

Embodying Nature, Becoming Ourselves: A Somatic-Expressive Journey

Jamie McHugh

*"The great sea has sent me adrift;
it moves me
like a reed in a great river.
Earth and the great weather move me,
have carried me away,
and fill my inward parts with joy." - Uvavnuk, Iglulik woman shaman*

"Our inner life is complete when it merges into nature and becomes one with it." - D.T. Suzuki

We are elements of nature: our soma (the body experienced from within) and psyche (the mind of the soul) are reflections of the planet, each intricately embedded in the other. When the natural world is out of sight and mind in these days of high-speed technology, sedentary workplaces and manufactured urban/ suburban sprawls, it is easy to lose our ground and our somatic connection to the planet. How do we redirect the modern mind away from its inner narratives, especially when they juggle so much input, expectation, and obligation, to meet the natural world on its own sensory terms? How can we revisit more often the primal consciousness expressed by the woman shaman that reminds us of our place in the larger body of life?

As a somatic artist and movement therapist specializing in leading groups into the wilds, I have witnessed this challenge many times over the past 25 years. People come on retreat with the psychic and somatic residue of urban life having taken its toll, with their weary souls in need of regeneration and restoration.¹

I consider the elements of nature to be curative forces in and of their own right. Nature is the master teacher and healer when we are open and available to be in active dialogue with what is offered. I simply think of my work as the conduit for receiving these transmissions. As facilitator, I prepare the space, set the stage, lead the warm-ups and attunements - and then get out of the way for magic to happen. The following is a short sketch of this approach.

There are three ecosystems that are addressed and overlap in Embodying Nature:

Personal Ecosystem of Self - We transition from clock time to Earth time by slowing down and immersing ourselves in our animal bodies to open the channels of inner communication.

Natural Ecosystem of Place - We encounter the living dreamscape of the natural world with the sensory capacities and playful instinct of our child self.

Social Ecosystem of the Group - We create a safe, empathic and accepting circle of fellow travelers to journey together in this ecosystem by making our interior experience visible.

These three ecosystems of self, place, and group interact with three stages in this process: befriending the inner landscape of the body with somatic resources; befriending the outer landscape through sensorimotor responses; and harvesting and then expressing personal meaning.

1) **The Five Somatic Technologies**: Breath, vocalization, contact, movement, and stillness are the five indigenous somatic technologies gifted to us by nature for accessing our body wisdom and expanding upon it. ² The use of these five create the conditions for receptive awareness and expressive response by diminishing the “white noise” of our minds. Somatic technologies give us a felt sense of security and trust in our bodies through the language of sensation. I know where I am in myself as a body on earth, making it easier and even more appealing to temporarily abandon the tried and true ways of habit, experiment with options, and allow new information to emerge.

One somatic movement pathway used is based on the basic developmental patterns of infants: Yield, Push, Reach, Grasp and Pull. Yielding into sand and allowing full support precedes pushing against; feeling my boundaries and the support of the ground precedes taking the risk of reaching out into space; going where I want, to what I want, and bringing it to me completes the trajectory of this basic imprint.

What we did automatically as infants and young children, we now consciously embody as adults. This and other forms of basic movement - such as rocking, creeping crawling, and rolling - re-calibrates our civilized, sedentary bodies; by lowering our center of gravity, bringing more parity between belly and brain, and allowing our overstimulated brains to rest, we generate fluidity and spaciousness that slows down time. The return to a beginner’s mind softens the blinders of motor habits, opening up our ability to sense more - internally and externally.

2) **Five-Part Conceptual Map**: From this beginner’s mind of inner sense perceptions and primitive movement, we bridge to an expressive relationship with nature by exploring the essential elements of whatever ecosystem we are inhabiting. Direct sensory experience of sky, ocean, rock, tree - and even other people - stimulates associations, feelings, and images. These impressions are reflected in the

outward expression of spontaneous sensorimotor responses, just like you see in the free-form play of young children as they follow their curiosity.

