

Embodying Nature - A Practice with Jamie McHugh

“At a certain point, you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening.” - Annie Dillard

“Whenever I go out, I go in.” – John Muir

Description: Embodying Nature is a somatic-expressive practice developed by Jamie McHugh for expanding and deepening our relationship with the natural world. This experiential, hands-on process is simple, inclusive and easy to understand and has been taught to various groups in the landscapes of North America and Europe over the past 30 years. The Embodying Nature approach combines specific somatic tools and relational activities to engage you in the sensorial experience of your surroundings. The first step is to settle into your inner landscape and find your own ground with the five somatic technologies of breath, vocalization, contact, movement and stillness. From there, you move into an active relationship with the outer landscape by contacting, witnessing, mirroring, responding, and resting. What emerges from this encounter between the inner and outer environment is a rich, creative stream that animates your interior to meet, receive and incorporate the larger body of the Earth with spontaneous dances, intuitive songs, and silent contemplations.

Intention: Enter your Body, Redirect your Mind, & Wake up your Senses

Receive (Witness) & Become (Mirror) the Movement of Place / Rest & Harvest

In this activity, we will journey outside to receive and internalize the dance of our environment. Before opening to experience an outer perception, it is helpful to first tune into our inner perception by sensing and feeling where we are in ourselves. The first activity centralizes our attention inside the torso with breath and self-contact so we can be gently focused and perceptually prepared. We then transfer this centralized attention of our inner landscape to the outer landscape.

#1 Inner preparation: Take a moment to sit, close your eyes and bring 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. (Your diaphragm divides your torso in two, separating your abdomen from your thorax. It is the floor for your heart and lungs, and the ceiling for your digestive organs.) Take a few minutes feeling the movement of breathing and its impact on your belly: inhale-belly swelling; exhale-belly settling. It is not necessary to use effort - your belly might swell a lot or a little. Give this movement your curious attention, temporarily suspending any thoughts or judgments that interfere with the 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. Periodically let the exhale slip out through your lips as sound.

Stay with this activity for a few minutes so you can explore lengthening and shortening the duration of the breathing movement throughout your torso. Afterwards, rest and notice how you feel yourself now. Any difference? And as you open your eyes, how does your environment look or sound to you now?

Finally, stand up and repeat the activity. Then, expand your attention: let your feet meet the ground on the inhale, and the ground meet your feet on the exhale, with the same sensitive contact used between your hands and your belly. Inhale, diaphragm moving downwards, belly swelling, feet meeting the ground. Exhale, diaphragm moving upwards, belly settling, ground meeting the feet.

#2 Outer exploration: Walk outside in a natural setting where you feel safe and undisturbed. (You may want to share this journey with another person to increase your sense of safety.) Every now and then when something interesting, beautiful, or unfamiliar catches your attention - stop, place your hands on your belly and/or chest, take at least three breaths and give this object your undivided attention. This is the act of *witnessing* - being still, open and receptive to what is. And when you are ready, move on.

As you continue your walk, become increasingly aware of the movements and sounds of the environment - the dances and songs of this place. Punctuate your walk with the three-breath witnessing – *stop/ make contact with yourself/ breathe - look - listen*.

Take in the world: inhale, receive, and metabolize. Give back to the world: exhale, express, and let go.

After repeating this rhythm of moving, stopping to witness, and then moving on again for some time, choose one place with recognizable movement where you can settle and linger. (Recognizable movement might be clouds passing, water flowing, leaves shaking, etc.) Take some moments to settle in to this place, either sitting or standing, and begin to *witness* (receive) the movement of this place while attending to your breathing. Then, let your head *mirror* (become) the quality, direction and tempo of the movement you are witnessing. The size of the movement isn't important – in fact, sometimes the smaller the movement, the greater the awareness of what you are doing! Commit fully to what you are mirroring without becoming overly

concerned about being exact. You are breathing and moving at the same time, and every now and then, punctuating this exploration with stillness.

Focus and wander: Feel free at times to let go of this form and wander, moving spontaneously without forethought; and then return again to the focus of the form whenever you wish.

After some time, shift the movement from your head to your shoulders. You are breathing and moving while mirroring, and every now and then punctuating this exploration with stillness as well as your own movement.

After some time, shift from your shoulders to any body part you want to engage in relationship to your designated teacher in the environment. You are breathing and moving while mirroring, and every now and then punctuating this flow with stillness, your own movement, or a change of body part.

End in stillness. Sit or lie down on the ground to let your mind rest and your body settle. When you are ready, do a piece of free writing to harvest your experience. You can write 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.

Reflective questions

- 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 might you further develop this activity for yourself?

(This is an excerpt from the upcoming “Embodying Nature, Becoming Ourselves” manual created by Jamie McHugh and students from his training groups due to be released in late 2022. For personal use only.)

Jamie McHugh, RSMT is an interdisciplinary artist and somatic movement specialist who has been teaching movement-based work internationally for over 40 years. He is committed to creating accessible, inclusive, and nourishing somatic-expressive practices for re-wilding the body, quieting the mind and restoring the spirit. Jamie continues to study and research the mystery of the body as an element of nature and as an expression of our humanity with the power to transform society – one being at a time.

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