

THE BODY AS TEACHER

Background and Context

At school we were taught mathematics, reading, and the geography of the world, but few of us were taught much about the geographical mapping of the home we live in—our bodies. - Donna Farhi

To be aware is to be awake, to be *present*. A good starting point for this journey to awareness is to be awake to the fact that we, each of us, experiences the world in something physical called a “body,” and that this body is connected to the entire universe. Indeed, as Wes Nisker points out:

Science is showing us our oneness with all things. The physicists have found evidence that we are sub-atomically joined at the hip to absolutely everything else in creation. The chemists and biologists have named the common molecules that make us co-existent with the atmosphere, the earth, and all other living things (pg. 12).

Yes, what you are, most essentially and fundamentally, is a mammal, a primate. Strangely, many of us fail to see ourselves as living organisms—beings with bodies—mammals!

It seems that we have been conditioned by our culture to see/perceive our bodies as objects—things that we wake up with, feed, and put to bed. We live in our heads imagining that our brains are all that matter. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Our bodies are not “objects”; they are dynamic happenings.

To awaken to the dynamism of your particular body, pause and place your finger on your wrist to locate your pulse. This is the life force throbbing within you ... renewing and invigorating your cells. Take a moment more to examine the skin on your wrist with the knowledge that all of your skin is completely replaced every six weeks—the old skin cells sloughed off and new cells created ... a new you—such is your body’s dynamism. Finally, hold a hand up to your mouth and breathe out feeling the moisture and warmth of your breath, bringing you news of your hot body core—the metabolic fire burning in each of your body’s trillions of cells. Indeed, all of us are, first and foremost, a body.

No Bodies?

Consider the story of the Yanomami Indian who became sick and, seeking help, made his way into to a small village on the banks of the Rio Negro in southern Venezuela. While he was recovering in the health clinic, a nurse gave him some crayons and suggested that he draw a picture. She was astounded by what happened next: The Indian first made an outline of a human body; then he filled in a human skeleton; in among the skeleton he crayoned in the organs making up the body; next came layers of muscle; only at the very end did the Indian add skin and clothes. If the nurse had not been there to watch she would have only seen the final picture—a brown-skinned man wearing shorts and a tee shirt. This native man had a way of seeing that was very different from that of “civilized” people. It seems that he was seeing more deeply, more fully, more holistically; he understood that humans have bodies. In our so-called “civilized” society, by contrast, crayoning is done in coloring books; the human figures already have clothes on; all that’s left to do is to color the clothes.

In some school settings, the idea that a student's body might serve as a kind of "teacher" is threatening—subversive even—because it posits that students are much more than simply "brains on a stick"—and it calls on teachers to bring attention to the body as a whole.

Warm up: Change the Mind→Change the Body→Change the Mood

Instructions to the Instructor:

1. Think of pleasant, warm, happy, enlivening, joyous, comforting, etc. moments (or moment) in your life or the life of others. Think so deeply that you begin to experience this joy and feel it again. This is my gift to you, the re-ignition of bright fires.
2. Now, as each person walks into the room, wonder what gift of joy they might soon unwrap. As they enter, look to them; aren't they, too, human?
3. Write the first two instructions onto small sheets of paper. Hand a sheet to each student as s/he finds a seat.

Activity One: Body Listening

If you ask someone how they feel, and they tell you, you will listen with your ears. Yet, for every "tell," there is a "show," and as your ears hear the telling, your body hears the showing.

Instructions:

- Think of how you feel about something or someone shortly to cross the path of your life—it can be anything or anyone that interests you to a fair degree.
- Take a moment to feel what this means to you. That is, how does its coming into your life make you feel?
- Think and feel the bodily posture (and, possibly, accompanying motion) that comes with this feeling.
- When it is your turn—as we move through the group, one by one—you will enact your posture (and possible motion), and the group will assume/embody that same stance. When you sense that the group has settled into your posture and knows it, you may look to your neighbor to indicate that you are done and it is his or her turn to lead.

This exercise is a silent one. And, perhaps, it maintains a mystery as to the reason for the posture/motion/feeling that your neighbor presents, for it asks that you dig deeply into the posture to truly come upon the feeling of this other. When you do come upon it, that is still all that you will have. That is, you must listen carefully, and even though you may hear, you cannot be certain as to just what it means.

Discussion:

- "Intimacy" is a touchy word; yet, is there an intimacy in body listening? What is your experience?

