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Selections from Ed Maupin's 1998 essay

Somatic Education: its Origins, Ancestors, and Prospects

Although the insights and many of the practices we now call "somatic" are very old, the particular convergence which we call the Somatic Movement probably began about thirty years ago. This is composed of people who work with the subjective or phenomenological body for various purposes, such as healing, education, and self-discovery. Many are now suggesting that we use the word "somatic" for this approach to the Human Being. That would give us "Somatics" or "Somatic Studies" for the field of knowledge thus derived, and "Somatic Practices" for its practical applications. Somatic practices include psychotherapy, education, awareness, movement, and hands-on techniques of bodywork.

Whatever the terms we ultimately use, a coherent viewpoint based on a new relationship with the body seemed to coalesce in the late '60's. In recent years the viewpoint has ripened into a body of knowledge.

Whereas its practitioners originally organized themselves around techniques, brand-names usually identified with particular originators, now we are approaching the field in terms of more general categories, looking for larger trends, bigger contexts, more ultimate issues.

I am going to suggest that a particular experience, the "body epiphany," was important in the beginning of the Somatic Movement. The body epiphany is an initial discovery of the body/mind unity, a discovery which matures into a more sustained state of "embodiment," in which every aspect of experience maintains some link with the sense of the "lived body." Embodiment is very close to the center of what we attempt to bring about with "somatic therapy" and "somatic education."

The quest for personal authenticity and the "Real Self" was a dominant motif, perhaps a collective longing of late '60's. It was a frequent theme at Esalen where people were eagerly doffing their clothes and their middle-class formality in order to "find themselves."

We are the present day inheritors of that collective longing, still in search of its grail. The somatic interest arose at that time, because it grew more and more clear that the body is a key to a more authentic reality. Authenticity is a function of embodiment.

The Body Epiphany

Most of us began with a fairly dramatic personal experience in which the reality of the body became clear. I call it the "Body Epiphany," or, less dramatically, the "Somatic Insight." I think it defines the beginning of the Somatic Movement historically. In other periods the reality of the body may have been too obvious to notice, or else so buried as to be inaccessible. At any rate, if people in other times were having the body epiphanies, they didn't create a somatic movement from it. Now, suddenly, this was an experience whose time had come.

The discovery of the reality of oneself as "lived body" takes many forms, some subtle, others more intense. For me the epiphany came as a result of my exploration of Zen meditation in about 1960. I discovered the ability to 'witness' my consciousness in the 'here-and-now', and that led quickly to the discovery that my body was Real in the present moment. I immediately knew several things: that my body is an on-going process in the here-and-now; that it possessed an acute intelligence quite apart from my conscious thought; and that how my awareness was distributed in it determined my consciousness. It's always so difficult to express these things, but I could say that I had discovered my Existence and knew that it was Embodied. Since I was a doctoral student in clinical psychology at the time, I began looking for embodied approaches to

psychotherapy.

Of course, the lived body becomes real to us in many different ways: for some it is a profound existential realization, for others it is the discovery that they are carrying emotions and feelings of which they had previously been unaware. In one way or another the body becomes Real as something other than a physical object which the mind happens to be wearing.

Embodiment

The body epiphany defines our beginning. When broadened and deepened, this initial insight becomes "embodiment," which could be considered our central term. Our professional goal is to produced embodiment and then to pursue its powerful possibilities, in education, health, art, spirituality, and all the rest.

What is embodiment? Following Drew Leder, I have described it as a state in which every aspect of experience maintains some link with one's sense of physical presence, or "lived body," Note that it is not restricted to any one aspect of experience. It is not limited to internal experience or subjective awareness, but includes the external sense of the objective world still linked with on-going here-and-now physical process. The lived body is not separate from the mind or intellect. One can think as well as

feel, act as well as introspect, in an embodied manner. How is Embodiment Developed?

First of all, embodiment involves coming into contact with here-and-now experience, loosening the grip of thinking and becoming aware of one's living process. A different relationship with time (sometimes) is involved. One learns to attend to 'duration' without continually making conceptual conclusions. Thoughts arise, but the thinking is an event in present process. This is the basis of intuition.

Many meditation techniques foster this kind of attention, whether the focus is on the breath or on observing the mind, listening to ambient sounds or watching a candle. Fritz Perls, the originator of Gestalt Therapy, and surely one of the parents of the Somatic Movement, relentlessly directed attention to what was happening now, in the physical present, in order to bring a person into dramatic awareness of the living moment.

Embodiment also implies a different balance of the senses. Many people are visually dominant. Seeing is their main way of knowing, which influences the way they think (sharply separated objects), and how they conceive of themselves. (Eye = "I").

The skeletal-muscular senses bring a particular component to our sense of physical presence. Since its earliest days, the human potential movement has

favored kinesthetic techniques. T'ai Chi, Aikido, Improvisational Movement, Bioenergetics, and a host of others seek to increase physical presence with greater physical awareness.

