

September 2004

Volume 4, No. 3

**WHY DO THE WORK OF THE BODY?  
A perspective on healing from  
a body-centered approach in psychotherapy**

**Sherry L. Osadchey, MA, LMFT**

**Abstract**

This article provides a framework for understanding how traumatic experience impacts the whole organism. Distorted thought process and projection, defensive verbal expression, tension pattern, disturbed subtle energy field, inhibited breathing, and characteristically-held body posture all exhibit the nature of the specific physical and emotional traumatic experiences of the individual. Accessing the information available within the clusters of symptoms and understanding how to facilitate the opening and release of the held memory enables a more effective modality for change in psychotherapy. This author also uses her personal experience in this therapeutic framework to speak to the spiritual transformations that naturally evolve when healing of trauma occurs.

**Points of departure**

When I began to do the work of my body - the work of addressing the emotional and physical impact of my childhood environment - I was a skeptic. I didn't actually believe the human condition contained much beyond despair. I certainly didn't believe in spirit or soul. The past twenty-four years of walking the path of this work have transformed my despair into faith, and my wish to feel better about myself into a profound wish to inspire others to discover and explore their own places of faith. I have come to feel that when I am able to inspire others along their path I am accomplishing my purpose.

This change from skepticism to spirituality was a natural, not a consciously-initiated, movement that occurred as I worked to reconnect my body and my intellect. My own experience has enabled me to build an internal foundation for understanding other's lives and history, and has expanded my perspective beyond the limitations of intellectual detachment.

The greatest teacher we have is our own experience. Listening to my body and continuing to identify, explore and clear my own places of forgotten pain continues to show me the way from intelligence to wisdom and from "lost to myself" to "home."

### **The bodymind experience and perpetuation of trauma**

Our body is of the earth. Our body is what connects us to the earth. It is the earthly home of our soul, and the physical diary of our history - both remembered and forgotten. What can be more sacred than this temple we inhabit for the journey of our lifetime here on earth? What can be more meaningful than doing the work of discovering how to bring honoring and affirmation to those places where dishonor was experienced? Nothing can surpass the bringing of compassionate understanding to the ways that trauma settled into the cells of our muscles, tissues, organs and bones.

We cannot grow fully, we cannot grow deeply, without unlocking our past and connecting to how we carry it, locked in tension patterns and cellular memory, in our body. The voice of our full being is in the *whole* of who we are. It is the ways in which we have been silenced by traumatizing experiences that lead our spirit and the hurt childhood memories inside us to find another voice. Physical and emotional pain, chronic symptoms or conditions, continued trouble in relationships - these become the language for what we could not speak. Learning how to listen and hear that which has been silenced within us, to identify and hear that which stands in the way of empowerment and growth, is the business of therapy. It is sacred and spiritual work - for both client and therapist.

It is our body that can inform and educate us about the negative bonding that we experienced, which we continue to use as a model to guide our present-day lives. It is our hunched shoulders, in the present, that can remind and inform us of having been beaten down and crushed as we tried to stand squarely as the person we truly felt ourself to be. It is our locked knees that can tell us about why we fear and expect that the rug will be pulled out from under us again. It is our broken hearts, armored so tightly with tension through our chests, that can show us the path back to loving openly and freely.

Because we habituate to the ways our bodymind holds its tension around painful memories, and lose consciousness of these body statements, we live them as second nature, having left our basic, true nature behind. Our true feelings and needs become lost to us. We learn to verbalize untruths - without realizing or wanting to remember our own lost truth. The painful treatment we experience from misguided or abusive adults in our lives teaches us to go "underground" and stay there. We lose awareness of our own body and of the hidden statements we are expressing nonverbally. Everything we are saying with our tension patterns, our shallow breathing, our pains, and our illnesses can become guideposts back to the experience of our original, uncomplicated feelings.

Our simple places of need, anger, hurt, joy, and protest can be rediscovered and nurtured with our own compassionate attention.

When we are constantly, unconsciously defending against the memories of old wounds, we are unable to truly exist in the present. We live in different degrees of projection and not in current reality. This disorientation that evolves is not only the outcome of the dysfunctional brain patterns that we develop for processing thought, it is the reflection of a cognitive process that is supported and maintained by a corresponding defensive structure in the body. Holding defensive tension and energy patterns chronically in the body ultimately translates into disease and disability, physical, emotional and spiritual. We become handicapped in our inability to acknowledge or "own" our true self. Our body cannot be the open and flexible container we

need to hold the full aliveness of our feelings and needs. We cannot fully embody our spirit when our “container” is filled with the defenses we developed to cope with what was happening in the past.

