

Increasing Aliveness through Positive Feedback Loops
(Notes on Somatic Psychotherapy)
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For the *Journal of Holistic Psychology*, Volume II, 2013

Everywhere are instructions such as, “Align your focus with the solution and not the problem.” I often wonder if those making these pithy suggestions could describe precisely how this focus is to be sustained, especially when the problem is nagging. “Surrender is about receiving and trusting the universe.” Heavenly. But what *are* the steps to receiving and trusting? If this was so obvious, wouldn’t we all already be doing that all the time? “How others see you is not important. How you see yourself means everything.” Feeling connected to others is as vital as sunshine, so how do you set aside the views of a loved one and still feel connected? “Surrender to what moves you and it will carry you. Tuning into what moves you will expand you.” Bill Bowen said this, and his trainings teach therapists how to guide their clients toward somatic understanding of such messages.

Through this paper I shine a light on tangible steps for increasing aliveness, drawing from the works of Craig Nakken, Daniel Siegel, James Kepner, Bill Bowen, John Welwood, Wendy Palmer, Deane Juhan, Nathaniel Branden, Byron Brown, Rick Hanson, Heinz Kohut, and Christine Caldwell. Through two vignettes I offer brief sketches of how I apply some of these concepts as a somatic psychotherapist. The second vignette also presents the aspect of working with a client to cultivate the capacity to describe physical experience, which is a vital part of shifting the paradigm of self to include the body.

The first part of the paper is organized around the four stages of Christine Caldwell’s (1996) “moving cycle” as laid out in her book, *Getting Our Bodies Back*. While there is an abundance of literature and different approaches to working with the self through the body, the moving cycle offers valuable organization of and

accessible insight into theories and techniques of somatic psychotherapy. So I was both delighted and disgruntled recently to have discovered Caldwell's work for only the first time. *Getting Our Bodies Back* was published the year before I entered this field, and I admire Caldwell for her luminous voice and for already having created substantial structure for the work as I have come to perceive it all these years later through other channels, yet without this sequence of stages.

I began studying with Deane Juhan in 1997 (and breaking my teeth on his monumental book, *Job's Body*). For the last eleven years Bill Bowen (Psycho-Physical Therapy) has been my primary guide and mentor. Both continue to be profound influences through their illumination of the inherently intertwining nature of the body-self. My discussion of the works included here has everything to do with the ground laid by their teachings.

I have come to recognize that sparks of aliveness are accessible through the explorations and practices of mindfulness, sensory awareness, self esteem, understanding addiction as a spiritual dis-ease, choice, purpose, soul/spirit, action, responsibility, commitment, vision, and in the recognition of the neurobiological effects of relationships. I propose that the linking together of any two of these practices creates a positive feedback loop—they mutually reinforce each other—so that the motivation for practicing any one of them can be elevated. Just as engaging the sense of smell enhances taste, so connecting any two systems creates a synergistic effect, such as deepening your breath while visualizing your heart space.

In physiology there are two types of feedback loops in the maintenance of homeostasis. Negative feedback loops work to return body systems to the previously established baseline. Most of our body processes thrive through these negative feedback loops. A positive feedback loop has the effect, once activated, of creating more of something. Since somatic psychotherapy understands the psyche to exist in relation to physical systems, this correlation is meant to be more than just metaphor.

Signals of increasing aliveness are the “body-self’s” ability to effectively hold a physical charge of energy, a sense of increased presence, a broader range of the whole palette of feeling, and a greater recognition of personal responsibility for one’s choices, all of which culminate in the experience of internal richness. (I use the phrase “body-self” to denote “I-body”, a term used by James Kepner (1998) in his book, *Body Process* (p.7), in which he discusses how our language fails us through the limiting concept of “my body,” which implies ownership, separation, and the body-as-object.)

As you go through your day making choices, rather than gauging your experience by your degree of *happiness*, experiment with checking out how *alive* you feel. I envision the more we each practice increasing our own aliveness, the more we can lift ourselves out of our collective dissociation, apathy, ignorance, and other forms of disconnection and suffering, and into “right living.” This is because another signal of increased aliveness is the inevitable ripple into the environment of a mutual permission to be embodied and to speak the truth.

Somatic Psychotherapy: Aliveness vs. Addiction

Somatic psychotherapy invites the client to move away from only talking abstractly about things and directs them instead into the fullness of their present moment sensory, muscular and energetic organization. Diagnoses can be useful to track clusters of symptoms, but the therapist’s vision of the client is not pathology-centered. Rather than pathologize self-sabotaging behaviors, these misguided reactions for coping with the stresses of living can be seen as false attempts at aliveness. Addiction is a cardinal example. Addictive behavior can be conceived as derailed drives for intimacy, emotional security, relief, and meaning.

Craig Nakken (1996) describes addiction as “an attempt to control the uncontrollable cycles of human experience.” In *The Addictive Personality*, Nakken explains how “the foundation of the addict is found in all people,” because “it’s found in a normal desire

to make it through life with the least amount of pain and the greatest amount of pleasure possible” (p.1). There is also a basic psychological need, often out of awareness, to transcend the mundane and to discover meaning, purpose and a feeling of connection which can be likened to living within spiritual principles. It is the *unconscious* seeking of fulfillment and satisfaction that sets the stage for addictive patterns. Nakken says addiction is:

[A] spiritual illness in which people believe in and seek spiritual connection through objects and behaviors that can only produce temporary sensations. These repeated, vain attempts to connect with the Divine produce hopelessness, fear, and grieving that further alienate the addict from spirituality and humanity...Here the definition of spiritual involves being connected in a meaningful way to the world (p.5).

