

Dancing at the Borders of Human Education:**The Body Prayer of Matthew Fox****by Neil Douglas-Klotz**

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The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart,
 the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore
 and dark color'd sea rocks, and of hay in the barn,
The sound of my belch'd words loos'd to the eddies of the wind..
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed
 and meeting the sun.

--Walt Whitman, from "Song of Myself" (p. 25, 1891)

I met Matthew Fox in 1986, and, as a Sufi saying goes "Heart spoke to heart, and soul to soul." While the Sufis don't really have a doctrine of reincarnation, they explain the feeling by saying that we have all brought with us gifts from another realm. In some cases, we recognize the gifts of another as belonging to the same family of souls as our own. It was with this original sense of recognition—knowing oneself and another again—that I spent ten years on the staff of the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality (ICCS).

I had experienced a variegated education and upbringing. My father was one of the first chiropractors in Illinois, USA, and both he and my mother deeply

engaged themselves in both holistic health and ecological issues. While my brothers and I were outwardly raised as Protestant Christians, my parents taught us only spirituality (not religion) at home and clandestinely attended Edgar Cayce study groups at night. Because my father's occupation was already seen as "alternative" (and in the 1950's this word was equivalent with "strange" in Illinois), he couldn't be seen as too different from his surroundings and still win his patients' trust. Like all children, I supposed that everyone was raised with a family "culture" like mine, where respect for the body, ecology and one's own spiritual experiences was taken for granted. Later I found out differently. By the time I met Matthew, my education had included that of a journalist writing about anti-war and environmental issues, the native Middle Eastern spiritual path of Sufism and a graduate degree in somatic (body-based) psychology and education.

When I met Matthew and was invited to teach ICCS, I felt that I had found a place where both spirituality and the body had a place. In my somatic graduate program and somatic therapy groups, I had found that I had to suppress my spiritual background: secular humanism was the default orthodoxy for all research in this area in the 1980's (fortunately, this has changed a bit now). At the same time, I had found that my usual spiritual circles were not interested in the body: flight from bodily perception and sensation seemed to dominate here. And in more politically active circles, neither the body nor spirituality was allowed in the door. I remember my excitement in reading the following passages from an early article by Matthew entitled "The Case for Extrovert Meditation":

Extrovert meditation does not cut one off from one's senses as introvert meditation does. Rather, it engages the senses in a total and disciplined effort and from this engagement an altered state of consciousness results.... It is body awareness that most often results in sensitivity to the body politic. Never were prophets out of touch with their own bodies....

The prophet speaks not from inner peace and calmness (the introvert way) but "charged with agitation, anguish and a spirit of non acceptance....

Thus, the prophet's task, like meditation's task, is to wake people up-- not to inner peace but to social injustice; not to perfect repose with the One but to relieving the burdens of others, so that oneness among people, that is, love and justice, might begin to happen....

By sensitizing perception, we train for compassion and prophecy (1978, pp. 68-71).

The big question remained: how do we sensitize perception and at the same time enlarge the feeling of the heart—the capacity for compassion and prophecy? Matthew had coined the term “body prayer” in one of his books. Yet if one mentally choreographed prayerful movements (as many people have tried to do) the head was really moving the body as though it were a machine or a separate object. This did not lead to respecting the wisdom of the body itself. In fact, much somatic theory maintained that even mentioning “body” as separate from the other aspects of one’s integrated being reinforced the split that many people feel between mind, body, emotions and spirit.

From my study of Middle Eastern mysticism (and especially the Aramaic version of Jesus’ words), I also knew that many older cultures and languages simply did not divide life in this way. For instance, if or when Jesus said anything about “spirit,” he had to use an Aramaic word (similar to the old Hebrew) that meant simultaneously spirit, breath, atmosphere, wind and air, and which included by extension even cosmic breath, including solar wind and other

manifestations of wave-like energy (Douglas-Klotz, 1999). In this sense, Jesus' famous saying about speaking or sinning against the "Holy Spirit" could be translated something like this from his original language (Luke 12:9):

Whoever speaks against me
will be released,
but whoever speaks against the connection with
Sacred Breath,
from the air we share to its source in Unity
will not be released,
until they heal the separation
by breathing again with consciousness
of the One.

We cannot blame the dualism and splintering of consciousness that infect modern life on the prophets and mystics of old. In fact, many of their statements, like those of Yeshua above, seem to point to a way out of these critical mind-binds—a way of instant, every-moment meditation: We only share One Breath.

When I began to teach at ICCS, I used these various perspectives in order to "flesh out" a rigorous approach to Matthew's ideas of body prayer. I also brought the invaluable tool of the Dances of Universal Peace and Sufi Walking meditations of Samuel L. Lewis, both of which are based in an understanding of the power of sacred breath, sound and movement (Lewis, 1990). Students were encouraged to begin to experience themselves moving as though from the inside out. This was a new notion to many and a new experience to many more. To

support it I used poets like Whitman as well as the 20th century American dancer-mystic Ruth St. Denis (the teacher of Samuel Lewis, Martha Graham and others) who said:

For long have we lived constantly in two worlds, or so we supposed we did, in body and in spirit; but the new waves of release and vision that have come over the earth have shown us that in reality there are not two warring substances but only one, which is consciousness, or mind. This being the case, our attitudes toward our bodies change, or should change. We should reverse our conceptions. We should realize in a vivid and revolutionary sense that we are not in our bodies but our bodies are in us (1997, pp. 25-26).