Take-Away Practice:

Tonight, tomorrow, next week in class, before your friend, before a stranger—any time, any one—**put yourself into the body posture of another, and listen.**

Activity Two: *Body as Teacher*

The opening activity was called, "body listening," because we listened to one another through and with and in the body, as opposed to via language, our ears, our head. We all have internal conversations with ourselves, where we go back and forth over an upcoming assignment, the night's dinner plans, how we feel for/about our boyfriend or girlfriend, or the plans or hopes we have for our life. Now that we have listened to each other with the body—and perhaps found a different ear, a different voice—can we begin to listen to **ourselves** in that same way?

Consider what your body might have to teach you. Indeed, consider that your body is a compass of sorts. It has the capacity to remind you what brings you joy and fullness as well as what causes you to feel empty and flat. In fact, it has always been your teacher, in wait for that time when you might be its student. But what does it teach, and how does it teach you? It does not tell you what to do; it tells you only one thing: how you feel. Yet, how often do we take the time to hear even this? And, if we should happen to hear, how often do we listen?

It is easy enough a question, if I ask you, "What state are you in?" ... and you answer, "Pennsylvania." But does the geography not become a little wilder if I ask you, "What state are you in? ... And to which have you been? ... And in which do you want to *raise* the rest of your life?" If when I ask this and I am not talking about the states of Pennsylvania or Florida or Wisconsin, but the states of your body? So, what state are you in? And to which have you been? And in which do you want to *raise* the rest of your life?

Instructions:

- Find a way to feel comfortable in this room—close your eyes, look down to the table, turn around, find a corner, do whatever you need to do.
- In the exercise that follows, remember who the teacher is. Your body is your teacher. Yet, you are still the student, and it will take an honest effort, and patience with yourself, to begin to learn what only you can.
- For each component of this exercise, write notes to yourself on your answer to each question, and on any small or large revelation that you may uncover.
- Search your body for **a time or experience when you felt:**
 - ... free
 - ... restricted, suffocated, depreciated
 - ... strong, vital
 - ... another emotion of your own choosing: in love, in the midst of an athletic feat, etc.

Take some time with this.

- Now, when you are ready, let's look to the body to see how we feel about (and not simply think of) the many strands of our life as they now make it. **What does your body tell you when you think about ...**
 - ... your roommate or neighbor?
 - ... your dinner plans for tonight, or some common but seemingly insignificant component of your life?
 - ... your significant other, or someone whom you might pine after?
 - ... your life as you are living it?
 - ... anything else that you might want to take this time to feel?

Again, take some time with this.

- Now that you have felt your body as it was in the past and is in the present, how do you feel for the future? **What can your body teach you of your relation to ...**
 - ... this summer?
 - ... your life after college?
 - ... what you think it will be like to be thirty years older than you are now?

Discussion:

- What stories do you have to share? (... of when you felt strong, free, suffocated, comfortable, etc.).
- Did you arrive at any insights—surprises—large or small? Tell us the small and the insignificant, for soon we might see that this is what our life is made of ... and who is to call the whole of that life small, or insignificant when it most definitely isn't?

Take-Away Practice:

The last thing our bodies have to teach us—and the last shall be first—is how we feel this very moment. Keep this in your back pocket; establish it as a practice. You know how you have felt and can feel—strong, free, suffocated, comfortable—yet, how do you feel right now?

Activity Three: Creating a Mood Virus

In his book, Emotional Intelligence, Donald Goldman writes:

It was an unbearably steamy August afternoon in New York City, the kind of sweaty day that makes people sullen with discomfort. I was heading back to a hotel, and as I stepped onto a bus up Madison Avenue I was startled by the driver, a middle-aged black man with an enthusiastic smile, who welcomed me with a friendly, "Hi! How you doing?" as I got on, a greeting he proffered to everyone else who entered as the bus wormed through the thick midtown traffic. Each passenger was as startled as I, and, locked into the morose mood of the day, few returned his greeting.

But as the bus crawled uptown through the gridlock, a slow, rather magical transformation occurred. The driver gave a running monologue for our benefit, a lively commentary on the passing scene around us: there was a terrific sale at that store, a wonderful exhibit at this museum, did you hear about the new movie that just opened at that cinema down the block? His delight in the rich possibilities the city offered was infectious. By the time people got off the bus, each in turn had shaken off the sullen shell they had entered with, and when the driver shouted out a "So long, have a great day!" each gave a smiling response.

