

Sara K. Schneider's Skin in the Game

The role of the body (virtually everyone's got one) in culture, learning, work, and spiritual practice

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A thing is a slow event.

--Stanley Eveling

Money often costs too much.

--George Bernard Shaw

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Greetings!

Welcome to the first issue of a monthly e-zine about life in the body.

Each issue will feature short writings that I hope will be perceptually enlarging--or will have the same effect on your grin--along with video, film, audio, and book recommendations and a brief practice.

I hope you will continue to subscribe and/or forward to friends whom you think might have an interest. However, if, like me, you have just about as much email--even good stuff--as you can handle, feel free to limit your subscription. (See top of this page.)

This comes with all my good wishes,
Sara

Ventricle to Ventricle

Sometimes in workshops on body-based learning I ask participants to press one of their palms against each other in front of their chests, in the familiar prayer or "namaste" posture. First I ask them to place their awareness in their right palm, noticing it as the "giver" of touch as it offers pressure against the left palm. Then I ask them to shift their awareness to the left palm, as it moves from being the receiver of touch to take up the role as giver. The exercise highlights the challenge of distinguishing giver and receiver in an experience of mutual touch, though it is technically possible to permit consciousness to undergo this kind of pendulum swing from one side of the body to the other.

Between two people, the familiar social gesture of the hug blurs both physical and psychic boundaries. Outside of dramatic refusals to participate in hugs--e.g., by leaving one's arms hanging stiffly at one's side as one is wrapped in another's embrace--it is difficult not to be simultaneously "hugger" and "huggee," its never being clear who has initiated and who has received.



Recently, on Chicago's famous shopping "Magnificent Mile," I came across members of the "Free Hugs" campaign (<http://www.freehugscampaign.org/>). Standing in groups in public places, members bear signs reading only "Free Hugs." As curious strangers sidle up to them suspiciously, inquiring what "the deal" is--I suppose, what's in it for those offering embrace seemingly without expectations--they don't gain much informationally. They're merely told, "We're giving hugs, if you'd like one."

I wanted one. In fact, I was up for three, moving down the line of about 15 volunteer huggers and experiencing their arms and hearts opening to me.

"Good hug!" one of them exclaimed. Shock of recognition: He had felt my hug back. As consenters to hugging come ventricle to ventricle there is only simultaneous giving and receiving. Perhaps it is the unparalleled intimacy, the unblocked flow of energy, in this social gesture that makes its practice so circumscribed between members of different genders or particular social groups in many cultures, among them South Asians and Orthodox Jews.

Many of us find it advisable, or safer under certain conditions, to block such contact. At events run by the social club Mensa, where what some members regarded as excessive hugging led to complaints, attendees now wear colored dots on their name tags, signifying whether they are receptive to hugs from (1) anyone, or (2) no one, or are (3) differentially receptive, depending on the context and the identity of their potential hugger. Such pre-identification prevents the stiffening, the armoring that many of us use to stave off the invasiveness of an unwelcome or forced hug, like the one ordered to a toddler to give to her greeting grandparents while she's still in just-off-the-plane shock.

In my dance life, I am trying to come to grips with the challenging Argentine tango, a dance impossible to imagine in either Orthodox Jewish or South Asian cultures, though it might go quite well at Mensa meetings. In Argentina, the tango is often danced with strangers in a position called "close embrace"--the man's right arm wrapped closely around the far-away shoulder blade of the woman, the right one, the woman's left arm wrapped to the far-away shoulder, the left one, of her partner. The dance is led chest-to-chest, the man signaling directional movements and even embellishments through subtle movements from high in his torso. As a friend of mine confessed, "Every partner I've ever danced with knows I wear a padded bra." A couple dances cheek to cheek, or with their foreheads and noses a seductive hair's breadth from each other, sharing breath, chests, embrace. Almost as intimately, their legs tangle decoratively, in, around, and under one another's as they travel over the dance floor.

On the website of self-confessed Oregon-based "tango addict" Alex Krebs (and phenomenal teacher) is a comic questionnaire

(<http://www.tangoberretin.com/alex/thoughts/survey.html>), on the model of the seemingly determinative personality questionnaires in magazines such as Cosmopolitan. Participants can receive tango addiction points for high scores on questions such as how many partners have cried in their arms from the sheer beauty of dancing tango with them, from the melting of the heart that occurs when rhythm, breath, mutuality, and motion conspire.

A Practice

Try this: Try placing right palm against left in front of your heart.

Think of your "self" as being centered in your right hand; press it purposefully against your left. Notice the left hand's sensation of touch.

Now shift your sense of self to be centered in your left hand and press it against the right; become aware of the right hand as the one that is touched.

(Alternatively, you might try this with an open-minded friend, in a handshake position, noticing first one person's right hand as the giver, then the other's.)

For reflection:

- How easy was it to differentiate the right hand's experience from that of the left?
- How did the experience of giver and receiver compare?
- How many physical social gestures can you think of that carry this kind of symmetry, mutuality?
- What *non-physical* gestures between people also dissolve these boundaries of apparent separateness?

