

## **THE RESONANT BODY**

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## Abstract

The body can be understood to be an open space of infinite possibilities, a locus of unlimited imagination. The “felt-experience” of the body as understood by somatic wisdom traditions as well as science-based knowledge, is revealed in this paper to be resonant with the world in complex and healing ways. Such a view is compatible with spiritual understandings and has significant implications for a more just and compassionate practice of social work.

## Biography

Anne Marie Walsh, PhD, now teaches social work at Lakehead University in Orillia after working in the field of child welfare for over 18 years. She is concerned that social workers find strong and meaningful ways to support themselves in their encounters with the trauma and deep needs of others.

## The Resonant Body

This paper considers the combined experience of the body, spirituality and social work by asking two questions: 1) what (if anything) does the felt-experience of the body contribute to our understanding of spirituality? And 2) what are the implications for social work of studying the body as it relates to an understanding of spirituality?

In this paper, the study of the body will be approached with concern for the felt or lived experience of this fundamental nexus of all of our experiences. The focus of interest in felt experience of embodiment is situated within the larger discourses of phenomenology, particularly hermeneutic and existential phenomenology. The work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968), and David Michael Levin (1997) (and thus, of their academic antecedents, Heidegger and Husserl among others) has informed this understanding of the body as it is experienced. A further line of thought that has contributed to understandings in this paper emerges from the field of study of aesthetic experience and education in the works of philosopher, Gaston Bachelard (1994) and educator, Maxine Greene (1995, 1978). At deeper layers, interest in the body arises within the Judeo-Christian world of concern for human suffering, and especially the Christian primacy granted the notion of Incarnation, yet it is additionally informed by the practical teachings of Eastern somatic traditions including Buddhism and Hinduism.

Rather than the anatomy or the psychology of the body, the aspects of the body's experience that are of primary concern here, have to do with our felt embodiment. The individual body is our only home and the place in which all our experiences – physical, sensual, spiritual, mental, emotional – take place. This particular, unique body is for each of us, a constant companion and the essential ground, a kind of primal matrix within which the whole world arrives as if at our threshold.

## BODY AND SPIRITUALITY

### *Felt experience as field of infinite possibilities*

When we grant attention, or what Levin (1985) calls “guardian awareness”(41) to the felt experience of the body’s presentations, we turn our attention inward to all that presents to us – the full array of darkness, sounds, sensations, feelings, breath and pulse, fleeting tensions or murmurs of the body taken in its givenness in this moment. It is the suggestion of this paper that this embodied experience, when attended even if briefly, returns to us a sense of prospect, of unclosed, or infinite possibility. We feel enlarged, open. Our awareness of the interior body’s experience discloses it as layered, always shifting, often subtle, full, multi-faceted. And it is a further proposition of this paper that such an experience is at least part of what is meant by spiritual experience.

How might we account for the felt experience of enlargement, of spacious or infinite possibility? This paper will refer briefly to a number of possible explanations for how it is that we seem to encounter a felt vastness or wholeness that is entirely embodied. Briefly mentioned will be Western notions of subsymbolic processes of the brain, of vibration and of explicate and implicate orders of new physics as well as the Eastern concept of ‘spanda’ or ‘All.’ Later, the embodied experience will be linked to aesthetic experience, particularly that of metaphor and language.

### *Subsymbolic dimension*

The attended experience of the body, so familiar to the practice of mindfulness meditation (Das, 2000) and to some extent to the practice of Gendlin’s (1978) “focusing”, is

founded upon dimensions of the body's dwelling that are deeper than cognitive consciousness. James Ashbrook (1989) refers to these deeper levels as "subsymbiotic", operating outside of consciousness, yet sustaining our existence in a complex order that is pre-reflexive and pre-lingual. The so-called "reptilian brain", developmentally and historically the earliest of human brain structures, gathers and governs the knowledge that is processed automatically or instinctively in the body that, in pulse of the heart, and persistence of the breath, resonates throughout the body at all times while we are alive.