Caldwell suggests the definition of addiction can be expanded to include everyone, as it can be seen as “anything we do that repeats, doesn’t change, doesn’t satisfy, doesn’t complete, and irritates our loved ones, have we left anyone out?” (p.50). And in *Body Process* James Kepner explains disembodiment as a root of dis-ease in general:

The range of desensitization reaches from the severe disembodied state of psychosis to the more selective desensitization most of us use to respond to temporary discomforts...Moderate gaps in our sensory ground result in selective dead areas in our experience of our self and the world...life isn’t bad, just dulled...little grips you or stands out in your experience...there are fewer highlights and contrasts except when we force our experience through hedonism, drugs, alcohol...to shock our deadened flesh into life...Those who flee their feelings through intellectualization and the disembodied life of pure thought are similar in nature...[They] flog their bodies alive by severe and addictive physical exercise...The problems of anomie (lack of identity),

detachment, uninvolved... [are] not from a philosophical crisis, but from the desensitization of our physical ground (p.98).

“The Moving Cycle”

In *Getting Our Bodies Back*, Caldwell presents “the moving cycle,” a four-step somatic process “that introduces experiences designed to transform addictive behaviors from an unconscious, insufficient need substitute into a conscious, and satisfying action” (p.69). The somatic work of the moving cycle is to learn kinesthetically such abstract concepts as acceptance, boundaries, responsibility and ownership, thereby transmuting aspirations to tangible experiences which make them more available to be accessed at will.

Stage One of the Moving Cycle: Awareness

In the therapy container there is much to be aware of. Awakening *sensory* awareness is the groundwork for embodiment (and is likely universal to all somatic approaches). “Our ability to feel and express our physical experience is the foundation of recovery, the bedrock of joyful and satisfying action in the world,” says Caldwell (p.71). This first stage of the cycle can be difficult or distressing as well as enlivening because attending to sensations involves breath, and breath can stimulate feeling as well as calm and stabilize. Awakening sensation means allowing the broad spectrums of pleasure and discomfort—even the piercing arrows of pain—to course through the body-self contained, yet unobstructed. Through this practice we become more available to all our feelings and states of mind.

The practices of focusing and sustaining attention are vital for awakening sensory awareness. There are many practices, ancient and new, for supporting awareness, and Caldwell speaks of the oscillation between focused and diffuse attention, as in alternating between seeing the trees and the forest. Cultivating the ability to choose the object of our awareness is like harnessing the

forces of sunlight and water for the effect this has on our life. Caldwell gives the example of how a client often focuses their attention in therapy. She writes that when someone comes to therapy with their attention pointing primarily toward the pain in their life, they are often unaware of other vital parts of themselves. These parts may have atrophied or were never allowed to grow to begin with, still, this narrowed focus helps to perpetuate the problem.

Bill Bowen calls these parts missing or undeveloped resources. Awakening awareness of existing and missing resources is a cornerstone of Bowen's Psycho-Physical Therapy:

Therapeutically, resources are defined as those actions, awarenesses, and abilities that support a person in maintaining a sense of self, a feeling of competency, regardless of what is occurring in his or her environment. There are many different categories of resources: psychological, emotional, intellectual, relational, artistic, spiritual, somatic, etc...When a person has inadequate resources, their ability to function fully and successfully in the demanding situations of life is undermined (2011).

Stage Two of the Moving Cycle: Owning

To own experience is to take responsibility and to tell the truth. We do this the more we recognize our role as creators of our own experience. To take full responsibility for our experience, without also blaming or otherwise judging ourselves, can be challenging. But combining these two attitudes of responsibility and acceptance (the third stage of the moving cycle) is how we begin to reclaim the power to make different choices and take different actions. By telling the truth the original pain of unmet needs can become available to us. The process of owning actually generates the strength needed in order to not only have a feeling but to sustain it, and also be moved by it. Caldwell describes how the restoration of "self-regulation" in the owning phase includes the kinesthetic awareness that the body is both the vehicle through which we feel as well as the container for feeling:

The essential problem behind the inability to take responsibility is a lack of boundaries, or inadequate limits. A need creates an energetic rush in the body... This rush of energy, in order to be resolved, must be met with a container or a boundary. When an infant is picked up and held, a boundary of love, warmth, and protection is created. This action by the caregiver is a primal response that lets the infant know that there is someone out there responding to its need to be held in safety. When needs are not met with such a boundary, the body's energy continues to rush out into space. This kind of unbounded energy is frightening on a primal level... It is this unbounded feeling in the body that people practice addiction to avoid. The addictive movement, behavior, belief, or substance provides some kind of sensory boundary (p.73).

According to Daniel Siegel, self-regulation can be understood as the ability to manage this flow of energy and information. In *The Developing Mind*, Siegel (2012) examines the intertwining cognitive and physiological components involved in effectively feeling emotion (i.e. self-regulation) which are known as 1/ the modulation of arousal and 2/ the appraisal of meaning. Somatic psychotherapy seeks to engage both concurrently.