Come to Esalen, Big Sur, February 26-28, 2010

Join Sara in breathtaking Big Sur, California February 26-28, 2010, for

The Song of the Body: Global Physical Practices Toward the Sacred

an exploration, both playful and meaningful, of the ways in which longings toward the sacred have been expressed in the world's spiritual traditions through body movement.

For more information, [click here](#).

Register by calling 831.667.3005 or at www.esalen.org.

Please share word of the workshop with interested friends.

Your Life Hove onto Your Back (or Your Head)



Woman carrying bananas in Kara, Togo. Photo by Sara K. Schneider, 2008.

I'm back in New York City, the scene of my 20s, my graduate education at NYU, and the place where I learned the full weight of packing just right. When you leave your apartment, you can well be sojourning for the entire day--especially if home base is Brooklyn. In New York, you live with your life hanging off your back, each shoulder, one or both hands, or any other part of the body to which you can affix essential supplies. For me, in the 80s and early 90s, the calculus consisted of a long and narrow book bag (on my back) for graduate classes at NYU and theatre review-writing, and a wide dance bag (on right shoulder) for ballet class on the Upper West Side. Hands were thus free for scarfing meals while walking, another New York habit. The only thing the feet had to do was walk.

Just as cars broadcast and bear the load of our public identities in just about every other city in America, briefcase, messenger bag, backpack, and multiple tote bags mark the New York subway commuter. As passengers eye each other surreptitiously on the MTA, they may imagine how a stranger traverses the territory over their day. They fantasize the dotted lines that connect one point with the next on another person's day's journey, and anticipate him dipping into the contents of one or more bags efficiently, knowingly, so that each motion--for a bottle of vitamin-enriched water, a cell phone, a book to read on the longest ride of the several that day, a Power Bar--conserves energy and needless jostling.

Underneath the elegance of these motions and of the bags themselves, there is, however, a kind of survivalism, a deeply rooted belief that, whatever it may be, if you don't bring it yourself, it won't be there for you--even though there are "gourmet" delis on virtually every corner in Manhattan. The early-morning anticipator of every need the day might present wrestles with two aesthetic (and practical) dimensions: a) comprehensiveness-place everything you're likely to need today somewhere on your body, and b) elegance-bring nothing you're unlikely to use, lest it become an albatross. Thoughtfully packed bags are artistic.

In December, I was in West Africa, watching the skill with which women carried their goods to market on their heads. Often a companion would hold the wide platter of oranges or other produce as the bearer would bend down, place a piece of fabric rolled into a ring shape on the top of her head to support the weight of and to balance the platter, and receive the load directly onto her head from the hands of her comrade.

The confidence of her walk seemed to suggest a self-reliance in bearing the heavy load once balanced. The relative poverty of the people in the Francophone West African countries I visited contrasts sharply with the material excess in what is arguably America's capital of consumption. Yet

the aesthetics of bearing up under the load, both comprehensive and elegant, of daily luggage rang as being similar--each culture using the body as the vehicle for the transport of goods--though I wonder whether New Yorkers see the elements through which they must make their way each day--the dirt, the crowding, the noise, the impatience of others--as more forboding even than do the Togolese.



This 2007 Flickr photo by Hernan Hernandez, of a New Yorker grabbing a bite of banana on the New York subway, carries the caption, "Yes, we have no bananas!"

Film, Video, Book, and Audio Selections

Film: *Unmistaken Child* (2008)

Documentary of 28-year-old Nepalese monk Tenzin Zopa's four-year, and eventually successful, search throughout Nepal, Tibet, and India for the child calculated to be of the proper age--only one to one-and-a half years old--to be the reincarnation of his beloved master, the widely revered Geshe Lama Konchong.

Shot against the profoundly beautiful craggy hillsides that ground Tenzin Zopa's search, the film shows the dual nature of the young boy who is both child and identified as the reincarnated master. As a toddler, Tenzin Ngodrop must at once pass traditional rites and tests of soul memory before he is identified as Geshe Lama Konchong's reincarnation--eventually offering blessing to the many Tibetan Buddhists who comes recognizing his identity--and undergo, as the little boy that he still is, such rituals, in scenes both traumatic to him and touching, as the shaving of his head for his new monastic life.

The scenes between Tenzin Zopa and the child are inexpressibly tender and knowing, speaking to the continuity of love, as the gentle monk nurtures in Tenzin Ngodrop the soul that in its previous body cared for him from his seventh year forward.

The 2009 theatres schedule for distribution in the United States is at:

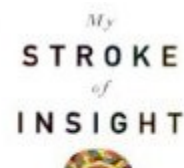
<http://www.unmistakenchild.com/theaters.php>

Some theatres are not listed, however, so *Unmistaken Child* may still be coming to your city even if it's not listed here. This was the case in Chicago, where the film opened at the historic Music Box Theatre in July.

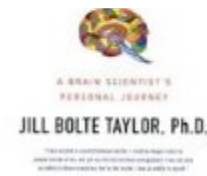
In October ...

What does "listening to your body" actually mean?

A listening practice



Book selection: Jill Bolte Taylor's *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey*



Thanks for joining me. Comments, suggestions, dialogue, and new interested friends welcome!

Sara K. Schneider

Order Sara's latest book on performance in everyday life,
[Art of Darkness: Ingenious Performances by Undercover Operators, Con Men, and Others,](#)

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