THE USE OF TRANSFORMATIVE SOMATIC PRACTICES IN PROCESSES OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION AND COLLABORATIVE FUTURE-SHAPING

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The quality of humanity’s future, Sardar writes, depends to a large extent upon our collective creativity and our ability to “unleash a broad spectrum of imaginations from the rich diversity of human cultures” toward the task of envisioning and shaping that future (2010, p. 443). Montuori, expanding on this theme, suggests that one vital approach to the global project of collectively imagining and creating better human futures might be the mobilization of a “new, participatory, grass-roots creativity” (2011, p. 225). My own experiments with cultivating the creative and collaborative capacities of individuals and groups have been closely entwined with my work in somatic psychology—a field which concerns itself with the interconnection of psyche and body—and my work as a teacher and facilitator of what I refer to as transformative somatic practices: aikido, physical theatre, and other embodiment-focused approaches to cultivating positive human potentials (Walker, 2019). In this chapter, I offer some thoughts as to how transformative somatic practices can be of use in facilitating the realization of human creative potentials, including potentials for more effective and harmonious collaboration among disparate individuals and groups, and how such practices might thus play an invaluable role in the project of mobilizing the collective imagination toward the co-creation of better futures.

Creative potentials and acquired rigidities

High capacities for creativity in individuals tend to be associated with high levels of tolerance—and appreciation—for novelty, complexity, difference, diversity, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Intolerance for these same phenomena, on the other hand, is a central feature of the sort of rigidity and authoritarianism that are inimical to the creative imagination. The openness to complexity, difference, and ambiguity that enables individual creativity to thrive...
is also essential to relational creativity and to engaging in processes of creative collaboration across lines of cultural difference; those who are less tolerant of difference and ambiguity are consequently less suited to constructive participation in such processes (Montuori, 2019).

In infants and young children of every culture, one can observe a seemingly innate instinct for open-minded curiosity and creative play. As long as infants and children are provided with an environment in which their basic needs for safety and nurturance are met and in which they are allowed sufficient freedom from externally imposed agendas, they will tend to gravitate toward spending many of their waking hours engaged in spontaneous processes of creative exploration and creative play (Winnicott, 1971/2005). This would seem to indicate that open-minded creativity is, to some extent, the natural or default human tendency, while the intolerances and rigidities which are inimical to creativity are generally acquired as a result of enculturation and/or adverse developmental experiences (Grand, 2015a, 2015b; Winnicott, 1971/2005).

One useful strategy when it comes to unleashing human creative potentials—including potentials for participating in collaborative processes and engaging constructively with difference and diversity—is to focus on loosening the grip of whatever acquired psychological rigidities, narrow mindsets, prejudices, and intolerances for uncertainty and ambiguity might be functioning as obstacles to the natural emergence and expression of those potentials. Somatically-informed perspectives and somatic practices can be invaluable in this regard.

**A somatic perspective**

The field of somatic psychology encompasses a broad, diverse, and evolving realm of theories and practices, united by two central principles; these same principles underlie the transformative capacities of numerous practices from a wide diversity of cultures—various martial arts, yogic and ecstatic traditions, bodywork methods, embodiment-focused mindfulness techniques, and more—which are sometimes collectively referred to as somatic practices. The first principle is that body and mind are a single unified system. The psyche or self is constructed and organized somatically; subjective experience and the workings of the psyche are inextricably entwined with specific embodiments. Consciousness, experience, perspectives, mindsets, attitudes, sense of self, and capacities for feeling, cognition, and action are grounded in—and shaped and delimited by—ingrained habits of bodily usage and bodily organization, including habits of tension, relaxation, excitation, posture, breath, restriction, and movement. The second principle follows from the first: since the dynamics of the psyche are grounded in the organization and usage of the body, intentional alterations to the habitual organization and use of the body can effect profound transformations of the psyche (Grand, 1978, 2015a, 2015b; Heckler, 1984; Walker, 2019).