One sign of the absence of felt internal boundaries is the perpetual need to turn toward whatever promises ease and pleasure in order to escape pain and difficulty. Practicing selectively permeable boundaries for the containment of feelings empowers self-regulation. "Selectively permeable" refers to the ability to make choices about the tone and the intensity of the ever-present internal dialogue, as well as what is exchanged between self and others—what is received into and given from the self. The kinesthetic sense of selectively permeable boundaries is a basis of self-identity and provides others something to push up against. Our boundaries, as opposed to defenses, signal the message we are substantial: *I am here. You can push on me, but you may not push me over.* The

ability to establish and maintain appropriate and effective interpersonal boundaries is an example of a relational resource.

Caldwell:

When we don't have adequate boundaries, when the needing goes on and owing to our ignorance or powerlessness, we erect defensive structures...defenses are a suit of armor that signal, I expect the worst, so that instead of having contact, we typically have a skirmish...We can eliminate much of our need for defense, though, by learning to generate our own boundaries. Boundaries are physical, emotional, and cognitive...And they are created through consistent need fulfillment (p.54).

Stage Three of the Moving Cycle: Acceptance

Disbanding the internal fight with reality is a prerequisite for change. The state of acceptance means we aren't aching for things to be other than they are, and this allows the nervous system to cease firing signals of distress. Acceptance doesn't mean liking, approving of, or colluding with. Instead, through a state of openness to what is we can approach and engage situations and deal more effectively rather than withdraw. The physical experience of acceptance means you can hold a challenging idea in your mind and breathe fully. This might be experienced as an internal sense of spaciousness and an idea such as: *I can be present to what is before me, even though I don't like it.*

The Acceptance Phase of the moving cycle presents three tasks: 1/ facing struggles with body image, 2/ challenging an "imprint of wrongness" that is often felt in one's body (which I equate with the felt responses to the internal critic as described by Byron Brown and referred to later), and 3/ "most important of all, [recognizing and transforming] the lack of love that we feel for ourselves [which] affects our breathing" (p.74).

Addiction has in its roots a failure of love, and we must not only process our woundedness about this failure, but we must also teach ourselves to love again. We first recover

loving ourselves, then we re-learn to love others...In making our commitment to love more important than anything that can interfere with it, we surrender our allegiance to the stances, positions, beliefs, and behaviors that drain love from our lives—in other words, we learn to make love unconditional (p.75).

Caldwell says Buddhists might refer to addictive behavior as “habit energy,” and that inherent in habit energy is “a tendency to be frightened of our awareness and aliveness” (p.50). I think narrowing awareness is such a common habitual response because to claim confidence in owning and accepting truth for one’s self is powerful; it calls up responsibility and also risk. Since “the need for love [and acceptance by others] has more survival value than the need to be genuine” (p.55) we often negate what we know so as to not risk losing connection. When we repeatedly negate ourselves, our energy diminishes and we lose the signals of sensations in general and of knowing truth in particular.

Telling the truth is ultimately an act of relationship. In order to reclaim our power, we first re-learn how to know the truth for ourselves, then we practice speaking it to others. This is not as scary as our judge or any prior experience with “addictive logic” would have us believe. According to Caldwell, “[t]he reality is that if we follow our body’s cues, the energy created by telling the truth will be completely friendly and transformative” (p. 112).

I see movement, sensation, posture, and breath as fulcrums through which, moment by moment, we have the ever-available option of moving towards or away from—of accepting or denying—knowing truth and the inherent aliveness that is our birthright. Attending to sensations which occur solely in the ever-present moment frees us of perpetual attachment to the past and the future. Acceptance is a state of *aliveness*, because by staying present to the ever-changing stream of sensory information, we are neither imprisoned by always interpreting what has already passed, nor are

we condemned to perpetually cling with anticipation to ideas of what might come next.

Lack of acceptance generates an internal void into which rushes “the judge” (inner critic) and the effort to control. The judge is an aspect of the ego, and the illusion of safety that the judge falsely promises is a ruse to keep you small. Denial, avoidance, and other ways of diminishing awareness are a few of the many clever ways the judge shields you from being hurt by reality. In *Soul Without Shame* Byron Brown (1998) teaches vital skills for bringing your “true nature” to the foreground of your awareness and for keeping the messages of the judge in perspective.

Another effective counterforce to shame (lack of self-acceptance) is the development of self esteem as explained by Nathaniel Branden (1994) in *The Six Pillars of Self Esteem*. Branden illustrates the imperative of owning and accepting truth for ourselves and the internal stability this provides against the backdrop of today’s world:

[W]ith a breakdown of cultural consensus, an absence of worthy role models, little in the public arena to inspire our allegiance, and disorientingly rapid change a permanent feature of our lives, it is a dangerous moment in history not to know who we are or not to trust ourselves (p.xi).

Stage Four of the Moving Cycle: Action

When we have learned to sustain uncritical and loving attention with ourselves we can then apply these skills in broader contexts. In the “action” phase we are bringing what we learn in therapy out into the world. Bill Bowen emphasizes that transformation occurs in between sessions in the client’s daily life and so each session we track the changes by reviewing the “homework.” Caldwell credits Gay Hendricks when she writes, “action makes us producers in the world rather than just consumers,” and I value her linking of love and action: “In order for change to become real, in order for love to mean anything, it must

be manifested in the world” (p.76). Through all of these practices we not only *feel* better, more, and differently, we also *act* these ways.

