

*Lilly Bechtel's Grad Class
July 2020*

Writing the Body Electric

The poem is wild and sometimes it wants to be tamed a bit or given some rational space to live in. But it always needs to retain that uncontrollable, ungovernable part of itself in order to be fully realized. Even if it's ungovernable self seems like the most rational thing you've ever seen. Or the clearest thing you've ever heard.

-Gabi Calvocoressi

To be wholly embodied means that we are guided by our instincts, while simultaneously having the opportunity to be self-aware of that guidance. We unveil our instincts as they live within us, rather than being alienated from them or forcibly driven by them. (278)

-Peter Lavine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*

In the Indian system of Kundalini yoga, the human body possesses seven energy centers, called chakras. I would like to use that image to suggest that there are poetic chakras too—centers of power to which a particular poet may be attuned, from which she or he may exercise certain poetic powers. (1)

-Tony Hoagland, "Altitudes, a Homemade Taxonomy"

Feelings are more complicated and involve cognitive reactions that combine, or can be combined, with emotions, experience, and intelligence. That is the kind of fear I have in mind—the feeling of fear that involves an intelligent, cognitive reaction. Fear that requires self-consciousness.... At this juncture it might be instructive of me to look up at you and say 'Try putting less emotion, and more feeling into your poems' (107).

-Mary Ruefle, "On Fear" from *Madness, Rack, and Honey*.

Aria Above Seattle

By Sharon Olds

About to land—in the state which used to be
islands, till the ocean floor dove under
the continent, bringing the masses
of rock in, to dock— I remember
that my father is buried here. Not his hair,
twenty years long in the grave, not his body,
distilled by the soil's rotgut,
but his ashes—for the first time in years I am near
my father's bones, ground and rendered,
and I want to go in, where they are, and play among their
ochre spheres, as if I could be in a
stone tumbler with him, or soar,
fellow solar orbiter,
inside an atom of his, neutrons
and protons and electrons of his ungainsayable
existence—there can never be a world, here,
whatever happens, in which my father will have
not existed. I want to say
I loved my father, always, on the
molecular level—I love the word
love, I want to wear it as
the human clothing, though I know I do not
know what it means for someone to love, to
honor, their father and mother. Well,
I will hold to the geological record,
here is where the mantle bent,
here is where the magna came up
through the mile of glacier. And I feel that if I could
hold some of those tiny, round
dice of his calcium and marrow I might be
feeling what any girl on a playground
would feel with her beloved marbles. I know—
wanting the animal evidence
in my palm, as if to own, to dote,
spiritless, on matter... but I have
my hopes of what could come, for me, from
knowing there are forms of love
unknowable to me.

How Trauma Complicates Language

Even years later traumatized people often have enormous difficulty telling other people what has happened to them. Our scans showed that “Broca’s Area” (one of the speech centers of the brain, often affected in stroke patients), went offline whenever a flashback was triggered, while simultaneously showing extreme activation in the limbic area, particularly the amygdala, which we depend on to warn us of incoming danger and active the stress response. The language center of the brain is about as far removed from the center for experiencing one’s self as is geographically possible. (238)

-Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*

Equinox Eve Silent Meeting Group

(From *Ecodeviance*, by CA Conrad)

Over seven billion humans beings live on Earth now. We have displaced or made extinct so many other species of animals, insects, and plants that we have actually lost track! In the age of Emily Dickinson less than a billion humans were alive and wild bison roamed the open plains of the United States. Today there is just a small herd grazing in Yellowstone National Park, and those were put there to be wild on purpose. Same with the wolves, also exterminated from the land, and now reintroduced by way of the park system. These animals are not wild they are museums of fur, hooves, and fangs, part of a well-managed safari rather than a wilderness. We love our museums, they comfort and soothe us when we feel uncertain of the choices we have made.