The following tasks define the map of this game in connecting the inner and outer landscapes in a delightful reciprocity - nature can guide us from our own interior (the inside out) as well as from the exterior (the outside in):

1. Witness
2. Contact
3. Mirror
4. Respond
5. Rest

Witness rock – be still, open and receptive to it. Take at least 3 breaths to receive this particular rock.

Contact rock - use different qualities of touch and various body parts, i.e. use hands or feet, belly or back.

Mirror rock – imitate and physically become what you perceive. Are you the solidity, stability or density?

Respond to rock – use your voice, movement and stillness in any form of response. Push against, lift, sing to rock, etc.

Rest - let your mind float and your body pause to assimilate the experience.

This process of exploration has a container with a specific focus and multiple activities, allowing people to be engaged in their own self-directed somatic rhythm of movement and stillness as well as their own psychological rhythm of safety and risk. By creating the conditions and letting the activities stimulate experience, each person has an opportunity for creative and emotional fulfillment.

Satisfaction arises and expresses itself in multiple ways. For example in one retreat, a highlight for one woman was feeling safe enough to fall asleep in the woods and yield into the embrace of the Great Mother; for another, it was about standing her ground in the cold, forceful flow of the river; while for still another, it was biding her time on a moss covered rock in the middle of a stream while

daydreaming and not feeling compelled to do anything. We each have our personal challenges and rewards that easily come into focus when the structure is more open.

*"During one of our explorations as I wandered in the field, the river called me with its sounds, and I followed the call to the water's edge. The river's surface was like a mirror to the sky and fields. I mirrored the streaming water. It told me its song and I sang the song of the murmuring river. I was quite open to Nature so I felt Nature was able to enter into my direct existence, as if both the river and I felt comfort and recognition toward one another. It is how I imagine native people feel towards Nature."*³

This active imagination in nature is an embodied dream state where we can uncover more expressive possibilities, ranging from the delicate and nuanced to the raw and unrefined. The sensorimotor state of playful participation allows us to become 5 years old once again, alive with basic openness, curiosity, and wonder. And without any pressure to perform in a specific way, the constricting mental burden of "being creative" or "being authentic" naturally falls away as we experience more personal freedom. Awash in the stream of motor impulses, desires, and inputs from all our senses, spontaneous expression can simply happen moment-to-moment like the continuous flow of our breathing.

3) Reflective Harvesting: The final stage is for assimilation and integration, where we review the highlights of our experience and write down whatever arises in a relaxed open presence. This reflective stage bridges the preverbal realm of sensorimotor experience with the more concrete realm of language. Our written expression is the result of a dialogue of self meeting place and place meeting self, with these writings being exploratory in their own right - narrative, poetic, cognitive recollections or symbolic representations.

Nature is such a diverse and large container that holds, mirrors and reflects all dimensions of our experience so it is not surprising that basic themes are quickly evoked. Each person then expresses their writing to the group in an embodied way through tone of voice, gesture, posture, intervals of silence and changes of tempo and force. The interior realm made visible with words illuminates personal themes that are meaningful, with each person's shared experience expanding our understanding of being human in relationship to this specific place and beyond. The expression of this aesthetic response, witnessed by others, completes the cycle in this approach as it bridges the unconscious sensorimotor play and the conscious personal concerns.

We are restored, refreshed and enlarged in our capacity to be sensing, feeling, thinking human beings. This is how I embody, and teach others to embody, the inner and outer landscape, and connect with the places we call home.

*Earth hold me,
Tree house me,
Sun warm me.
Air touch me,
Water move me,
Rock speak:
This is my home.
I am at home. ⁴*

1 For more information on Embodying Nature retreats and Leadership Training:
<http://www.somaticexpression.com/classes/natura.html>

2 For more information on the 5 technologies:
http://www.somaticexpression.com/articles/5_elements.html

3 Embodying Nature Leadership Training participant's reflection (personal correspondence 2016)

4 Embodying Nature Leadership Training participant's reflective harvesting (personal correspondence 2016)

Copyright 2017 Jamie McHugh. All rights reserved