Embodied Writing

Presencing the Body in Somatic Research

Part I

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Embodied writing brings the finely textured experience of the human body to the art of writing. Introduced into research praxis in an effort to describe human experiences more closely to the way in which they are truly lived, embodied writing is itself an act of embodiment, entwining in words our human senses with the senses of the world. Developed as an alternative to scientific and professional writing that seems parched of the body's lived experience, embodied writing attempts to "presence" the embodied experience of the writer for readers as they read.

Cindy Lou Golin (personal communication, June 1, 2002) describes her early experiences with embodied writing:

"I connected with myself and wrote from a place deep down, monitoring and recording my experiences as though I were doing the color commentary for a baseball game. It reminded me of cultivating a witness consciousness during meditation. The difference was, however, that I was not witnessing or disconnecting from the physical experience, but embodying it. A subtle difference that made all the difference in the world."

Often the movements of earth, fire, air, and water within our bodies pass unnoticed by awareness. Yet, writers using embodied writing typically report feeling more alert to the world, both within their bodies and in the world. The simple act of relaying experience from the inside out affirms life as embedded in the sensual world in which we live. Nature feels dear and close. The blood pulsing through our veins insinuates the rush of a stream, or the wash of waves upon a strand. Breathing feels more akin to the wind, neurons to the lightning, and our human corpus to solid earth. Embodied writing coaxes our senses to explore the world within and beyond our skin, unifying human nature with the natural world.

Especially in the fields of humanistic, transpersonal, somatic, and health psychologies, writing split off from the body in a Cartesian style seems unacceptable to me. Too often scientific reports and professional writing, even on the body, seem intractably intent on perpetuating the object-subject bifurcation between the world of our bodies and the world we inhabit day to day. The hegemony of behaviorism in psychology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries widened the divide. I sit down for a good read on a topic that interests me and instead I find myself yawning uncontrollably and yearning for a nap. Results sections of reports are rarely exact from the full experiential perspective of the body. If the reports were exact in the sense of being fully present and alive to the reader, I would feel alert and quickened by the writing. More often, I feel disembodied, as the report has little to do with me or things precious in my life.

Seeking to relay the rich experience of the human body, embodied writing portrays experience from the point of view of the lived body, *Leib* rather than *Körper* in Edmund Husserl's (1952/1989) sense. The researcher collects, analyzes, and reports findings, fully intending to invite readers to encounter the narrative accounts for themselves and from within their own bodies through a form of sympathetic resonance. Ultimately, as a communication tool for somatic research and writing in general, the value of embodied writing depends on its capacity to engender a quality of resonance between the written text and the senses of the reader that permits readers to resonate with the phenomena de-

scribed. The readers' perceptual, visceral, sensory-motor, kinesthetic, and imaginal senses are invited to come alive to the words and images as though the experience were their own, akin to the way we might read fine poetry or fiction. Attempting to describe human experiences—and especially profound human experiences—as they truly are lived, embodied writing tries to give the body voice.

Sympathetic Resonance and Validity

The principle of sympathetic resonance (Anderson, 1998, 2000; Braud, 1998) in the scientific endeavor is best introduced with an analogy. If one plucks a cello string, the matching string on another cello a few feet away will begin to vibrate, too. Striking a tuning fork will vibrate another with the same pitch some distance away. The resonance communicates and connects directly and immediately without intermediaries, except for the conduits of air and space.

In applying this principle to research, sympathetic resonance suggests that validity can function more like poetry in its capacity to evoke immediate apprehension and recognition of an experience written or spoken by another. It seems surprisingly true for oneself as well. Research methods may begin to approach the borders of understanding and communication that seem more like poetry than like conventional empirical science as we have known it. The poetry of Jelaluddin Rumi, Emily Dickinson, and Rainer Maria Rilke are notable examples of poetry that speaks directly to the inmost Self. In describing the poetry of Rilke, Robert Hass, a previous American poet laureate, describes the poet's unique ability to "whisper or croon into our inmost ear":

"Rilke's special gift as a poet is that he does not seem to speak from the middle of life, that he is always calling us away from it. His poems have the feeling of being written from a great depth in himself. What makes them so seductive is that they also speak to the reader so intimately. They seem whispered or crooned into our inmost ear, insinuating us toward the same depth in ourselves . . . . It is also what makes him difficult to read thoughtfully. He induces a kind of trance, as soon as the whispering begins" (in Mitchell, 1989, p. xiv).