From a somatically-informed perspective, then, the states of psychological rigidity and reactivity that are obstacles to creativity are entwined with and anchored in chronic bodily rigidities. These bodily rigidities, which Reich (1933/1972a) referred to as character armor, have little to do with stiffness or flexibility in the conventional athletic sense; one’s degree of prejudice or open-mindedness cannot be measured by how easily one can touch one’s toes. Rather, the rigidities in question are deeply ingrained and largely unconscious patterns of habitual muscular tension or “holding,” which originate as instinctual defensive reactions to frightening or traumatic events, attempts to adapt to external demands in the developmental environment, or self-protective efforts to suppress feelings, excitation, postures, and/or self-expressions that are unsafe or unacceptable in the developmental environment (Conger, 1994; Grand, 1978, 2015b; Heckler, 1984).
The tensions of character armor are continually present in the body to varying degrees and reflexively activate and intensify in circumstances an individual consciously or unconsciously perceives as potentially threatening; Heckler (1984) describes this automatic defensive intensification of armoring patterns as a “conditioned tendency” (pp. 20–27). For instance, key elements of one man’s character armor might include tensions in the jaw and throat and around the eyes and mouth (perhaps first developed as a way to suppress crying and other vulnerable emotional expressions, in a childhood environment in which male children were shamed and rejected for such expressions), chronic constriction in the deepest muscular layers of the torso (perhaps originating in early childhood as an instinctual defensive pulling-inward, in reaction to the presence of aggressive adults), and a complicated arrangement of interconnected muscular tensions throughout the body which serve to maintain a stereotypically masculine embodiment—a performance of confident certainty and an aggressive taking-up of space that overcompensates for the aforementioned internal constriction (and has its origins in pervasive cultural lessons about how “real men” should act). In situations that invoke anxiety, including situations of uncertainty—such as encounters with forms of ambiguity, complexity, and difference that fall outside his accustomed comfort zone—his conditioned tendency will be toward a reflexive activation and intensification of these various tensions: the habitual tightnesses in the jaw and the inner layers of the torso might intensify into clenchings; muscles might engage to contort the body into a more exaggerated version of its habitual posture of aggressive masculinity.

Each person’s somatic organization is “the mechanism by which the person’s defenses are actually enacted,” and “in the same way that other feelings and actions are defended against, creative play and participation in the making and forming of possibility can be restricted” (Grand, 2015b, p. 215). To whatever extent a given person’s character armor and other ingrained habits of embodiment keep them locked into a specific limited range of patterns of embodiment, that person will also tend to remain entrenched in a corresponding limited mindset, limited range of cognitive and behavioral options, and diminished access to creative capacities (Grand, 1978, 2015b; Heckler, 1984). In situations in which they experience anxiety, including situations that challenge the limitations of their perspectives, their habitual patterns of bodily armoring will temporarily intensify as part of their conditioned defensive reaction; this, in turn, will lock them even more rigidly into their habitual mindsets and psychological patterns (Heckler, 1984).

Applications of somatic practices

Somatic practices can be used to help people release themselves from the constraints of their character armor and other limiting ingrained patterns of embodiment, which in turn can serve to relax whatever mental inflexibilities and limitations on creativity are entwined with those bodily patterns (Grand, 1978, 2015b). There are numerous practices—ranging from vigorous approaches based in dance, martial arts, and physical theatre to slower and more contemplative movement practices—that can help to facilitate transcendence of ingrained habits of self-limitation (Johnson, 1995, 2018). For releasing character armor, practices with roots in the work of Wilhelm Reich, such as the bioenergetic approach developed by Lowen, can be particularly effective (Conger, 1994).

The breaking down of character armor and other patterns of inhibition is a powerful somatic approach to the liberation of creative potentials but is not necessarily sufficient. The capacity to recognize and attune to the deep internal stirrings of the creative impulse, and to bring creative impulses into coherent expression and enactment, can remain underdeveloped.
in individuals whose characterological rigidities and/or life circumstances have afforded them little opportunity to freely explore their creativity. Such individuals may still have difficulty accessing that creativity or bringing it into expression even after rigid patterns of embodiment and cognition have been loosened. Fortunately, this creative capacity can be developed, strengthened, and refined through various forms of somatic practice. Grand (2015b) observes that the creative impulse, like other phenomena that occur in the psyche, has a somatic component that one can learn to tune into on a bodily level. Through practice, “attunement to the somatic processes of unconscious creation can be learned,” enabling the individual to more effectively “follow impulses from their inchoate beginnings … to their enactment and solidification” (p. 215). Forms of somatic practice that can be especially helpful in this regard include those that involve a combination of subtle body awareness and spontaneous physical action, such as Authentic Movement (Adler, 2002), Continuum (Conrad, 2007), the physical theatre techniques developed by Alli (2003), and various approaches to dance therapy, expressive arts therapy, and play therapy (Grand, 2015b).

While somatic practices, in general, tend to focus a great deal on bringing about liberatory transformations within the bodymind of the individual, these transformations often include an expansion of the individual’s capacities for harmonious interpersonal interaction and collaboration. Through this expansion of relational capacities, somatic practices can serve to foster not only greater personal creativity but also enhanced participation in processes of collective creativity.

