

Somatics, Movement and Gestalt

What is Somatics

Soma is an ancient Greek word meaning body. Somatics is a practice in, with, and through the body. Somatics looks at the individual as one functioning unit which includes the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual bodies and how they impact and influence each other. The Soma, BodyMind, is the vehicle through which all our experience filters and flows. Somatics has become a broad field of work that includes this entire range of experience.

Being aware of the body in movement, in action, is the Somatic practice. There is not one instant, in one's living body, where there is no movement. Moshe Feldenkrais said the obvious, and I quote, "Movement is life; without movement life is unthinkable." Somatics is about cultivating and deepening the awareness of that life force we call movement.

Movement is what we do and in movement we apply the practices of awareness, of mindfulness. Early practices of awareness in action originated in Asia. These original practices were anchored in paying attention and learning through movement. Yoga, Tai Qi, Qi Gong, Aikido and other more mindful Martial Art Practices, plus, for example, practices of the tea ceremony (Chado) and flower arranging (Ikebana) were all movement-based disciplines. They were meditations in action, in movement. The ultimate intention of these practices was to extend the awareness beyond the dojo, studio or mat and to bring more consciousness and awareness into our everyday lives. To our thoughts, words, actions, relationship to others, and our environment.

In developing the Somatic presence practice is the key. Through repetition, being more aware and mindful, the practice immerses into one's being, one becomes the practice. To quote the famous modern dancer Merce Cunningham "we become good at what we practice." I

would add to that: how we practice is also an important part of the equation. What I practice and how I practice supports my “waking up.” The practice becomes me and I become the practice leading to my embodiment.

History of Somatic's in the West

Thomas Hanna, a student of Moshe Feldenkrais, was the first to call conscious movement based on first person experience, Somatics. Consequently, developing western systems of consciousness, such as body work and breathing practices, martial arts, Yoga and the new possibilities in dance (dance that moved away from the traditional technique based models and instead focused on personal expression, therapeutic applications, and improvisation.) were all part of the pool of Somatic disciplines that evolved into being.

Some of the early pioneers of Somatics included Moshe Feldenkrais, Elsa Gindler, Gerda Alexander, Frederick Matthias Alexander, Margaret H'Doubler, Mabel Elsworth Todd, Ida Rolf, Rudolf von Laban,, Mary Wigman, Anna Halprin, Irmgard Bartenieff, Lulu Sweigard, Charlotte Selver, Andre Bernard, Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen, and the list goes on and on.

Presently Somatics is used in referring to various movement practices, healing modalities, therapies, and education. Additionally it is the basis of the “mindfulness” movement. Many of these new “Somatic disciplines” do not work inside the movement model. My reference, when I use the word Somatics is movement.

Why Movement?

We live in and through movement. The Body/Mind/Spirit lives, expresses, and creates through movement. Our movement plays a huge part in our evolution and development. It is an essential element in our being human. When our movement stops; there is no life.

Being attentive to our movement, to the adjustments we are making

continuously on subtle and not so subtle levels brings awareness. Awareness to the movement of our thoughts, our emotions, and our feelings. This facilitates awareness to what we are doing and the possibility to make more conscious choices. It is the door, the metaphor, through which we study the self in action. It is a mirror to our unfoldment as human beings.

The study of Somatic's holds an important potential to be a benefit and resource in a therapeutic practice. The physical, mental, emotional and spiritual parts of being human are constantly interacting with, and influencing each other. They all present this door into our experience and are all part of the Gestalt.

Anna Halprin

In the early 1970's I first met and worked with Anna Halprin and the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop. Ms Halprin is recognized as the face and soul of Post Modern Dance. She believed and taught that life influences art and that art, potentially, can influence how we live our life. That we have the possibility to live our lives as a work of art. She calls this the Life/Art Process.

Anna is now 98 years old. She has touched thousands of lives. Her work has influenced dance, Somatics, the environmental movement, dance in nature, social action, architecture, healing, death and dying, HIV awareness, trance, education, aging, therapy, and creativity. She is still dancing, teaching and spreading her message.

I worked along side Anna for 43 years. I have been touched deeply and influenced immensely by her work and her person. Recently, she shared with me some of her memories of Fritz Perls, the Father of Gestalt Therapy, when first he came to America. And so the story goes!

Anna and Fritz...A Strange Coupling of a Dancer and Gestalt Therapist

Fritz Perls and Anna first met at a conference in the United States. Fritz was not yet a well known name in Psychology. Anna discovered that Perls was interested in the BauHaus, a German art school that combined crafts, design, fine arts, and was most well known for its approach to design and architecture.

Anna's husband, Lawrence Halprin, who later became the foremost landscape architect in the world, was a student of the BauHaus. Anna invited Fritz to her house so the two could meet. Anna, Lawrence and Fritz shared a lot of common interests and thus their bond was formed.

Because Anna was always an innovator and experimenter in the arts, she invited Mr Perls to work with her dance company. How Mr. Perls made his therapeutic approach accessible to each person's life situations intrigued Anna. In turn Mr Perls invited Anna to visit Esalen Institute in Big Sur where Fritz was staying and working. She began to work with his clients. Through these seemingly different approaches, he brought psychological therapy and she brought movement, they built a relationship of sharing and blending their work.

