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Embodying nature: Discovering eco- consciousness through sensate experience

ABSTRACT

Eco-consciousness has its foundation in an active relationship between the individual soma and the larger body of the natural world. Embedded within this relationship is our innate sensorimotor intelligence and our natural instinct as children to spontaneously play as living, sensing, expressive bodies coming to know ourselves and our environment. In this practice reflection, I delineate a map and a process with sample activities for embodied creative engagement to cultivate our capacity to witness, contact, mirror, respond and rest in partnership with the living planet. This approach – ‘embodying nature’ – is highly adaptable for various ages and degrees of experience, inviting participation at any level and in whatever natural environment is available.

KEYWORDS

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'Mencius (in the Fourth Century B.C.) tells of the tendency in humans as they move out of childhood to throw away their minds. Thereafter the whole of life is to recover the lost mind of the child' (Swimme and Berry 1992: 189).

What fuels the increasing momentum of our voracious appetite for innovation, acquisition and consumption? What is the motivation? Is it the manic nature of anxiety, the protest-phase of the abandoned primate/child searching for its maker? And is the absence of fulfilling relationships with ourselves, each other, and the places we inhabit, provoking this insatiable quest for 'more, better, bigger?

(Berry 2000: 130)

Notes from a practice #1: *body laying on sand dune, next to pool of water, late afternoon light, everything crisp, emboldened by the shadows while ocean drones and wind caresses, irregular patterns of contact and traces. A symphony of endless repetition and constant variation – nothing is repeated twice and yet everything blends together in a soothing seamless rhythm of constancy. Breathing out long, elaborate exhales and witnessing the minute detail of sand grains, hand traces circles in the sand. They roll and collide in response to the push, wedges and grooves arise and disappear. Ripples from the breeze reach across this little pool of water; I imagine how my exhale also creates an unseen ripple through the substance of space. The movement of breath expressed, the action of hand in sand and wind rippling the water all meet together in this moment. Spine wiggles while eyes reach to the horizon and return to the miniature landscape of endless sand grains. I am both this tiny space and this vast one – resting inside the tendrils of breath, embraced by dune, infused by glowing light, touched by textured air.*

For the past 30 years, I have been cultivating a series of somatic-expressive activities and a model for practice to bring the soma into direct contact and connection with the elemental bodies of nature. The original impulse for this work slowly began during five years of assisting Anna Halprin in her month-long 'Dance in the Natural Environment' intensives on the California coast (McHugh 1989). Halprin's Life/Art Process[®] approach was oriented towards a humanistic psychology/expressive arts therapy outcome for more individual awareness and integration (i.e. the elements are reflections of one's personal mythology that are danced, drawn, dialogued with and ritualized with others). I found over time I was less interested in this therapeutic process revolving around personal narratives and was more drawn to a simultaneous educational and aesthetic exploration of our creaturely selves related to evolutionary processes. What can happen when we connect matter to spirit, transcend the limitations of the individual self, and become *part* of the larger body of the environment?

Certainly, just walking, breathing and perceiving in the natural environment are beneficial for the human organism. It is our true home. And yet, western cultural conditioning and the pre-occupations of the modern, complicated mind have created a barrier to simple sensorial experience, effectively keeping us encased in our tensions and our individual separateness. We forget our true, uncomplicated, interwoven nature. A key for me in unravelling this conundrum was to go backwards in development and return to children's play as a model for re-patterning the body and re-engaging consciousness at its most fundamental level. Young children, especially during the early years, naturally embody *mindfulness* and *presence* with their total absorption in exploring the

world through their senses and kinaesthetic responses. This active, exploratory mindfulness with heightened sensory perception in spontaneous play is the foundation for the formalized play of art that evolves as we mature.

