By Don Hanlon Johnson

Last year (1993) there were two successful television specials on the relationship between mind and healing—The Heart of Healing, produced by IONS and Independent Communication Associates for TBS, and Healing and the Mind with Bill Moyers. Since then some people have communicated to us that a significant area of therapy, known generically as "Somatics", had been overlooked. Somatics, as defined by one of its pioneers, Thomas Hanna, is a field which studies the soma "the body as perceived from within by first person perception". Hanna distinguished this from disciplines which study the human body from the outside ideas an objective "third-person" phenomenon.

One of the people who drew our attention to this oversight was Don Hanlon Johnson, Director of the Graduate Somatics Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies. He pointed out that the current explosion of interest in mind-body integration, and in "alternative" or "complementary" medicine, has conspicuously omitted the therapeutic efficacy of a broad range of Somatics practices. In this article, Johnson emphasizes that many of these "schools"—such as Sensory Awareness, Rolfing, Eutony, Trager Work, Hakomi, Feldenkrais, and the Alexander Technique—have been around for more than a century, and serve a large population in North and South America, Europe and Australia.

For more than 100 years, a number of independent groups have been exploring and teaching a view of the human body and its relation to physical, mental and spiritual health that differs radically from conventional notions. These schools of thought and practice—which collectively may be called the "Somatics Movement"—reject the separation of spirit from a mechanistic human body, a view common to both mainstream biomedicine and orthodox religion.

The pioneers of Somatics introduced to the West an alternative vision of health and the body which emphasizes an intimate integrity of movement, anatomical structure, intelligence and spiritual consciousness. These teachers encouraged respect for lived experience and the wisdom that can be found through "attending to" rather than "conquering" or "controlling" life processes.

A growing interest in Somatics throughout the world may be attributed to the scope of its therapeutic applications. Claims for efficacy include, for example, relieving chronic physical symptoms: back pain, whiplash injuries, various forms of arthritis, scoliosis, the restrictions of cerebral palsy; easing emotional or psychological complaints: depression, sexual dysfunctions, body-image problems, substance addictions, relationship problems; improving focused awareness and stillness required for the practice of meditation; increasing flexibility and vitality.

Because it can be applied to a wide range of conditions, Somatics is sometimes confused with other practices such as behavioral medicine, conventional physical therapy, chiropractic and massage. These other systems exhibit a different attitude and approach to health, however. Behavioral medicine, for example, employs a terminology which includes ideas such as controlling the disease processes of the body by visualizations, affirmation, biofeedback devices, and changes in attitude and other states of mind. Such an approach differs greatly from the context typical of Somatics practitioners in which people are encouraged to "listen" to the messages of their flesh; to "embrace" their breathing patterns; to "follow" their styles of moving; and to pay attention to the insights which emerge within the movement itself.

Origins of Somatics

Often associated with the "New Age" and with the flourishing of body-oriented disciplines in the 1960s at places like the Esalen Institute in California, Somatics has, in fact a much longer history. The field dates back to the mid- and late nineteenth century Gymnastik movement in Northern Europe and the Eastern United States. At a time when physicians were still engaged in the crudest uses of surgery and medication, and when psychotherapy was just beginning, the practitioners of various branches of Gymnastik were already doing sophisticated healing work using expressive movement, sensory awareness, sound, music and touch.

The task of uncovering the early history of Somatics is similar to that confronting feminist historians: We depend on oral history, fragments mentioned by the way in exercise books, a passing reference to a teacher, or a footnote in a history of dance. However, we do know that early pioneers of this movement included, for example, Francois Delsarte, Genevieve Stebbins, Bess Mensendieck, Leo Kofler, and Emile Jacques-Dalcroze. These people shared a new vision of embodiment which differed from the dominant models in biomedicine, physical education, religion and classical ballet. For example, instead of training dancers and athletes to shape their bodies to fit a normative classical form, they encouraged individual expressiveness and a return to a more natural body, allowing forms of movement to emerge from within rather than imposing them. What Somatics practitioners refer to as "inhabiting" the body.

