



EMBODYING CHANGE: A WHOLE SYSTEMS APPROACH

BY VICTORIA CASTLE

When the ancient Greeks explored what constituted the ideal citizen, they identified four qualities: physically fit and strong, emotionally balanced and mature, mentally agile and alert, and having a spiritual or moral order. They saw those qualities as living in the *soma*—the embodiment of the self. The Greeks viewed the living body in its wholeness—mind, body, and spirit as one.

Somatics is a whole systems view that addresses the nature of how we operate and what shapes our perceptions, opinions, and actions. It deals with our innate structure, moving beyond any superficial investigation of body language or posture. The principles of Somatics recognize that the self is indistinguishable from the body, from our lived experience. Somatic practices such as deep breathing, centering, gratitude, and curiosity are effective because they retrain the nervous system by attending to the self as a whole, rather than treating it like a machine to be managed. In this way, real change can take root and become lasting experience.

In our culture, talking about the body can be tricky, because we link it to appearance, fitness, and health, relegating it to the status of an object to be managed. The body is often consid-

ered an inert mass activated by something else, the mind or the spirit. For our purposes, we hold the notion of the body very differently: We see it as an intelligent, awake, and powerful part of an organic unity. To arrive at this understanding, we must investigate and mend the mind-body schism that disconnects us from ourselves and keeps us trapped in our heads, trying to win the battle of mind over matter.

Overcoming the Mind-Body Schism

One profound cause of the schism between body and mind is that we have learned to mistrust or disregard our senses. We've lost touch with what poet Mary Oliver calls "the soft animal of your body." Living as though we're disembodied (numb or disconnected), we lose touch with our self-direction. Rather than forge ahead with a firm sense of purpose, we're caught in the drift of whatever thought or action prevails; we go wherever we're led.

Think about it: Can you really separate yourself from your biology, your experience, your history? We are *in-formed* by our lived experience. It influences what we perceive and how we react to everything we encounter.

I grew up as a military kid. We lived a few hundred yards from the flight line, and my days began and ended with the scream and quake of jets taking off. When our windows rattled, it was a sign to me that all was right with the world. Now as an adult, whenever the Blue Angels come to my area, I always make sure that when they fly over, I am close enough so my whole body thunders with the vibration. My system relishes the experience. Someone who has lived in a war zone would experience the sensation

very differently.

If you went to a strict school where you were ridiculed for making mistakes, it's not likely that you are the first one to offer a new idea at work. If you grew up with lots of siblings and not quite enough food, you probably eat fast. If you have traveled internationally and adapted to constant change, chances are good that you feel energized in new settings rather than frightened. We are formed or shaped by our experience. That shape, or *soma*, influences who we are. Along with our life story, our *soma* determines what is possible (and improbable) in our experience.

For a moment, slump in your chair, drop your chin to your chest, tighten your back and shoulders, make your breathing shallow, squint your eyes, and tighten your gut. Now get out there and be great! Lead that team, sell that project, host that event, attract that partner—you're a sure bet! It's absurd, right? We intrinsically know that this tight *soma* we've crunched ourselves into is just not consistent with effectiveness. Even so, many of us are still living in some chronic variation of this shape, and we struggle all the harder because of it.

Most of us have been practicing contraction for decades, holding a tension-filled *soma* that makes ease and flow feel a long way off. The good news is that when we begin to recognize how we have been shaped, we can begin to change our way of being and reshape ourselves to experience life with ease.

The Body Is Not a Taxi for the Brain

Let's start where we all start, as babies. The work of Daniel Stern, MD,

TEAM TIP

When team members recognize how their bodies respond to stress, they can take steps to release their tension, whether going for a short walk or consciously relaxing their shoulder muscles. By doing so, they can deal with work problems more productively.

focuses on infant development. He has found that:

“All mental acts are accompanied by input from the body, including all the things the body does or must do to permit, support, and amplify the ongoing mental activity, postures formed or held, movements of the eyes, head, or body, displacements of space, and contractions and relaxations of muscular tone.”

The body and mind inform each other, and our resulting mental constructs create what Stern refers to as the *embodied mind*. The way we learned things in the beginning is how we continue to learn them: through the body-mind loop.