In encounters with the world, then, the body receives a plenum of colour, texture, information – at both conscious and unconscious levels, and gathers these endless streams of incoming material in such a way that we experience things so that they "make sense" to us. Phenomenological psychologist, Merleau-Ponty (1968) in his studies of perception has elaborated on the embodied *chiasm* that permits what is of the world to become enfleshed in us at every colour, sound, touch (141). Merleau-Ponty finds that what is outside of body, and what is inside, what is visible and invisible - these aspects of our encounter with reality are entirely intertwined and inseparable, by way of our corporeality.

### *Vibration*

Modern physics has taught that all matter vibrates – whether the chair in the library or whether any cell of the human body. Thus, the term "resonant body" can be taken to apply to the literal resonance that the body sets up in response to the material of the world. To mention only one of the senses, that of hearing, we find concrete evidence of vibration of body and 'world'. Through the complex mechanisms of the human ear and the properties of acoustics, the experience of listening to, for example, a Dvorak symphony, ensures that the human body is

vibrant *with* it, becoming resonant with the same vibrations that are produced by the instruments. We are substance of the vibrations we receive – not only in music, but in all that we see, touch, breathe. (Zuckermandl, 1956)

### *Implicate-explicate*

But in addition to vibration of the earlier understandings of physics, propositions of ‘new’ physics offer us an imagination for the body’s (and the world’s) intricacies that extend beyond acoustic theory. Physicist, David Bohm (1985), finds that all matter is comprised of both a material and a less-material dimension – sometimes considered particle and wave, but referred to by Bohm as “explicate” and “implicate” orders (13). In this view, what *is* manifest – the table, someone’s face – always contains or is implicate in what is *not* present. A very simple example of this phenomenon can be seen in an apple seed. We can hold the seed in our hand, but we ‘know’ that the seed contains the potential, the full encryption that becomes a whole apple tree – complete with its millions of new apple seeds. The seed then can be said to be explicate or manifest as seed, and at the same time, the apple tree is implicate in the seed. In Bohm, the implicate order is a latency enfolded within all that is explicate. The implicate dimension – invisible, latent, inhabiting all that is – can be seen as a field of infinite possibility, an infinite domain in/out of which all explicate manifestation arises. (In new physics, the dimension of time takes on new understandings too so that, for example, at subatomic levels, the exchange of explicate for implicate can be instant and not reducible to the linearity of time of tree growth.)

## *Spanda*

In this way, the field of infinite possibilities that emerges in new physics bears resemblance to what is implied by the ancient Sanskrit word “spanda” meaning vibration. In Hindu tradition, spanda is the formless sea of All in which we and all things arise as forms, and subside back into the formlessness from which we arose; we are entirely immersed in this sea of All, inseparable from it, formless in some conditions, with form (body) at others (Muller-Ortega, 1989).

## *What is “spiritual”?*

If what we have talked about so far is body – vibrant, resonant, implicate – then, what do we mean by “spiritual”?

It is possible to suggest that the encounter with the implicate dimension of reality comes close to what is meant by “spiritual” in many traditions. Christian Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson (2008) speaks of the universal tendency for human societies (and individuals) to formulate religious questions and to speak of a deity or deities that:

“...generally symbolize a reality greater than the fragments of everyday mundane life, a totality greater than the people themselves, a wholeness beyond what the senses can grasp, a horizon that encompasses everything.”...and that this “...powerful wholeness has the character of something numinous, that is, intangible but real” .(8)

For Johnson, the sense of this presence is disclosed in nature, art, music and dance; inner peacefulness and healing; experiences of love and loss... (8). When we speak of the spiritual, we are usually intending a sense of some larger wholeness that in some way grants meaning or purpose to our lived experience, something invisible but felt as having to do with the deepest

human needs and yearning for wholeness. Such an experience is sometimes recorded as Love or Oneness, Emptiness, Peace, Harmony, as sense of enlargement or of being somehow complete (Das, 2000; Woodman, 1990; Hillman, 1981; Levin, 1985).

