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Writing and the Body in Motion: Awakening Voice through Somatic Practice

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Writing and the Body in Motion

*Awakening Voice
through Somatic Practice*

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Preface

I must dance. I must write. On first glance, these disciplines appear unrelated and incompatible. On the surface it would seem that dance relies solely on the body and writing relies exclusively on the mind and never the twain shall meet. Each discipline requires ample time and effort devoted to build skill. Over the years, well intentioned teachers and colleagues advised me to choose one or the other. I tried. Yet as soon as I chose one, the other returned like a scorned lover knocking on the door with hopes of winning back my affections. Once the door opened, I recognized the error in my decision and the relationship resumed.

My love of writing began early. By fourth grade a closet shelved my notebooks filled with my musings, stories, and poems. Any time a teacher assigned a story to write for homework, the next day my classmates urged me to read my completed work aloud. They knew my writing contained vivid detail that rendered my stories believable. Mostly I shared my writing with a select audience, my best friend who lived next door and my cat who listened by sitting upright and then belly flat upon the paper once I set it down.

I had a fertile imagination, fed by reading books and adventuring into thousands of acres of woods behind my house. Pages turned and steps taken onto leaves and broken branches colored my imagination with larvae, moles, arrow heads, Seussian rhymes, and a shy stegosaurus. I could sit for hours watching a spider weave its web and catch an unsuspecting beetle. Day after day I monitored the trickle or rush of a stream by whether I crossed with an easy hop or a catapulted leap and sometimes splash. I spent entire mornings curled under my blanket in bed, unwilling to put my book down or close my journal, doing so only at the beckoning of my mom insisting I attend to household chores.

Hikes into the woods, reading, and writing took me places beyond the familiarity of my house and family. I regularly traveled by both word and foot, my hunger for encounters opening me to witness and participate in the wonders of life. Writing came naturally and continued over the years, my

notebooks a guaranteed stage and consummate audience who encouraged exploration, expression, and my quest to understand the world.

Dance entered my life in college. The course catalog listed a class in creative movement which I signed up for on a whim. I did so in defiance of a doctor who at the start of high school labeled me disabled because of a diagnosis of scoliosis, a curved spine, and discouraged my participation in dance and gym. To avoid the need to wear a brace or be encased by a cast during high school, I had maintained a rigid posture to prevent the worsening of my curvature. Pain, my doctor warned, would be with me for life.

Movement would change everything.

Initially, I entered dance class lethargically, my body stiff, my energy droopy. It took great effort to battle inertia and learned passivity and be able to carry out small exercises like lifting my right leg for ten counts, then my right leg, then twisting or bending. "More," insisted my teacher, "bigger." On some days the thought of packing a bag with dance clothes for the exertion to follow felt overly burdensome. I persisted, though. I persisted because each class noticeably shifted me. I would walk across campus with a new levity and heightened alertness for my studies. I developed a curiosity about my body and its abilities. My invisible brace had unlocked and was slipping off. I felt renewed, as if flinging windows and doors open after a long, oppressive storm.

As my strength and range of motion increased in the dance studio, my experiences in the world shifted. I came to recognize the link between how I moved in the world and how the world moved me. I was learning what it felt like to move with freedom and joy, to feel open and engage actively with each moment. Colors intensified, shapes sharpened, and thoughts ignited. Attending to my body and feeling its many sensations rooted me in the present moment. My newly found creative outlet captured my attention and pointed toward an interdependency between the mind and the body. Significantly, the shackle to lifelong back pain predicted by my doctor proved impermanent, the pain lessening with every dance class. Years later the pain disappeared entirely.

As an English major, I spoke little about my dual involvement with professors who, depending on their field of dance or English, either put down the body or put down books. The Cartesian battle raged with me on the front lines waving the white flag. There was no way I was going to give up either involvement.

Graduate school showed me the first of many ways movement and writing complement each other. I was sitting at the desk in my apartment writing my thesis. Fifty pages into the paper, the writing stopped. I stared at the blank page hoping concentration alone would generate the next paragraph, but no combination of ink and willpower worked. When no words appeared the rest

of afternoon nor the next day, panic set in. Deadlines loomed. There was no time for idling.

On impulse, I got up from my chair. I looked around the room at the design of the window grid and the dried flowers in a vase. As was the custom in dance class, my focus turned to feeling the press of my feet upon the floor. My breath changed, deepened, and a small dance blossomed near the table, then the dresser and the bed as I settled by chance upon a pace and rhythm that contrasted the writing stranglehold. A necessary shift occurred and inspiration for writing returned. I headed back to my chair.

This pattern of alternating writing with movement, attention to thought and words with attention to body and movement, carried me through to the final page and successful completion of my thesis. But something else took hold during that period, curiosity about how these disciplines may be complementary.

Curiosity led to numerous interdisciplinary performances and writing several cross-genre books. Curiosity led to learning about many forms of improvisational dance such as Contact Improvisation, Authentic Movement, and 5 Rhythms; to somatic practices such as Body-Mind Centering, Continuum, Tai Chi, Trager Mentastics and Alexander Technique; to energy healing modalities such as Reiki and Healing Touch. Curiosity led to understanding that movement is helped by writing and writing is helped by movement. Curiosity led to further explore an already formed meditation practice, to embodied states of consciousness, and to the recognition of a life-affirming energy that is personal and universal, fleeting and transformative, and core to the well being. The body contained mystery, but it also supplied gifts.

Findings from these investigations made their way into creating *Writing from the Body*, the class I teach semester-long and as a workshop around the country and abroad. This book draws heavily from that material. It looks at the ways dancing and writing work together with somatic awareness to create a synergy that yields powerful results. This potent combination leads to new material in movement and in writing, to insights, wisdom, consciousness, and healing. It supports finding out who we are and who we can become. It supports living in our body with embodied awareness and knowing. It supports thriving in our personal, subjectively felt body with an awareness of the mutual influence of the collective body.

This book is an invitation to deep bodily listening. It invites you to open your senses, to listen deeply to your body and your words, to come to know your somatic, relational self, and to suspend usual preconceptions and expectations. It invites you to journey to follow the motion, meaning, and sinews of your own curiosity.