In his book *Descartes' Error*, neurologist Antonio Damasio confirms the mind-body loop and describes how we can step in and make changes, how we can self-observe and self-regulate so that we don't allow our “negative body state” to negatively affect our mental state as well (see “The Mind-Body Loop”). The process requires, first, that we be in touch with our own sensations.

Under stress, we tighten. Our bodily system contracts muscles, constricts blood vessels, alters breathing, and generally prepares for danger. It is designed to do so very efficiently for a brief period of time, and then to return to a more relaxed and fluid state. Sadly, what is meant to be a brief and intense organization of the human system has become a chronic way of being for many of us. Our

muscles stay rigid and tight. We grind our teeth in our sleep. We're squeezed in and up, losing our sense of groundedness or flexibility.

We're trapped in a conditioned reaction that perceives everything as more reason to bear down.

Without the Body, Never Mind

I'm not a fan of suffering or struggle. In fact, my life's work is devoted to interrupting struggle wherever I find it. As an educator and executive coach, seeing people stuck in stories or somas that strangle their aliveness launches me into action. I have witnessed myself and others valiantly trying to change our lives strictly within the mind-over-matter Cartesian model by conceptualizing, intellectualizing, rationalizing, and willing ourselves into a new reality.

This method is insufficient, however, given our human nature. We are intricate psychobiological beings, not merely minds to be programmed with new data. When I was first introduced to the discourses of Somatics about 15 years ago, I knew I had found the element that had been missing from all the well-intended work of personal and cultural transformation I had been involved with. I became an avid student. My teacher, Richard Strozzi-Heckler, has taken this important work to governments and corporations, consulting with such organizations as NATO and the Marine Corps. When I seek hope for the future, I take our cultural welcoming of Somatic principles as a very good sign.

And in my own experience, I have found corporations, leaders, parents, entrepreneurs, and social leaders grateful for this powerful approach for personal and organizational change.

Strozzi-Heckler tells us: “By living in our body we can generate a presence that has the power to allow genuine contact with our most inner core, with others, and with the environment. I have come to believe that by liv-

ing close to our bodily and energetic processes, we may lead lives of increasing wholeness and purpose.”

I've seen these changes, even in individuals and organizations for which exhaustion and defeat had gained what seemed like a permanent stronghold. By understanding our soma and learning to listen to its messages, we become equipped to create a new reality.

Thawing Out Our Life Force

Embodiment is the result of what we practice. Sadly, most of us have been practicing various forms of contraction for many years. We learned early on to squeeze down our sensations,

PRACTICE Noticing Our Sensations

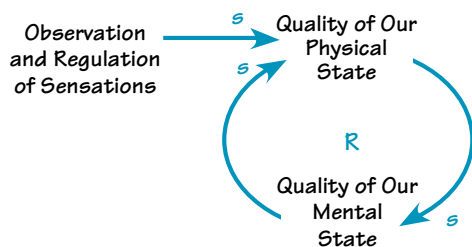
While you're reading, don't change a thing about the way you are sitting. Just begin to observe. How would you describe your breathing? Is it shallow, full, tight, small, slow, fast? (This is no time for judging, just observe.)

Let your attention scan through your body, starting at the top of your head. Scalp, face, eyes, jaw. Does it feel fluid or congested inside your skull? Throat, neck, shoulders—if you rated them (say one is relaxed and seven is tense), what number would you assign to each? Chest, back, arms, stomach. Do you feel movement, energy, dullness, discomfort, flexibility? Hips, organs, buttocks, genitals. Are they tight, relaxed? What do you notice? Legs, thighs, knees, calves, shins, feet, toes. Can you feel contact with the floor? Do some areas feel more alive than others?

The game here is to *notice*. The path to freedom begins with self-awareness, coming to know what *is*. Although we might want to race ahead to judge and categorize what we find, this actually precludes learning. And right now we're information gatherers. So just let yourself notice whatever you notice.

The language of sensation is new to many of us. You may not have words to describe what you find. You may not be able to locate any sensations to observe. Remember that we have been trained to dull down our senses and impulses, either to fit in or to tolerate our surroundings. Unfreezing all this takes both practice and a healthy measure of curiosity.

THE MIND-BODY LOOP



In his book *Descartes' Error*, neurologist Antonio Damasio confirms the mind-body loop and describes how we can self-observe and self-regulate so that we don't allow our “negative body state” to negatively affect our mental state as well. The process requires, first, that we be in touch with our own sensations.