What is called “spiritual” in many traditions, remains outside of precise or final definition. But it is grounded in the sensual realities of the natural world around and composing the human being. Abram (2006) states that “the “spirits”...spoken of by oral, indigenous peoples are not aphysical beings, but are ways of acknowledging the myriad dimensions of the sensuous that we cannot see at any moment...” (11). We can see that some of the felt experience of the body, along with our understanding of the subsymbolic dimension and the notion of the implicate order (or spanda), may intersect with what has traditionally been considered to be spiritual experience. The body’s experience of vastness, of infinite possibility, of spacious openness can coincide with what is meant by spirituality. This notion of spirituality is deeply grounded in the corporeal and can be cultivated by way of any practice of guardian awareness brought to the full, unjudged contents of the body’s presentations. Such practices are most clearly articulated in Buddhist traditions of mindfulness, but they arise in other discourses as well.

## BEAUTY AND LANGUAGE: PORTALS TO THE INFINITE

### *Beauty*

Beauty, like spirituality, is another vaguely defined element of human living – it shifts, tends to be considerably subjective, yet each one of us ‘knows’ what we find beautiful. The experience is embodied, often unexpected yet it is also something that can be increased through learning (Greene, 1995 and 1978; Dewey, 1980; Rukeyser, 1968; Carravetta, 1991). What is



sometimes called an aesthetic experience, the apprehension of beauty touches us and opens us into a resonant space in which we can feel our selves to be entirely adequate to the reception of the world's provisions even though this beauty envelops and exceeds us.

The Greek word *aisthesis* originally means 'taking in', 'breathing in', 'a gasp' (Hillman, 1981, 31), thus associating the aesthetic apprehension of the world with bodily senses and the 'gasp' of wonder (32). Its opposite sense can be found in *anaesthesia*, the closure of the senses to the reception of the world. The word *spirit* (from Latin, *spritus*) originally signified wind and breath, a natural part of lived experience but a part that is invisible to us (Abram, 2006, 11). Abram suggests that this invisibility of 'spirit' came later to be construed as 'intangible', something outside of the arena of the senses despite its sensual origins (11). When the world is 'breathed in', the body is animated, or we can say 'resonant' with the world and its sensual intricacy of texture and form.

The encounter with what we find beautiful and what we might call spiritual, is similar in that our felt experience of both is enlargement, and the sense that we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves, an order that is felt as deeply satisfying, of which we might say, "it is with me, yet not-of me, existing without my doing". Thus, mystical Islamic understandings find that beauty is inseparable from the experience of God (Iraj Anvar, 2005). And, Catholic church father, Augustine addresses God in his well-known words, "Late have I loved you, O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new..." (Augustine, 10:27)

## **Word**

The felt experience of the body, the spiritual or aesthetic experience – all of these intersecting experiences must then be addressed using language. As human beings, in language

we have the rare and remarkable ability to refer to our experience after the fact and to conjure it up again. Arising out of the body's experience, language is always first an utterance of the flesh – through the breath – announcing the visceral response to the world around us. In the words of poet, John Vernon (1979), “a word...is first of all an act of the body” (2) and quoting Roland Barthes, he allows that poetry is “language lined with flesh” (7). Poet W. B. Yeats (1952) writes that nothing in art could move us if “our thought did not rush out to the edges of our flesh” (106).

As Vernon (1979) argues, words have flexible capacities, so that they can starkly stand in for the pure object in a kind of exact equation, or they can be highly abstract referring to something like a numeral, the basis for mathematics and high levels of human abstract thought. Words are also able to render themselves more nuanced, less concrete – as in poetry and metaphor, where language strives to remain open enough to permit an evocation of mood or feeling. Thus, in poetry, the experience of one person can be recreated such that another person can share the experience in some way. The poetic word is an attempt to use language in such a way that no closure occurs in writer or reader. Instead, the experience intended or felt by the author is suggested, even in some way engendered in the particular choice of words. Language in poetry (that is, by way of metaphor) articulates the body's felt experience of openness despite its use of apparently concrete limited words and lines: the explicate (words) is permeated with the implicate (the spirit of the experience), felt again in reading or writing this way.

When speaking of an aesthetic or spiritual experience, then, we must use language to account for something that cannot be pointed to directly. We must evoke language that leaves open the space/room needed for an experience to be enabled in another (or even in the creator of the work). In the same way, social work must also develop the ability and agree to use a

language that accurately names human experience in its nuanced, contradictory, and elusive presentations.