Action, Intention, Wanting, Vision

Need and want are two motivators for action. We are warned that desire leads to suffering, but I think Rick Hanson (2009) says it well in *Buddha’s Brain* when he writes that besides addictive cravings, “the territory of desire is far-reaching, and it includes wishes, intentions, [and] hopes...” (p.103). I believe that the ability to access a felt sense of wanting helps to sustain the potency of your inner fire. I think that a clear intention can actually draw you to itself in other words, what I hold in my mind becomes the path I walk along. Bowen and Caldwell both emphasize the tenet that what the client wants for himself is a beacon for the direction of the therapy. Sometimes the work is about clarifying this vision. Bowen says, “you must [also] have vision [as a clinician] to be able to support [the clients] into new options. There is a momentum in all of us that moves us to evolve. It requires that the therapist must be awake to subtler levels of consciousness” (Bowen, 2011).

Dampening feelings of want when needs are perpetually frustrated is a protective defense and a root of dissociation and depression. The task is to rekindle the energy of wanting that is not grasping or demanding, because this is the fuel for your passion. In *The Intuitive Body*, Wendy Palmer (1999) writes that an effective antidote for depression is action, because engaging physically with the world rebalances the tendencies to over-think and under-act and generates a tangible feeling of connection to your surroundings “Your focus shifts away from your negative view of yourself and toward what you want to create. It helps to know what you want, and what you want in any given moment is clearer and more powerful when part of a larger vision” (p.100).

Honing a vision of that which we are forming *towards* helps us to *brace less* against the uncomfortable body signals as they arise, and we can depend less on random circumstances for how we feel. Optimal self-regulation calls us to participate in the deeper

currents of our development by intentionally practicing the qualities (described later) that we are organizing *into*.

“The Cycle of Experience,” Survival vs. Creativity, Approach and Avoidance

Addiction indicates we have not only given up the effort to more effectively meet a need, but that the original need may have also vanished from awareness. In *Body Process*, James Kepner addresses these losses, and his “cycle of experience” has parallels to Caldwell’s moving cycle. Kepner bases the experience cycle on the understanding that the self is “a fluid process rather than a thing or static structure.” By calling the self “the integrator of experience” Kepner paints a riveting picture of the self as not having any nature of its own “except in contact with or in relation to its environment” (p.10). Kepner offers assessment and interventions for each stage in which we may get stuck while adjusting to changes in the environment and meeting our needs in the cycle of experience:

Through *excitement* we feel our needs. Through *orientation* we organize ourselves to meet these needs in relation to our environment. Through *manipulation* we act in the service of our needs. Through *identification* we take into our organism—“make I”—what can be assimilated and through *alienation* we reject—“make not I”—what is foreign to our nature and so cannot be assimilated (p.11).

In *Buddha’s Brain* Rick Hanson provides what could be considered a neurological companion guide to the cycle of experience by detailing the parts of the brain and the neurotransmitters involved in meeting the needs of the body-self, or in Hanson’s terms, approaching and avoiding (p.36). To each of these stages of experience (as well as the stages of the moving cycle) we can apply Bill Bowen’s method of assessing a client’s resources against the continuum of survival and creativity (two opposing responses to life). At each stage it could be considered whether the client is acting creatively in service of his or her needs,

or unconsciously and automatically from a mode of survival. I see the tasks of increasing aliveness as one and the same as those of the creative process described by Bowen: “awakening, engaging, embracing, personalizing, facing, resourcing, deepening, forming, harvesting, resting” (2011).

Celia

Celia is a hard-working, devoted mother of two young children who has recently completed a graduate degree. For years she has been living with undiagnosed and challenging physical symptoms, despite her own diligent research and countless doctor consultations. Recently Celia began recognizing the pernicious effects of chronic anxiety concerning her symptoms on her daily experience of life. We’re tracking her frequent worry that “something bad is going to happen,” as well as her perpetual overwhelm by her schedule. Since she feels worse after exertion (such as a yoga class), she’s considering the value of a mindful and deliberate, but gentler practice such as Chi Gung or Tai Chi. I assert this approach to movement doesn’t mean what she thinks it does—that it’s for the convalescent or infirm—but she’s not convinced.

Celia: I see it, but I don’t do it yet. I’m holding down all the feelings and sadness that this is my reality [that I might have to do less or move more mindfully]. I’ve spent years guarding against this pushing through.

Therapist: Sense into this physical effort of ‘holding down’ and ‘guarding against’.

Celia uses an image to describe the feeling: It feels like being in a room with the wind blowing fiercely and I’m trying to keep the door closed. I’m trying to live like that—at breakfast, in the shower, every moment. It’s always: “I feel crappy but I’m going to do it anyway.”

Therapist: That is an important ability to have.

Celia: It has served me well many times. (To explore the physicality of her image, I have Celia stand and push against the wall, to exaggerate the physical feeling of “pushing against.” This

brings to the foreground and makes voluntary an effort usually in the background of her awareness.) It's tiring.

Therapist: Yes, that would be. Now, notice what happens as you slowly ease up on pushing.