All things of the body are statements of our history - our positive and our negative experiences. Our genetic history and our childhood experiences are all evidenced in our body, compounded by any traumatic emotional or physical injury suffered post-childhood. We always bring our body with us into every interaction, carrying with it our tendency toward the characteristic ways we developed of holding tension and memory in our muscles, tissues, organs and bones.

### **Awakening mind-body awareness**

When our body is holding onto these hurt memories and defensive postures, then our past experiences are felt as on-going, not really past. Without awareness or intention, we perpetuate the past by bringing it into the present. We re-create, over and over again, the feelings and beliefs that developed from our old experiences because we are still entangled in them, not only emotionally but physically. The same old fights with others and the same old ways of feeling hurt repeatedly occur. We feel continually victimized in these same old ways. It is not because all people we encounter are exactly the same that our negative experiences repeat themselves, but because we are exactly the same.

Without consciousness of this process, we are not aware of our own participation in creating the experiences we encounter as we move through our present-day world. Because there was a time, as children, when we had no escape from what others were doing to us, we learned to live ourselves in relationship to and defined by others' energy and actions toward us and their beliefs about us. It is our own learned beliefs and fears from those experiences that we use to maintain our now habitual, but no longer conscious, body structure. And thus, we perpetuate our historically-based ways of defeating or denying each *new* moment in the present without realizing the implications. Our characteristic styles of organizing our muscles, breath, reactions, assumptions, projections, beliefs, and expectations, which developed out of a necessity that belongs to our childhood experience, are the foundation from which we express ourselves now. Our body is the expression on a physical level of who we are as a whole. Our soul, or life force, combined with how we have been impacted by the goodness and the harm that have come our way creates the dynamic process through which we experience and express ourselves.

When we can live our needs, boundaries, and feelings in a self-supporting and clear way, we stand in full possession of who we are. We feel adult. In our defensiveness we are living from different degrees of helplessness and hurt and without awareness of the embedded origin that is in our emotional and physical memory. Our underlying feeling and belief is that we are not empowered adults - and in our defensiveness this becomes the truth. We are still feeling “owned,” or influenced, in different ways by our past.

### **Tools for beginning**

In some ways the process of opening what became locked trauma in the body is very simple. Not easy, but simple. Asking someone to bring awareness to their breathing, or to their characteristic lack of full, deep breathing, can provide the first essential step into consciousness of one's body. This step in and of itself is a gateway to re-acquaintance with one's own forgotten places of hurt and fear.

Diminishing one's breath stops the energetic flow of emotion through the body and enables detachment from feeling the hurt and fear that can be overwhelming, especially for children. We do this without thinking. It is instinct.

We can guide someone into beginning this process of re-acquaintance with the simple suggestion of bringing their attention to their breathing in an intentional, but not forced, fashion. This will initiate one of two possible outcomes. One is the relaxation of a place of tension that has been held in what became a characteristic pattern. The memories of the feelings and/or events that necessitated formation of this pattern of tension can then also surface into one's conscious awareness. The underlying feelings can now be held with support and compassion, allowing for openness emotionally and physically. One can gain access to those feelings and needs that were previously being denied.

The other outcome that can follow bringing one's consciousness to their breathing is an experiencing of a deeper tightening, or "resistance," to the releasing of the tension. Should this happen, this may become an opportunity for bringing understanding and compassion to these held memories that contain such deep feelings of vulnerability and fear that our unconscious mind is reluctant to relinquish them. Relaxing the tension will create an opening up into the feelings. The body's resistance to doing so is evidence of a crucial and missing feeling of adequate internal supports. Tension, holding, lost spirit, and lost faith are the SOS signals of pains and fears that have lost their way to someone's heartfelt reception. We welcome them home when we can offer witness to them with our own heart.

Bringing awareness to one's breath is merely the beginning of the healing process for many places of held trauma in the bodymind. The body and mind's memories of having been hurt can make us want to steer clear of any situations or feelings that we believe could trigger our being hurt again. In harm's way we learned to bend, hoping to not be threatened again with being broken. Bending can involve: 1. shallowed breathing to decrease the flow of energy into the body; 2. tightening of the specific muscle groups that create a "body shield" where it was needed to defend oneself against the physical action or emotional energy of hurtfulness; and, 3. altered brain activity which transmits the appropriate messages throughout the body for maintaining what will provide us with the ideal defensive posture.

With time, we lose our awareness of the chronic holding of these physical, physiological, and cognitive changes, and the holding becomes second nature. By following the guideposts constructed by our held traumatic memories we can literally walk our way back to the embodiment of our core nature. Guiding someone to bring their attention to symptomatic parts of the body can provide the doorway to important information. Typical guideposts can be a backache, a characteristic place of pain in the eyes or head, a tendency to drum one's fingers on the arms of the chair in which one is sitting, an ache in a particular joint, a recurring bladder infection, or any other symptom.