The social implications of this realization--really beginning to move from the inside out—were also explored extensively by somatic pioneer Wilhelm Reich, a student of Freud who broke with his mentor over the latter's inability to integrate either body or cosmos in his psychology:

All social development heretofore was the result of an outer commotion, be it war or revolution, ripping the people from their spots of sitting. Not a single development from an inner motion on the part of people has yet happened.... To move outward, man would first have to stir inside without outer excitation. The impulse to move on, to change things, to end the endless sitting, would have to be ingrained in his structure from the very beginning and skillfully developed as a basic characteristic of his being, as was the case, of necessity, with the American pioneers or the old nomadic peoples (1953, pp. 56-7).

As we delved deeper into the subject of embodiment together, we not only discovered the way in which “our bodies are in us,” but also the way in which the perceptions of both mystics and somatic pioneers coincided with the latest research about the body, a subject that constituted a veritable “new physiology” that was as unknown to most people as was the “new physics” in the 1970's.

The following relates just one facet of this new physiology (which I explored more fully in an article in Creation Spirituality magazine in 1991):

The Skin is the Surface of the Brain. It has been found that the skin and brain develop from the same primary tissue layer in the fetus--the primary ectoderm. As this layer unfolds, it begins to contact the larger universe through the skin in effort to organize our entire nervous system. Scientists now see this nervous organization taking place beginning at the periphery rather than centrally controlled and planned from an all-wise brain. That is, the organization of our neural pathways seems to proceed from outside in rather than inside out (Juhan 1987).

This means that our touching, feeling, sensing and making sound as infants is, in large part, an attempt to organize our nervous systems through a contact with "out-thereeness." This model also accounts for the common, but previously unexplained, phenomena of infants "wasting away" due to touch starvation (Montagu, 1971). So-called "sensory malnutrition" prevents the nervous system from properly organizing itself by pre-empting contact with the rest of the universe. In some way, the "mind" of the universe wants to act through the body to help us know itself and ourselves through it. Further, some scientists now believe that the sensory activity of the skin affects our entire disposition to emotional feeling. That is, how we "feel" something influences to a large degree our "feelings."

The implications of this for our treatment of the environment are horrifying. If we continue to lay waste to the planet, we are not only destroying our home but also the means by which our children's nervous systems and emotional lives can organize themselves. Especially in inner cities, the absence of the presence of

nature, useful employment, stimulating education and, in general, hope encourages abusive patterns of touch, which teaches the nervous systems of infants that "this world doesn't make sense."

In the intervening years, more of this new research has been collected, although its implications for orienting us to a New Story of the Body has not been properly communicated. Both the research scientists who make the discoveries as well as the somatic therapists who generate a seemingly infinite number of name-brand techniques, seem in a rush to generate new chemicals or processes to intervene further in the body's story. With the number of environmental, stress-related and immune disorders abounding in Western society, perhaps this is natural.

Nevertheless, the overall habits of a society do not change through individuals being pushed and pulled by fear from one new allopathic drug--or holistic technique--to another. I suggest here that before we rush from information to action, we need to stand (or perhaps, sit or lie) in awe of the some of the story that our bodies tell us. Perhaps then our own deepest reactions--the mysticism of our own bodies--can prompt a more creative response.

Some years after I began to teach at ICCS, Matt asked me to start the first Deep Ecumenism emphasis at the program. The integration of embodiment with spiritual practice seemed the key to moving the usual academic discipline of "comparative religion," which emphasized concepts, to the level of comparative spirituality, which emphasized experiences. At the time of its inauguration, I sketched out the field for potential students by quoting some of Matthew's words in Creation Spirituality (1992) and then contributing a somatic commentary upon them:

“In awakening our capacity for cosmic ritual and for mysticism that is more aesthetic than ascetic, Creation Spirituality promotes a movement among all world religions called Deep Ecumenism. This ecumenical movement is based less on theological position papers than on shared mystical practices. Meeting in sweat lodges, ceremonial dances, and rituals ancient and new that allow us to experience the awe that we share in common--this is the heart of Deep Ecumenism.”

From the beginnings of the human species, all people at all times have breathed the air and sensed the earth around them through their bodies. From these sensations arose intimations of wisdom about their place in the cosmos. From the great cave paintings of Southern France to modern Gospel music, humans have sought to embody these intimations through art, ritual and spiritual practice.

All human beings can share in these intimations reached at various stages of the Cosmic Story—we all share the same bodies and can participate through them in the Original Blessing that began the universe. Perhaps no individual spiritual tradition or path holds all the keys to the current plight of the planet, yet by deeply listening to the harmony of voices, we may be able to pick out the overtones that indicate our next steps (from the Deep Ecumenism syllabus, 1992).

More than anything, Matthew Fox’s creation of universities that truly educate for unity—of mind, body and spirit—has contributed to the actual embodied experience of many human beings who have then gone on to touch countless others, with awareness and with heart. I am grateful that I was able to play a part in helping launch this revolution in human education. If we are to survive the 21st century, this “Foxian” revolution, and the “echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine” it entails, will need to pervade all of Western learning.

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