Embodied writing invites this same inward tuning. In writing from the perspective of the body, the writer (or researcher) records in writing the subtle ways the body responds to experience and imbues his or her writing with the rich sensorial texture of that experience.

In allowing for the complex sensorial awareness, embodied writing posits that we have many senses—perhaps dozens or hundreds—but probably more than we can name in words. The five senses themselves date back to Aristotle's five special organ senses described in *De Anima* (parts I and II). Contemporary psychologists add the proprioceptive and kinesthetic senses to the list. Proprioception has to do with what we ordinarily refer to as a gut feeling or "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1978) about something, originating in sensory impulses connected to the body's organs, inner ear, joints, tendons, muscles, ligaments, skin, and connective tissues. Kinesthetic involves sensory responses connected to movements large and small (Mindell, 1982; Root-Bernstein, 1999). Actually, human sensorial awareness is a complex play of organ senses and imagination. To the list, I add the visceral sense of rightness or safety in the world (or the lack of it), the body's impulse to explore without intention or cognitive overlay, and the sense of recognition in touch and ambiance of feeling deeply loved. Suffice it to say in this brief article that embodied writing assumes that there are many subtle senses beyond simple categories and definitions. Writers are encouraged to record all that their imaginal and sensorial awareness provides to witnessing consciousness, allowing readers to resonate from the rich texture of their own experience and sensorial awareness.

Development of Embodied Writing

As a means of collecting empirical data, and presenting research findings, embodied writing was developed in a research seminar entitled "Spirituality and the Body" at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. Students interested in body-related research topics gathered under my leadership. Though student membership changed some each quarter, we met weekly each quarter for four years between 1996 and 2001. Embodied writing con-

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tinues as a course in the institute's research program. Long-term seminar participants and collaborators in the early stages of developing embodied writing were Holly Brannon, Jay Dufrechou, Rosie Kuhn, Kelly Sue Lynch, Cortney Phelon, and Katherine McIver.

Initially, we wrote only about strong somatic experiences, such as being awakened to the oneness of being in nature, relief of bodily trauma while being massaged, chronic physical pain, giving birth to a child, sculpting with clay, and sailing the open seas. Week after week for about two hours, we shared our writings in small groups, giving feedback to one another about "what resonated" to each of us individually as we read or listened to another's writings. Confidentiality was strictly observed. Analysis or reflection on content, grammar, syntax, spelling, et cetera, was discouraged by group consensus. What mattered was what the reader felt in his or her own body, and then checking with the writer to see if that were what the writer intended or not. We cared about what worked specifically, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence—and why. We cared most about the qualities in the writing that invited sympathetic resonance, not a brilliant idea or turn of phrase.

Despite the fact that we did not focus on any model of what good writing ought to be, our writing got better and better. Sometimes, a single piece of writing, even a single paragraph, was rewritten and discussed half a dozen times. Learnings grew gradually, but tended to jump as though we had pressed through a threshold and arrived at a new level of understanding together as a group. At the end of each two-hour group session, we would reflect on what we had learned together more generally, and I would take notes.

I have been facilitating embodied writing groups now for six years, so I know that it is getting easier and easier to teach others to write from an embodied perspective. Probably I am more confident in leading the groups, but mostly embodied writing seems so attuned to the culture of our times that those new to the process catch on quite easily. All I have to do now is give some modest instruction about the distinctive features of embodied writing and a few key examples. After one to two rounds of feedback, most people have begun to write in distinctively embodied voices all their own. Additional details about the evolution of embodied writing can be found in Anderson (2001).