When breathing into a place of held trauma leads us to our resistance, we can enlist the creativity and wisdom of our spirit. Imagery can be a powerful way to access information that is buried deep in the protective walls of our chronic holding patterns. A simple question such as "can you allow an image to emerge from the pain behind your eye?" can be all that is needed to take a next step.

Imagery is not an exact science. It may be the visual memory representation to us of something actual as it occurred. It may also be the metaphorical picture of how something that was happening in the past felt to us. Someone may not have literally hit us over the head with a wooden two-by-four, yet to us their energy may have carried the feeling of being smashed. If, out of a particular place of pain in one's head, an image emerges of being smashed by a two-

by-four and one then begins to recall the feeling of having been brutally criticized, releasing the somatic holding of this painful and frightening memory becomes possible. This possibility is facilitated through the new awareness that an old experience was in some way painful and harmful to us and that it led us to develop a defensive means for coping. The origin of that coping, or chronic holding pattern, can now be understood, not just intellectually, but on a deep body level, and brought into consciousness where it can be processed and released.

A new way of caring with compassionate understanding for one's self can then begin. The bodymind shows us again and again that we learn to do to ourselves what was done to us in the past, perpetuating the cycle of pain and hurt. For example, if we were brutally criticized in the past, but have not seen this as having been hurtful, we tend to believe we deserve such harshness and become our own internal critic. With a deepened awareness and felt sense of what did feel brutal, one can begin to make the choice to stop repeating this hurtfulness upon one's self.

A feeling of our own self-nurturing and support can now become an embodied experience when tension and unconscious fear are no longer perpetuating the chronic holding of a defensive bodymind state. As held trauma releases, our true feelings and needs can once again be lived openly and the negative bonding (i.e. brutal criticism) can be replaced with new feelings of compassion and understanding.

### **Case example**

Let me illustrate these beginning tools with a psychotherapy session. "Laurie", a 34-year-old business consultant, entered therapy with intense anxiety, depression and sexual abuse issues. She began this particular session "feeling pretty irritable." Laurie reported, "I felt as if everyone was getting under my skin."

I asked her if she could notice her breathing and give form to this experience. I sensed it to be a feeling of invasion.

She replied, "It's like a big, formless darkness." When I asked how this felt in her body, the awareness she had was of feeling "very tense and constricted."

I wondered if Laurie could imagine someone or something that would protect her or give her a sense of feeling safe with this darkness. An image of a globe came to her. I asked her to describe the globe and she said it was made of "clear, thick plastic" which allowed for her to see out of it but be protected when in it. Her image included grass inside, as well. I suggested that she had the right to put anything outside the globe that gave her the feeling of being invaded and told her that this is called forming a boundary. As she later shared with me, this experience was probably the first time she began to have a feeling in her body, or felt sense, of "boundaries" – or, as she noted, also of her *lack* of boundaries.

Laurie also began to have a deeper intellectual understanding of the purpose and need for boundaries. "The concept felt pretty foreign to me and really came up against my childhood beliefs." She had developed a cognitive belief system that became a second nature perspective on when it is permissible or appropriate to say "no" to others. She had learned to see herself as selfish if she didn't feel open to attending to someone else's spoken as well as unspoken need of her.

As she could now image, breathe, and feel the globe surrounding her and have my support in her having this "globe" boundary she experienced a new feeling of safety. Her feeling of constriction relaxed and her anxiety and irritability dissipated. Laurie's awareness expanded

regarding the cognitive and physical ways that she had compensated for having her boundaries “smashed” as a child. She was learning to feel permission now to say “no” to others. She was developing a new feeling of compassionate understanding for her own needs as well as for the fears that had held her hostage since her childhood, making it so difficult to say “no.”

### **The journey of transformation**

Transformation from held trauma to embodied aliveness and spirit travels a path that has little to do with the time frames we might wish to impose on our journey. Bringing light and love to our hidden pains, deepest terrors, and dysfunctional thought processes has a schedule that often defies our truest convictions to change. The creativity and commitment of both the healer and the individual walking the path of their healing journey can form a dynamic relationship for creating the tools and holding the many shapes that can promote healing.

One of the gifts, often unexpected, that arrives when one walks their own healing path is a more developed ability to sense energy and receive information regarding someone else’s experiences. Perception through the five “physical” senses as well as those typically considered “extrasensory” expands when one’s spirit is more fully housed within one’s body. Letting go of characteristic patterns of tension, letting go of defeating or limiting beliefs that are based in past hurts and fears, and letting go of the corresponding altered physiological and neurological activities, enables deeper access to all of our body’s “organs” of reception.