### *Language and experience*

This capacity is shut down when our language seeks causes and attributes “meaning” too soon to the complex human condition. The child removed from his home by kindly social workers, can be quickly described in terms of attachment theory ...but what is it like to BE that child? The full grief and wrench of that removal, the exposure to new persons, new food – all of this is a universe of loss for the child. Our language can at least be tentative - what Van Manen (1997) calls “tactful”- enough to allow for the fact that we do not really know the whole interior of another: we need to attend gently to that world and not to label it too soon or with language that is certain of its ability to mop up after the disaster. By contrast, one young mother, in describing to this author what her 5-year old son was experiencing when his absent father again cancelled a long awaited visit, said with feeling, “ I think I am witnessing my little boy’s heart breaking for the first time.” These words, which stand outside of assessment formats and social work theory, nevertheless, speak poignantly and poetically to the complex fragility of the two broken hearts in this story.

Why is this attention to language important? Because it suggests that language is not uniform in its ability to convey meaning. We must speak of some things in a way that permits their/our deeper natures to be disclosed. If we encounter something that moves us deeply, (that our bodies claim as significant), we will want to capture that experience by the subtle and nuanced use of language that does nothing to strangle the tentative and fragile nature of the experience.

The experiences of any person are always intricately complex and derive from a well of depth that is often unsuspected even by the person undergoing the experience. The spiritual and the aesthetic dimensions, I would suggest, both seek to provide shelter for the full range of human experience – especially for that which sounds in us of a vast wholeness of which we are part and which is vital to our sense of being fully alive. Paradoxically, it seems that the sense of felt wholeness for humans arises by the *finite* embodiment encountering that which is felt to be *infinite*: so wholeness (deep satisfaction, being “fully alive”) for us has to do with some apprehension of the vast, the infinite, open possibilities.

#### *Language – implications of an embodied literacy*

In order to speak accurately and inclusively about the experience we have of the body, and to account for what we experience that we may call ‘spiritual’, in all its variety, and multi faceted presentations, we need language that will not foreclose on the spacious, infinite qualities of that experience. The language that is perhaps best suited to such a permeable and unclosed provision is that of aesthetic experience – the use of metaphor, symbol, the senses. In fact, we find that spiritual traditions throughout the world turn to aesthetic expressions – of language, image, ritual, performance – to enact or to evoke or to respond to the spiritual experience. And yet, in social work, concerned though it is for the breadth of the human experience, we are often strongly advised against the use of aesthetic language.

The full experience of the human being (lives that are lived) as well as the moment to moment experience of our embodied receptions and presentations, discloses the felt body to be fluid, shifting, mercurial and resistant to the confinement of precise singular definitions. The

use of metaphorical language, for those who are prepared, leaves human experience open, and felt as infinite; experience can be suggested, hinted at, uttered in such a way that the nuances and contradictions, the breadth and complexity of experience can be perceived again in the sensitive (the prepared) observer/reader/witness.

*When metaphor becomes concrete*

If we do not know how to incorporate metaphor or symbol, then we tend to make it concrete, according to Woodman and Dickson, Jungian analysts. Woodman, a former teacher of literature, believes that, at what they call “a soul level”, we *need* metaphor, and are fed by symbols that we can deeply feel. Yet, in our societies, urged as we are to have our needs met by what we can purchase or consume, it is possible (and widely lamented in postmodern literature) that as a culture, we seem to be losing the ability to respond aesthetically to the world.

Poet, Muriel Rukeyser (1968) articulates the dilemma saying, “the thinning out of our response [to poetry] is the weakness that leads to mechanical aggression” (41). In a similar way, phenomenological philosopher, Ortega y Gasset (1961) laments that “things do not interest us because they do not find in us favourable surfaces on which to be reflected, and it is necessary for us to multiply the facets of our mind so that an infinite number of themes may penetrate it” (35).