Forming an Embodied Writing Group

If you wish to start an embodied writing group, you might begin with these simple norms, modifying them as needed as you go along.

1. Meet as a group weekly to create momentum and group cohesiveness.
2. Establish norms of confidentiality to protect private information and further trust among group members.
3. Work in small groups of 5 or 6 people who share their prepared embodied writings each week. Groups of 10 to 12 people can be divided into two subgroups that alternate week by week in presenting their embodied writings.
4. Read each aloud, either by the writer or by an another group member. Reading the writings silently as a group is less desirable, especially initially, but is quicker if time gets short.
5. Invite group members to give each writer feedback on what resonates for them within their own bodies.
6. Do not dwell on content, grammar, writing style, spelling, punctuation, et cetera, no matter how interesting or informative.
7. Establish some means of communicating between sessions, perhaps online.
8. Write about experiences that have singular importance to your personal and spiritual life and are intrinsically imbued with somatic elements, be they sensorial, visceral, proprioceptive, kinesthetic, or intra-psychic. After individuals have established unique styles of embodied writings, you may wish to expand your range by describing other types of experiences.
9. Do not try to write well according to an imposed style of writing learned in school, industry, or elsewhere.
10. Be kind. Give feedback clearly and kindly. People are typically more critical of their own writing than about the writing of others. If you feel fearful about sharing your own writing, remember that it is likely that all of the others have some of the same feelings when they share theirs. Try not to judge yourself or others.
11. Expect the unexpected.

Two Examples of Embodied Writing

Even from the start, embodied writing seemed to invite a unique writerly voice, even a kind of essentiality of expression. Far from making everyone sound alike by employing a particular style of writing, embodied writing seems to bring forth the particular or unique qualities of the writer. There may be "as many styles as there are embodied authors," as David Michael Levin put it in a letter to me (May 22, 1998).

In graphic, down-to-earth terms, Robin Margulies, who died of breast cancer metastasized to the bone, describes the unique pain of dying as "different than other pain":

Poor Mom has to hear me bitch about my physical state. When I do, she thinks I'm jumping ahead to say I'm dying and that nothing will help. I think she jumps ahead and thinks that. She wants to help make it better, but I just want to say Wow, Oh Wow, this is intense. Of course, we'd do all we can to help make it better, but what's intense is the sensation that it is happening, this thing is happening which has the quality of not being able to be helped. It's that quality that's so intense—there's this thing happening which can't be helped. It's like nothing I've ever felt before. Maybe like birth pangs? Maybe when in labor you want to just say Wow to all of it at first and not just jump right to being comfortable, not yet, not 'til or if it gets so intense that, yes, you do want to think about epidurals right now, thank you very much (Margulies & Margulies, 1997, p. 9).

In the following example, Bryan Rich (2000) writes of his experience of blowing the shofar shaped from a ram's horn to herald the new year at Rosh Hashanah. Notice Bryan's attention to detail and nuance as kinesthetic, perceptual, and visceral senses change over time and how he appears to relive the experience as he writes and in so doing, reaches out to us in words without reducing the significance of the experience to bits and bites of sensations. Since few readers are likely to have had the experience of blowing the shofar, Bryan's portrayal represents a robust test of embodied writing to evoke sympathetic resonance.