This (Soma)tic ritual gets us a little closer to how strange and troubled we humans are. I made a flier and hung it all over Philadelphia:

SILENT MEETING GROUP
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20th
5 pm to 6 pm
2nd floor couch area of
THE BOOK TRADER
ONLY RULE: NO TALKING

There are only a few places where strangers can respectfully be together in silence: on an elevator, at the movies, waiting for a bus, waiting to pay at the store. But to come together for the purpose of being quiet, to study one another for a full hour, that is something very different. As much as 80 percent of human communication is nonverbal,

remember this detail. Do not fear looking at the people who show up because we all came to look and be looked at.

Twelve people participated, some of them quite odd looking, and one young Goth teen who glared at us with a sneer. Several were uncomfortable at the ten-minute mark, and they closed their eyes to meditate, or to appear to be meditating, but their eyes were closed for the rest of the hour. As soon as the hour was up I casually walked away **WITHOUT TALKING!** It's important to **GO, GET GOING, GO SOMEWHERE** where you can sit and quietly take account of your silent meeting. Take the quiet with you to write your poem.

Restoration Fiber Song

(From *Ecodeviance* by CA Conrad)

Go back to where you grew up. Don't let anyone know you're coming if there's anyone to let know. I went back, and the most important thing is to not write a single line of memoir, no autobiographical writing whatsoever. **RESISTANCE** is in the making, true resistance of the self. Immerse yourself with all the ways you felt about the world when living back there. Take notes without taking down memories, especially if you were suicidal. Where were you when you first researched the least painful way to go, the way that leaves no mess behind? Where were you when you finally realized it was impossible to not leave a mess behind? Go there and write about anything but this place, and write about what it's like to write about anything but this place.

There is a taste from your childhood. Find it, the taste you know well, a kind of candy or cake from a store out there. Take it to the river. You were loneliest by the river once many years ago. Go be there again. Be alone with your delicious childhood treat and smell it for a very long time. Write and keep writing without acknowledging the cake. Now **REFUSE** to eat it, and throw it in the river!! Write about something you love drowning as you watch it rush away with the current. This feels horrible because it is. Happiness is the place you went to after leaving when you were old enough and brave enough to leave. Go home, to the home where you made yourself happiest, and leave this broken spirit behind, unsated, untasted, and completely unwritten.

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Addressing a client's "body speak" first and then, gradually, enlisting his or her emotion, perception and cognition is not merely valuable, it's essential. Effective treatment is a matter of helping individuals keep the "observing" prefrontal -cortex online as it simultaneously experiences the raw primitive sensations generated in the archaic portions of the brain (the limbic system, hypothalamus and brain stem). With

such a body-based epiphany, the mind's interpretation of what happened and the meaning of it in one's life and who one is shifts profoundly. (75, 76)

-Peter Lavine, In An Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness

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One morning I made a list of the worst problems with the factory, and at the top of that list was "lack of being present." The more I thought about this the more I realized this was what the factory robbed my family of the most, and the thing that frightened me the most, this not being aware of place in the present. That morning I started what I now call (Soma)tics, ritualized structures where being anything but present was next to impossible. These rituals create what I refer to as an "extreme present" where the many facets of what is around me wherever I am can come together through a sharper lens. It has been inspiriting that (Soma)tics reveal the creative viability of everything around me (xi).

-CA Conrad, Ecodeviance

The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor

-Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery

The goal of trauma recovery is to experience any sensation in the body exactly as it is and for what it is without being hijacked into the past.

-Bessel Van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score

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When we think of the word rehabilitation, we all know that in the most common way in which it is used, it means to re-enable, to get ourselves together so that we can do again what for a time we have been unable to do. And that, of course, is an important meaning. But the word also has within it a root that sounds a lot like "habitation" and "habit" and "habitat" from the French "habiter," which means "to inhabit," to dwell inside. So rehabilitation also has this other meaning, which is to learn to live inside again. And that is where the interiority comes in- the interiority of experience, to actually learn to live inside again.

John Kabat-Zinn, in a keynote Given at the Harvard/Spaulding Conferences on Complementary and Alternative Practices in Rehabilitative Medicine, Spring 2004.

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