French psychologist Jean Piaget, in delineating stages of child development, identified the *sensorimotor* as the primary stage during the first two years of life (Piaget 1977). What caught my attention in this stage is (1) *repetition* – first through the automatic reflex system/developmental movement patterns and then through volitional movement and (2) *sensory immersion* – awash in the multiple streams of the senses and in particular, the tactile sense. With the enchantment of simple, repetitive action in concert with sensory wakefulness, the mind's pre-occupations can be diverted into another realm. Indeed, all of the world's spiritual traditions have utilized multiple combinations of simple, repetitive movement and chanting with sensory stimulation (fire and water, incense, instruments, mandalas and processions, etc.) in rituals for millennia!

'Embodying nature', then, is the confluence of basic somatic practices and expressive action within the container of a relational conceptual map for evoking this sensorimotor consciousness. Two mutually informing systems – the Five Somatic Technologies and the Five-Part Relational Map – combine the preverbal, sensate dimension and its counterpart, reflective cognition, to sustain attention and deepen engagement between self and place.

Five somatic technologies (McHugh 2016): Breath, Vocalization, Contact, Movement and Stillness are the five indigenous somatic technologies implicit in our design. Like all human technologies, these five can be developed and consciously used to expand our natural capacities beyond their ordinary range. Layering and blending them together occupies the mind with multiple streams of sensory information and brings the body's perceptual network more into the foreground. We redirect and channel the ramblings of the mind into the sensory coherence of bodily presence: ground interweaving with sky through the central channels of musculoskeletal structure and meridian lines, buoyed by respiratory flow and circulatory pulses, animated by interoceptive responses to exteroceptive infusions, and savoured, encoded and digested by the nervous system's vast connectivity network. This orchestrated ecosystem of multitudes establishes a felt sense of safety – and emboldens bravery. Through the movement of my breath, the benevolent contact of my hands, the autonomous expression of my voice and the contented rest of stillness, I know where I am in myself, am able to experience my solidity and my fluidity, and can easily blur the boundaries of self to experiment with who or what I might become as I enter into alchemical relationship with place.

Five-part relational map: from this body of inner sense perceptions and beginner's mind, we extend ourselves into relationship with whatever ecosystem we currently inhabit and explore the elements present there. The input of direct, unmediated sensory experience with sky, ocean, rock or tree stimulates associations, feelings and images that are acted upon and made visible in the creative output of varied sensorimotor choices:

- **Witness** – be still, open and receptive.
- **Contact** – use different qualities of touch and various body parts, i.e. use hands or feet, belly or back.
- **Mirror** – become what you perceive through imitation simultaneously or in a call-and-response rhythm. Become the quality, the shape, the movement or the sound.

- **Respond** – use your voice, movement and stillness in counterpoint/reaction/response.
- **Rest** – pause and settle, taking time out from the concentrated focus.

The fluid back and forth between mirroring and responding in the spontaneous, kinetic and imaginative flow state of play is how children experiment with possibilities, grow their capacities and enlarge their behavioural repertoire. And interacting with the natural world through sensorimotor play punctuated by the stillness of rest and witnessing, we are able to rediscover the 'lost mind of the child' within an adult body of lived experience – and similarly experiment, grow and enlarge our capacity for relationship with the larger body of life.

PRACTICE

These are a few sample activities (or tasks) for sensory-motor encounters with available ecosystems such as ocean, woods, rivers and meadows. They are specifically invitations for inclusive participation – simple enough for beginners and (oftentimes) difficult for people with experience! Like all spontaneous play, there is not a deliberate end-goal to accomplish or specific experience to be had from these experiments in environmental relationship. The state of being engendered in the present moment is the primary reward, with a secondary reward arising in the aftermath. This 'harvesting' during the self-reflective phase sorts out the wheat from the chaff, illuminating what has heart and meaning for each of us, and what has value for our lives.

As a prologue to these journeys outside to receive and internalize the environment, we first lay the groundwork by focusing on inner perception to sense and feel our home base within ourselves. This initial activity centralizes attention inside the torso so we can be emotionally centred, kinaesthetically awake and perceptually prepared for outer relationship.