Celia describes the feeling: The door's open and the wind just blows through. It's a lot less effort. Something makes me feel more alive in the pushing. More of a warrior. But I pay for it.

Therapist: So you're longing for your exercising to also be big, like a warrior's. When you're imagining learning a practice like Chi Gung, what do you notice?

Celia: I feel resignation in my head, not my body. I feel tightness in my chest and throat. (I have her exaggerate the tension while being mindful of her breath, and then ask her to notice what else arises, including any thoughts.) I have this dialogue that this is just the way it is. I have this belief that acceptance means I have to give up doing things, especially when I'm feeling bad. I hate this feeling. I can accept *this* moment. But I can't accept that this is a long-term way of life.

Therapist: So, you can accept *this* moment. Is that necessary, to decide in advance that this is your fate for life?

Celia: If only I can work on accepting the feeling bad as it's happening.

Therapist: So this is very much about being with what is happening in the moment, and also about not denying the challenges you're experiencing.

Celia: I've been making some choices to say no and it feels good to moderate the amount on my plate. But it also feels shameful, flaky. I don't want to be that person that people know as "Celia's a maybe."

Therapist: What do you want for yourself [with your friend who's coming to visit], given how you're feeling right now?

Celia: I want to be able to plan and anticipate without dread.

Therapist: Are you feeling the dread right now? (She isn't at the moment, just tired.) I have an image of you being pulled along by your schedule. (Celia confirms, so I ask,) What does that feel like?

Celia: It feels like there's a heavy cloak on me, and I'm being dragged, weighed down. (I ask her to stay with the sensations of being "dragged down". She describes her energy as pinning her through her whole body to the couch and the floor. I invite her to follow the feeling of being weighted down by moving to the mat. She lies quietly for a while, encouraged to focus awareness on following her breath.)

Every thought and every feeling has a physical organization. According to Kepner, "[t]ension results from movement that is held back in the body. Flaccidity, or limpness, is movement that is depressed" (p.104). Contact through bodywork can provide support in sustaining attention in order to study this organization. As well as being soothing or nurturing, hands-on contact can also be used to take over the self's physical efforting.

Celia identifies the heavy cloak feeling as covering her entire body, with more pressure in her chest area. I layer a few blankets on her to simulate the generalized pressure and I take over the pressure in her chest by gently applying compression to her upper ribs. I ask what she notices.

Celia: (Pauses). I feel tension draining out a little. I could stay like this for a long time. (I invite her to stay with mindful breathing, which she does for a while.) I think, what if I didn't have children? Would I ever get out of bed? (Another long pause as she "feels into that question.") I just realized I think I have this belief that I want stillness *because* I'm sick. (She elaborates how this belief has involved judgment and devaluing of herself.) Maybe it's the reverse My *wellness* wants the stillness. (She recalls feeling free from the dread recently on their family vacation and without most of the usual symptoms.)

This is a crucial shift in Celia's perspective of what her body is demanding as well as her overall relationship to rest. I encourage her to continue following her body responses of being dragged down, experiencing full permission and space to do so. The suggestion is through these practices, over time, Celia may recover her inherent internal spark and the felt sense of intrinsic motivation.

Perception of Figure/Ground, Paradoxical Nervous System, Fulfillment

Kepner says “[r]aw sensation alone is not, of course, sufficient to guide our functioning. It must be organized into something meaningful in order to be important to us...One sensation stands out from other sensations as lively and having energy when it has meaning for our functioning” (p. 109). In the development of awareness, Gestalt therapy works with the concept of a figure emerging against a background. Sensations can be considered one of the figures emerging in awareness. To knit together sensations and language, in order to give voice and meaning to the emergent figures that are the body’s messages, Bill Bowen teaches therapists how to work back and forth across “the mind/body interface.”

Unpleasant sensations are Nature’s ingenious way of getting us to attend to restoring our equilibrium. This fact points to the danger of desensitizing through addictive behaviors rather than attending to the discomfort: when our needs go unmet—whether emotional or physical or otherwise—we unwittingly put signals that are trying to get our attention outside of our awareness. Since we may not have learned how to interpret and creatively respond to the uncomfortable signals, hints of their presence can feel like threats to our survival, when in actuality they are messages calling us to an increased aliveness.

Another challenge to maintaining equilibrium is that every system of the body-self must balance two conflicting needs: openness to input, and the preservation of stability within certain ranges. Says Hanson: “inhibition from the prefrontal cortex and arousal from the limbic system must balance each other: too much inhibition and you feel numb inside, too much arousal and you feel overwhelmed” (p.32). No wonder we get confused sometimes—our nervous system is wired towards both change *and* sameness.

In *Job’s Body*, Deane Juhan (1998) tells the engrossing story of this paradox of our neuro-muscular programming, and he walks

us through the gradual entrenchment of learned behavior. What first is new becomes, through repetition, as hard-wired as our biological inheritance in the alpha and gamma motor systems of the brain.

These two systems are admirably designed to give us the best of two worlds—a conservative one which obliges us to maintain behavioral norms that are inherited, and a radically experimental one which seems to be capable of learning everything that is not included in our inheritance. The two working together make it possible for us to preserve our lives while at the same time expanding their possibilities, a truly ideal combination (p.234).