Imagine the spreading virus of good feeling that must have rippled through the city, starting from the passengers on this bus. Now, think of Penn State's very own, Mike the Mailman; of how he creates this same magic at the campus post office next to the HUB.

Consider this statement: "Look, you feel what another feels. Mood is contagious. Hear this again: You feel what another feels ... and this is automatic. Among the happy, you are compelled to feel happiness. Among the sad, sadness. Among the hard-hearted, a coldness. Among the angry, an agitation." Now, consider that sometimes we feel as we feel simply

because that is the way we have been feeling. So, what happens when you change that, when you become aware of that?

Discussion:

- Does our class/group have its mood or moods? What is it, and why?
- Does this season, this town, this country have its moods?
- And for each mood, are you not ever taken in by it?
- If you are still skeptical about this idea of mood contagion, try this small experiment: pick up a pencil and hold it between your teeth, in effect, forcing your mouth into a smile and pay attention to what happens—i.e., to how you feel—as you do this.

Take-Away Practice:

How do you feel right now? And why? Someday you may ask this of yourself, and you may answer, "**I feel this way because they do.**" Yet, what comes next is up to you.

Take-Away Quote:

There is one thing that, when cultivated and regularly practiced, leads to deep spiritual intention, to peace, to mindfulness and clear comprehension, to vision and knowledge, to a happy life here and now, and to the culmination of wisdom and awakening. And what is that one thing? It is mindfulness centered on the body. The Buddha, Anguttara Nikaya

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES

Supplemental Activity One: Freeze Frame

Researchers at the HeartMath Institute have developed an elegant technique called "Freeze-Frame" that has proven very successful in helping people move from stress (which generates incoherent heart rhythms) to equanimity (coherent heart rhythms and general well being). Freeze-Frame consists of five simple steps and can be done with the eyes open or closed:

Instructions:

1-Recognize that you are experiencing stress. If you wish to end stress in your life, you first have to become aware of when you are experiencing it. This is not as easy as it seems. Many of us live so continually in stress that we aren't even aware of it. So the first step is to detect stress as it arises and to simply "freeze" it. Think of it as pressing the pause button on your VCR to stop the movie, except in this case it is the "movie" of your life that you are freeze-framing.

2-Shift your attention from your stressful thoughts and emotions to the area around your heart, imagining that you are literally breathing in and out through your heart. Do this heart breathing for at least ten seconds. "Shifting the focus from head to heart improves nervous system balance, heightens cardiovascular efficiency and enhances communication between heart and brain, bringing more coherence to the mind and emotions" (Childre and Martin, 1999, pg. 67).

3-Recall a positive feeling—e.g., joy, appreciation, love, care, compassion—that you have had and try to literally re-experience this feeling. The idea is not to think about the event that caused this feeling but, rather, to allow yourself to re-experience the actual feeling. "Experiencing these core heart feelings is what provides regeneration to the nervous system, the

immune system and the hormonal system, facilitating health and well being” (Childre and Martin, 1999).

4-Now, with sincerity, and keeping your attention anchored in your heart, ask your heart: “What would be a more efficient response to the situation—i.e., one that would minimize future stress?”

5-Set your reactive mind in check and listen with humility to what your heart says in response to your question.

Supplemental Activity Two: Body Muscle Response as Teacher

I sometimes go for a jog around our neighborhood. Like other joggers I have noted that I do some of my best thinking while running. There is something else I have noticed: Depending on my thoughts while jogging I can either feel energized or depleted. For example, if I begin to think about something that excites me and brings me joy, my pace and pep with spike upward; if my thoughts turn to something dark and sad that I feel I have no control over, my energy will spike downward and I may even be inclined to stop jogging altogether.

If you have never experienced how your own thoughts can influence your energy level, try getting down on the floor in the classic push-up position right now. Don’t do any pushups. Simply lock your arms, holding your body plank-like suspended above the floor. Now, in this stationary position, tell various lies and truths to yourself and observe how your strength and energy wax and wane.

