

## **Finding Ourselves**

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I used to spend a lot of time in the woods when I was a kid. I remember what it was like when going out for a walk to just stop, listen and wait. Gradually, into the waiting would emerge the hidden life of the forest: the grey flicker of a mouse in the grass, a squirrel popping its head from around the trunk of a nearby tree, the sudden ripple as a muskrat slipped from the reeds of the muddy bank into the water. And if I took the time to look carefully, each silent rock or rotten log carefully lifted would reveal the chaos of a startled insect community, fleeing from my sudden intrusion.

In this two part series, I'd like to take you on such a nature walk. I would like to invite you to take the time to stop, paying attention to the rich diversity of creative life that is our somatic community, and one that we can often overlook. At times we might bump up against questions you have sometimes thought about but perhaps never knew quite how to ask. And in the process we might not just come up with answers but, I would hope, nurture that capacity that is such an essentially human contribution to life, the ability to look on its mystery, and wonder.

I want to start by turning over a very big and rotten log that we often skirt around in our somatic community. What I am talking about is the struggle for empowerment and identity that is so much a part of our experience as massage and bodywork practitioners, and yet so little discussed. I want to talk about loss of voice and the wound to the soul of the somatic therapies.

Recently, I wrote about how the loss of story was connected to the individual's experience of being wounded ( The Sacred Vessel, Issue #65). But, loss of story is not just a wound to the person. Ancient peoples knew that telling their stories helped sustain the identity of the community and connected the individual to a sense of meaning. The source of self-sustaining story is found in the folk wisdom of the community. Individuals sharing similar experiences gather a body of knowledge whose integrity is sustained through an empathic resonance that says, "Yes, I know that too... I know that too". It affirms a connection through shared experience that at times can be difficult to transmit through words. Because the outsider can find it difficult to understand the shared experience of the culture it was often hidden. For as you may know, not having our experience received in the eye of the beholder inevitably affects it,

diminishing it. More and more, we lose the empowerment of our own story and become as the beholder sees us.

This is the experience of the massage and bodywork community within our dominant culture. The story of our healing tradition is, to a large extent, shaped by the dominant story of the healing traditions that surround us. For example, in massage schools, the history of massage often begins with the history of the technical modalities we call Swedish massage. It is used as a bridge to teach the skills of manual manipulation that we identify with the practice of massage. Each student learns the techniques of petrissage and effleurage, combining them in designated ways into a recipe that helps guide them through a session of allotted time. Under the influence of a culture that is dominated by the view of the body as a largely physical entity, we are taught how to touch tissue, not being.

The influence of the dominant culture is pervasive. It is like the air we breathe. Despite our best intentions its power affects us. As a profession, massage and bodywork look to the dominant culture of the medical healing model for its authority. Those modalities and techniques that fit the model carry the authority of identity with the dominant culture. Standards of practice at the national level, such as those of the NCBTMB, reflect the identification with dominant culture models even when they try to honour modalities not in the mainstream. In the struggle to be heard, modalities that don't fit well with the dominant view have diminished advocacy. Whether talking to government, the medical establishment or the insurance industry, we draw empowerment from the physical modalities to support the effectiveness of body therapies. We speak of the enhancement of fluid movement, the breakdown of ligamentous scar tissue. We talk about the reorganization of fascia and the alignment of bone. We tell the story of massage and bodywork as a therapy that is effective by its reorganization of matter. From the moment a student enters the doors of a massage school the recitation of the dominant story begins. The knowing of the individual, our felt connection with the mythos of touch fades to an echo, lost in the halls of structure, a shadow under the bright light of science. For many individual, it takes years after their graduation from school to begin to recover the native knowing in their touch.

As Jung pointed out, a strength developed out of proportion to one's other talents leaves a person one sided, off balance and having difficulty finding their centre. To a large extent, somatic practice has developed its identity as a therapy of the physical body with little voice for the ways in which we engage in a therapeutic way with the lived experience of the body. Those approaches that develop a relational style tend not to foster education in the physical therapy style modalities. Within our community we have a breakdown in relationship. The result is a split between head and body, objective and subjective experience, with the intellect's capacity to view the body as an object in the ascendancy while the subjective, internal view is marginalized. This loss of empowerment of an important part of the voice of the somatic community in the face of

the dominant story leads to a deep loss of self-confidence. In the struggle to be accepted and heard in the greater world we often forget to accept the less acceptable within ourselves. And the relationship between the heaven and earth of our identity as a healing profession breaks down.

How do we heal such a split? In the healing of a break down in any relationship it is important to learn to listen for the story that has not been heard. In the I Ching such a situation might be best described by the hexigram, Influence (Wooing). This is the hexigram of courtship. In it, the weak is put above, the strong below. The image is of the strong mountain holding the waters of the lake. In our instance we might say that the yang, that part of our selves that is most identified with the world of science, rational thought and structure needs to stop and receive the yin, the subjective experience of the body. This is not always an easy thing to do. The world of the forgotten cultural story can often be inarticulate, diffuse, contradictory. It's lack of focus on structure can offend the rational mind. Yet, I would suggest that it is in learning to facilitate the experiential voice of body therapy that a renewed balance in the identity of the somatic community may be found.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Breema bodywork was covered in a recent issue of Massage Magazine (Issue #65). Breema gets about as close to an example of the folk voice of our somatic community as you can get. It was originated by a community out of a natural response to healing needs and was transmitted experientially from one individual to the next over generations. Teaching, when it is done verbally, is transmitted by telling stories. This is not the stuff of a left brain, structurally organized physical therapy. But Breema doesn't stop there. "[T]he emphasis in Breema", we are told, "is not to cure the client but to experience your own body, because your body is a vehicle for consciousness". To some of you this sounds wonderful; you may be drawn to such work intuitively. But how do we make sense of such information in this modern world? How can we come to understand it, bridging the gap between the ground of body based knowing and scientific knowing in a way that gives each its voice while honouring its truth?