[M]y eyes widen with anticipation. I've done this so many times, and still that quiet fear whispers its electricity. The hairs on my forearm become alert

and my chest tingles, as they do every time I approach this threshold. I feel my blood move a little faster. My ears prick up and hearing becomes razor keen even as it's suddenly silent inside my head. A small prayer, the primeval curve of the ram's horn shapes my hand and I touch the small opening to my lips—the familiar feeling, there's no way I can fit it quite right except that it fits perfectly, hard against soft, like the first joint of my index finger fits together, or like a kiss. I have to inhale from deep, and as I inhale time slows down through an endless moment until there is nothing left but now. I begin to blow slowly, and slowly, without forcing, pressure swells from my belly up through my chest. I can feel my heart claiming more space in my chest. . . . My whole body is expanding. It soars, riding the wave of the sound—but not off the ground . . . Now [the wave] flows inward at the same time, finding and caressing the familiar opening in the inner depths of my belly center. . . . My heart is losing its boundaries as it spreads further in all directions. The spring overflows from the hidden place inside the precisely innermost point in the center of my body and carries me into it. This is the open secret. It's the gently overwhelming place too small to be found by my knowing mind, caressed in my body center and bigger than the sky (pp. 1-2).

Seven Distinctive Features of Embodied Writing

In the course of three years' weekly writing and feedback in small groups, seven features emerged as distinctive of embodied writing:

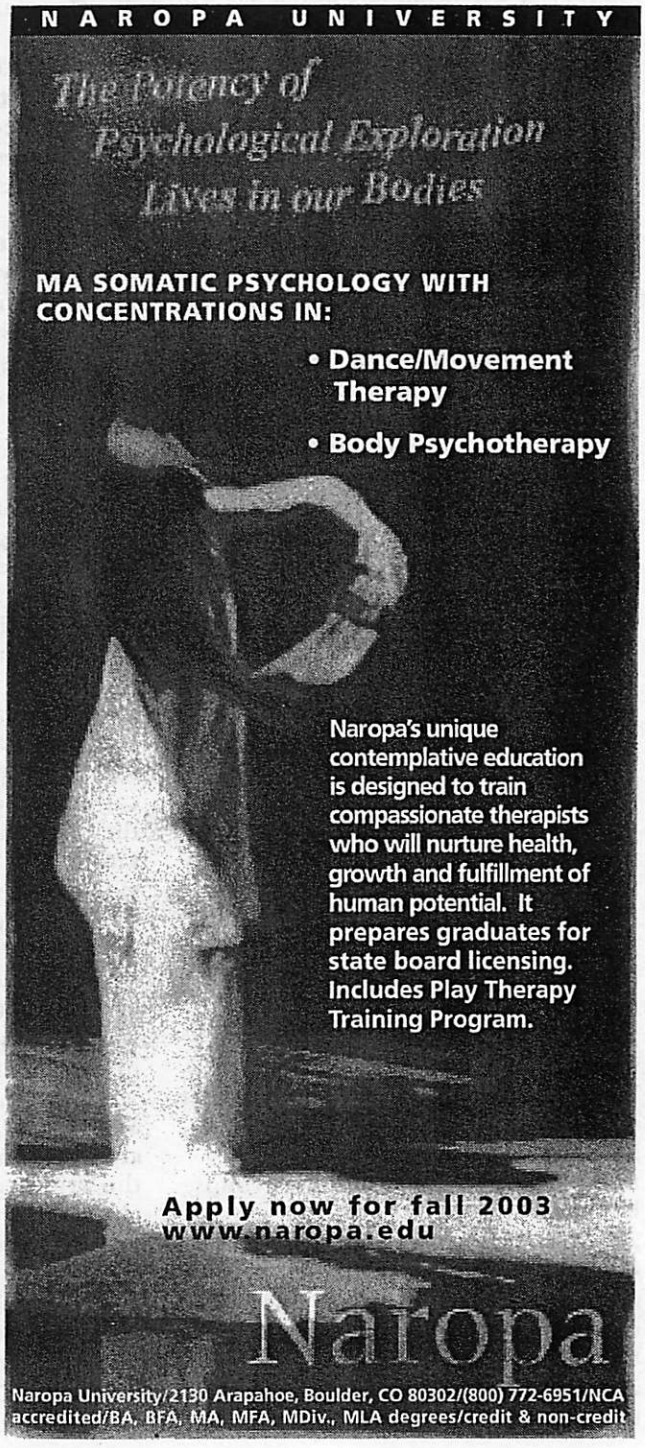
1. True-to-life, vivid depictions intended to invite sympathetic resonance in the readers or audience. The finely nuanced quality of the writing invites readers or listeners to palpably feel the writer's experience or something much akin to it. In a sense, the experience itself becomes tangibly present and therefore present to others. However successful (or unsuccessful) in each instance, embodied writing seeks to communicate through sympathetic resonance. The writing "rings a bell" for the reader.