OPEN

ease
 prevailing trust
 relaxed body
 effortless breathing
 “can do” attitude
 collaborative
 curious, asking questions
 see opportunities
 generous
 willing to take risks
 laugh easily at self
 energized
 fighting FOR
 resilient
 grateful
 releasing things easily
 make clear requests and agreements
 generative, accountable
 wholehearted

CONTRACTED

effort
 constant worry
 chronic tension
 congestion
 “can’t happen” attitude
 competitive
 judgmental, defensive
 see obstacles
 withholding
 hyper-cautious
 take self too seriously
 exhausted
 fighting AGAINST
 resigned
 keeping score
 hanging on
 unspoken or vague expectations
 consumptive, “victim”
 inner conflict

be they excitement (“People don’t like little girls who are too loud”) or distress (“If you keep crying, I’m going to have to put you down”). How open and alive can you be if your breath is high and shallow, your shoulders are tense, and your jaw is tightly clenched?

I perfected the clenched jaw decades ago. I’ve since learned that when I hold my jaw tight, it determines how I interact with the world. Life becomes a series of hurdles to be conquered. Even if I’m not upset about anything, my tight jaw will lead me to feel *I’ve got to get this done* or *This is hard* or *I have to get through this*.

The good news is now I know that one place I regularly contract is my jaw. As soon as I’m clenched, my day changes from a bright package of possibility to one huge, daunting To-Do List.

By continually checking in with what’s happening in my soma, I can catch my clenched jaw early and then I can relax it. I may have to relax it a dozen times throughout the day. But every time I do, I’m interrupting an old pattern and replacing it with a new one. In the meantime, my day begins flowing much more smoothly.

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. We are always practicing something, and what we practice, we become. In fact, the body is incapable of *not* practicing. Under stress, 99.9 percent of us will gravitate to our accustomed practices, our embodied way of being. David Morris, in his paper “Placebos, Pain and Belief,” says that our biology, like our culture, limits the world we recognize and respond to. When we release the contraction in our bodies, our world expands, too.

The Shape of Our Experience

How have you shaped or configured yourself in a way that is life-suppressing, that is not available to ease and flow, that squeezes down aliveness? Yes, I’m flagrantly assuming that you have a habit of contraction, given that you’re a member of this culture. What is your customized, highly sophisticated, well-practiced personal separation strategy? And once you’re out,

where do you go? You can find your suppressing practice by watching what is habitual (embodied) in how you operate.

It’s Monday morning. Today is the day you present your team’s new project to your boss and other executives. You stayed up late last night preparing. You need to drop your kids off at daycare on the way to work. The clothes you planned to wear are still at the cleaners. How do you move with all this: are you tight or at ease, hopeful or filled with dread?

Using the list in “Open Versus Contracted,” note which traits or symptoms best describe your normal experience. Where on the continuum of Open to Contracted do you spend more time? What are the results you produce from there? What is your energy level like at the end of the day? What impact does that have on your interactions and relationships? On your self-esteem? What’s the deeply embedded story (masquerading as truth) that lives in your soma?

When we live in contraction, the tension keeps us disturbed and attending to what’s wrong. We think, “There must be a problem if I’m this

tight and anxious.”

Our body informs our thinking and our mood. If we consistently hang out in our physical tensions, we can actually become addicted to struggle; in an odd way, struggle becomes our comfort zone. Many of us build our identity around making continued noble efforts in the face of almost certain defeat. We’re in a cultural harness that says the way to be attractive is to look strong and hide our vulnerability. So we squeeze down a little tighter and separate ourselves a little more. Just look at a person’s soma, or shape. (We’re talking about the shape of lived experience, not clothing size.) The shape we inhabit over time becomes our outlook on life. Our separation strategies are our stories in action.

Mick was a struggling entrepreneur who lived by the story that “Life is unsafe.” If something didn’t happen as he hoped it would, he immediately moved into resignation. It didn’t take any effort at all for him to go there—it was his default mode, and he had been practicing it for years. You can imagine what the shape of resignation looks like: rounded shoulders, flaccid

belly, crumpled chest, lips pursed, and eyes dull. As Mick shifted into a new orientation of “Great things just keep happening to me,” it was amazing to see how he changed. He practiced a new shape, a new way of being, that included coming up to his full height, letting his shoulders rest back and down, breathing fully into the belly, feeling his feet solidly planted and his face relaxed and responsive.

