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Turning *Toward* Feeling

Elizabeth McGrew

Five years ago, upon completing a 200-hour, 30-day intensive yoga teacher-training course, we took this group photo. Painted on the wall behind us are the words, “Feel pain? Change positions.” At that time in my life, my understanding of this assertion was shallow: if it feels as though something is ripping, pulling, or tearing, move out of the yoga pose. But as for other physical and emotional pain, I had been taught to sit with it and accept it, and by doing so I would demonstrate strength and continue to grow stronger. Turning away from pain seemed cowardly. It wasn’t until this program that I learned that pain is one of many expressions of feeling that carries inherent wisdom, and learning to feel fully and to respond appropriately is the essence of sustainability.

As part of my graduate assistantship, I spent the first and third weekends at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest as an Environmental Educational Intern. While participating in their Naturalist-in-Training program, I met Elizabeth, a fifty-two year old woman who homeschooled two boys in an intentional community in New Hampshire. Their motto was, “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” One day, she said to me, “In everything we do, we should ask ourselves, ‘how does it feel?’ Whether sitting in a chair or telling the truth, we should reflect on how it feels. I had been much more accustomed to friends, co-workers, and family members asking, “What do you *think* about such-and-such?” Until that moment, it hadn’t occurred to me how infrequently we ask others, and ourselves, “How does it *feel*?”

“No pain, no gain,” coaches roar. Kelly Clarkson’s voice sings through the radio, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” like a fight song cheering us up the ladder to higher status

and pay. The military uses the following statement as recruitment propaganda: Pain is weakness leaving the body. And our public education system encourages students to learn the same material in the similar ways, which often means focusing on improving on students' weaknesses as opposed to advancing their strengths. This leads to normalizing a frustrating and unpleasant learning experience that we teach students to accept.

Frustration and pain are only two of many feelings that we tolerate, normalize, rationalize, suppress, ignore, and sometimes glorify. In *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett bring attention to the relationship of income inequality as host to many endemic social problems including incarceration, obesity, substance abuse, and physical and mental health. Wilkinson and Pickett present Jean Twenge's research, which indicates that "we really are much more anxious than we used to be" (30). Increased anxiety, in degree and occurrence, is associated with income inequality because of what Sally Dickerson and Margaret Kameny call, "social evaluative threat" (37). Where income inequality is high, it is more likely that we will feel inadequate in comparison to others, and anxiety rises as we fear that others perceive us as inadequate. Such anxiety is another feeling we have grown accustomed to in unhealthy ways, as are stress and guilt. What is the alternative? We could feel these feelings fully, seek to understand them, and change positions.

In "Sexualized Aliens and the Racialized State," Siobhan Somerville addresses something similar to social evaluative threat and offers a healthy solution. Whereas Wilkinson and Pickett explore the devastation of income inequality, Somerville questions the race to equality. From Wilkinson and Pickett's perspective, it would seem that moving closer to marriage equality would ease social evaluative threat and therefore, ease anxiety. But Somerville points out that by fighting for marriage equality and for more inclusive immigration law, we are

only allowing the state to reproduce standards such normative sexuality through marriage. Somerville presents an alternative that suggests we deconstruct the very standards that perpetuate feelings of anxiety and inadequacy. To do this, we must first feel the anxiety and inadequacy that normalizing standards provoke.

Feeling fully is the first step. As Tom Wessels illustrates in *The Myth of Progress* that what is true for the individual is true for whole systems, we can explore a similar relationship between the physical and emotional. Just as we might move toward warmth or away from danger, we should also move toward and away from emotional feelings. This requires that we feel fully, so as to know whether we should move toward or away from those feelings. Wessels writes about how the majority of species steer clear of physical conflict, as it is an inefficient use of energy and generally results in net loss for most. Similarly, emotional conflict results in a net loss in the form of stress, anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, despondence, and more. These forms of emotional conflict are unlike physical conflict, which can arise and dissipate quickly. Emotional conflict can build over time and linger indefinitely, with seemingly subtle yet equally destructive effects. Feeling emotions fully allows one to determine whether they lead to greater peace or discord within, creating possibilities of moving toward greater peace. Peace is honoring those values that you determine to be more important than others.