However, when we are under duress we tend to go for what feels *normal* no matter how far that may be from *optimal*. Juhan explains how the security that comes from the feeling of normalcy is exceptionally compelling because of its contribution to the sense of a continuous self-identity. When we're leaning towards sameness, afraid of aliveness, and *gripping the side of the riverbank*, our lives may seem repetitive and we will be more inclined to contrive "substitute gratifications" to satisfy the brain's biological "craving for the new." Alternately, we can learn skills for living *in the flow of the river*. Hanson says the ego itself can become a figure in awareness that fades to the background: "When you relax the subtle sense of contraction at the very nub of "me"—when you're immersed in the flow of life rather than standing apart from it...then you feel more peaceful and fulfilled" (p.205). Meditation and mindfulness are means for satisfying both tendencies; over time the practices becomes deeply familiar (sameness), while every moment is increasingly experienced as fresh and new (change).

States and Traits, Intention, Trance vs. Transcendence

Without mindfulness most of our present moments are preprogrammed and based on previous meaning-making. Hanson makes a convincing case for the mindfulness required to study the raw datum of experience because, he says, most of our mind's

content “comes from internal memory stores and perceptual processing modules.” He describes how typically only a tiny fraction of the content of our awareness is direct information from the external world: “Your brain simulates the world—each of us lives in a virtual reality that’s close enough to the real thing that we don’t bump into the furniture” (Hanson, 2009, p.43).

Furthermore, without mindfulness, states of mind shift like the weather, in tandem with changing external conditions and our internal dialogue about these conditions. Without mindfulness we are liable to be seduced by the mood change that accompanies the trance state of the addictive ritual because of a (false) promise of transcendence. But unlike the spiritual mind-state of true transcendence of the limitations of the physical world, “the trance state is a state of detachment, a state of separation from one’s physical surroundings” (Nakken, 1996, p.4). This trance state bypasses the need for you to *participate* in the focusing of your own attention; the state of addiction then focuses *for you*.

In *The Neurobiology of We*, Daniel Siegel (2011b) describes mindfulness as “a special kind of awareness” and, drawing from scientific studies, offers it as the prescription for those who want to intentionally alter states of mind, and ultimately, to “use the mind to reshape the brain.” Through mindful intention we can gradually create new grooves in our nervous system, and the cultivation of intentional states of mind can, in turn, actually alter our *traits*. Siegel explains traits as those enduring qualities, usually outside of our awareness, that have become ingrained neural connections based on past learning. The automated behavior of addiction can be considered a trait that leads *away* from integration. On the other hand, according to Siegel, the practice of holding something in awareness with curiosity allows the intentional creation of states of mind that directly *promote* integration and well-being.

Both Hanson and Wendy Palmer suggest choosing a quality to cultivate deliberately because this will sublimely interrupt the otherwise automatic tendency to identify ourselves with whatever we habitually give the most attention to—which, without awareness

typically leaves us with a narrow and limited perception of ourselves. Hanson and Palmer each walk their reader through a somatically visualized exercise of invoking the energetic sense of a given quality, such as strength, to fuel one's intentions. Hanson suggests to:

Involve the entire neuroaxis in order to power up your experience of strength. For example, bring to mind a sense of visceral, muscular willfulness to stimulate your brain stem to send norepinephrine and dopamine like a rising fountain up into the rest of your brain for arousal and drive. Bring the limbic system into the action by focusing on how good it feels to be strong, so you'll be increasingly drawn to strength in the future (p.104).

Relationship, Neural Integration, Self-Coherence

The quality of our relationship with ourselves—such as how we esteem ourselves, our sensory awareness, and our commitment to our own aliveness—is the foundation for the way we are in relationship with others. Important relationships have, in turn, profound effects on one's sense of self. As Siegel describes, self-organization actually emerges out of self-other interactions. This means that not only are we shaped by our early relationships with our parents, but that throughout our lives, shared, collaborative experiences with others—or lack thereof—are much more than casual occurrences. There is an integrating sense of connection and meaning that literally shapes our brains, and we continue to be formed—and unformed—by the relationships that are intimate and close to who we are. This speaks to the power of the therapeutic relationship itself, since sustained, focused interactions with a “significant” other contribute to shaping the mind by allowing new states to emerge.

Relationship experiences have a dominant influence on the brain because the circuits responsible for social perception are the same as or tightly linked to those that integrate the important functions controlling the creation of meaning, the

regulation of bodily states, the modulation of emotion, the organization of memory, and the capacity for interpersonal communication (Siegel, 2012, Ch. 1).

Siegel details how integration of the self occurs as a result of establishing a functional flow in states of mind across time, as well as through the integration of the triad of “mind, brain, and relationship.” (I consider the “brain” as the hub where organization and meaning-making takes place, and “mind” as the whole experience of the embodied self.) The therapeutic relationship provides assessment of and support for self-coherence through the client’s *autobiographical narratives*: “By organizing the self across past, present, and future, the integrating mind creates a sense of coherence and continuity” (Siegel, 2001, *The Mindful Brain*).

Diane

Diane is on the precipice of what she calls her “big life.” During our sessions she moves fluidly and frequently between past, present and future. She speaks not only personally, but also of the collective. While it seems changes in her external circumstances are imminent, Diane also feels the pull to stay with the “smaller life” she has been living. This smaller life includes a successful business with her ex-fiance. Diane is highly skilled and the work suits her in meaningful ways but the relationship is stressful and it keeps her from engaging in some more vital personal projects that she longs for. For the past few months she has been riding waves of depression.