We’re not talking about body language or posture. Such terms refer to the body as an object, a thing we configure by putting arms this way and tilting the head that way for a certain effect. Shape is our lived experience; it reveals who we are. Maybe our parents knew something when they told us to stand up straight because it produced a different mood for us to live in than being hunched down or drawn back. While shape may reflect cultural differences, travel to any country and you can see who has a sense of freedom and self-direction and who does not, just by observing how they inhabit their somas. A person raised in a position of authority is trained to take the shape of a leader or a sovereign. Such people are believable, coherent to themselves and those around them. They become the self that leads.

There’s no question that we are formed and shaped by our history, whether that means never forgetting how to ride a bicycle or flinching at the sight of the family home we lived in 30 years ago. What we experience lives in our bodies and informs our actions and reactions daily. Wilhelm Reich, the Austrian psychoanalyst of the early 1900s, was among the first to recognize muscular armoring as a reaction to stress, either current or historical. If you were yelled at frequently as a child, you might have developed protective muscular armoring in your neck and shoulders. Your eyes might be chronically squeezed. The yelling might have stopped decades ago, but if your muscles never got the message that they don’t need to contract anymore, they’re still on duty whether or not yelling is present. The armoring you took on was absolutely the right choice at the time because it helped you take care of

yourself. But based on who you are and what you want today, it may be time for a different shape.

Taking Off a Tight Shoe

Once something is embodied, it becomes automatic, especially when we’re under stress. This is both the good news and the bad news. We have been conditioned a certain way. Duane Elgin, in his book *Voluntary Simplicity*, suggests we would do well to acknowledge how much we act in preprogrammed ways. “We live ensnared in an automated, reflexive, and dreamlike reality,” he writes, “that is a subtle and continuously changing blend of fantasy, inner dialogue, memory, planning, and so on.”

When we recognize what creates our experience, we can change it.

Don’t despair, however. We are not locked forever into the trances we have embodied. At the same time, I’m not here to blow sunshine by telling you that the whole process is a simple matter of relaxing your muscles and thinking happy thoughts. We must address things as they are, things we can count on.

One thing we can count on is that human nature is changeable.

We are living beings, not inert clumps. We are made of live, malleable substances in constant flux. Dr. Amit Goswami, who wrote the textbook on quantum mechanics, confirms that “atoms are not things, they are tendencies.”

When we recognize what creates our experience, we can change it. We can then respect, even revere, our human psychobiology, rather than ignoring it or trying to wish our way to a better life. Coming into a new relationship with embodiment, we become effective players in this game of life. Our awareness is our ace in the deck.

The person who wears a perpetual frown even when she is “relaxed”—how do you suppose that person

sees the world? Or the one who inhabits a rigid back, tight arms, and hard eyes—what is she expecting life to deliver? If someone doesn’t know that it’s possible to inhabit life another way, she remains trapped. In contrast, the person who breathes deep and easy, who holds minimal tension in the shoulders, who lifts the heart and chest—she has a very different experience of life. The root of the word *courage* means *heart*. When we collapse the chest, we become easily discouraged, disheartened. When we fill our space and widen our chest, there is suddenly room for connection, purpose, and passion.

Our shape doesn’t impact only us, it affects those around us. The shape we take on creates our identity, and others respond to us based on the shape they see. Remember, we humans are always deciding what everything means. All I need to do is look at you, and I create an instant story about you based on what I see; it’s an automatic process. Just as an actor takes on a certain shape to get in character, we can experiment with how we inhabit ourselves until we find the soma that best supports what we care about. We can choose to inhabit the shape that encourages the unrestricted flow of life.

Saying “Yes” to the Flow

Thank goodness for great teachers! Our dog Tucker adopted us seven years ago, probably because she saw how much we needed to learn about real pleasure. The way she stalks a squirrel (which she has absolutely no intention of catching) is an exquisite act of choreography. Her muscles tremble with excitement, and she places each paw so slowly that the squirrel doesn’t even notice she’s moved closer. Her nose twitches as she draws in every scent, until her waiting explodes in a final burst of speed as she chases the squirrel up the tree, following it all the way to a second-tier branch. Then she proudly trots into the house, slurps up a loud, luscious drink of water, and paws the rug until it’s just right as she walks the secret number of circles that make her ready to throw herself down with a satisfied

sigh. In minutes she drifts into a contented asleep.