In the late 1800s, F. M. Alexander in Melbourne, Australia, and Leo Kofler in New York were coincidentally afflicted by chronic laryngitis for which physicians could find no cause or cure. Both men conducted independent healing investigations and discovered that as they learned to fully inhabit their body movements, posture, and voice, they were healed. Similar stories are...
told of Moshe Feldenkrais, Ida Rolf, Gerda Alexander, Ilsa Middendorf and many others who discovered healing capacities inherent in heightened bodily experience, unmediated by images or positive thoughts nor by biofeedback and video display terminals.

Some 20 years later, around the turn of the century, another paradigm-breaking event occurred in Berlin. Elsa Gindler fell ill with tuberculosis and was told by her doctors that she would never regain the use of one lobe of her lungs. She spent several months devoting herself for hours daily to learning how to inhabit her breathing, and eventually she regained full use of the collapsed lung. In the course of that process, she realized the extent of the healing capacities released by quiet, sustained sensing of bodily activities without trying to control them with images, affirmations or programmed strategies. Gindler went on to found a school now known in the United States through the work of Charlotte Selsor as "Sensory Awareness".

From the beginning, the various branches of Somatics shared an emphasis on the systematic refinement of nonverbal skills, particularly sophisticated methods of touch, breathing, and body-movement instruction. While psychosomatic and behavioral medicine developed out of the marriage between biomedicine and psychoanalysis, from the top down as it were, Somatics developed from the "bottom up", from a wide range of experimental methods of manipulation, movement, and awareness, outside universities and clinics. These unconventional methods were typically developed in response to critical health problems that were unresponsive to existing medical and psychological treatments.

Because the innovators of Somatics lived within a comparatively silent world of non-verbal practices, few texts have articulated the early work; only participants in the methods had access to what was being discovered. Much of the early knowledge, therefore, has been lost. The catastrophes of both World Wars and subsequent diasporas contributed significantly to this loss. World War I broke up the early interdisciplinary Somatics community, leaving individual schools intact but isolated and fragmented. World War II further dispersed the pioneers, forcing many to put aside the more visionary aspects of their work, and to eke out a living as refugees, marketing their work under the more acceptable forms of physical rehabilitation or psychotherapy.

Growth of the Movement

In the 1960s, the Esalen Institute and a growing counterculture exploring different states of consciousness provided an opportunity for a revival of the Somatics vision. Some of the old pioneers traveled westward from Tel Aviv London, Berlin, and New York, gathered together large numbers of students, returned to the eastern seaboard, established new schools, and eventually brought their work back to Europe,

By the end of the 1980s, international conferences on Somatics had been held in Paris, Zurich, Naples, Montevideo, Montreal, Strasbourg, San Francisco, and New York. Today, at least three international professional organizations use a version of the name "Somatics", and the Association for Humanistic Psychology has recently formed a Somatics wing. In California, the Coalition on Somatic Practices is a professional group lobbying for state licensing; masters degree-level programs in Somatics and at least one doctoral program at Ohio State University are currently offered in the United States.

Pilot studies and a large body of anecdotal evidence attest to the efficacy of various Somatics methods. The medical establishment often disputes therapeutic claims for Somatics. On closer inspection, however, one finds that the major private institutes designed by their founders to monitor the quality of practitioner education and to further the development of their work through case studies and research have initiated a number of studies of different methods. For instance, the Rolf Institute, created by Ida Rolf, has from its inception encouraged investigation of its work by biomedical researchers. With little outside funding, it has managed to complete a number of empirical studies. The Feldenkrais and F. M. Alexander Teachers Guilds, created to develop the work of their founders, have also sponsored several pilot studies. (See sidebar below)

Reading The Body As Text: A Feldenkrais Case Study

Nora was a well-educated woman in her sixties living in a small town in Switzerland. One morning she found it difficult to get out of bed. Her body was stiff and her speech slow and slurred. Her local physician diagnosed a clot or hemorrhage. A few days later, feeling a little better, Nora tried to read the morning paper but found everything blurring. She realized she could neither read nor write. A neurological clinic in Zurich established that some injury had occurred to the left side of her brain.