A most powerful example for me of such unexpected gifts was my developing an ability to bring healing energy through my hands. I began to be able to both access information and offer information in a therapeutic style not previously available to me. All the work I had done to create the opening back into my own body brought me connection to my spirit and an expanded ability to perceive that had not even occurred to me as a goal for the development of my clinical skills. We deepen our abilities to see, hear, and feel as we heal. We can also develop our channels of clairaudience, clairvoyance, clairsentience, and claircognizance through building the bridge back into our body.

### **Conclusion**

Why do the work of the body? Why focus on the body in therapy? If our life’s journey is propelled by the desire for deeper integration and healing, then remembering the past merely with our intellect isn’t enough. We can hold memory of those things that were hurtful or destructive toward us with our intellect, while still holding tightly defended in our body against feeling the “old” fear and hurt. Intellectual awareness in itself does not translate to letting go of the past’s impact on us. Softening our places of tension, deepening our breathing, and surrendering into our forgotten and/or feared places of emotional and physical pain is what can move us into letting go.

It is in allowing the memory in our bodies to open and feeling the impact of the old wounds that we find the parts of ourselves that we buried and re-claim them. In this way we can release ourselves from the past. Our health on every level of our being can strengthen. The benefits are evidenced in our more relaxed muscles, our less stressed organs, our more potent immune system, our more fluid energy body, and our overall experience of greater vitality. We can feel more youthful, open, loving, alive, and “home” by creating the possibility for embodiment of our spirit. Tightly defended bodies cannot be open containers for housing our spirits.

The process of which I speak is not easy and does not unfold perfectly. It is, however, deeply meaningful for anyone choosing to engage in bringing love and acceptance to their own places of pain and vulnerability. It is profoundly powerful to make the commitment to oneself to come forward with what has been veiled and face and heal what feels unbearable.

Following the cues from our body can direct us to every next step on our path toward integration, healing, and personal transformation. Moving forward in this way can be achieved as we work to separate from the limiting aspects of our past.

It is our bodies that make us of the earth. It is the beating of our hearts in harmony with our spirit that connects us to the meaning of life here. To live honoring our own body naturally translates into consciousness that extends beyond us to an understanding of how all life deserves honoring. This is not an easy path to walk but we all have within us exactly what is needed to take each step. It requires trusting oneself and knowing that we hold within us the power and love to go exactly where we are supposed to go.

## Diane DeArmond's Report

I had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. I scheduled appointments with Stuart Alpert, Naomi Lubin-Alpert, and Sherry Osadchey. In my first session, with Naomi, she asked me if there was any image that came from the lump in my breast. I saw a baby screaming mad in the lump in my right breast. The baby wanted me to take care of her, which meant I had to stop taking care of my deceased father. In the next session, which I had with Stuart, the angry baby moved into my root chakra and I felt my lower back come together in support of my connection to myself.

In my healing session with Sherry, she told me that she saw a tear in the lump in my breast, and I could see the relief of the baby who had been left alone for so long. Sherry's words were: "you are not alone." As Sherry kept her healing hands on my shoulders, my father appeared and expressed his regret at not understanding how heart connections are so much more important than accomplishments. He apologized for having driven me so hard. During the healing, I felt a reunion with my father and an acknowledgment of his betrayal of me that seemed to me to integrate the two therapy sessions I had had with Naomi and Stuart.

Throughout the healing session, as the warmth from Sherry's hands traveled down through my shoulders, chest, solar plexus, legs and feet, I could feel the presence of my spirit guides holding me in love. I was able to let go of any resentment for how my father and mother responded to me when I was an infant/child. I could begin to feel a me that felt separate from the me that was formed in response to their demands. A sense of freedom began to trickle through my body.

The diagnosis has been very recent so I do not know the physical effect of these sessions on the breast lump. However I feel more accepting and interested in the meaning of the cancer rather than feeling a victim of some disease. I attribute this to the work I allowed Naomi, Stuart, and Sherry to do with me.

Sherry L. Osadchey, MA, LMFT, is a psychotherapist in private practice in West Hartford, CT. Her original training is in Body-Centered Psychotherapy with additional influences from animal imagery, past-life regression, hands-on healing, and her current training process in Somatic Experiencing. She can be reached by at (860)313-1112  
[sherrylosadchey@sherrylosadchey.com](mailto:sherrylosadchey@sherrylosadchey.com).

### TERMS OF USE

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading. Feel free to forward this to others.

**The International Journal of Healing and Caring**  
**P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099**  
**Phone (609) 714-1885 - Fax (609) 714-3553**

Email: [center@ijhc.org](mailto:center@ijhc.org) Web Site: <http://www.ijhc.org>

**Copyright 2001 IJHC. All rights reserved.**