Diane has a rich internal life and is strongly self-reliant. She has expressed interest in somatic processes, yet she has always done most of the work in therapy by herself. We have discussed this and have agreed that I am holding the space for her to reflect on her life in the way that feels right for her, until the moments when she’s ready to try something different. Over the past few months as she has searched and grieved, she has begun to respond in small measures to somatic interventions. This excerpt is from one of

those times. I think the two postures aided in externalizing the exploration, which was therefore more tangible than the usual queries that seek to describe feelings and sensations.

Following thoughts, intellectualizing, and “talking about” things are some of the most prevalent ways to keep ourselves hovering above feeling, and can be considered an attempt to self-soothe. But this can also keep us looping through the same territory without real relief or change. “We want the client to self soothe, and we want to get access to what’s being soothed,” says Bowen. “They have to settle down enough to get access” (2011). Diane moves rapidly from idea to idea, and she pauses periodically to allow feeling to cycle through her, even while she doesn’t yet usually use words to describe her experience in these moments.

Diane: As a child I didn’t understand what was going on here. People were mean and preoccupied, yet lonely. (She jumps to berating herself for not making better choices in her life. I reflect that I hear her judging herself, and ask if she will describe the tone with which she was talking about herself just then.)

Diane pauses, then goes back even earlier: As a teenager I harangued myself every night. I kept things contained. But I grew out of that. When I chose my life and values (over her ex-fiancé’s which were very different), that was big, but not the same as living the fullness of my life. (She begins to talk about the swings of depression she has been enduring.) I’m resting on all these plateaus for a little while, but then it shifts again.

I want to know more about her thoughts and her feelings at each plateau. Periodically I educate or remind about how change happens through the body, but beyond that I’m not attached to engaging in what would otherwise be a power struggle to insist she slow down and focus longer on one thing at a time. She has to want to. From time to time we speak to this dynamic. So for now I go to clarify what she wants for herself at this juncture, but she takes an unexpected turn by spontaneously demonstrating two postures along with awareness of their relevance to her experience.

Diane: I've been mapping and planning to step into the next phase with grace and dignity, to be "the Queen of my own life" (she sits up straighter demonstrating what she has recently referred to as her "regal" posture). I want to be able to live this way, rather than hunkered down (hunches). This is the time of my own authority. But I'm still feeling depressed.

Therapist: Those two postures really are strikingly different. Are you interested in exploring the contrast for a bit? (Agreement and permission.) So just as you are right now, hunkered down, bring your attention to your posture, and your breath, and describe what stands out in your awareness—it could be an energy pattern, sensation, a feeling, imagery.

Diane pauses and then uses imagery to describe her current state: I'm withholding. I'm not participating. I feel like I'm in the woods, there are bullets zinging all around, I'm annoyed. I'm not afraid; it's irritating. Like I'm waiting for it to calm down. (I invite her to remain in this posture, and to slowly shift her attention back and forth, internally and externally, to see what she notices. Diane speaks to attitudes of self and other—when her attention is external she speaks of the meanness of people and when internal, her over-concern for others.)

Diane: Health is not on either side. I have a sense of discernment and clarity: the only way my ex and I can have a healthy relationship is for us both to be healthy. I have to be able to be vulnerable and not overly-concerned. I couldn't be that with him. I lie to myself by saying I feel differently than I do. I layered a story line, willfully imposed a story. You have to listen to what the other person is saying. But I would set aside what I was hearing. The regal self is an offering. I have to come into relationship with other people, but now it is in "right relationship." Hunkered down is not relating. I don't want to deal. It's a withholding.

Therapist: Are you willing to continue to get a little more information about how "hunkered down" feels physically? Exaggerate the posture by adding some tension to "hunkering." Let information come to you. You don't have to look for it.

Diane: I'm waiting for the other people to stop. Irritated, biding my time. Compression in my chest. (I ask her a focusing question about the compression. Then I invite her to intentionally exaggerate the sensations of tension in her chest to make the response more voluntary and to increase her familiarity with this state. I ask her what she notices.)

Diane: Profound disappointment. What am I doing here? (I invite her to allow the feeling of disappointment a little bit, while lengthening her breath a bit more.) It's time to get up and move on. But it's unknown. There may be nothing, nobody else...But *this* is untenable. It just goes on and on. If I wait for them to stop...Maybe there *will* be someone else...But I can't even get close to (anyone new) from here. There are just bullets going by, strafing.

Therapist: Allow your attention to alternate, back and forth, between your breath and the bullets. See what you notice.

Diane: The bullets are people's fear. Not in relation to me personally, fear in all kinds of forms. But the cessation of fear is not the presence of love. The most deadening zombie state is avoiding fear, emotionless...I started drinking at a young age. Even during periods of alcoholism, I was hyper responsible. Now I'm finding my regal self, and right relationship, and in this place I'm not afraid of their fear.

Therapist: What tells you you're not afraid, in this place?

Diane: It's easier to just watch them. It doesn't feel personal.

Therapist: What do you notice with your breath?