At that time there was a social, cultural, artistic, and therapeutic evolution, and revolution, taking place in the west. San Francisco and the Bay Area were the center of this "dawning of the new age." Everything was being questioned, turned upside down and redefined. This blending of the therapeutic process into dance was one of these questions. It was innovative and very controversial. Many dancers questioned this new idea and wanted to shove it into the "dance therapy" box. But Anna never claimed to be a therapist, she always said she was a dancer and that the emotional body was part of the dance.

Movement and Emotions

I grew up playing sports. Basketball was the vehicle that allowed me the possibility to go to a University. Through sports I gained self confidence and experienced positive results of my actions both individually, and as part of a team. A year after leaving school, at 23 years old, I began practicing Yoga and then dance. Two years later I began my study of the Martial Arts.

In these movement practices emotions were not part of the work. If they came up I had to ignore them, pretend they weren't there, or "stuff them!" Meeting Anna and her work changed that, and in so doing changed my life. She introduced me to the possibility that my emotional body was part of the human condition and an essential part of the creative and artistic process as well. This understanding was a fundamental piece of my development as a human being, a teacher and an artist!

How I came to teach Somatics at the IGW...39 years later

In 1979 I was leading a workshop at Zist in Bayern and much to my good fortune Victor Chu was participating. Victor, one of the founders of the IGW liked my work, and through him, the following year I was invited to teach at the IGW.

As a movement teacher my work has changed and evolved over the years. One constant I ride is that the emotional body is 1) an aspect of the human condition and 2) an important part of our expression and creativity.

I have witnessed countless people using movement, dance, and the arts to express their emotional life. How working somatically and creatively is a step in changing one's perspective, and relationship, to the emotional body. How it is a movement in letting go, in transforming the emotion into a creative resource. And how it is a step in the healing process. It may not be psychotherapy, but it is therapeutic!

Over the years in my own study and teaching I began to work with the metaphor of the lotus flower. Many say that the lotus is the most beautiful flower and that it grows from the most terrible human dung. The idea of transforming our unwanted thoughts, actions, and emotions into flowers: dances, poems, songs or paintings intrigues and motivates me. The idea of recycling my emotional garbage and turning it into something that serves me is a gift not only to myself, but potentially, others as well. Once I begin to change my relationship to my “stuff” it begins to change the impact it has on me. It is a big step in my healing.

For me that is that is an important aspect and potential of Somatics: accepting the good and the bad, all of the parts, and transforming them into a garden of Flowers.

What if...

Often i find that I am stuck in my narrative about myself. As soon as my rib cage tenses I interpret the feeling to the story I tell myself about it...that I am inadequate. My story that I am not good enough, that I am not accepted for who I am. This is the story I have developed and told myself over much of my lifetime.

It is recognized that most of what we know is not available to the conscious mind at any given moment. In fact, some say it is as high as 95% of what we know is below consciousness. I can not think about breathing for months and it goes on, my body knows how to breathe. My blood circulates, hormones communicating with other hormones, the nervous system in unimaginable numbers of networks sharing information. It is mind boggling!

This stimulates my curiosity. I become excited to explore other possibilities and narratives about my issues with inadequacy! That maybe the story I continue to tell myself may have some bylines, or sub plots, not available to my conscious mind. Movement can be an important resource to open my body and bring to the surface some of these stories below consciousness.

Below is some simple resources, Somatic movements, to explore, and possibility, expand my story about me and my inadequacies.

*what if I breath in and open and expand my chest and when breathing out I close it?

*what if I continue with this exploration staying open or closed for a few seconds longer?

*what if I breath a little faster or slower?

*what if I try working with these breathing explorations in standing, sitting, and lying on the ground?

*what if I listen to my body mind and the feelings in my rib cage and move how these sensations want me to move and not how my thinking mind wants me to move?

My thinking and everyday mind can keep me stuck in “what I know.” Our history lives in the body, in the muscles, tissue, organs etc. Moving this aspect of my history may take me beyond what I think I know, into places I don’t know. Perhaps my BodyMind knows something my thinking mind doesn’t.”

Since movement is such essential and ever-present reality in our lives it becomes a valuable resource and tool in our unfolding and healing. Movement has been accepted as medicine for the body for a long time. Now it is clear that movement is good medicine for the mind, emotions and spirit as well.

There is a very strong possibility that some information that perhaps I have not realized can come to the surface. That feelings and stories I was not aware of will come up. Perhaps it changes my narrative about the situation and I can approach my story about my feelings of inadequacy in a new way. That I can gain new information that can help me in my acceptance and healing process. Perhaps my BodyMind knows something my thinking mind is not aware of, perhaps.

I feel that working with people on any level it is wise to approach the situation with as many possibilities as I can manage. Each possibility gives me another perspective on the issue.

Once the alignment is established it can be much more fluid in moving forward.

Since movement is such essential and ever-present reality in our lives it becomes a valuable resource and tool in working with others, and ourselves, to become more fully who and how we want to be in this life. I always come back to this point: Movement is Life.