Inner preparation: take a moment to sit and bring both your hands to your belly. With each inhale, feel your belly swell as a response to the downward movement of your diaphragm; and with each exhale, feel your belly settle as a response to the upward movement of your diaphragm. So take a few minutes to feel the movement of breath and its impact on your belly: inhale-belly swelling; exhale-belly settling. You do not have to effort or try hard; your belly might swell a lot or a little. Give the movement your curious attention, temporarily suspending any thoughts or judgments that interfere with the easy, graceful rhythm of inhale and exhale.

Now, keep one hand on your belly and place the other hand on your chest so you can feel the coordination between the downstairs and the upstairs. With each inhale, as your diaphragm descends, feel your belly swell and your lungs rise; and with each exhale, as your diaphragm rises, feel both your belly and lungs settle. Repeat this for a few minutes so you can relax into the activity, and then begin to innovate – experiment with lengthening and shortening the duration of the breathing movement throughout your torso. Afterwards, rest and notice first, how you experience yourself now and then, how do you experience your immediate environment now?

Finally, stand up and repeat the last activity a few times with eyes closed. Then, open your eyes and expand your attention to include the space around

you with the same sensitive contact used between your hands and your belly. Inhale, diaphragm moving downwards, belly swelling, eyes meeting the world. Exhale, diaphragm moving upwards, belly settling, world meeting the eyes.

KEY PARTS OF THE PROCESS TO USE OUTSIDE WITH THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES

Orient without. Begin by scanning, witnessing and absorbing this place while settling in with your breathing.

Orient within. Close your eyes and make contact with your hands anywhere on your torso. When you open your eyes after some time, focus on an aspect of your environment. Activate your head to mirror (imitate) the quality, directionality and tempo of whatever you are witnessing. Commit presence to what you behold and become its action. You are breathing and moving at the same time ... and every now and then, punctuating the action with stillness.

Focus and wander. Move as you wish at times as a counterpoint to the focused attention. After some time, shift the movement focus from your head to your shoulders. You are breathing and moving – and every now and then, punctuating the exploration with stillness and your own movement response.

After some time, shift the movement focus from your shoulders to any body part you want to involve in relationship to your element of focus. You are breathing and moving at the same time – and periodically, punctuating the mirroring with stillness, a change of body part or your own movement response.

Pause. End in stillness. Sit or lie down on the ground and let your mind rest.

Reflect. When you are ready, do a piece of free writing to harvest your experience, writing down sensory impressions, thoughts or feelings in a random order or in a linear narrative. Feel free to let your voice emerge in your own unique way.

- How do you experience the inner landscape of your body now?
- What did you discover about yourself in this activity and the place you chose? What was revealed?
- How would you further develop this activity for yourself?

Trail activity #1: go for a walk outside in a natural setting where you feel safe and can be undisturbed. Every now and then when something interesting, beautiful or just unfamiliar catches your attention – stop, place your hands on your belly and/or chest, take at least three breaths and give this moment your undivided attention. As you continue to walk, become increasingly aware of the movement and sounds around – the dance and song of your environment. Punctuate your walk with: *stop – make contact with yourself – three-breath witnessing (looking and listening) – moving on.*

After some time of settling into this rhythm of moving, noticing, coming to attention and then moving on, identify a place where you want to linger with recognizable movement. (Recognizable movement might be clouds passing, water flowing, leaves shaking, etc.)

Trail activity #2: walk on a trail and find your easy walking rhythm. Once you are in an easy groove, and can feel your breath and structure moving as one, spread attention out into the environment. Let your skull pivot up, down, to both sides and all around – shift the forward-directed nature of your focus into a more global attention and play with the corresponding disequilibrium in your movement.

After reorienting, let whatever catches your attention bring you to a pause. Witness what you behold for a few breath cycles and then mirror with your arms the lines, forms and shapes of your environment – a tree reaching upwards on a diagonal evokes a similar reaching with your arms, or a tree spreading out and down is echoed with a similar gesture. Repeat the gesture as many times as desired, adding the sound of your breath, altering the tempo or quality of movement and punctuating the flow with moments of stillness. Find a transition and then move on, back into an easy contralateral walk to integrate.

