

Passing on the Legacy

Remembering the Somatic Pioneers

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Abstract

The author describes her privileged experience studying with the Masters of Somatics during the 70's, 80's and 90's - Charlotte Selver, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Emily Conrad. She acknowledges their powerful and healing impact on her personal life, and shows how she applies the teachings in her current Profession as a Clinical Psychologist. This article expresses her deep appreciation for these revolutionary teachers and the desire to pass on their legacy.

I had the good fortune to study with the Somatic Pioneers of the 1970's, 80's and 90's, all masters of the most revolutionary methods of mind-body integration. Most notably, Moshe Feldenkrais, who taught "Awareness through Movement", Charlotte Selver, of "Sensory Awareness" and Emilie Conrad, of "Continuum". Their practices helped me find wholeness and deep places of inner healing, as I learned to integrate mind and body. I also reclaimed my inner self, and found a vast, untapped potential within me. Because these teachings were experiential, I learned through doing, rather than intellectual understanding. The teachings remain with me to this day and I value them as part of my practice in Psychotherapy.

During Continuum seminars with Emilie Conrad, I experienced a joining of mind, body and spirit. Emilie says "Continuum's elegant sound and movement practices make an art form of dissolving constraint, welcoming the liberation of the entire person". Eight hour days doing free movement interspersed with sounding without words moved away layers of my outer conventional shell. As I released healthy and vibrant spaces inside me, I fell into states of profound peace and bliss, where inner and outer became one. I felt lovingly held by the Universe. Emilie believed these feelings were housed within our cellular structure, and would emerge, naturally, through integration.

I vividly remember Emilie, a very charismatic woman, demonstrating what happens when we separate ourselves from our natural connections. One day, she stood up, took off her long gray sweater, and dragged it behind her as she walked around the outside of our circle. She said, "this is our nervous system. We schlep it behind us like an orphaned child. We hold onto it tightly, but in no way is it inside where it should be". Yes, we all belly laughed at her demonstration because we knew it to be true.

Whenever I tell this story to my clients, I also show it, and they "get" it. It becomes a metaphor to encourage clients to "bring themselves with themselves" wherever they go. "Your inner self is your best friend, bring it with you in everything you do". Although they laugh at the paradox, they understand the wisdom in the image, and find amazing results when they follow this simple practice. When I remember to take "myself" with me, I feel a closer relationship with myself and others, and more supported in my everyday activities.

Charlotte Selver had her own vitality and charisma. I always described her as a polished diamond, whose teachings emanated from every facet of her being with sparkling brilliance. Charlotte helped me develop the utmost respect for my body and mind and its natural connections. Her words and activities were invitations to reshape every experience into something positive and valuable. She imparted a deep respect for the human condition. Her work helped me to honor and attend to the negative and painful in my life, and move through it. Over a period of time, I reclaimed a vitality that had been lost through a serious stress related illness, caused primarily by not attending to my body's cry for help.

The work of Sensory Awareness, was so fresh and new, so organic so natural, it made me feel at once alive and at rest—all in balance. I learned to come to sitting or standing, bringing all of myself with me. Through such novel, yet normal concepts, I experienced the freshness of the

present moment. I learned to sit, according to my natural design, to walk so I stepped on the ground, feeling the support underneath me, yet not coming down so hard I crushed everything beneath my feet. Charlotte had so many ways of introducing us to our body and its movement. She encouraged us to listen attentively to the feedback from our movement to our senses, so that we learned totally from our own inner wisdom.

After engaging in movement experiments, we would talk about our experience. Often, Charlotte would surprise us. One day, she asked, "Are your words connected to anything that is living inside"? Simply a question, but one so vividly presented, I always remember it. With clients, in therapy, I try to provide opportunities where they can talk to me, connected to places inside them that feel alive. I, in turn, try to be mindful of doing the same. In these moments, we form an authentic connection, where change and healing emerges more readily than with words not connected to "anything living inside". Charlotte taught these elegant and subtle practices in a powerful, yet simple manner. I studied with her from 1972 to 2003, her last year of teaching, at age 102.

Like Conrad and Selver, Feldenkrais had his own brand of charisma. He was tough, though. During our summer long training he would bellow everyday, "No one can teach you anything! You don't learn anything from books! You have to experience something if you want to learn it, if you want it to register inside you." His entire training was experiential, learning by doing, forcing us to find autonomy within our own body-mind connections.