Without the ability to relate to the world metaphorically or to deeply feel the body’s presence in the world of sense, symbol and nuance, we are in danger of making concrete that which is meant to be subtle, or en-spirited. So, for example, the use of alcoholic spirits can take the place of the genuinely spiritual (Woodman and Dickson, 1997). Perhaps this concretization is what is at work when education (the traditional path of opening mind and heart to the greater

virtues, the Good the True and the Beautiful) is unquestioningly colonized by the notion of job pathways, goals, careers. An inability to respond to things metaphorically (to engage the symbol) leaves us with a response that is concrete (explicate) without the implication of infinity (implicate). And the concrete is inevitably dissatisfying when it is used to address the spiritual or ineffable realms of our existence, as the numerous addictions treatment programs can attest. Unless the concrete is able to suggest (or connect us to) what is implicate in every surface, in every presentation, then it presents a face that is at once knowable and so, finite, finished.

Bringing Bohm's understanding of matter together with Woodman's understanding of psyche, it can be surmised that if we are unable to conjure up the implicate, the felt vastness of the symbol, then we are likely going to live in a society in which the concrete will ever more insistently (and insufficiently) be offered or sought to act in place of that which is vast, or infinite for us.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Social work and spirituality have in common their concern for the full experience of the human being. Human experience cannot easily be located or named; it is vague with shifting 'meanings' assigned; it is open to contradiction; and it is embodied – thus it includes dimensions both explicate and implicate, prelingual as well as precisely coded.

To be able to attend ever more fully to what the body is presenting requires a response on our part that is restrained, that seeks to set aside (to notice) judgements, preconceptions, assumptions/biases, all that is taken-for-granted or habitual in our reception of the world. Such stances are congruent with the ethics and values of social work practice. Increased attentiveness to the body's full presence, we are told through ancient somatic traditions, leads to a way of

living in the world that draws upon and prepares the way for the universally human virtues of patience, restraint, open-heartedness, loving kindness, happiness (Das, 2000).

The felt experience of the body's full presence, if included in social work practice, has potential to deepen the experience of both client and worker. Mindfulness, Focusing and phenomenological reflection are practices or disciplines by which the individual can become aware of the breadth of formations the body offers. But even without establishing a discipline, the body can be immediately regarded, even in a deep breath, as a beginning place for the felt experience of resting in the spaciousness of our given corporeality. Beyond the purely personal, consideration of the body's nuanced, mingled presentations requires an approach which honours restraint, strengthens our capacities for the traditional virtues of patience, refrains from judgement, welcomes diversity, retains curiosity about differences, and accepts contradiction. To become ever more aware of the body's presentations, then, requires just those practices that are necessary for living in harmony and justice with the complexities and otherness of the world itself, of community, of our shared humanity.

An inclusion of the body's full presence in our awareness, enlarges our life and puts us in touch with the ever present infinite which is implicit in us and around us at all times. In closing, some of the ways this openness of the body's experience can be awakened and can affirm practices in social work will be offered:

1. Body as universal 'home'

The felt experience of the body is an avenue into the felt experience of the infinite for every person whether or not s/he identifies with a spiritual tradition.

## 2. The need for a reclaimed and recreated language

The language chosen by social work to account for human experience must be beyond the restrictions of the language of bureaucracy. We are not capable of some of the constructs that bureaucratic language suggests by such terms as “measurable outcomes” and “competency based practice”. Nor does the language of efficiency account adequately for the many simultaneously contradictory ways in which we live. Complexity of lived experience suggests the need for a language capable of sheltering such complexity.

## 3. Suitable forms of inquiry

We need to find suitable forms of inquiry for addressing the full experience of human beings – experience which is honoured by religious, spiritual and wisdom traditions and which upholds the dignity of human life. Such traditions seek to honour the human condition beyond the political, the psychological or purely physical realms. Such forms of inquiry might include the arts, or hermeneutical phenomenological approaches such as those proposed in education by Van Manen (1997).

## 4. Claim for the ineffable

Social work needs to claim space for the ineffable in human experience and bring this into a legitimate conversation within the academic arena.



## 5. Implicate social justice

Like the split between contemplation and action in religious language, social work has kept alive a tension between individual or clinical work and societal levels or social justice levels of engagement. These need not be separate. In fact, the body reveals that these two approaches are simultaneous within our perceptions and that the contradictory need not be eliminated. The body's openness to the infinite is of such deep necessity to us - like a kind of food which religions have called "gift of finest wheat" – that any lived conditions that prohibit its access must be strongly opposed. Hence, the body, even beyond material necessities, persists in defining the ground of social justice.

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