After a year at the clinic her speech had improved, but not her reading or writing. She could no longer write her own name, nor read it written or printed.

When Moshe Feldenkrais came to Zurich to give a class on his therapeutic method, Nora went to him for help. Feldenkrais' way of working with her was profoundly simple. He spent an early session simply lifting and moving Nora's head very gently with her lying on her back. He reports:

Examining Nora's head, and gradually reducing the intensity of my touch and of movements for finer appreciation, bad an effect on the muscles of her neck, and her head became easier and smoother to move.... As I examined her legs, arms, body and chest for the quality of the movement not just how much but first of all how easily they could be moved she relaxed further. I pushed the sole of one foot and watched carefully to determine whether I could make her legs push the pelvis and, through the spine, affect her head. ... After I examined the cardinal movements of her body for about three-quarters of an hour, Nora became quite cheerful and looked much brighter. Her sister and other relatives in the room observed that the expression of her face and eyes and her facial mobility changed almost to normal. (When Feldenkrais uses words like "push" he is speaking of the most sensitive and evocative movements, a result of long training in refined use of the hands, not gross prodding. It is such a profoundly healing experience to be so fully met with this kind of touch which is radically different from...
During several sessions over the next year, Feldenkrais followed this radically simple way of working with Nora moving from an initial general exploration of large regions of her body to the small movements involved in her experiences of dysfunction reaching for a door handle, trying to write, tying shoe laces, sitting down in chair, putting on her eyeglasses. In each case, he followed the same procedure: taking on the beginner’s mind, feeling his way into what it was like for her to do these movements, and gently responding with his hands on her as she attempted them, or by suggesting movement experiments for her to do.

When finally he began working with her loss of ability to read, he asked her to do an eye-focusing experiment that involved placing a straw between her teeth, holding it with the tips of thumb and forefinger, and doing various exercises. At one point, he asked her to look at the end of the straw adjusted in length to normal reading distance and placed on a word in a text before her, and asked her to say whatever word crossed her mind (notice that he did not ask her what she was seeing).

When she saw the word at the end of the straw for the first time, her lips opened and she dropped the straw from her mouth. Her first movement was to catch the straw and not to speak the word she saw. I knew that she saw the word and would have uttered it were her mouth free. Then the word was gone. In a flash, I knew that she saw the word but did not read it; I remembered that she had never said I cannot read, ‘but always ‘I cannot see.’ Not seeing the difference, I had concentrated on her reading problem while her real problem was, first, seeing, and only later reading. The transformation into words of the letters she saw was the difficulty, not uttering the words or seeing the letters. Soon enough she was able to say the word at the end of the straw, and after making about twenty trials, I showed her that all her guesses were correct.

The core of Feldenkrais’ work, and of other Somatics methods, is to enter an inquiry into who the person is and how he or she is embodied. What kinds of responses lie within the patients’ joints? How far can they move when touched with empathy? What are their rhythms of moving through the room, sitting down, standing up? How does the ebb and flow of breath change in response to various stimuli, including gentle touch?

The body as text: It involves entering into a form of body-focused awareness and education as different from ordinary sensation and attention as reading Shakespeare instead of Classic Comics. One moves from the superficial judgments we make each day about our and others’ embodied personalities to realizing the rich and endless layers of meanings in another’s gait, gasping for breath, flushed face-meanings that cannot be captured by thin rational diagnostic concepts.

After a lifetime of not being really seen or felt, as is the case with many of us, the encounter with a practitioner that is able to meet another person at this preverbal, preconceptual level is itself healing. To be grasped in that way is to be healed.