Stop and repeat this stationary activity a few times so it becomes more familiar; after some time, repeat the activity while walking, or moving through space in any way, at the same time. You can alter the tempo of your walk – fast or slow; your gestures can move at the same tempo so there is congruence between your arms and legs, or they can move in counterpoint – slow legs and fast arms, or fast legs and slow arms. The dance can be as simple or as complex as you wish. Let your voice mirror and support the movement, and periodically add a moment of stillness for a second or longer.

Trail activity #3: focus on the breeze moving through the forest. As it animates the leaves, so too let it activate your arms and then after some time, your centerline from pelvis to head with the same quality of movement. Feel the air touch you, closing your eyes at times and responding to how you sense that movement making contact with you. Go back and forth between eyes open and mirroring the moving plants; and eyes closed and responding to the feel and sound of the breeze. After some time, both mirror and respond to the touch of air, the moving plants and the ‘sensational’ feedback with eyes open.

Notes from a practice # 2: as I witness a tree up close, I see an irregular pattern of grooves as pathways into connection. I feel the variations in depth as my fingers trace these pathways, opening out and closing in, following the grooves to see where they take me. Movement of my fingers caressing, settling into a rhythm, adding a layer of breath articulation, creating more complexity and gradually shifting from a localized awareness – my fingers moving back and forth – to a more globalized awareness – my whole arm, from fingertips through hands, lower arm, elbow, upper arm, shoulder socket and even into my scapula. The reverberations, like ripples over the water, begin to spread through my whole body when I expand attention from those fingertips moving on the tree. I stop and sense the difference between the actively engaged arm in this exploration, and the other arm, waiting by the wayside. The active arm feels light, energized and fluid while the other feels dense, sleepy and leaden. The contrast between the two highlights the difference between the solo body and the body in relationship. This short vignette was enhanced by the musicality of the larger body – air circulating around me, tree branches bending and arcing in the breeze, and the ebb and flow of rustling leaves and squeaking branches.

Contact activity #1: as you walk periodically stop when something captures your attention, focus on it for at least three-breath cycles and then move on. Use this rhythm of movement and stillness, wandering and focused attention, to propel you on the trail for a while. When a specific tree captures your attention, witness from a distance with three breaths and take in the totality of the tree – and then get a little closer and compress your attention – and finally, get up close and personal as you contact the tree. Use one hand, then the other and then both at the same time. Experiment with different types of contact – light or dense, stationary or meandering.

Contact yourself for a spell with the same types of contact. Contact the tree again, this time with your back, or your front, or your skull or with your feet. All these variations will change your body shaping, your quality of touch and your relationship to gravity. Let the point of contact and connection spread out into your body, into your breath, perhaps even expressing your breath as vocalization. Allow the relationship to grow and expand as big, as energetic and as complex as you wish – and then let the relationship return to simplicity and smallness and rest.

Epilogue: my husband and I have uprooted and left northern California after 35 years for a new life in upstate New York. Packing up our rented house, purchasing a home and separately driving cross-country all within two months time has effectively destabilized my personal rhythm of living and being. I arrive and am overwhelmed by the complexity of negotiating all these varied demands and tasks while also revelling in the healing balm of rain and late summer abundance after a month of catastrophic fires, smoke and drought. Moving through the forest each day for an hour and making contact with the land, I return time and again to a large boulder next to the river, mould my body within its contours and yield into place. Breathing, and then sounding, punctuated by stillness and rest – thoughts releasing, clarifying, emptying and shifting, I become part of this place. Renewed and restored, I enter back into being human and navigating what needs to be done. Engaging with the larger body of the planet, I find myself, become my nature, and inhabit life in its most basic way – by being a body in connection. Tapping into eco-consciousness and the mind of the Earth expands my humanness by forgetting it, over and over, as I orient within/orient without – interrupt and untether from the habits of civilization – embody nature, become nature – protect, defend and sustain nature within/without.

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