Before I entered this program, Dr. Olmsted recommended that I take her class “Place and the Problem of Healing” to better determine whether the Master’s program would be a good fit. Derek Jenson’s *A Language Older than Words* punted me out of my slumber. Gone were the days that I could say I didn’t know any better, and with that knowing comes feeling. This program demands that we look closely at issues as horrendous as scenes described in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, and that we sit with the feelings that they provoke: abandonment,

helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, sorrow, shame, failure. McCarthy writes, “Huddled against the back wall were naked people ... on the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt ... help us, they whispered. Please help us” (110). But feelings of fear flood over the father, and he hurries himself and the boy out of the cellar. In contrast, the boy is consumed with compassion and sympathy; he wants to answer their pleas for help and feels burdened by guilt and shame for not doing so. To what can we attribute their different responses? The gap between their ages and their relative exposure to societal influences may be the answer.

How we respond to physical and emotional feeling evolves from infancy to adulthood. As our largest organ, skin senses temperature, light, and pressure. Newborn infants communicate first through this medium, as skin-to-skin contact encourages hormone and milk production. As we grow a few years older and become more independent, we feel hungry, thirsty, or tired, and we respond to those feelings; we eat when we're hungry, sleep when we're tired, and isolate ourselves when we're over-stimulated. In childhood, our sense of self and other are relatively fluid. Children are much more sensitive to other's pain, as though they cannot differentiate between another's pain and their own. My daughter's response to learning about Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations was uncontrollable sobbing. But as we grow even older, more independent, and socialized, our value of knowledge and reason begins to eclipse our value and awareness of what we feel, and we begin to eat at socially designated mealtimes instead of when we're hungry, our sleeping hours shift to meet working and school demands, and we rationalize feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness in the interest of efficiency, comfort, or convenience. Furthermore, in adulthood we perceive identities of self and other rigidly, and doing so can dispel feelings such as compassion and empathy.

The self's relationship to other and its connection to compassion and empathy became more clear to me while reading *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos Theory* by John Briggs and David Peat. Chaos theory provokes a new "sense of the world" characterized by interconnectedness, letting go, and humility, in that chaos is "as much about what we *can't* know as it is about certainty and fact" (7). Chaos theory presents an alternative to control and a new understanding of order that includes disorder.

I first grasped this concept while creating my project titled, "Creative Participation in Chaos." I realized that my project started long before I began constructing it; the logs with which I was working had first been trees for over 30 years, and as trees, they were hundreds of rainfalls, thousands of days of sunlight, and millions of soil microbes and fungi. The limestone rock had once been millions of living sea creatures! Just as the project began long before I arrived, the project would continue long after I "finished." When I ceased to participate creatively with these elements, they and I would continue participating creatively with others. For the first time, I saw myself simultaneously as both creator and creative participator; the project was both complete and incomplete. Although I arrived at this understanding by way of reading and thinking, it felt like an inherent but estranged wisdom. How had I forgotten or ignored this interconnectedness and interdependence? How was my knowledge and understanding of myself not more connected with others?

Realizing interconnectedness and interdependence provoked a feeling of equality. Whether sunlight, a loyal and caring friend, an absent mother, or unknown species, I was humbled to value others equally and with reverence, compassion, and gratitude in that we were all participating creatively with one another. In my final project for *Utopias, Dystopias, and Intentional Communities*, I had carefully considered what to place in the center of my intentional

community. What would the community value so much that it placed it at the center of the community? Briggs and Peat helped me decide that what was already there—whether a rotting log or a patch of dandelions—in the center of the community was just as valuable as any deliberate human-created installation, such as a statue, building, or garden, might be.

Most cities today have an economic or political center, pulsing with either business development or judicial affairs, and sometimes both. This illustrates our focus on what we know and have, and how we reason and think. Since the onset of the Scientific Revolution over 200 years ago, an increasing reliance on thinking, reasoning, and knowing has displaced the wisdom in feeling we once respected. One of the costs of civilization is that we have forgotten “primitive” ways of being connected and feeling and now value only “civilized” ways of innovation and having.

Long ago when communities were smaller and more intimate, before birth control pills and other endocrine disruptors, all women were in harmony with the moon’s cycle. But the natural feelings of menstruation such as mood swings, food cravings, and low-energy are now diagnosed as a syndrome, P.M.S. The wisdom in these feelings tells us to distance ourselves from potential harm, ensure adequate energy and blood pressure in preparation for blood loss, and to slow down and allow for restoration and regeneration. However, the medical professionals and society tell us to take Midol for symptoms and to keep pace.

