

Embodying Nature, Becoming Ourselves: A Sensorimotor Approach to Ecosomatics by Jamie McHugh

"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." – Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme

"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

"Our inner life is complete when it merges into nature and becomes one with it." - D.T. Suzuki

We are elements of nature: our soma (the body experienced from within) and psyche (the mind of the soul) are reflections of, and intricately embedded within, the planet. Yet it is easy to lose our ground and our felt attachment to the planet when the natural world is effectively out of sight and mind in urban culture. Our attention is more directed towards screens than soil, clocks than clouds, freeways than forests. This impacts us in ways we might not be aware of, but clearly the "healthy human animal", the phrase coined by the somatic pioneer Moshe Feldenkrais, is in a state of distress.

As a somatic artist and body ecologist specializing in Ecosomatics, I have witnessed this distress syndrome many times leading groups for the past 30 years into the wilds ¹. People come on retreat with the psychic and somatic residue of modern industrial life having taken its toll. These weary souls are in need of regeneration and restoration to counteract the demands of daily life. Body and nature entwined offer a sumptuous sanctuary - if we attend and befriend them on their own terms.

How do we come back down to Earth and settle into our own visceral nature? How do we steer the modern mind away from its inner chatter and towards the natural world? And how do we reclaim the authority of primal consciousness that reminds us of our place in the larger body of life? Somatic Expression – Body Wisdom for Modern Minds® is an integrative approach to the art and craft of embodiment that serves as an umbrella for the various aspects of my work. Embodying Nature is an important dimension of my work that holds these questions with respect and gravitas because without the Earth, there can be no soma. Our future as humans is contingent upon our re-negotiating our relationship with the natural world - from a position of separateness and exploitation to one of togetherness and care. Consequently, I have created somatic-expressive activities, or "scores", for people to actively engage with the natural world through their whole selves – body, mind and spirit - as a way to ignite mutual love for themselves and the planet.² The following is a short sketch of this approach.

The Embodying Nature process begins with a focus on a body-based, sensate consciousness. We slow down our inner tempo, direct our attention to the sensory capacities of our bodies and open the channels of inner communication. We then explore various dimensions of the outer landscape with awakened, playful and curious instincts. I am guided by the premise: Evolution is not a 1-way street with human movement or psychological behavior. We consistently return to our origins to refresh and renew inner support for complex challenges. Moving on the ground gives us support for standing upright. Exhaling out through the mouth with loud sounds supports assertiveness. And remembering to invoke a soft “baby belly” is an antidote to the automatic bracing and holding that so easily occurs at driving 60 MPH.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget’s identification of the *sensorimotor stage* is considered a universal foundation for the infant in both developing cognition and a sense of self during the first 2 years of life.³ What I want to highlight from this stage of body and brain development is:

- 1) **Repetitive movement** - first through the automatic reflex system/developmental movement patterns and then through volitional “what feels good” movement; and
- 2) **Sensory immersion** – bathing in the multiple streams of sight, sound, and in particular, the tactile sense.

Repetition slows down time by relaxing into the *feeling* of what’s happening and letting the movement of the body guide the psyche. Sensory immersion is a return to beginner’s mind – the time before conceptual thought eclipsed our here and now wonder. These two features are the underpinnings of this approach that uses a combination of basic somatic practices and expressive articulation (The Five Somatic Technologies) and an activity-based conceptual system (The Five-Part Relational Map).

Five Somatic Technologies⁴: Breath, Vocalization, Contact, Movement, and Stillness are the five indigenous somatic technologies gifted to us by nature to access our body wisdom and to create with it. The use of these five creates the conditions for receptive awareness and expressive response by diminishing the “white noise” of our minds through attention to the interoceptive and proprioceptive networks. Somatic technologies give us a felt sense of security and trust in our bodies through the language of sensation as we redirect the ramblings of our mind into the sensory coherence of our bodily presence. Presence gives us enough of a felt sense of security and safety to temporarily leave the comfort zone of habit and allow new information and experience to emerge.

What we did automatically as infants and young children, we now consciously embody as adults to generate a different relationship to self and Earth. Basic movement, such as rocking, creeping, crawling and rolling, re-calibrates our

civilized, and often times sedentary, bodies; we lower our center of gravity, bring more parity between belly and brain, and allow our over-stimulated brains to rest. Little by little, through the movement of my breath, the benevolent contact of my hands, the expression of my voice and the stillness of my structure, I know where I am in myself; can feel my solidity and my fluidity; and can experiment with who or what I might become when I blur the boundaries of inner and outer.

