

EMBODYING POWER AND LOVE:
A Somatic Method of Understanding
Violence and Teaching Peace
by
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What is violence? What is harmony? How can human beings overcome their violent urges and learn to act in harmonious ways? Though such questions are often the subjects for philosophical, psychological or political discussion, I would like to describe a way of examining them somatically.

A somatic approach focuses on the body as both an objective physical process governed by rules of biology, physics, structure and function and as a subjective process of lived consciousness governed by rules of awareness, emotion, and energy flow. Rather than looking at violence and harmony as mental processes, I would like to look at them as somatic processes.

Ideally, somatic investigations are done in actual body exercises. However, since we can't actually practice together, and since there is no space for a full and detailed how-to description of exercises for you to try, the next best thing will be to briefly describe some of the exercises I use to investigate violence and harmony and indicate the kinds of things people typically learn by doing them.

MOVEMENT EXPERIMENTS: Movement experiments are useful ways of making abstract concepts practical and concrete and studying large problems in small laboratory versions. I have designed a number of movement experiments to allow people to study violence in a safe and productive manner.

To study violence, a violent situation is needed, but to make the study safe and useful, the threat or attack must be minimal. I most often have people throw tissues at each other as a minimal, safe attack. Clearly this is a symbolic and non-injurious attack. However, even though it is mostly symbolic, the gestures and movements of the attack feel real and give students an opportunity to examine their reactions to violence. (Since many people have experienced various forms of violence, when I am teaching, I modify the exercise so it is tolerable and safe for each individual, but here a generic description will have to do.)

RESPONSES: The first step in the experiment is to have people observe and report on their reactions to being hit with a tissue. There are a number of common reactions to this action. People being hit often experience surprise, fear, or shock. They may feel invaded and invalidated. Frequently they brace themselves to resist the impact of the tissue and the feelings it produces. Many people get angry and wish to hit back.

The problem with these typical reports is that they are too vague. We may understand the English words, but do we really know what inner experiences people are referring to when they use the words? My experience of ³fear² might include getting stiff, holding my breath, and trying to block the tissue from hitting me -- while your experience of ³fear² might include getting limp, dissociating, turning away and letting the tissue hit you. These would be two very different experiences. The fact that we use the same word just clouds over the lack of real communication.

In order to overcome the vagueness which is common when reports are based on mental language, I teach people to report their experiences in body-based

language instead. A body-based description frames reports of experiences in terms of specific physical sensations occurring in specific spots in the body.

Each person's experience in the tissue throwing experiment will be somewhat different, but speaking generally, people most commonly report that when they are attacked, they restrict their breath, tighten muscles (often in their shoulders, throat, chest and belly), and contract their posture. Some people experience limpness and collapse, which is a more passive form of response.

Once I know what you are doing and where in your body you are doing it, I have a much clearer sense of just what you are feeling. And for that matter, once you can pin down your feelings and express them by way of body sensations and body events, you yourself will have a clearer sense of what you are feeling.

People generally see responses of tensing or going limp as defensive responses, as ways of either bracing themselves to withstand the assault or resigning themselves to endure it. However, when I ask people to do these tense or limp body states as they walk around, they notice that using the body this way results in awkwardness and weak movement. If a real attack were to happen, they could neither run nor fight effectively in a tense or limp state. They notice, in other words, that what they do as defenses makes them undefended.

POWER AND LOVE: In order to help people experience a more effective way of being and moving, I guide them into an integrated mind/body state of power and love. The physical organization which gives rise to the emotional experience of power and to the capacity for powerful action in one's life is rooted in a particular way of using the pelvis and the belly. The experience of love is rooted in a particular way of using the chest.

I often use a particular series of body exercises to help people cultivate this new way of using the body. (There is much more to the exercises I will describe than we have space for here. For much greater detail on these exercises, which are drawn from Being In Movement® training, you could look at my book *Compute in Comfort: Body awareness training: A day-to-day guide to pain-free computing.* Prentice Hall, 1995.) The series of exercises begins with a movement challenge. I have people sit on the edge of a flat chair, and I ask them to resist me when I push on their chests. Usually everyone stiffens to resist and gets pushed over anyway.

To help people find a more powerful way of responding to the push, I begin with relaxation. I have people tense their stomachs and then let them soften, and I ask them to go even further with this softening, letting their bellies soften and melt more and more, releasing all tension. I suggest they release their throats and pelvic floor muscles as well (the genital and anal sphincter muscles). I ask them to notice their breathing and make sure that when they inhale, their bellies swell gently outward. By keeping the whole core of the body soft and breathing fully into the soft core, people experience a spacious freedom.

The next step involves constructing a state of relaxed power. I ask people to let their bodies fall down into a slump and then move up out of the slump into an upright sitting position, and I ask them to figure out what body segments/muscles initiate the movement of rising up out of the slump. Most people believe that rising to an upright sitting position comes from straightening the back or moving the shoulders back. However, the real key is pelvic rotation. When you slump, your pelvis rolls back/down. When you roll your pelvis forward, that moves your torso up to an erect sitting position.

