

SOMATIC EDUCATION, BEYOND SINGULAR METHODS (1)

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Preface

Over the last 20 years I have been learning and reflecting on the experience of “being embodied”, the sensation of movement in action and the emergence of awareness through movement. On this path, I have encountered and studied many methods. I have also explored the greater field of body-mind in many directions. My background in psychology and my experience of psychotherapy were often useful. Yet sometimes the habits of psychological thinking got in the way of new understandings. From the earliest years and for various reasons I have focused my interest on the FELDENKRAIS® Method(3). Yet I have always had the clear impression that as Feldenkrais practitioners my colleagues and I are part of a broader movement. In the last years, partly due to legal and governmental pressures, partly through maturation of each discipline and partly through the growth of the whole domain itself, many practitioners and teachers in the field of what came to be known as “somatics” and “somatic education” met to establish bridges, compare methods and share concerns. For example, in Québec, since 1991, “Le Regroupement québécois en éducation somatique” brings together six internationally renowned approaches which are well represented in our province. And lately, in its listing of members, the FELDENKRAIS GUILD®(3) states that the FELDENKRAIS Method is a method of “Somatic Education”.

The following text is my personal contribution to the effort of defining a field broader than any method, beyond singular methods, a discipline called “somatic education”.

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In 1976, Thomas Hanna began publishing the Magazine-Journal “Somatics”. The title was inspired by the ancient Greek word “soma”, which since the time of Hesiod has meant “the living body”. Over the years Hanna developed a new definition of somatics as “the art and science of the interrelational process between awareness, biological function and the environment, all three factors being understood as a synergetic whole” (Hanna, 1989, p.1). Thus he delineated a vast field which includes various approaches to the living body: massage, bodywork, rolfing, bioenergetics and other Reichian therapies, traditional Oriental practices such as yoga, tai chi, and martial arts, as well as biofeedback, mental imagery, relaxation techniques, studies of body-mind and of psychoneuroimmunology.

In the larger field of somatics, somatic education groups together a set of methods oriented primarily toward the learning and development of body awareness in movement. Several of these methods have been known in Europe and America for many decades. I will refer here to those which I have experienced personally and which have achieved international renown: Gerda Alexander’s *Eutony*; the *Alexander Technique* of Mathias Alexander; Thérèse Bertherat’s “*Anti-gymnastique*” (kinetic awareness); Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen’s *Body-Mind Centering™*; Louise Ehrenfried’s “*Gymnastique*”

holistique™”; Moshe Feldenkrais *Awareness through Movement* ® and *Functional Integration* ®; and Irmgard Bartenieff’s *Fundamentals™*”.

Somatic Education differentiates itself from many somatic methods who use body movement to investigate the psychological domain. In these psycho-corporeal methods, repressed emotions and relational “unfinished businesses” are re-activated through the body. Such methods could be labelled “somatherapies”, as in the title of the French journal “Somatothérapies”. But somatic education is not specifically about therapy. Etymologically, the word “therapy” means the treatment of dysfunction and disease. Though their work may be used in a process of healing, somatic educators do not center their attention on pathology, symptoms, etiology and cure, but on the art and science of the sensory-motor learning process, the development of movement potentialities, and the discovery of better ways of doing in action, with awareness.

Somatic education also differs from almost all the health sciences, physiotherapy, physical and sports education, and even most teachings in dance and music. The training of somatic educators involves not only the external knowledge of the body as object, i.e. something to be described in the third person mode, as in anatomy, physiology and biomechanics. Somatic education addresses in addition the awakening and developing of one’s own body awareness, primarily through movement. In that context the principal aspects of learning to be considered both objectively and subjectively are: the intention of the action; the organization of the body as a whole and the relationship among its parts; the orientation in space and the synchronisation in time. The training in somatic education offers a completely different, more internal first person stance in learning combined with a profound knowledge of how movement can be optimal in one’s life. Yet somatic educators are not mere teachers of movement, but facilitators of awareness in and through movement.