Five-Part Relational Map: From this body of inner sense perceptions, we bridge to a heightened perceptual relationship with whatever ecosystem we occupy by discovering the essence of the elements present: sky, ocean, rock or tree. Direct sensory experience with the natural environment stimulates internal associations, feelings, and images. These inner impressions are then expressed and made visible through the sensorimotor output of movement and vocalization. In this back and forth dialogue between sensing and acting, the following activities are used for connecting the interior with the exterior:

- **Witness** – be still, open and receptive to what you behold.
- **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 without needing to know rationally what you are doing. (Meaning will arise in its own time.)
- **Rest** - let your body and mind pause and float, taking time out from exploration and focus to assimilate.

These five codified stages reflect the free-form play of young children, who naturally embody mindfulness with their total absorption and single-mindedness in engaging the world through their senses and kinesthetic responses. We follow their lead by awakening the child's mind within an adult body of experience as we explore the whole gamut of possibilities within our known (and unknown) range. The container of the map specifies a focus with multiple choices, letting the activities stimulate experience without a pre-determined outcome. Everyone can be engaged in their own self-directed somatic rhythm of movement and stillness as well as their own psychological rhythm of safety and risk. This gives each person an opportunity for creative and emotional fulfillment.

Nature is the master teacher, healer, parent and friend when we are open and available to what is offered. The varying elements of nature are curative forces in their own right as they affirm and support different parts of our being, such as the delicate flower, the raging surf, the solid mountain, the expansive sky. By mirroring and responding, we uncover and overtly express more possibilities

without apology, ranging from the delicate and nuanced to the raw and unrefined.

Satisfaction arises and expresses itself in multiple ways. For example in one retreat, a highlight for one participant was feeling safe enough to fall asleep in the woods and yield into the embrace of the Great Mother. For another, it was about standing her ground in the cold, forceful flow of the river, testing her power by becoming rock. And for a third who was always on the go, a highlight was biding his time daydreaming on a moss-covered rock in the middle of a stream without any compulsion to do anything. We each have our personal challenges and rewards that can slip easily into awareness when the structure is more open and our psyches are more receptive.

Befriending the inner landscape of the body with somatic resources both calms and invigorates, and sets a tone for outer engagement with the world. This somatic foundation opens the door to creative and imaginative flow states for experimenting with unforeseen possibilities. The sensorimotor state of playful participation allows us to become 5 years old once again, alive with basic openness, curiosity, and wonder. Awash in the stream of impulses, desires, and inputs from all our senses, spontaneous expression, like the continuous flow of our breathing, can simply happen moment-to-moment. And without any pressure to perform in a specific way, more internal permission is available for taking the risk to sing out or move within, to linger longer than we ordinarily would or to spring into action spontaneously.

"During one of our explorations as I wandered in the field, the river called me with its sounds, and I followed the call to the water's edge. The river's surface was like a mirror to the sky and fields. I mirrored the streaming water. It told me its song and I sang the song of the murmuring river. I was quite open to Nature so I felt Nature was able to enter into my direct existence, as if both the river and I felt comfort and recognition toward one another. It is how I imagine native people feel towards Nature." ⁵

A final stage in this process is assimilation and integration – an outgrowth of the stage **Rest**. The reflective stage bridges the preverbal realm of sensorimotor experience with the more concrete realm of language. We review the highlights of our experience and write down whatever arises in a relaxed, open presence. The written expression emerges as exploratory in its own right - whether in the form of narrative, poetic, cognitive recollection or symbolic representation.

Each person then vocalizes the writing in an embodied way. The solidity of words illuminates meaning, with each person's experience and expression expanding our understanding of being human in relationship to this specific place and beyond. It is really not surprising basic themes are quickly evoked since the

container of nature holds, mirrors and reflects all dimensions of our human and creaturely experience.

This expression of aesthetic response, witnessed by others, completes the cycle. By taking the risk to make our interior experience visible, we create a safe and empathic circle of solidarity as fellow travelers journeying together. We are restored, refreshed and enlarged in our capacity to be sensing, feeling, thinking human beings, ready to return to our ordinary lives with new perspectives and clarified commitments. This is how I embody, and teach others to embody, the inner and outer landscape as one seamless expression of life.

We liberate our nature by embodying nature to become more fully ourselves.

*Earth hold me,
Tree house me,
Sun warm me.
Air touch me,
Water move me,
Rock speak:*

*This is my home.
I am at home.⁶*

1 For more information on Embodying Nature retreats and Leadership Training:
<http://www.somaticexpression.com/classes/natura.html>

2 You can find a sample score to explore on your own here:
<http://somaticexpression.com/documents/AsamplescoreforEmbodyingNature.pdf>

3 Jean Piaget: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Piaget

4 For an overview of the 5 technologies:
<https://player.vimeo.com/video/170979436>

5 Embodying Nature Leadership Training participant's reflection (personal correspondence 2016)

6 Embodying Nature Leadership Training participant's reflective poetic harvesting (personal correspondence 2016)