Keeping pace is linear; it is perseverance, determination, and hard work. It is meeting a goal, completing a task, moving up. Society values all of these characteristics. But this plowing through feeling in pursuit of knowledge, status, and material possessions is a linear way of being, similar to the linear systems that Wessels describes. Linear systems are predictable, contained, and controllable. They do not take into account outside influences or other factors, but rather

they operate as though they exist independently. Rene Descartes was most notably responsible for this paradigmatic shift in Western science, which moved away from Aristotle's focus on whole systems and toward understanding, analyzing, and ultimately, controlling parts of whole systems (18). In contrast to linear systems, complex systems interact with one another, responding and changing, and this requires feeling. Complex systems sense changes in one another and respond. We see evidence of this with climate change. The unprecedented rate at which we burn fossil fuels has led to a significant increase in the concentration of carbon in the atmosphere. In response, the ocean absorbs more carbon, which leads to ocean acidification.

Wessels emphasizes that all socioeconomic systems are also complex systems, adhering to the same principles that govern other complex systems: bifurcation, self-organization, nestedness, and entropy. However, we have forgotten this truth, and we believe ourselves to be linear systems, independent and unaffected, amongst other controllable and predictable linear systems. Turning toward feeling can bring us back to an awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence that characterizes all complex systems.

Learning to feel requires that we unlearn what society perpetually chants. Hurry. Reason. Consume. Progress. To express emotional feelings or to be sensitive to pain is often gendered with negative implications, such as "Don't be a girl about it." These statements drive home the message that it is bad to be a girl, and that it is bad to have feelings. Furthermore, "touchy-feely" is negatively associated with both physical and emotional feelings. Public-school policy discourages teachers from touching our children or showing them physical affection. My grandmother has never had a massage and avoids pedicures because she is uncomfortable with others touching her. As a yoga instructor, I struggle with insecurities when touching students during class although I am well aware of the benefits of healthy touch. So familiar I am with

identifying and respecting someone's personal space, personal property, what's mine and what's yours. With such clear and definitive boundaries of what is mine and what is yours, what space do we share? Where do we connect?

Peruvians still practice the art of connection. Affection and touch physically connect them to one another, as fathers hold their adolescent sons' hands in the street, and great granddaughters drape themselves over their grandmother like a protective shawl. I wonder if this constant physical connection with each other is indicative of a stronger sense of interconnectedness and interdependence with *all* others, and if their emotional feelings are welcome and accepted to the same degree as their physical feelings.

In contrast to the physical connectedness that Peruvians displayed, my grandparents took pride in my going to college "out of state," as though it demonstrated independence and confidence that reflected positively on them. In fact, attending college "in state" was never even discussed. Similarly, I hear parents boast about their grown children who have moved away as though geographical distance somehow qualified their success. Conversely, moving back home almost always implies failure to thrive in another environment, and so shame and consolation guard the gates of our hometown—of place and of relationships of the past.

In "Thoughts in the Presence of Fear," Wendell Berry criticizes our quickness to collectively abandon what we previously valued. "This of course implied at every point a hatred of the past, of all things inherited and free. All things superseded in our progress of innovations, whatever their value might have been, were discounted as of no value at all" (1). We used to send children outside to play, and now we turn on the T.V. We used to care for each other—our families, friends, and neighbors— and now it is common to have over 400 "friends," not know our neighbors, and to pay others to care for our children and aging parents. *I* pay others to care

for my children. *I* am not present for my aging grandparents in need of a caregiver. Not caring for my own children feels like I am displacing responsibility, not giving or loving as much as a could. Not caring for my grandparents feels as though I am failing to reciprocate the selflessness and love that they so generously gave to me. Daily, I recognize these feelings, and I feel pain. But I don't change positions. Instead, I turn away from those feelings. Turning away from feelings is quite different from changing positions. Turning away ignores the wisdom in feelings; it chooses to hear reason. It politely excuses you from a truthful conversation. Changing positions requires that we make changes in response to feelings. My youngest son reaches for me, as he cries, "I want to go with you, Mommy." I have become the father in *The Road* that runs away from the helpless, pleading, begging victims. But really, I'm still the father's son. We all are. I feel my own son's devastation and rejection, abandonment and distrust as I walk back to my car with tear-clouded vision, calling over my shoulder, "I love you. You're going to have a great day!" Feeling this pain fully, I begin to think of ways to make spending the coming year with him possible. I daydream about how I could care for my grandparents. Family connections should not be so easily abandoned, and in these thoughts of investing myself in closer connectedness, I find peace.

