

A SOMATIC MEMOIR

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In the earliest days of my life, I lived in a small cabin encompassed by the wild Missouri forest. In the company of grass, tree and stone, sky and earth, I considered my self another element of nature. Nature was an intrinsic element of life, as much a part of my world as my siblings and parents. The boundaries between inside and outside were porous and open. These early impressions shaped my mental, physical, emotional and spiritual life. Before I started school, we moved to a small house in a neighborhood. Our big yard opened into our neighbors' yards and into the surrounding creeks and woods. Almost every day I was outside – climbing trees, running races and skipping rope, inventing and playing games. Outside, I felt free and wild.

I grew up in the Catholic faith, in sight of our parish church, within earshot of the bells that rang throughout the day, signaling time for prayer. Play was paused for these prayers – a time of stillness, a time to draw my senses inward, a time for inner reflection. The church itself was a sanctuary of quiet. The sunlight from outside filtered through stained glass windows and laid itself down in rainbow shapes on rosy hued, terrazzo floors. There was always a faint aroma of frankincense and myrrh. I sat on long, gleaming oak pews, amid statues, plaques, and paintings of saints and angels. I felt a spacious calm, and deep connection to a mystical community that transcended time and space through ritual, song, and contemplative silence. I was part of a community grounded in spiritual unity, and ritual practice. I felt a sense of place and belonging.

When I was still young, I began to study ballet. I remember the sensation of stepping into the studio for the first time, my eyes taking in the light, my nose feeling the sting of the aroma of rosin, my ears filled with silence, my ribs opening to an instinctive wave of breath. I loved moving

through space; leaping, spinning, jumping, carving space with my limbs, pausing in dynamic stillness – all held in the rhythmic pulse of music. Dance and movement became a familiar vocabulary for my body to express what I felt in nature and in the silent intimacy of the church. It was in these three places – nature, the church, and the studio, that I found my primary connection to life – in immediate contact with nature, stillness, movement, and experiencing my environment through the sensate capacities of my body. The quiet awe and stillness I felt in the church, the spectrum of expressions I found and embodied in the studio, the wild freedom I felt outdoors became the underlying texture of my life. The language of spirit and body and place became my essential language.

As time went by and I became an adult, the demands of a contemporary human life condensed in and around me. The quality of being of my childhood was eroded by those demands. I stumbled into pockets of time here and there, where I could feel the energy and vibration of life that I had found in my childhood. I longed for a return to the vibrancy of nature, easy expression through movement, and a spiritual connection to a mystical source of energy and solace. I often felt lost, hungry and thirsty. I began a search for a way of living that bridged life and art, life and nature, life and spirit. Along the way I studied shamanic healing arts, the use of imagery as a healing modality, energy medicine, the healing power of creativity, eastern philosophies. All of these studies have been boons. However, I still longed to be in alive awareness throughout my day, not just when I was away from my contemporary life in a retreat or in a session. I wanted a bridge that was always within an arm's length of my body, a breath away from my mind. I found the bridge in Embodied Mindfulness, a somatic approach to experiencing the body as an ally, rather than an obstacle.

Embodied Mindfulness is a set of somatic practices originated by Jamie McHugh. Informed by his studies in Body Mind Centering, Continuum Movement, modern and indigenous dance, play therapy, and influenced by his studies with the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh,

Jamie identified five primary capacities of expression in the human body: Breath, Vocalization, Stillness, Movement, and Contact. He articulated his experiences as a sensate being into a set of somatic practices that are available and accessible to anyone who has a body, anyone who breathes. In Jamie's own words, Embodied Mindfulness "is an integrative approach to the art and craft of embodiment." Supported by his active curiosity, and energetic intellect, Jamie continues to study, learn, and develop the rich and varied technologies of these five elements. He lives at and interacts with the wild and beautiful northern California coast, learning and teaching from that diverse ecosystem. I have studied and practiced the deep play that is Embodied Mindfulness with Jamie for ten years. What an adventure it's been, and continues to be!

These somatic practices led me to a return to my primary relationship to the world through the innate and intuitive wisdom of my body. These practices are simple and accessible to any body. We all breathe, and our breath vibrates to become sound. Our bodies oscillate between states of movement and stillness to propel us through space, and to come to rest. It is through contact – the sense of touch – that we ground, center, and support ourselves. As I integrated these practices into my everyday life – much in the same way that nature, contemplative prayer, and dance were the integral elements of my childhood happiness and stability – I felt the desire to bring others to the practice.

In my contemporary life, I'm a yoga, mindfulness, and meditation teacher in corporate wellness programs. My students are people whose lives are governed by the clock. Their bodies are accustomed to conforming to the demands of their jobs, and are often forgotten as they go about their days behind a desk, behind the wheel of a vehicle, behind a podium as they teach. Their bodies are directed by the activities of their strategic minds, and often at the expense of their comfort, ease, and health. As their teacher, it's my job to lead them back to their soft animal bodies, back to the rhythm of their heartbeat, their breath, the ebb and flow of their fluid bodies. I do this through Embodied Mindfulness practices.