The fact that our thoughts affect our body state is a foundational principle for practitioners of alternative medicine. These professionals use a diagnostic tool called “muscle testing” to tap into the body’s deep knowing. Muscle testing is simple to do. Two people are involved—the person having his/her muscles tested (subject) and the person doing the testing (tester). The test begins with the subject (in this case let’s call her Jane) standing and extending his right arm straight out in front, parallel to the ground. The tester stands to the side of the subject (Jane), placing one hand on her wrist and the other on her shoulder. Meanwhile, Jane looks straight ahead, head level, eyes cast down. The tester then asks Jane to say her name several times (e.g., “My name is Jane.”) while concentrating on what she is saying. Then the tester instructs Jane to “be strong” just before pushing down gently on her outstretched arm (at the wrist). Next, the tester asks Jane to say a false name (e.g., In this case, Jane might say, “My name is Rosemary.”). Jane repeats her false name several times concentrating on what she is saying. Then, once again the tester says “be strong” and then pushes down gently on Jane’s arm at the wrist. In almost all cases, both the tester and the subject will note that much more resistance is present when the subject is telling the truth (e.g., in this case, when Jane speaks her true name) compared to when he/she is lying. The differences in muscle resistance for subjects making true and false statements have been measured with precision in laboratory settings (e.g., using a computerized dynamometer to measure the resistance and force applied to the subject’s arm while being tested).

Not surprisingly, subjects differ in their sensitivity to muscle testing. Those with high body awareness—i.e., who respond to life from and through their body—register large difference in response when making true vs. false statements—while those who live more in their head—i.e., out-of-touch with their feelings and body sensations—exhibit less dramatic differences in muscle response when making true vs. false statements.

Muscles move in response to electrical signals from the brain. In the case of muscle testing, it appears that the brain's electrical signals are significantly affected by thoughts and that stressful or untrue thoughts cause electrical conflict reducing the signal strength to the muscles (Williams, 2004). In this sense, muscle testing operates on a principle analogous to lie detector tests where the polygraph machine detects small electro-physical changes in the physical body resulting from mental processes.

The significance of muscle testing in the context of schooling is that it offers an approach to using the body to delve more deeply into one's thinking and beliefs. For example, suppose you have thoughts like:

- I trust myself to make wise decisions.
- I am independent and don't need to rely on others.
- I forgive my mother and father for their shortcomings.
- I experience the presence of God within me.
- I have no racist tendencies.
- I am not an alcoholic.

And you really believe that you hold these things to be true. Now imagine using muscle testing to verify this. You could do it yourself by holding up a barbell while you repeat these statements, or you could ask a friend to test you using the muscle testing protocol (above). It may be that through this testing you discover that you don't actually hold some of these things to be true (e.g., you test weak for two of the six statements). This would be revelatory. As pointed out above, the body does not lie; it integrates all of you; it will tell you what is really true for you (Williams, 2004). How exciting for all of us—teachers and students alike—to know that in times of confusion and uncertainty that we can relay on our bodies to reveal our deepest truths.

OUT-OF-CLASS FIELD STUDY: THE BODY

1. Use Your Body.

Use your body. One hour minimum. As always, the best choice is your own choice. What do you want to do with your body that will remind you that you have it? Some suggestions for Central Pennsylvania include:

A. Walk

B. Jog/Run

<http://www.nvrun.com/>

Penn State Outdoor Track:

C. Bike

<http://www.centrebike.org/rides.html>

<http://www.mtnittanywheelworks.com/rides.html>

D. Hike

Mount Nittany: <http://www.mtnittany.org/TM.htm>

Rothrock State Forest: <http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/stateforests/rothrock.aspx>

The "Purple Lizard" Trail Map: at any local bicycle or outdoor shop.

"The Short Hiker: Small Green Circles," by Jean Aron (GV199.42.P42A76)

E. Swim

The White Building: <http://www.psu.edu/dept/whitebldg/pool.html>

McCoy Nat: <http://www.athletics.psu.edu/nat/>

2. Meditate on what you did.

Spend the time to honestly meditate over what you did, how you felt, how you feel, what it means to you, and why. Write a short response piece.

3. Get curious, ask questions, and begin to find some answers.

If you went swimming, do you wonder what the world record is for a man or woman in the 50 free? How do they train? What does chlorine do to their skin? Does YouTube have anything to show you? Are there others in the area who are enthusiasts for what you just did? Give yourself a few moments, you will find many questions. Write down at least 25 questions that occur to you regarding your experience with this bodily activity. Now, take the time to *pursue* the answer to at least five of these questions. For each of these five questions, write a few paragraphs detailing what you learned about the possible answer(s).