

Earthbody – Bodyearth: For the ArtHumanNature Conference

By Jamie McHugh

"Ecopsychologists make the following assumption: if we are a species that has evolved out of the womb of this planet - as all other species have - then there is something in us that has bonded to the planet and that responds to the needs of the planet as directly and as strongly as we respond to the needs of the people we love, as with parents and children. If that bond exists, then the role of psychotherapy is to find it and...awaken it." - Theodore Roszak

I attended a conference a few summers ago sponsored by the Institute for Deep Ecology. I was excited to finally connect with an environmental action group that has its roots in Eco-psychology. I have always felt a certain affinity with the principles of this work. What surprised me at this gathering was that the body was left out of the picture. The conference was held indoors, though the parkland of the Presidio surrounded us. We sat in folding chairs in concentric circles. The format was primarily listening to speakers, with room at times for response. Most of the talking was impassioned intellectualism, speaking from the heart about concepts, ideas and statistics. Certainly, an important departure point, yet where was the body in this dialogue? Where was the energizing communion of non-verbal exchange? It was quite striking that our sensorial languages, especially the kinesthetic, were absent. As body artists and somatic practitioners we can make a great contribution to the world of environmental discourse and activism with our participatory inquiry into the life-sustaining nature of the body and its humane expression – a different kind of deep ecology.

"What's the nature of the place? The proper approach to any kind of land use begins with that question. What is the nature of this place? And then: What will nature permit me to do here?...What will nature permit me to do here without damage to herself or to me? What will nature help me to do here?" - Wendell Berry

We could take many quotes from Eco-psychology texts and substitute the word "body" for "land". How do we lessen our domination and increase our collaboration with the body's wisdom? How do we steward the body? Just as we are learning to re-negotiate land use by bringing more attention to sustainable practices, can we also reclaim the body in a similar fashion? The environmental movement is literate about outer sustainability. The somatics movement is literate about interior sustainability. It makes sense to have a dialogue between these two movements that would strengthen and energize us all. Without advocating for the health of the global body, the value of the work we do as somatic practitioners with the localized body is questionable. How does the fact that there is less oxygen available in the atmosphere affect breath practices? And what good does it do to awaken the vitality of our organism if we are simultaneously dooming it to extinction through our habits of over-population and over-consumption?

"You do not have to be good. You do not have to crawl on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." - Mary Oliver

The sad truth is that the majority of people in our culture don't know the soft animal of their body. People pay little attention to their bodies until pain or disease incapacitates them. The current ecological crisis is also a pain and a disease demanding our attention, but the symptoms are not felt as directly as with our own body. We don't have discernible feedback to grab our attention yet we are all clearly affected. Journalist Bill Moyers

did an investigative report on the chemical industry in the US in 2001: "Trade Secrets". (pbs.org/tradesecrets) Part of what he uncovered: There are now 80,000 manufactured chemicals registered with the Environmental Protection Agency. 38,000 of them are high use, and only 43% of those have been rigorously tested for their health effects. 100 years ago, most of these chemicals did not exist. Trace residues of many chemicals that can be found in our bodies today would not have been present in the bodies of our grandparents. Since 1972, when public health officials began to compile statistics, there has been a 41% increase in brain cancer in children, and a 68% increase in testicular cancer in young men, ages 15-30. We do not know why.

These Earth maladies are not only affecting our health now, but also endangering the survival of the next generation. As Americans, we comprise only 4% of the world's population, yet we consume 20% of the planet's resources, and produce 25% of carbon emissions in the atmosphere. As middle-class Americans, we have the privilege of counteracting the effects of environmental toxicity on our bodies through health foods and dietary supplements. But we are only buying time for ourselves and delaying the inevitable. But maybe the vast amount of money we spend on our individual health would be better spent on funding a huge mobilization of citizen action groups to curtail ecological catastrophe? All peoples, regardless of income, ethnicity, or location equally share the web of life. We all share the same breath, the same water, and the same land. The "wisdom of no-escape" that Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron speaks of is a potent reminder about being a body in relation to all other bodies of life on this planet.

We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love. - Wendell Berry

We cannot take the gifts of Creation for granted. We are called to be stewards of our homes, both our body and the larger body of the Earth. Each day we are challenged to be a wise body in a body-phobic culture, to breathe, move, wiggle and hum. Each day we are called upon to manage our energy mindfully and treat our bodies compassionately. Each day we are challenged to be a wise consumer of natural resources in an increasingly nature-phobic culture, to make choices about our use of water, autos, paper and plastics. Each day we are called upon to manage our consumptive desires and treat the Earth responsibly.

Re-visioning our personal consumption habits and living in sustainable ways is one piece of the work to be done. Another piece is the revolution in creativity that will restore the arts to their proper place in life: the place of the sacred, the celebratory, the participatory, and the magical. Dancing, singing and creating together mobilizes and connects our energies as an engaged citizenry, and helps counteract personal and collective despair. The arts of creation are critical for casting away the pallor around our hearts, and awakening the deep well of committed and purposeful love for life now, and for generations to come. Can we awaken to the loving bond between our bodies and the planet in time?