Diane: It's fine. But now I'm visible. In harm's way. In the line of fire. Incidental. Now, I just want to go somewhere else.

Therapist: Your breath is fine, as in, at ease, peaceful?

Diane: Normal.

Therapist: Okay, normal. (Sensations don't come with words. Ultimately we each have to develop our own somatic vocabulary. I see Diane immersed in this vivid imagery at the moment and so I don't want to push her to keep focusing physically. I also think that over time, periodic brief invitations to re-focus attention on the breath serve to increase the significance of shifting attention this

way. So I return to her imagery.) What happens when I say: “You can go somewhere else.”

Diane sits up straighter: I *can* go somewhere else. At least there will be peace and quiet. Not hiding. And I’m not going to find something. With the unknown I feel nervous, but it’s necessary to go somewhere else. A lot of “no’s” have been coming up in my relationships. It feels so right, not trying to appease others’ most basest selves. And I have a variety of “no’s.”

Later in this session, Diane is lying prone on the mat with the invitation for her awareness to follow her breath and to let her body gradually respond to the pull of gravity. A new insight arises about her relationship to her “Essential Self”, a concept that has come up in our work before. Diane’s connection to this aspect of her identity is one of her many powerful resources—powerful when she remembers to call on it.

Diane: I never thought of letting my Essential Self lead the way. We always make pilgrimages to her. The Essential Self doesn’t lie. She tells the truth. The Essential Self is not bullying. She is respectful. She can lead the way. (I think Caldwell would agree):

Telling the truth generates a lot of energy, both in ourselves and in the people with whom we share it. Energy is generated each time we align ourselves with our essence...Often we withhold the truth because we are not used to that much energy...or because we think that whoever we might tell it to might not be able to handle the intense aliveness that it generates...The reality is if we follow our body’s cues, the energy created by telling the truth will be completely friendly and transformative (p. 112).

When she’s alone, Diane reports having an easy relationship with her sense of Essential Self. The task is to practice letting her Essential Self lead the way while in the presence of other people. Bowen says that “[a] person in an expansive level of mind may not be embodied. They may have decided to not be incarnated on the earth; may not know what they’re here to do” (2011). Diane uses

this language as well, and from time to time she contends with this very concept. Even though she usually forgoes the option to verbally describe her physical experience, I believe Diane does have a sense of being embodied, and that she does know what she's here for.

For the times when she is willing to try something new, these are a few of the ways I offer support somatically: helping her discover the strength and stability available through more consistent, fuller breathing; reflecting and refining the posture of her Regal Self; reflecting places to slow down and deepen into, and keeping a list of the physical metaphors (like the regal posture) she comes up with on her own to use as doorways into her physical experience.

Self Esteem, Vision, Widening Circles of Self

In *Toward a Psychology of Awakening* John Welwood (2000) weaves the intersections of psychological and spiritual work. "The core wound we all suffer from," he writes, "is the disconnection from our own being." The essential purpose of mindfulness meditation "is to liberate us from attachment to a narrow, conditioned self-structure, so that we realize we are something much larger...however, we first need to have a workable self-structure. This means being grounded in earthly form" (p.16). I say, *embodying our earthly form* is what increasing aliveness is all about.

A vital skill in sustaining aliveness is the ability to self-soothe to deliberately invoke a sense of safety and calm. Two clusters of developmental needs described in Kohut's Self Psychology (Lessem, 2005) reveal that these abilities are originally formed and reinforced through relationship: "1/ those having to do with the building and maintenance of self-esteem—the need for mirroring experience and 2/ those having to do with experiencing a sense of safety, calming, and soothing—the need for idealizing experience" (p.6). As children, one of the functions of the idealizing experience is this sense of being contained and soothed by the other who is looking out for us. Optimal circumstances permitting, we

increasingly provide this function for ourselves as we develop and learn to self-soothe.

As adults we continue to require mirroring, and fortunately there are other ways to support the fulfillment of Kohut's first cluster of developmental needs, such as cultivating self esteem directly through increasing awareness, integrity, and action. In *The Six Pillars of Self Esteem*, Branden clarifies "the value of self esteem lies not merely in the fact that it allows us to feel better but that it allows us to live better...to respond to challenges and opportunities more resourcefully and appropriately" (p.5). Branden says self-esteem is more than a judgment or a feeling. It is not enough to know as an abstract concept that you are worthy of love. You have to feel it. But you also have to *act* it, because "[t]here is a continuous feedback loop between our actions in the world and our self esteem. The level of our self esteem influences how we act, and how we act influences the level of our self esteem" (p.4).

Transferring what we learn from meditation and reflection to life-in-motion is challenged by what I see as a negative feedback loop: the never-ending barrage of stimuli within and around us coupled with our conditioned responses sends us returning again and again to that which is known and familiar. Alternatively, building on the attention-training of mindfulness meditation, somatic psychotherapy brings the body into the foreground in order to recover the aspects of our body-self that are the basis for aliveness in relationship to others and to the environment, thereby generating lives full of aliveness.

Pithy words of wisdom are even more useful when they arise organically as a result of the work, and serve as a personalized anchor for what was experienced in the session, in order to practice every day. As Andy Dufresne says in *The Shawshank Redemption*: "I guess it comes down to a simple choice, really: get busy living, or get busy dying." Now, *how exactly* are you going to do this?

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