D. H. J.

A Shared Vision

Despite differences in method and style among the thousands of today’s Somatics practitioners, they share a vision of reality more akin to older, indigenous ideas than to modernist European scientific models. That vision includes an awareness of the significance of natural forms and processes, and of the human spirit’s interaction with its environment. Although bioenergeticists, Rolfers, and Feldenkrais practitioners may differ about the effectiveness of procedures, they all share the assumption that sensing, feeling, breathing, moving, postural changes, and excitation are crucial factors in the human search for meaning. Whether a client is being probed by a Rolf’er’s elbow, vibrating under a Reichean’s palm, or trying to concentrate on the sensual effects of the disorienting Feldenkrais movements, he or she is constantly reminded that the realities categorized under “body” or “mind” are experiential: aching muscles and frayed nerves at one extreme, love and cosmic intuition at the other. Healing takes place in creative interweaving of these extremes.

The holistic view of the person, particularly emphasized in Somatics, is based on an assumption that various regions and parts of the body are systemically related. For example, bursitis in the shoulder joint or disorders in the lumbar region may be related to torsions on the ankles and knees; chronic back pain may be related to restricted breathing; carpal tunnel syndrome may be related to muscular tensions in the pelvis. In Somatics trainings, no matter what the school, practitioners are taught to see these relationships among body parts and layers within any body regions, and to develop their interventions accordingly.

Meaning In The Flesh

Somatics methods differ also from many non-conventional psychotherapeutic approaches, such as some forms of hypnosis, meditation and guided imagery, by emphasizing bodily awareness, anatomy, sensory and kinesthetic education, as well as non-verbal language as the foundation for therapeutic insights, emotional clarity and spiritual growth. Frequently, the language of other alternative healing practices reveals a belief that “meaning” or “healing thoughts” come from somewhere other than the depths of the flesh, movement and experience.

It may be easier both for physicians and for the public, brought up within the dominant medical paradigm, to accept hypnosis, imaging, relaxation techniques, biofeedback, and exotic or foreign healing methods. These modalities, it is generally assumed, do not require a radical and sometimes uncomfortable attitude-shift toward the body. Yet it is precisely this radical shift in viewpoint, acknowledging the body as a repository of wisdom and meaning, which constitutes the heart of the various Somatics methods.

E. Bach-y-Rita, "New Pathways in the Recovery from Brain Injury" (parts 1 & 2), Somatics (1981) 3 (2) and (3).


--RETURN TO SIDEBAR 1 "Reading The Body As Text: A Feldenkrais Case Study"--

Don Hanlon Johnson is Director of the Somatics Graduate Program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and an author, whose most recent book is Body, Spirit and Democracy (North Atlantic Books, 1993).

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Notes & References


2. For explanations of this work see Ida Rolf, Rolfing: The Integration of Human Structures (Harper & Row, 1979); Moshe Feldenkrais, The Case of Nora: Body Awareness as Healing Therapy (North Atlantic Books, 1993).


Jannings- who goes the way of all flesh. A characterization which will linger long in your memory. (Print Ad- Rock Rapids Review, (Rock Rapids Iowa)) 12 July 1928) See more Â–. Â User Reviews. the last part of the movie The Way of all Flesh. 7 May 2006 | by omakdon32 â€“ See all my reviews. I saw this movie when I was a very young boy prior to WW2 I believe that I was nine at the time. For some reason this movie has followed throughout my life, it made a great impression on me. Especially the last scene when the dad was watching his family through the window of their home at Xmas time and it was snowing, the local cop caught him went to the door and asked the mans wife [whom she did not recognize] what she wanted him to do with the man. The flesh in the album title is basically representing all living things, and their way is life followed inevitably by death. The album therefore discusses the importance of our short passage on planet Earth and the responsibilities that goes with that passage. That is, to be aware of and to live respectfully towards our environment. Gojira is a firm supporter of Sea Shepherd, a marine wildlife conservation organization that campaigns for the preservation of wildlife in the worldâ€™s oceans. Gojira often denounces the destruction of the planet and especially the oceans in their many songs. T Gojira â€“ The Way of All Flesh (2008), previous. play.Â Update Required To play the media you will need to either update your browser to a recent version or update your Flash plugin.