The cultivation of richer and more empathic interpersonal connections and of harmony and creative problem-solving on a collective level has long been an explicit goal of various traditions of somatic practice. Reich (1933/1972b) maintained that the psychological rigidity and repression that made people susceptible to participation in the horrors of fascism was anchored in their character armor and that the process of releasing character armor could serve as an antidote to authoritarianism and make people more capable of participating in the co-creation of free and egalitarian societies. Morihei Ueshiba developed the martial art of aikido with the express intent of fostering compassion on a societal level by teaching people on a bodily level how to act with mindfulness and harmony in situations of conflict (Leonard, 1999); in my own years as a practitioner and teacher of aikido, I’ve experienced first-hand how effectively that art can train one over time to consciously override one’s conditioned bodily defensive reactions, so that in the face of potential conflicts and challenges, one has the opportunity to choose harmonious, constructive, and creative responses over knee-jerk reactivity (Walker, 2018, 2019). More recently, somatically-informed thinkers like Menakem (2017) have begun exploring how racism and other forms of bigotry are anchored in acquired bodily defensive reactions and how somatic practices that address those habitual bodily reactions could thus play an essential role in helping individuals, communities, and societies to overcome pervasive patterns of bigotry and oppression. In short, the integration of transformative somatic practices into processes of collective collaboration and creative future-building would by no means be much of a stretch, as many of these practices have always aimed at fostering harmonious cooperation among humans and have always been inspired by visions of better futures.

**Integrating somatic practices into collaborative processes**

Montuori (2011) suggests that one way to begin engaging the collective imagination in future-shaping on a grass-roots level could be through “community collaborative creativity sessions in which citizens are invited to share their personal and/or collaborative vision of
what a better world … might be like, and then dialogue with others in small groups to weave the visions together and look for common themes and patterns” (pp. 225–226); the goal of such sessions would be to articulate “visions of desirable futures” which could be widely shared in order to “promote dialogues and the exchange of ideas and resources, and above all to trigger and mobilize the imagination of others” (p. 226).

Processes of mobilizing grass-roots creativity, by their very nature, will unfold differently and take various forms within different communities and contexts. Consequently, there can be no single universally applicable blueprint for how somatic practices might be incorporated into such processes, nor for which specific practices might be most appropriate; the answers will always be contingent on the myriad shifting variables that make each collective process unique. For the sake of example, though, we can consider how somatic practices might be usefully integrated into the sort of community collaborative sessions proposed by Montuori.

First, somatic practices that involve improvisational physical movement and attunement to and expression of spontaneous movement impulses—practices derived from various dance and theatre traditions, for instance, or practices such as Authentic Movement or Continuum—could be introduced into community collaborative sessions to help get the creativity flowing, to enhance collaborative processes by functioning as icebreakers and group bonding activities, to increase the vitality and synergy of group processes, and to break down embodied patterns of inflexibility that might otherwise limit the creative participation of some individual members or the relational dynamics of the group.

Second, session participants can be taught practices geared toward cultivating attunement to the shiftings and nuances of one’s internal state. As previously noted, practices of this sort can be used to strengthen and refine the capacity of participants to feel into the stirrings of their creative impulses. The practices of improvisational movement mentioned above, with their emphasis on attunement to spontaneous movement impulses, can also be helpful when it comes to attuning to creative impulses in general and to other aspects of one’s inner state. There are also more contemplative somatic approaches that have the specific aim of cultivating attunement to pre-verbal internal processes and knowings; the practice called Focusing, developed by Gendlin (1981) is a notable example.

Third and perhaps most importantly, certain somatic practices could enhance collaborative processes by facilitating more harmonious relational dynamics among participants. The generative potentials of collective processes can be undermined by a wide variety of interpersonal difficulties, ranging from open conflict to more subtle situations in which various social/relational tensions, prejudices, frictions, projections, or anxieties obstruct group synergy and diminish the capacity of individuals to participate constructively. Effective somatically-informed approaches to resolving such issues or to transforming them into opportunities for growth and creative insight generally involve a combination of two different skills.

The first of these two skills is the skill of attuning to and maintaining awareness of one’s own internal somatic states, as discussed above. The second relevant skill is the form of somatic self-regulation sometimes referred to as centering: the skill of intentionally regulating the arousal of one’s nervous system and intentionally calming, relaxing, and stabilizing the state of one’s bodymind. The centered state is essentially the opposite of the state in which ingrained automatic defensive reactions are activated; to center oneself when in a stressful situation is to intentionally override one’s conditioned defensive tendencies (Heckler, 1984; Leonard, 1999; Ogden et al., 2006; Walker, 2018, 2019). Many systems of somatic practice—from various yogic traditions and martial arts to modern forms of somatic psychotherapy—emphasize centering as fundamental and teach some repertoire of centering techniques.
In the context of interpersonal interactions and group processes, these two skills—somatic self-awareness and centering—become richly transformative when participants learn to use them in combination: maintaining a centered state while engaged in interaction and maintaining awareness of their own internal somatic states so that when their conditioned defensive reactions are activated, they can notice it happening and re-center themselves as needed. Aikido training, in particular, tends to emphasize this goal of combined somatic self-awareness and centeredness in the midst of interaction with others (Leonard, 1999; Walker, 2018, 2019), but is certainly not the only effective approach to cultivating this invaluable combination of somatic skills.