Hearing, too, is a vital entrance into embodied reality. Like kinesthesia, it bypasses vision with its all-too-dominant relationships with thinking. The entire body can "hear," and hearing is a different experience from seeing.

And, of course, Touch: giving and receiving touch has so many ramifications it would be futile to begin describing them here. Touch and feeling, being so closely connected, experiencing ones own body through being touched is a major source of learning. The developed touch of a developed bodyworker represents a significant change in how the senses are used.

Somatics as a Basis for a new Humanities Education

Having evolved from individual sessions with clients and human potential workshops through spiritual trainings and vocational schools, Somatic Education is poised on the brink of a new phase. The somatic insights seem peculiarly relevant to a new kind of humanities education. Just when the humanities seem almost defunct in academic settings, victim to the successes of science and engineering and to the

practical concerns of contemporary students, somatics offers a basis for answering the age-old questions of what it means to be human. Already somatic education is taking on academic forms. Some academic institutions have somatics departments, and a few pioneering vocational schools are moving to establish broader academic programs.

Embodiment changes everything. As somatic education becomes education in humanities, we are faced with the necessity of reevaluating our body of knowledge. For example, do we have a somatic psychology adequate to address all the somatic systems which need to integrated into embodied awareness? How adequate are our maps of the body/mind? Also, how can the traditional parts of a humanities education be brought into the perspective of embodiment? Every field of knowledge can be linked with embodiment. What would an embodied Sociology be, for example? First, what does an embodied individual want to know about society, social groups, and so on? Also, what is the impact of class and power, of group identification, of cultural origin, on the body? With embodiment, philosophy returns to its original interest in ultimate wisdom and the structure of experience. Drew Leder surveys European phenomenology of the body and refutes Descartes' dualism on the basis of the body/mind experience Descartes was attempting to organize. He has also proposed mapping the body in terms of the relative appearance and non-appearance of its parts

in different states and activities, and in different cultures. Such mapping could be a new source of embodied knowledge in psychology and anthropology.

Embodied Learning: Student-Centered and Self-Directed

Education itself is radically altered by embodiment. What characteristics would we expect embodied education to possess? The embodied state implies the "embodied learner," who, once aroused, is the Real thing: a human being in touch with essential, core responses. The appropriate education for such a learner is obviously student-centered. The embodied learner can answer the question, "what do I want to learn?" Everything which innovative educators have evolved in the way of "self-directed learning" should work with them, because they can become aware of themselves in this way.

Socratic dialogue is another part of student-centered learning. Rather than absorbing information through lectures, students need to evolve their own thinking through classroom dialogue.

And the techniques of somatic therapy and education? These students can be shown techniques, but ultimately, they must devise their own: the lived body is the key to intuitive knowledge. Our students must find within themselves the essential experiences around which their craft is formed. We offer processes

which may reveal what is necessary. We present maps and conceptual systems with the understanding that they are metaphors for the real thing. Even the scientific facts of anatomy and physiology are metaphorical in this sense.

Multi-Sensory Learning

At Esalen we spoke of "affective education" or “experiential education” to distinguish it from ordinary conceptual and logical learning. Part of the impact was due to engaging the body as well as (or even rather than) the mind. Since then there has come to be a remarkable amount of information about different kinds of learning and the functions they involve. Jung's typology based on the four functions of thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition has been useful. Neuro-Linguistic Programming identified individual differences in the use of different sensory systems, such as the visual, the auditory, or the kinesthetic. Later the differing "learning styles" favored by different learners received attention, especially as it became clear that students attracted into the study of Somatic Therapy were sometimes not adept in conventional academic skills, even when they were talented for somatic work. More recently Howard Gardner has proposed "Multiple Intelligences." Different kinds of learning require different sets of functions. Somatically based education seems well placed to take these differences into account and to design trainings which appeal to

many aspects of the learner.

Are We Thinking Big Enough?

Clearly, we have touched upon some major topics, seen across long periods of human history. Somatic therapy, it would seem, is not, or not only, the latest "alternative therapy" promising to cure physical problems at a savings in cost to the health care system. It is, rather, a recurrent philosophical and spiritual viewpoint which attempts to return to human reality at its most basic level and to mobilize human nature at its very core. It is the inheritor of historical culture reaching back to ancient times. It is a promise of freedom in a confused and distracted age.

We have come a long way from individual bodyworkers putting cards in health food stores, but are we thinking big enough? The body epiphany has ripened into embodiment, and embodiment changes everything. Somatic therapy makes changes which may take years to assimilate. Somatic education may be at the foundation of a philosophical revolution with consequences in all the traditional fields of knowledge. The traditional academics, still caught in the old disembodied game, are not likely to pursue this to its conclusions. Our students may.