Generally, when anatomy is taught as I learned it, and as I see it taught elsewhere, you're given visual pictures of it. We have an image of it, but we don't have the kinesthesia of it within ourselves. Maybe we'll even say, "Oh, I have this bone or this muscle *in me*," but it's an intellectual concept, rather than the information coming through viscerally from the proprioceptors of that thing itself. The information is *always* coming in viscerally, but each person is selective in terms of what they choose to acknowledge. The studying that we're doing at the school [School for Body/Mind Centering] is highly selective in terms of receiving input; we go from one system to the other—now we're going into the senses, now we're going to *acknowledge the information* from the skeleton, now from the eye, now from the muscles, now from the organs, from the glands, the brain, the blood, etc. (Cohen, 2008, p. 64)

Authentic Movement is another widespread discipline that involves similar altered states. It is of special relevance to transpersonal psychology because its founders developed their work out of a psychological perspective that included not only perceptions and sensations, but feelings, emotions, dream awareness, and tracking of thoughts themselves. Its origins are in the work of Mary Whitehouse (1995; Frantz, 1999), one of the founders of Dance Therapy, and developed by a handful of others. The emphasis is on long and sustained practice of movement usually in groups or pairs. One person adopts the role of non-critical witness, eyes open, present to what is happening, creating an atmosphere of containment so that the mover is free to attend to

what wants to happen—impulses, images, feelings. The presence of the witness helps create a feeling of safety that allows new and possibly fearful experiences to emerge in movement. The mover often moves with eyes closed. At the end of a period of movement, which may last from a few minutes to an hour or more, there is a disciplined period of discourse whose aim is to allow words to emerge in the same way that movements emerged, not talking about the experience, neither judging it nor interpreting, but allowing words and thoughts to come from out of the experience in the same way that the movements arose. This practiced discourse in a non-judgmental atmosphere of safety is makes Authentic Movement especially valuable in developing new theories of psychotherapy. The moving, speaking, writing, allow the mover to claim forgotten or rejected dimensions of the self as well as fractured links between thinking, moving, and direct experience.

Mary Whitehouse expressed how she came to develop this practice, which she called “Movement in Depth:”

What I began to understand during the beginning of my work in movement in depth was that in order to release a movement that is instinctive (i.e., not the “idea” of the person doing that movement nor my idea of what I want them to do), I found that I had to go back toward not moving. In that way I found out where movement actually started. It was when I learned to see what was authentic about movement, and what was not, and when people were cheating, and when I interfered, and when they were starting to move from within themselves, and when they were compelled to move because they had an image in their heads of what they wanted to do; it was then that I learned to say “Go ahead and do your image, never mind if you are thinking of it,” and when to say “Oh, wait longer. Wait until you feel it from within. (Frantz, 1999, p. 23)

The practice involves teaching people how to wait for movement to arise and evolve as one gives oneself to it within an atmosphere of quiet attention. It is a sustained, tutored, disciplined waiting for movement—and words—to come from the self, instead of from habitual movements—or words—or moving and speaking as others would have us.

A word about what this way of working with the body requires. There is necessary an attitude of inner openness, a kind of capacity for listening to one’s self that I would call honesty. It is made possible only by concentration and patience. In allowing the body to move in its way, not in a way that would look nice, or that one thinks it should, in waiting patiently for the inner impulsive, in letting the reactions come up exactly as they occur on any given evening—new capacities appear, new modes of behavior are possible, and the awareness gained in the specialized situation goes over into a new sense of one’s self. (Whitehouse, 1995, p. 250)

Janet Adler (2007) who has carried this work forward under the name *Authentic Movement*, deliberately developing its transpersonal dimensions, wrote of her early work with autistic children that inspired her eventual engagement with Authentic Movement:

With the children and within the discipline of Authentic Movement, there is much learning about distinguishing between when we are here and when we are not here. In

times of grace there is a shared presence and in these moments . . . ritual occurs. When this happens, an immediate sense of inherent order becomes apparent within a felt sense of sacred space. (p. 25)

The Intertwinings: With Others and the World

There are two particularly important results of the marriage of certain kinds of somatic practices and transpersonal psychology. The first has to do with resolving an old tension between the transpersonal realm and the tangible worlds of body and earth. In the account above, you can see that the cultivation of various regions of our bodily reality lead to a consciousness in which the illusion of a bounded self undergoes a metamorphosis in which one becomes ever more aware that humans are a network of interactions in the environment—air, food, bacteria, cells, the looks and touches of others—within which we find some bare core of agency, the “I can” of Edmund Husserl (Behnke, 2003). Husserl’s student Maurice Merleau-Ponty formulated this interconnection as “intercorporeity” to replace the more abstract “intersubjectivity,” to emphasize our congenital insertion into the web of relationships that makes up the Real (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). In that view, the pervasive troubles of alienation, isolation, and narcissism are secondary in the archaic processes of self-shaping, rooted not in nature but nurture. Individuation is an adult achievement; sociality is our body of birth. In this revisioning of our intercorporeal origins, Western thought joins with the Buddhist notion of interdependence, realized in the flesh. With this easing of the boundaries between flesh, cells, and higher states of consciousness, the therapeutic task of gaining some purchase over the sorrows of everyday life is rendered less problematic.³

A second, and intimately related result of the marriage is an enhanced capacity to deal with the great challenge of our time, the destruction of our ecosystem and the species that nurture it. It has been hard to mobilize the vast numbers of people necessary to change destructive public policies. Part of the difficulty results from a cultural alienation from our soulful connection with flesh, for it is our skin, lungs, and senses that interface our consciousness with air, water, sounds of crickets, sweep of great herons. Not enough people feel that our consciousness, our minds, souls, ideals are intertwined with the earth in which we are embedded. As we become more aware of this intertwining, perhaps there is some hope that we will succeed in turning away from destruction.

Notes

1. Husserlian Phenomenology has played a crucial role in my finding ways to articulate the layers of meaning in these many brilliant body practices. His intricate methods have been drastically oversimplified in the field of psychology. For an account of the method of constitutive phenomenology, cf. the article on that topic by Fred Kersten (1997). Elizabeth Behnke (e.g., 2003) has done a great service in her Study Project in The Phenomenology of the Body (sppb@openaccess.org) where she has brought together little noticed Husserlian texts

with various body practices to demonstrate the radically transformative power in this classical tradition.

2. Her notion of neutral space is similar to Edmund Husserl's notion of the "null-body." Cf. Elizabeth Behnke's (n.d.) "Null-Body, Protean Body, Potent Body, Neutral Body, Wild Body."
3. There are increasing signs that the well-established bioenergetic approach to therapy initiated by Wilhelm Reich and carried forward by Stanley Keleman, Alexander Lowen, John Pierrakos, and others, will make increasingly significant contributions to transpersonal psychology by fostering the sense of self as a biological organism. Even though the founders were virulently secular in resistance to the toxic mystical and spiritual climate of pre-war Germany they managed to lay the foundations for a materialist sense of self that was not atomistic/mechanistic but embedded within the dense interdependent networks of biological evolution.

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