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Wisdom of Sensations

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In her 1981 book *Relieve: A Memoir*, choreographer, dancer, and author Agnes de Mille (1905-1993) wrote about her experience of suffering a near fatal cerebral hemorrhage just prior to a benefit performance for her dance company Heritage Dance Theater at the Hunter College Playhouse in New York in 1975.¹ She spoke of the paralysis of the right side of her body:

What worried me agonizingly was that I could not get my touch back. Sometimes I lost track of my right hand completely and had to hunt through the bedclothes to find it. I couldn't feel how long my arm was, or where my hand was in relation to my forearm. I had to feel along the inside of the arm with the left hand until I reached the member. I sensed that I *had* a hand, but it always seemed to be in the middle of the forearm. I actually felt along the bone and into the fingers with astonishment at its length and distance until I came to it, quite surprisingly, a long way off and way down there. I kept being surprised by how long my leg was, how long and far away my foot was. I would feel where my foot ought to be, and where I thought it was, and it was inches, oh, a foot longer, which was startling. And when I raised my arm, I didn't know where it was—before, behind, to the

left, to the right. And if I closed my eyes, I didn't know whether it was up or had moved somewhere else. If I extended my arm, I strained the muscles and tensed them. But the hand always fell to my coverlets and I never knew because I was still making the effort. This is an astonishing experience.²

In the passage above, de Mille described the loss of the capacity to track sensations in one part of the body and to possess a functioning proprioception, the ability to sense the relative position of one's body parts and the strength of effort needed for movement. Her description encourages readers not to take sensations and the ability to feel the body for granted, but to treat sensations as an integral source for well-being and knowledge of the self. As a somatic movement educator, when I speak to my students of mind-body movement techniques about the importance of physical sensations, I ask them to imagine what it would be like to be unable to sense.

Somatics and Cultivating Awareness of Sensations

The field of somatics provides ample opportunities for explorations of sensation. Somatics is an umbrella term for numerous practices that integrate the mind and the body. The Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method[®], ideokinesis, Mind-Body Centering, Nia dance, Continuum, and 5Rhythms are some of them. The methods of delivery of somatic practices differ greatly. What they share is a commitment to the participant's exploration of movement, the inner over the outer, and the attention to expressing oneself in movement. When I work with clients, I ask them to notice sensations. An important part of this mission is cultivating my own ability to stay connected to the felt sense, "the

ability to be able to notice and attend to the happenings of the body,” during and after my time with clients.³

Tracing sensations takes time and patience. The first step in working with sensations is learning how to *notice* them. Somatic practices tend to use simple movements or improvisational, free movement in order to allow participants to direct their mind’s attention toward sensing what their bodies are telling them. Participants learn to employ the “felt sense” or what I call the “inner eye” or the “mind’s eye.” Allowing the “mind’s eye” to travel throughout the body as I execute a simple dance movement of stepping to the front, side and back with my right leg, I might discover a sensation of tightness in the hip joint, a tense hip flexor, or aliveness in the ankle joint. Making a big circle with my arms, I feel a surge of energy in the chest and sense my spine lengthening. I might notice an absence of clear sensation in the middle of the back as I do a “lat pulldown” at the gym, a difficulty of finding the contraction of the triceps muscle as I extend my arms to the back, or a sensation of discomfort in between my shoulder blades as I do a back row. All of these are sensations—some are pleasant, some are not. Attending to sensations with a non-judgmental, open, non-interpretive mind is essential in cultivating awareness of the body-mind union.

The second step in working with sensations is learning how to use these observations to make new choices about health. Noticing tightness in the chest, what movements would make me feel good in that area? Would moving the ribcage side to side make me feel better? Or interlocking my fingers behind the head, leaning back, and allowing the sternum to lift? Noticing that I have difficulties feeling grounded, could I move my mind’s eye toward the feet and pay attention to roll from the heel to the ball of

the foot? Sensing an increased length in the spine in a dance class, could I return to this sensation periodically throughout the day and see if it is possible to maintain this sensation by imagining my crown of the head reaching toward the heaven and the tailbone relaxing toward the earth? The key to developing awareness of sensations is dedicating time for practicing this skill in a somatic movement class or a private session and then tuning in to the body and sensations periodically throughout the day, outside of the classroom setting.