2. Inclusive of internal and external data as essential to relaying the experience. Embodied writing includes both internal (imaginal, perceptual, kinesthetic, and visceral data usually known only by the experiencer) and external (sometimes observable to others, but not always, such as sensory-motor reactions and context) sources of information. Rather than writing from the perspective of a positivistic science, and specifically of behaviorism in psychology, embodied writing values both internal and external sources without privileging one over the other or presuming external verifiability. Embodied writing does assume, however, that an experience important enough to write about is likely, though not necessarily in all cases, to contain rich internal and external information. Indeed, an experience does not have to be extraordinary or transcendent in order to be significant to psychological or spiritual development.

3. Written specifically from the inside out. Embodied writing drops the external witnessing perspective customary for conventional, "objective" science. The body speaks for itself through the vehicle of words. Like any medium of expression, words often elude the immediate fullness of experience. Yet, to the extent possible, embodied writing positions the writerly voice inside the body as it lives, letting the body's perceptual matrix guide the words, impulse by impulse, sensation by sensation. In the examples of embodied writing given in this article, please notice that positioning the writerly voice inside the body does not support indulgent, mental chatter. When done well, the embodied writing stays quite concrete and specific.

4. Richly concrete and specific, descriptive of all sensory modalities, and often slowed down to capture nuance. Embodied writing invites a lively sense of living here and now by attending rigorously to minor external and internal details as they arise in experience. Accounts often employ multi-sensorial and synaesthetic descriptions, that is, inclusive of more than one of the five conventional senses. Experience is often slowed down in the temporal sense and described carefully in order to relive and remember to the extent possible. In slowing down, we often notice how much is actually taking place.

5. Attuned to the living body (*Leib* rather than *Körper* in Husserl's [1952/1989] sense). Though embodied writing describes the body's physical sens-



es in detail, accounts are not limited to the physical senses. Living in a body is to live fully attuned to the sensual matrix of the world. We are situated in an animate world within and without. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968) points out, the body lives inhabiting the world and the world inhabiting the body. Embodiment is not commensurate with our physical senses. It is not the lips alone that touch the ram's horn in blowing the shofar at Rosh Hashanah, but the world of sensual experience summoned by the blowing. It's not sex alone that makes for sensuality, but the touching and intimacy that sex intimates. No love letter—or hate letter for that matter—is but bits and bites of sweetness and fears, but a host of sensual enactments past and present.

6. Narratives embedded in experience, often first-person narratives. Embodied writing is based on personal experience even if a writer or researcher is summarizing the collective experience of many. If the writer is speaking of his or her own experience, the first person is used for referential accuracy.

7. Poetic images, literary style, and cadence serve embodied depictions and not the other way around. Embodied writing values vivid accounts of lived experience over literary artfulness. A good phrase or artful expression is extraneous to a sentence unless it supports an embodied description. Notice too in the examples that acoustical cadence, such as andante as in walking or allegro as in lively, mirrors the sensory or emotional tone of the experience described and lends meaning. Good editing (sometimes know as "killing your darlings") is essential to the embodied writing. The features of embodied writing are inherently related and flow readily one to another.

Part II of this article will apply embodied writing to the practice of research. Readers will be led through the process of preparing research participants to write from an embodied perspective, gathering embodied writing from research participants, conducting resonance panels to support claims of validity, and presenting findings through embodied writing. Part II will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of embodied writing and personal reflection by the author on the future of body from a sacred perspective.



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