More specifically, to do this movement with maximal efficiency, it must come from the psoas and iliacus muscles (which are deep core muscles in the front of the body) rather than from muscles along the back -- but almost no one initiates the movement from these muscles without specific training. The way to access those muscles is to sit slumped and then gently roll the pelvis forward, moving the pubic symphysis (the bone in the front of the pelvis just above the genitals) forward and down, toward a spot on the floor between the feet. Most people need more than these brief instructions to discover this new way of using the body. However, once people are able to breathe softly and do this new movement, they are able to effortlessly resist being pushed over backwards. They experience a relaxed, gentle, expansive power and stability which is very unlike anything they have ever felt.

I have people to go back to the tissue throwing attack and see how it feels to be attacked while they maintain the somatic state of power. They find that staying rooted in power transforms the experience. Rather than tensing or getting limp when they are attacked, people come to the experience strong and open and stay strong and open through it. They do not get overwhelmed by the attack, but stay rooted in self-awareness and personal strength. The power people feel is constructed physically but is just as much emotional and spiritual as physical.

People find that staying strong and open vastly lessens the physical and emotional discomfort they experience when they are attacked, and they realize that most of the discomfort they experienced they actually created themselves by their tension or limpness and resistance. They realize also that when they were tense or limp, they were shutting down their awareness of both themselves and their partners, stiffening and alienating themselves from themselves and from the attacker.

They realize that in a real conflict shrinking in fear would make them respond weakly and ineffectively to the attack and would actually encourage further aggression. They realize also that hardening themselves with anger would make them respond to the attack in awkward, uncontrolled ways and would encourage escalation of the violence. They realize that both fear and anger reduce the capacity to respond effectively to an attack. Receiving the attacker and the attack in a mindbody state of power, people find that they do not react with fear or anger to being hit and that they can continue to experience a calm connection to the attacker rather than feeling an urge to hurt and destroy him or her.

However, power alone is not complete. In addition to power, the somatic quality of love is also important, and I use another body awareness exercise to help people experience this. I ask people to think of someone they hate and despise and to observe their bodies as they do this. Most people experience that this strong negative feeling creates tension and compression in their breathing and posture. On the other hand, when people think of something that makes their heart smile, they experience a warmth and an opening of the chest and breath. This is the somatic manifestation of sensitivity and love.

Love is actually inseparable from power. The physical softening and opening created by love frees people's bodies to move in a powerful and balanced way. People find that when they construct the inner sense of love, the movements they do are softer, more efficient, more economical and more effective, in other words, more powerful.

A person acting from power without love is strong but so insensitive to the feelings and needs of others that he or she will apply his power in a way that will be destructive -- both to others and to the person acting. That isn't truly power. It is brutality and weakness. A person acting from love without power is sensitive but cannot benefit the world through effective action. Ineffective love isn't really love at all. It is weakness. The fusion of power and love produces an ability to act forcefully and effectively from a place of sensitivity and compassion.

When people integrate power and love, they find that the experience of being hit with the tissue is even easier to handle. They can maintain the feeling of personal strength while at the same time feeling love toward their attacker. They will see the person attacking them as a human being and feel a sense of empathy with and protectiveness toward him or her.

As the last step in this learning process, I have people experiment with ways of lovingly and effectively protecting themselves from the attack. That, of course, is crucial. It would not be satisfactory to be powerful and loving and yet unable to prevent the attack >from succeeding. However, there is no particular solution that is the one and only Right Solution. People experience that once they are not frozen by fear or anger, all kinds of creative solutions open up for them. This is the important point -- that once people can maintain a loving and powerful state of being, rather than responding to violence with more violence, they have the ability to think creatively and come up with options for solving the problem of violence.

HARMONY: Experiencing that it is possible to respond to an attack with loving power gives people an important insight into the roots of violence. With the state of loving power as a comparison, people realize that their initial state of defensiveness was both weak and violent.

Violence is behavior undertaken in a state of fear, anger, numbness and alienation. In that state, there is no connection of the Self to the Other. The Other is dehumanized, and, for that matter, so is the Self. In that state, people will not experience the Other as a conscious, feeling being and will be willing to cause pain and injury to him or her.

Powerlessness is the root cause of violence. People who are powerless will feel afraid, angry, numb, alienated and unsafe, and they will lash out to destroy what they perceive as the external cause of their feelings. Empowerment allows people to maintain a loving connection to themselves and the attacker, and that is the foundation for an attempt to create peace.

Harmony is the somatic opposite of violence. Feelings such as fear, anger and aggression produce constriction and imbalance in breathing, posture and movement. It is impossible to stop a feeling/body state, but it is possible to replace one body action with another. The feeling of powerlessness is an internal body process and as such can be replaced by other more useful body states. Creating the body state of integrated power and compassion is a way of replacing violent feelings with life-affirming feelings.

Study of one's own body and practice of body integrity are the foundation for learning to identify habits of violence and replace them with habits of cooperative problem solving. (There are many verbal methods of conflict resolution, and the verbal and somatic approaches are complementary.) The key to applying this somatic learning in real life is the skill of self-examination. Remembering to observe, interpret and control their physical responses gives

people a powerful tool for choosing harmonious ways of interaction. This somatic approach to harmony is a way of finding a powerful, loving and centered state of being and from that state making decisions as to how to act. It puts the power and the responsibility for harmony in the hands of the individual and challenges him or her to constantly aim at understanding and creating harmony.