Benefits of Noticing Sensations

Learning to track sensations can bring many benefits. Being more in touch with the body, balance, posture, alignment, and effort needed to execute movements can help prevent injuries. When you attune to your body's needs and learn to drop unnecessary tension you can develop a habit of paying attention to how your body is feeling and as a result, a deeper and more precise dialogue opens up between an individual's mental capacities and the physical self. I have witnessed an increase in clients' ability to express themselves artistically and through movement, such as in improvisational free dance, as they gain confidence in their physical expressiveness. Attention moves away from ideals of outer physical "perfection" to feeling *connected* to the body, feeling *well* in the body, and regarding one's self—in times of strength and vulnerability—with compassion.

Embodied Intelligence and Kinesthetic Empathy

In my work with private clients, I have noticed that my ability to tune in to my client's needs is heightened when I am connected to myself somatically, through

sensations. Before starting a private session, I listen to my client's breathing. How does my body register the person's current mental, emotional, and physical state based on how my body feels in response to his or her breathing? Through my body, I can sense whether their exhales are full and calm or short and surface-level. This information guides me in making decisions about movement choices—an hour of calm, meditative movement and stretching, or a more vigorous workout and creative free dance.

The awareness of sensations, then, raises my kinesthetic empathy with my clients. Kinesthetic empathy is a phenomenon where “spectators identify with the mover and themselves experience virtual movement sensations.”⁴ Scholars have argued that viewers' kinesthetic empathy increases if they can see themselves executing the viewed movement—their familiarity with certain movements can heighten their ability to feel in their bodies what performers on the stage might be sensing physically.^{5,5} The concept of kinesthetic empathy has been discussed largely in the context of dance performance, but it can be applied to other situations where a person physically senses what the other might be sensing. In my work, I not only use my visual senses with clients, I also connect with them kinesthetically. I sense in my body where their bodies feel tight, where their bodies yearn to expand, where the movement is inhibited, where they feel flexible, and where and how they are overusing a muscle group that does not need to initiate and carry out a particular exercise. Learning to listen to my own somatic sensations allows me to learn to listen to my clients.

Physicians can utilize the concept of kinesthetic empathy. Through honing their skills in listening to body sensations, they can cultivate their ability to sense what it might feel like to be in their patients' bodies and use these felt insights to come up with

solutions that can contribute to their clients' health. One simple step physicians can take is to tune in to their clients' breathing: is the breathing full or shallow, relatively slow or quick? To develop kinesthetic empathy, they can ask: "How does it feel to be in this person's body? Do I feel aligned and centered as I imagine being in that person's body and doing his/her movements? Do I feel any physical tensions or tightness in my body as I watch him/her? Where in my body do I feel good—expanded, free, with energy flowing—as I speak to him/her?" In this way, physicians can use their bodily felt sense, a nonverbal means, in addition to listening to their patients' verbal messages.

Using felt sense and the ability to notice and respond to sensations is different from decoding body language. In kinesthetic empathy, the emphasis is on the question of "how does my body feel as I interact with another being?" We *connect* to another person on a subtle, nonverbal level. We open our body's intelligence in front of another being. Dealing with body language, the question may become "what could the other's gesture mean?" The focus moves away from *connecting* to patients, *imagining* ourselves in their bodies, and shifts to interpreting the other's physical and emotional states from the outside. Habitually turning the mind's attention to the body and its sensations allows us to connect to our embodied intelligence, the wisdom of the body. We do not empathize with others through emotions only—we empathize with others also through our bodies.

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References

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² de Mille, A. *Reprieve: A Memoir*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1981:56.

³ Keogh, AF and Davis, J. “Cultivating the Felt Sense of Wellbeing: How We Know We Are Well,” in Karkou V et al. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017:535-546.

⁴ Reynolds, D. *Rhythmic Subjects. Uses of Energy in the Dances of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham*. Alton, Hampshire: Dance Books, 2007:14.

⁵ Profeta, K. *Dramaturgy in Motion*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015:147.

⁵ Batson, G, Wilson, M. *Body and Mind in Motion: Dance and Neuroscience in Conversation*. Bristol: Intellect, 2014.