The pedagogical strategies of somatic educators are far from being homogeneous. One teacher may be looking for “good” movement and he may be directive or even corrective; another teacher may be more exploratory, guiding students towards their own sense of quality; one may stress the use of movement in space; another may highlight the internalization of movement; one may prefer to have students work as they lie on the floor; the other will prefer to have the students standing and moving in the room. Some methods use props and various objects like balls and sticks. Language, imagination, interaction among participants, communication by touch, emotional or artistic expression - all these ingredients are weighed and arranged differently in every method. But all methods work toward a similar goal: to learn to refine the kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses; to learn to move and act with efficiency; to learn to evoke pleasure, increased expression, and well being.

It seems to me that a growing number of people are looking for ways to improve their health and the quality of their life through means that are more pleasant, less mechanical, and more founded in sensitivity and intelligence than in force and brute strength. Who does not want to spend less energy with better results by learning

appropriate action, by learning to sharpen one's senses, without using a model or a mirror or a program predetermined by a computer or anything else? One of the fundamental postulates of somatic education, in my view, is that the human being has no need to be bullied or regimented in order to develop. Pain, discomfort, unease and fatigue are indicators that the organism generates for itself to regulate its activity. Pushing and pulling on oneself is not only unnecessary but it is also detrimental to learning.

Concretely, in the field of gravity, honouring the laws of physics, somatic education develops better self-use of the body in accord with biomechanical principles. A person who moves well or who carries himself well is easy to recognize. She stands tall without having to pull herself up; she does not contract or stretch any part of her body unnecessarily; her skeleton aligns itself to support her appropriately; she is in harmony with the force of gravity rather than at its mercy.

Each somatic education system offers a variety of activities and exercises for learning how to sense the body in action and how to discover the sensation of organic movement. To develop kinesthetic sensitivity, somatic educators seek to respect the perceptual thresholds of the nervous system, and thus suggest proceeding slowly, reducing effort for better sensitivity. Under these conditions, the nervous system can perceive fine differences. The person is able to eliminate parasitic movements, reduce useless contraction, refine coordination, and discover - by feeling it - the optimum way of acting. She is then invited to repeat these movements - often they are unfamiliar or unhabitual -, to pay attention, to observe herself in action and to notice differences and nuances in sensation. Then when the new neuromotor patterns have been explored and clarified slowly and delicately, they can be tried more strongly, more quickly and they can be transferred in one's life to be applied in a variety of ways. Given a chance to learn, the nervous system prefers and adopts flexibility and conscious skill over simple mechanical repetition and outside norms.

When a person wishes to learn what is right for her body and her "self", when she looks for a way to improve or even to heal herself, she must consider each part of her body as it functions in an integrated organism and also as it relates to its environment. In fact, if a person limits attention to one single organ or area of the body, she denies the interactive systemic reality of this organism, an attitude which has probably contributed to the creation of the difficulties. Consequently, a single localized symptom indicates the necessity for a general reorganization of the body and of the person. When one begins a somatic learning experience, one can evolve globally; sensations, thoughts, emotions, movement all being aspects of a system unique to each individual.

Moreover, posture, breathing patterns, organization of the moving body, orientation in space, the ability to contract and extend, joint mobility, reaction to gravity, use of one part of oneself coordinated with the whole, the ability to imagine movement and to translate intention into action - all of those things learned in somatic education seem inherent in all human activity. The applications of somatic education are not limited to any specialized discipline, since awareness of the moving body is necessary for every living

human being who wishes to pursue learning and improve health and efficiency, regardless of one's particular professional, artistic, or athletic activities. Somatic education classes are therefore offered in the fields of arts, sports, health, psychology and education. The clientele comes from all walks of life, all age groups and includes people of all conditions or state of health and ability.

Somatic educators teach that one's feeling of oneself and the results of one's action depend on the way one organizes oneself. It is this practical felt self knowledge which is the goal: the ability to be more aware and appreciative of one's corporal being. A person can take care of herself and take charge of her condition and development in the context of her environment. Thus somatic experience is not simply subjective, personal and internal, but is also concerned with an harmonious relationship with the people and the world around oneself. The development of awareness does not stop at the surface of the skin. And in that sense somatic education is also ecological.

NOTES

1. This article was first published in France, in french, in 1993 by “L’association des praticiens de la méthode Feldenkrais”, under the title: “L’éducation somatique: au delà du discours des méthodes”.
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3. FELDENKRAIS ® and the FELDENKRAIS GUILD ® are registered marks, of the FELDENKRAIS GUILD.

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