They were practices of being more conscious of our own actions and thoughts, in our relationships to others, and our immediate environments. Movement is what we do. Life exists in movement. I can apply all the teachings of awareness and mindfulness in action through my movement practices.

about my emotional body and my tight ribcage. I also know that movement, in some form, is always present and so what if I explore consciously moving my rib cage. What if i open my chest, breath in and when breathing out close it. What if I continue with this exploration staying in open or close for a longer time, move faster or slower, try it standing, sitting, lying and moving between these three positions.

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Our history lives in the body, in the muscles, tissue, organs etc. When I begin to activate that history through movement, not by what I think or believe based on the stories I have created over the years about myself, but to begin to touch on the information that has been sitting below my consciousness mind. This potentially can rise up and give me a whole

other story,

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***Many years ago when I first began teaching in Europe I taught a group of students of Milton Erickson in a small institute in Dusseldorf. They exposed me to his teachings through videos and books. I was very impressed and taken with his flexibility in his work. One thing that really stuck with me was his ability, in working with extremely difficult clients, to adjust to the client and not expect the client to immediately adjust to him. Once some synchronism, or entrainment happened, it became a much smoother process in these difficult situations.

Later in doing some research on Neural Linguistic Programming (NLP) I read that if you have only one way to work with a client or student, and the client/student doesn't align with that way, then you both are stuck and the common refrain in this situation "the client/student isn't ready to change." In reality it is the therapist/teacher who isn't able to change. If you have at least three options to work with someone, then in the beginning you have the flexibility to adjust to the client/student needs, and not always expect them to adjust to you . Once the alignment is established it can be much more fluid in moving forward.

Since movement is such essential and ever-present reality in our lives it becomes a valuable resource and tool in working with others, and ourselves, to become more fully who and how we want to be in this life.

Gestalt and Somatics

In Somatics the use of the word body is referring to all aspects of the individual. The heart, brain, nervous system, blood circulating, breathing, hormonal activity, thoughts, emotions, sensations and on and on. It implies all of our experiences, it implies a Gestalt. It is one and the sum of all its parts.

When we study and engage in Somatic practices it is possible to

isolate and separate out different parts to study and better understand the whole. We can isolate and study the breath, or the movement and kinesthetic of the shoulders, spine or pelvis. We can explore balance, or how we get out of a chair or off the floor. We can look at how we shift weight when we walk, or move our head when we look around the room. We can feel our sadness, anger or joy in the body and how that shapes and moves us. We can isolate to focus on an aspect of our experience and then integrate that experience and information back into the whole; to the body, mind, spirit, intellect, thoughts, emotions, words and actions. To the complete human experience.

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I had friends at the time who were working holistically and Gestalt Therapy, hands on body work, yoga and Aikido were part of their methodology. I had much respect for them and their work. They too were a source of support and inspiration.

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I have always worked to give students at the IGW a sense of how movement could be applied in a therapeutic situation. Both directly and indirectly. As I said I am not a therapist but I have worked with people and all their issues for almost 50 years.

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There is never a time in a living body where there is no movement. Without the experience of the body we do not have an experience of consciousness and all that implies. The breathe is flowing in and out, the heart is beating, blood circulating and nerve cells communicating with thousand, and in some cases millions, of other cells. Moshe Feldenkrais said the obvious when he said, and I quote, "*Movement is life; without movement life is unthinkable.*" Being aware and awake in the body in action, in movement, is the Somatic practice.

The original practices of being aware of our actions were anchored in movement and originated in Asia. Yoga, Tai Qi and Qi Gong, Aikido and some of the more mindful Martial Art Practices. These are all movement based studies and disciplines. They were practiced as meditations in movement. The practice extended beyond the dojo, studio or mat. They were practices of being more conscious of our own actions and thoughts, in our relationships to others, and our immediate environments. Movement is what we do. Life exists in movement. I can apply all the teachings of awareness and mindfulness in action through my movement practices.

Movement is what we do. Life exists in movement, and in movement we apply the teaching ideas of awareness, of mindfulness. Early practices of awareness in action originated in Asia. These original practices were anchored in paying attention and learning through movement. Yoga, Tai Qi and Qi Gong, Aikido and other more mindful Martial Art Practices were all movement-based disciplines. They were meditations in action, in movement. The practice extended beyond the dojo, studio or mat and intended to bring more consciousness and awareness to our thoughts, words, actions and relationship to others and our environment.

pain and suffering, as well as their joy, confusion, and how that becomes a step in changing their perspective and relationship to the emotion. It is a movement in letting go, in transforming the emotion into a creative resource. it is a step in healing. It may not be

psychotherapy, but it is therapeutic!

I have seen and experienced positive and meaningful therapy by people lying on their backs relaxing, paying attention to their breath and the movement it creates.

I have witnessed countless people using dance and the arts to express their emotional pain and suffering and how that becomes a step in changing their perspective and relationship to the emotion. It is a movement in letting go, in transforming the emotion into a creative resource. it is a step in healing. It may not be psychotherapy, but it is therapeutic.