Tucker gives herself completely to the moment, just as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes in his book *Flow*, a study in the state of high performance. In the state of flow, the moment is rewarding in and of itself. There is no split attention. This, I realized one day, is exactly the state that Tucker effortlessly inhabits. Whether she's tracking a squirrel or drinking water or preparing for a nap, she's completely in touch with her sensations and uses them to enhance her experience and her action. The more she feels, the more alive she is. And it gives her impeccable timing, with no action wasted.

I am fascinated by Tucker's unabashed experience of pleasure. My default mode has always been to settle for relief instead. When I'm stressed or pushed or uncomfortable, relief sounds pretty good. At such times, I think that anywhere other than where I am would be preferable. But here's the problem: Relief takes me in the opposite direction from pleasure. Instead of becoming more alive, I move to being more numb. I move away from myself.

Erich Fromm identified *relief* as the satiation of deficiency, which he calls scarcity-pleasure, distinct from the abundance-pleasure of creation and growth. "We go to glut, relaxation, loss of tension," he said, "in contrast to the ecstasy, the serenity one experiences when functioning easily and at the peak of one's power. Relief is less stable or enduring than the pleasure that accompanies growth which can go on forever."

Pleasure requires a certain degree of intimacy with ourselves. To be true to myself, I must know myself: what I enjoy, what I resist, what moves me. Pleasure asks that we reacquaint ourselves with who we are. It is through feeling sensations that we come to know ourselves in new ways. Our senses give us answers to questions such as *What do I feel? What calls me? How am I affected? What am I drawn toward? What do I avoid? When do I feel most alive?* The more alive we feel, the more responsibility we have. This is

only fitting because we have more power when we're fully alive. Instead of being the disembodied self that drifts away from life and goes numb, our embodied self's aliveness grants us greater discernment.

As we become more self-aware and self-directed, our life force dramatically increases. When we are fully awake, our life force is more powerful than any trance.

The more present we are, the more consciously we choose where to direct our attention and what action to take.

So pleasure is a way of waking up! Who would have guessed it? Many of us have been taught that pleasure is the first step into the quagmire of sloth. But as Kay Redfield Jamieson asserts in her thoughtful book *Exuberance*, play is essential for human beings. She writes, "Play encourages fearlessness—that is, the readiness to explore one's world, test boundaries, reward flexibility and prepare one for the unpredictable."

Time and space for play are, nevertheless, dwindling in our culture. Today's children have 40 percent less

free time to play than they had 20 years ago. Some elementary schools have eliminated recess entirely, so students have more time to study for state-required competency tests. Such shortsightedness edges the body out of the picture and stymies our natural creativity, resilience, and excellence.

But why even bother to feel more, since life is pretty challenging as it is? Well, simply put, the more sensation we can tolerate, the more present we can be. The more present we are, the more consciously we choose where to direct our attention and what action to take. The more choice, the more power. We get to own our lives, to climb out from the valley of habits we've been stuck in. Life can be messy, but it doesn't have to affect us as though a two-ton truck were barreling down upon us. We may still experience that kind of thing once in awhile, but we have options.

We now know where our feet are, and we can move out of the way with purpose and grace. And in plenty of time. ■

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NEXT STEPS

Flexing Your Pleasure Muscle

To ensure that you don't go the way of the squeezed and disembodied, take on the following practices.

1. At least three times a day, stop for a moment and scan your body for sensations, as described earlier in this article. You're an explorer traveling a new landscape, fascinated by everything you see. You don't waste a moment of your journey judging what you find. Your curiosity is boundless.
2. Without changing any conditions around you, how can you have more pleasure right in this moment? Make any adjustments in your soma that allow you more ease and spaciousness (adjustments to breath and tension are always great places to start).
3. Inhabit yourself in your own version of my dog Tucker stalking her squirrel: fully present, fully alive. Notice your mood. Allow the colors and light around you to become more vivid. Feel your blood pumping, your breath moving, the sensations of your clothing against your skin. Be nowhere else but right here, right now.
4. Notice what happens to your experience. If you like the change, keep that shape. Getting used to feeling sensations comes with—you guessed it—practice.