He proclaimed "awareness has to be cultivated" and "habitual ways of acting and moving are slayers to your potential". He designed movement patterns to dissolve habitual patterns and raise awareness of 'how' we moved. We would twist our body to the left and notice our range of motion. Then we repeated the movement while turning our head to the right, and our eyes to the left. When

the original movement was repeated, it became amazingly more agile and efficient. Through his ingenious movement methods, I moved away old habits, making room for new pathways using my brain and body together.

Part of Feldenkrais' teaching was through movement exercises, the other was training in "hands on" somatic work. I remember one week, for five days, seven hours a day, we took turns "holding" each others heads while lying. He was trying to teach us to reach inside our partner's nervous system, to join and connect with the other through holding their head. I remember him repeating over and over, so we would "get" it; "if you don't connect with the person's nervous system, nothing will change". I believed him, and the truth of his statement influences my work with clients in therapy.

I was committed to moving deeply my into my own mind-body connections. I was learning that universal knowledge lies deep within, and emerges more naturally when I truly join together with another in present time, with deep meaning and connection. I try to bring those moments to people I work with by joining with them in ways change occurs, naturally. As with my teachers, much of what I do with others is experiential and created in the moment.

What do I do In Psychotherapy? How do I use what I learned, and bequeath it to the people I work with? I sit thoughtfully, and ask, "Where are the windows to enter the mind and heart and body of this human being who sits in front of me. What are the words and what is beyond the words that needs attention, a curious attitude, and exploration. How do we go together and reach inside and "catch" those moments that are life changing. I do whatever I can to go beyond linear, logical thought and enter the subjective realm. I emphasize therapy as a collaborative adventure, something we do together. I am there to guide the journey, but not to "fix". I help create an experience in therapy, rather than only "talking about" something.

I believe there is a place inside of us that is whole, that wants to heal, but too often we are lost and don't know how to find it. As the stresses of life increase, we become disconnected. The connection to our original design, one interwoven whole, body mind emotions and spirituality, becomes challenged and often buried. Therapy becomes like a treasure hunt. Our treasures, our resources are endless. However, often they are buried behind a tangle of weeds and debris. We fear, if we go looking, we will be the debris and lose sight of the treasure underneath. In Psychotherapy, I try to help others understand that "weeds" have grown in their inner garden, through trauma and negative experiences. Part of our work together is to validate the treasures, while tilling the weeds. I often suggest that we are cultivating the soil of their inner landscape, so new flowers can grow. Through my experiences with my teachers of Somatic Therapy, I learned how to move a lot of weeds and cultivate a lot of soil.

The body and the inner landscape have a language of their own, and clients in therapy learn to dialogue with it as their best friend. The messages are not always positive at first, yet if they attend to them with respect, a deep transformation eventually takes place within. Then it is time to integrate the inner change with their outer behaviors, thoughts, and perceptions, which are at the interface of their lives. Inner and outer, body and mind joined together are more powerful, give more insight and meaning, than either alone. The joining becomes a launching place for positive change and transformation.

Somatic and alternative methods in therapy facilitate integration of inner and outer, body and mind, feelings and cognition, and relationships. Feeling held and supported by the co-creative joining of therapist and client, reminds us we are not alone in our journey. I deeply believe we are longing for connection, ownership of ourselves, to be content with our own space, inside and out, a return to wholeness. Perhaps we can honor our human condition, knowing we all are susceptible to

disruption of our original design. Then we can support one another with compassion and sensitivity. We owe ourselves the gift of being present, whole and connected with one another. This requires passionate dedication, and respect that we will always be approximating an ideal.

My teachers of Somatic Therapy, offered experiences of body mind and spirit connecting, with awareness. I discovered in the moment of that connection, something new and rich is born. A sensation of unity that brings with it more peace, calm and authentic relatedness. I encourage people to engage in practices that heighten awareness and bring them closer to integration. Perhaps it will be Continuum, Feldenkrais, Sensory Awareness, Therapy, Yoga, Meditation, rock climbing, or a deep communion with another. One, more, or all. Whatever path you take, "bring yourself with you".

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