Teaching the basics of this skillset to groups engaged in collective collaborative processes is relatively simple for an experienced and somatically-knowledgeable facilitator. Once participants have learned the basics, those who are acting in facilitator roles may need to occasionally remind them—particularly when conflicts arise in the group’s process—to check in with their own somatic states and re-center. With time and continued practice, self-awareness and re-centering become increasingly habitual and the need for external prompting fades. A group in which a majority of participants are able to take responsibility for keeping themselves centered in the midst of intensive engagement and uncertainty is a group well-equipped to engage boldly and constructively with a diversity of novel perspectives, ideas, and visions of possible futures.

**Somatic practices and ecological consciousness**

A further consideration worth noting is that some of the most pressing crises of the present postnormal era have their roots in attitudes of mind-body dualism to which transformative somatic practices can serve as an antidote. The pervasive attitude toward the human body in the modern industrialized world is dualistic and mechanistic: dominant societal paradigms and languagings encourage people to view themselves as *having* bodies rather than *being* bodies—to experience themselves as minds driving around in vehicles of flesh and bone, rather than as *bodyminds* (Dychtwald, 1977/1986).

As bodies, we are part of local and planetary ecosystems, inseparably interconnected with the rest of the natural world. To be alienated from our own embodiment—to treat our bodies as things separate from ourselves that we possess and must manage and control—perpetuates a corresponding alienation from the bodies of others and from nature as a whole, and a corresponding tendency to treat other living beings and the natural world as things which are separate from ourselves and which can be possessed, dominated, and exploited (Johnson, 2018). This attitude toward the natural world has played a central role in bringing about the present state of global ecological devastation and climate catastrophe.

Somatic practices—particularly somatic practices that involve cultivating a felt sense of mind-body unity and integration, attuning to the body as a source of wisdom, and feeling into the body’s connectedness with the rest of the world—have the potential to transform one’s relationship with one’s bodily self in a way that can also fundamentally transform one’s relationship with the natural world, awakening an embodied ecological consciousness in which the deeply felt sense of being a living body expands into a deeply felt sense of being part of a greater living ecosystem. The integration of somatic practices into the work of collectively envisioning and co-creating better futures thus has the potential not only to enhance creative and collaborative processes but also to increase the likelihood that the futures birthed through those processes will be more ecologically conscious futures which avoid duplicating the attitudes and approaches that produced the current conditions of ecological crisis.
The use of transformative somatic practices in processes

Concluding thoughts

The states of uncertainty evoked by complexity, chaos, contradiction, ambiguity, and difference often cause people to retreat into patterns of defensive rigidity, which can manifest as authoritarianism, aggression, black-and-white thinking, reductionist attitudes, and a stubborn resistance to new ideas or approaches (Montuori, 2011, 2019). Such patterns of rigidity, in their various manifestations, can constitute substantial obstacles to creative collaboration. Fortunately, because these patterns of rigidity are anchored in the body and entwined with ingrained patterns of defensive embodiment, they can be altered and transcended through somatic practices that enable practitioners to transform those aspects of their embodiment. When patterns of rigidity and reactivity can be undone on a somatic level, participants in collective future-shaping processes can be more empowered to embrace uncertainty as a state of creative potential, to attune to the stirrings of their own creativity, and “to address complex, chaotic, and contradictory issues and … dialogue about them in a civil and generative manner with others” (Montuori, 2011, p. 225).

My intent in this chapter has been to provide a few introductory thoughts on how transformative somatic practices might be of use in projects and processes of collaborative future-shaping. My hope is that readers who engage in any manner of constructive future-shaping—from creative collaboration aimed at generating visions of positive futures to grass-roots action aimed at bringing such visions closer to realization—will be inspired to explore further and to experiment with integrating various forms of transformative somatic practice into their own personal and collective processes. I hope, too, that the possibilities I’ve suggested here might serve as a starting point for fruitful collaborations between individuals and communities devoted to transformative somatic practice and individuals and communities devoted to the work of mobilizing the collective imagination toward the co-creation of better futures.

References