Berry says that we must first be peaceable individuals before we can build the peaceable economy we so desperately need. To achieve both, Berry writes, "What leads to peace ... is not passivity, but an alert, informed, practiced, and active state of being" (2). Berry maintains that we must constantly practice self-criticism and self-correction, "We must recognize our mistakes" (2). All of these—to be alert, to be active, to recognize our mistakes, to self-criticize, to self-correct—require that we feel fully. Only then can we determine whether they encourage peace or discord, and then we can self-correct to align with a peaceable way of being.

However, society conditions us to rationalize our feelings, which encourages trust of reason *over* trust of feeling, as opposed to harmonizing the two. Immanuel Kant emphasizes reason over feeling in his claim that respect is *the* superior motive over sentiments such as love, sympathy, and solidarity because reason is rational, whereas the other three are feelings, which “draw us closer to some people than to others” (Sandel, 2010). Kant’s adherence to this reasoning also undermines connectedness to one another, as though being emotionally close and connected to another influences one’s judgment negatively. This program has led me to a quite different conclusion: with greater understanding and connectedness to each other and to our feelings, our judgment, ability, and stamina to address tough issues improve.

In *This Changes Everything*, Naomi Klein provides a blistering critique of corporate corruption, but in her closing section, she shares her experience with what it is to feel fully. Her experience with infertility and her journey to fertility serves as a testament to feeling and to responding appropriately. She learns that carrying a child is one of the most physically demanding tasks that one’s body can take on, so any factor that might compromise the body’s ability to successfully develop, carry, and raise healthy offspring is likely to disallow conception.

Klein’s personal narrative on infertility is nested within a larger focus on extractivism, “of taking without caretaking, of treating land and people as resources to deplete rather than as complex entities with rights to a dignified existence based on renewal and regeneration” (447). Although Klein writes primarily about extracting fossil fuels and other resources from the earth to meet our growing demands with little regard for balance, restoration, or consequences, this same mindset applies to humans, as individuals.

In *The Myth of Progress*, Tom Wessels explains that what is true for even the smallest organism is also true for complex systems, and vice versa. Applying this principle to Klein’s

narrative of infertility, we can see that citizens in wealthy countries like the US employ the same extractivist mindset to ourselves as individuals, as we are as a species to the Earth.

Klein's holistic doctor suggested she identify certain factors that might cause her stress and to work toward removing those from her life. Stress and busyness are forms of extractivism out of balance with a restorative and regenerative way of being. Klein writes, "Living nonextractively does not mean that extraction does not happen: all living things must take from nature in order to survive" (447). However, we must acknowledge what we take—from ourselves and from others—and balance that extraction with self-care and care for others. We can feel this giving and taking. When imbalanced, we are unfulfilled, frazzled, frantic, and not present; however, when what we give is balanced with what we take or receive, we feel connected and participatory, grounded, and calm. In *Research Methods for Community Change*, Randy Stoeker writes about the Goose Approach to research in this way: "All I knew is that it felt better. I felt as though I was giving rather than just taking. And I no longer felt like an outsider" (29).

When we feel the effects of stress, we can then work toward removing them from our lives and finding different ways of being. After Klein removed stress factors from her life and established a more balanced and aware practice in self-care, her body conceived, carried, and delivered a healthy child.

During my first semester in this program, we read Michael Sandel's *Justice*, throughout which we examined various approaches to ethics. Kant observes, "everything in nature works in accordance to laws" (117). And although Kant conceives of the categorical imperative as the law of morality, the laws of nature that come to my mind are Chaos Theory and the Second Law of Thermodynamics. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, anti-entropic states are

those that require energy input to maintain order. Think about two DNA strands. Their coiling—maintaining order—requires energy in the form of self-criticism and self-correction, which are responses to feeling. When I fail to put energy into the system, if I ignore my feelings and refuse to self-correct, those strands uncoil and energy dissipates.

The SRSC has provided a non-traditional education that is less focused on accumulating information, knowledge, or skills, and more intentional about creatively guiding us toward greater humanness. Part of that is finding our place at the table where we are all interconnected and interdependent. Upon sitting down and settling into our chair, we can peacefully answer the question, “How does it feel?”

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