While traditional yogic breath practices offer many resources, I find it can be difficult for my students to embrace a tradition that is sourced from an ancient, esoteric art and craft that can be suspect in their own faith traditions. Embodied Mindfulness is clear in its approach – these are simple, easy to understand, straightforward prompts that are grounded in the basic anatomical landmarks of the human body – the skull, the rib case, the belly, the pelvis and the feet, and the continuous flow of breathing. Adding the sometimes forgotten and often devalued sense of touch grounds the practice in the immediate, felt sense of the body. Attention follows touch. Bringing one's own hand to the body brings one's mind to the body in a kind and conscious way. It's deeply rewarding when my students report how they use the practice to meet the challenges they encounter in their everyday lives. One student used the waterfall breath (breathing in, guide awareness up the back body from tailbone to skull – breathing out, guide awareness down the front of the body from skull to pelvis) while she was undergoing an MRI, and found the experience to be not only tolerable, but actually relaxing. Another student used targeted touch (her hand anchored on her thigh) while undergoing a stressful and painful mammogram. She was able to stay grounded and centered, and avoided the unpleasant effects of a runaway mind. I have elder students who find balance an ongoing challenge. It's particularly helpful for these students to practice the Th-hiss breath (a long, slow exhale with the tip of the tongue at the back of the upper teeth, creating a soft hissing sound) in balancing poses. One student laughingly reported that she is focused so much on the sound she is producing that she forgets that she's standing on one leg. I love that she's bringing the lightness of laughter to a situation that was once frightening.

I have the privilege of being a nanny to two humans, one from the time he was three months old, and his sister from her birth day. The children are now 5 and 3 years old. When they were infants I consciously brought awareness to my ordinary, rhythmic breath as I held them; to soothe them, burp them, and coax them to sleep. Now that they are older, and very active, I've found Embodied Mindfulness practices indispensable

to help them self regulate. I've taught them to breath in through the nose, and out through the mouth, with either their own hands or mine on their belly and rib case. I've taught them candle breath (a slow release of the outbreath, as if blowing out the flame of a candle in slow motion). Many an outburst has been shortened with 3 candle breaths! It's always stressful for me to wrangle the wiggly kids into their car seats and get them safely buckled in. Afterwards, I come to stillness at the back of the car and enjoy three intentional breaths before getting into the driver's seat. With this simple activity, I become more present, more aware, and more kind.

As a coach and mentor, I begin each session with a client with Embodied Mindfulness practices. It's a potent way to slow down the quickness of the mind and bring calm to an overactive emotional state. Beginning each session with a simple ritual that the individual controls, creates an atmosphere of safety and predictability that supports transcendent change. I find that people tend to live their lives from and in the context of their stories, from their imaginal perspective. These stories are often impediments to understanding and acceptance. Our personal stories can be so embedded in our awareness that they become unconscious patterns of thought and behavior. Embodied Mindfulness practices are rooted in kindness, and kindness liberates energy. When we calm the mind and the body, and come to our senses, we enter an essential frame of reference that can only be found in the present moment. When we can be in the immediate moment, in the graceful ease of a body that breathes, moves and senses, we can more easily access the wisdom of the soul and mind. Once we know, "nothing bad is happening right now", and verify that truth with the physical sensations of ease in our bodies, we can encounter the ways our story - our fixed perception of our contemporary human life - is impacting the choices we make in our moment to moment life. and more readily find the internal resources that facilitate change and growth.

I help people find wiggle room in their stories, by helping them find wiggle room in their breath and movement - from restriction to

expansiveness in breath - from stillness to subtle movements - to larger, broader movements, and on to broader ranges of thought. There's a swing and sway in the breath that replicates the swing and sway of emotional and mental responses. People are able to experience their stories in a less emotionally charged way, and find new pathways to problem solving. Folks find acceptance of their circumstances, without falling into the numbness of dull resignation or the problematic dynamic of impulsive reactivity. Embodied Mindfulness practices access the wisdom of the body, and shift that wisdom from the localized sensations of the movement of breath in the body to the globalized array of choices that are available to release, change and growth in one's life.

My clients have said, "This is like physical therapy for the spirit" and "I discovered things about myself that I didn't know before – things that are valuable to me as I move forward in my life."

As a movement artist and poet, I find Embodied Mindfulness practices the gateway to deep creativity. With my breath and body as my compassionate companion, I can leave behind the concerns, dramas, distractions of the ordinary world and bring wholeness to my creative expression.

*It's good to have a friend in my breath.
It's good to be at home in my body.
It's good to have a place of refuge,
no shame, no scolding, no remorse.
From here, I willingly enter the territory of creative flow,
the cave of the unknown,
the grit and marrow of unflinching perception.
My breath, my body companion me
as I enter this moment
and the next and the next,
with awareness, innocence, compassion,
acceptance.*

*This breath and this breath and
this one
usher me into my own immensity
and genius
and I midwife
the birth of my soul.
My story becomes myth
and muse
and friend.*

Embodied Mindfulness is a homecoming to my natural self, to the self that is free of societal norms and expectations. It returns me to my essential humanity. It rewilds and rewires me. Embodied Mindfulness is a practice of choice. Every day, in every moment, my breath is running through my body. I may not be able to choose many things about my life, but I can choose to breathe in nourishing ways, to bring my body to stillness for repose and restoration, to vibrate my breath and feel the energy of life vibrating through, in and around me, to consciously contact my self and my environment in meaningful, respectful, loving ways that expand my joy and ease my sorrow.

I look forward to continuing to deepen my practice, and to teach these practices to others in my community, and in residential retreats in the natural environment. I look forward to more teaching, more writing, more dance, more creative flow. This is my peace making activism. I believe when we are at peace with ourselves, we can be at peace with others. I believe when we respect and care for our own ecosystem with joy, we are more likely to respect and care for our planetary home. I intend to continue to express my humanity with Embodied Mindfulness practices, in ways that are a support to myself, to others, and to our planet.

*To learn more about Jamie McHugh, please visit his websites:
www.somaticexpression.com , where you'll find articles, interviews and
Jamie's teaching schedule,
and www.naturebeingart.org, where you'll find Jamie's exceptional
photography.*

*To learn more about me, please visit my website:
www.kateclearysomatics.com, where you'll be able to schedule sessions,
find my teaching schedule, and read my writings.*