Let's start with the central idea that the beginning of healing is in the experience of the practitioner's own body. What do we actually experience if we pay attention to our own body when acting as therapist? Try it sometime. Focus on your body sensations, taking in as much as you can of what you feel. Once you get over your autistic fear of being lost in a sea of sensations and losing your client, you will likely notice that one of the primary experiences you have is of touching your client. You may actually feel them more. We experience a paradox. If we focus more on feeling within ourselves we have the possibility of feeling the other more.

Just the other day I was working with a training therapist who was concerned about the pain in his hands when he massaged. I asked him to hold his hands so that I could touch my palms to his and asked him what he felt. He could sense the warmth of my hands and began to feel his body relax. Then I asked him to imagine doing a massage. Immediately, he could feel his body tighten and a numbness came into his hands. This is actually a common experience in many a bodywork session. If you pay attention to its manifestation you will notice that this dichotomy between "doing to" and "being with" has a definite connection to changes in the therapist's experience of their own body tension .

The reason for this is rooted in some basic physiology that tells us that the neuromuscular system needs sensory input for the muscles to respond. If we control the input of that information the muscles show the control through lack of responsiveness and tension. Now lets add a piece of theory from body-centred psychology that tells us that when an individual diminishes sensory information from external sources, not only is their ability for responsive interaction diminished but a split between inner and outer reality begins. We lose our ability to be in relationship with another. Simply put, touch that focuses more on receiving than doing is more sensitive, interactive and responsive. It is the "listening" touch of any effective therapist.

But there is more to learn from the example of Breema bodywork. Listening to the other isn't all that Breema seems to be talking about. In the experiential world of Breema we are explicitly told that the focus isn't just on taking in what you feel of the other, its about taking in what you feel of yourself. How can that be the basis of good therapy?

Let's go back to our idea that we need to take in our experience of the world to be able to adequately respond to it. This, in fact, is what we are doing to some degree all the time. In other words, the way in which we know the world is by experiencing it in our own space. This way of experiencing the other is actually one part of what Object Relations psychology sometimes called the relational or interactional field, a shared field of perception between ourself and the other. The experience is now more complex. We are not just taking our experience of another, we are taking in our experience of the interaction with another.

This is what Breema bodyworker, Maggie Wingfield, is talking about when she says, "you can tell by touch if [your client] is making an effort". When we focus on taking in the experience of the other we also enhance our experience of the other - we take in the immediacy of their response to us. For example, the resistance we feel is not just the resistance in the client or the resistance in us, it is the resistance in the relationship. From this perspective, for the resistance to change it is not just the client who will have to change, the relationship will have to change.

What we learn from the Breema bodywork experience is that sensitivity to the relational field has two potential values:

1. It increases sensory responsiveness to the reality of the client's body.
2. Awareness of the relational field between client and therapist allows the therapist to read client body response by its affect on the therapist's own body experience.

Through the insights of physiology and psychology we gain a little more understanding of the Breema paradigm, and a glimpse of how its essence might be integrated into the work of any practitioner. But the knowledge of Breema bodywork isn't just the genius of an isolated village in Kurdistan. In fact, we have a rich history within the somatic community to draw upon in understanding therapy in the relational field. Working with the interactional field also happens to be the basis of the decades long development of somatic education theory, beginning with the work of F. Matthias Alexander at the turn of the century and extrapolated by pioneers like Moshe Feldenkrais, Milton Trager and Thomas Hanna, most of whom have left a body of written work documenting the development of their theories.

For example, sensory resonance is also utilized in the Trager approach when the practitioner asks herself, "What could be lighter"? Working with the therapist's own experience of tension in the relational field, she is able to find a way of engaging that doesn't fall into collusion with the experience of "tenseness" and the client is freed to find a new way of relating as well. Sound complex? Then try this: The next time you are in a session, take the time to be aware of your own body state. When you notice yourself tense or feel that you are working too hard, don't do anything, don't try to make a change. Just take a breath of your own body reality and ask yourself the Trager question, "What could be lighter"? And then let it happen. You will likely be surprised to find that your body just naturally reorganizes and relaxes, and that your client does too.

Within the seemingly contradictory and irreconcilable array of somatic modalities lie many more threads of similarity than those I have given. The difficulty is that in working so hard to establish identity, in bringing so much energy to being heard, we have forgotten the equally important need to listen, and like effective touch, respond. When working with the seemingly chaotic diversity of somatic therapies, I am often guided by the psychological perspective of Carl Jung, who used the tools of the modern intellect to painstakingly unearth the meaning in the story of the soul. Our ability to hear the voice of the experience of the body in therapy is only limited by how little time we have given to exploring, and valuing, the touch experience in which so much of our work is grounded. The tools are with us. We can turn to the contributions of modern psychology as I have in the example we have worked with. We can learn our own somatic heritage through the thoughtful contributions of bodywork pioneers such as Alexander, Feldenkrais and Hanna. And we can turn to the felt experience of each and every one of

us and ask, "why"? The unheard voice of somatic therapy no longer needs to be confined to the inner knowing of individual therapists and the mythos of "alternative" therapies. It needs to be developed, not just so that we can bring the wisdom of the touch tradition into its rightful place as a therapeutic perspective, or so that the folk knowledge of our touch tradition can bring its wellspring of knowledge to a form that can be used with understanding by practitioners of every stripe, but because healing the fault in the foundation of the somatic therapist's identity must be an essential part of our responsibility to healing as a profession.