

Explorations in body consciousness

Tree Staunton



*"If you cannot find it in your own body,
where will you go in search of it?"
The Upanishads*

Jung said of Freud that sex was a kind of *numinosum* for him. (Jung 1995:173) It had a quality of sacred otherness, as though it represented another realm, beyond ordinary consciousness. For me this *numinosum* is the body: the experience of embodied aliveness.

My professional training and clinical experience in Body Psychotherapy (Staunton 2002) are relevant only against the backdrop of a lifelong journey to come home to my own body, a search which has inspired over two decades of research, body process, dialogue and inquiry.

I would like to share some of my most recent research for my MA which provided the opportunity for me to explore these themes in greater depth – to review relevant literature, to process my experiences and to talk to others about their experience of embodiment.

My original training focused largely on Reich's armoured body- the developmentally wounded and deficient body - using the framework of understanding a client's core issues through body reading and bodywork. I was more interested in what I call body *consciousness*, and this pointed me towards the modern Jungians - mostly women - working with the body as a transformative vessel in the process of individuation. I was particularly inspired by the more process oriented practices such as Joan Chodrow's *Inner directed movement* (1982,1991), *Authentic Movement* (Wyman-McGinty 1998, 2005), Stromsted and Haze's *Dreamdancing* (2006), and of course Marion Woodman's *BodySoul Rhythms* (1982, 1985, 1998).

However in framing the inquiry as 'explorations in body consciousness' my interest was to find a phenomenology of the body, an experience or set of experiences which could delineate or describe the experience of consciousness in the body - not to medicalise it, as did Freud, nor to literalise it as did

Reich, nor symbolise it as did Jung, but in the first instance to find a way of establishing a viable and valid metapsychology for the understanding of the body's part in the process of 'individuation' (Hillman 1975,1997; Jung 1965,1971,1976,1981; Jacobi 1973; Johnson 1991).

I knew body consciousness as an experiential reality, but my question surrounded the spectrum of possible realities within that experience. Could the body provide a transitional space - not only in the Winnicottian sense - but an access to experiences across a spectrum ranging from prepersonal to transpersonal? (Wilber 1979) I had known heaven and hell in my own body - from the deeply regressive to the transcendent. I was looking for a map of this territory.

My research

My subject arose out of an extended first person inquiry, drawing on my clinical experience, understood through the lens of relevant literature. It suggested a qualitative investigation which was primarily phenomenological, since being embodied is a universal experience, and I was seeking to understand my experience through the experience of others. Phenomenology 'pushes at the edge of language, trying to find words for what is beyond our everyday ways of speaking about whatever it is we are studying.' (McLeod 2001:56)

Finding language for body experiences can be remarkably difficult - it is not always immediately obvious that the

body has a psychological life, and many people are unaware or numb to their body's signals. In view of this I did not consider that a survey by questionnaire would reveal in-depth reflections, and an interview seemed the best format.

In thinking how to go about the interviews I knew that I would not reach much experiential evidence of body consciousness in verbal interviews. Years of clinical experience had taught me that the body is not generally referred to unless it is a source of pain, and that encouraging someone to include their bodily awareness can feel 'strange' and 'alien' to them, unless they are practiced in a technique such as focusing (Gendlin 1982). In seeking to find validity in the research there needed to be some 'entering into' embodied experience, to be body-centred, to find a way to talk *from* the bodily experience.

My two pilot interviews helped me to find clarity about the appropriate level of engagement with the body in an interview setting, and suggested an exploratory rather than an experimental approach. I did not use formal grounded theory, since I was not seeking to generate a 'theory', (McLeod 2001:70) but I used some of its principles in the analysis of the results.

Choice of participants

I decided to interview participants who were all at different levels in psychotherapy training. Considerations were ethical as well as practical: they would be interested and

motivated; they would be familiar with the therapy framework, and would be able to participate immediately and actively; they would have their own therapy to support any process which emerged; they would be somewhat familiar with the terms I was using and have some basic understanding of what it might mean to allow a body process. Notwithstanding these positive considerations, there is a disadvantage to selection of this non - random group. Can results be generalized? Furthermore there was no gender distribution - I had email responses from about twelve people, one man and eleven women, and of these, eight women were able to attend the interviews within the time frame that I had available.

The format

I arranged all the interviews within a time frame of four weeks, in my consulting room, and with an hour for each. I had the same level of contact with each participant in terms of email and follow up. I did not prompt participants about the kind of experiences I was looking for or expecting to arise out of the body interview. I told them that I was interested in the phenomenon of 'body consciousness' as opposed to 'normal ego consciousness'.

I decided to conduct them using techniques of free association through the body (Boyesen 1981,1982) and vegeto therapy (Reich 1970, 1990, Eiden 2002) as appropriate. All began in a similar way, which was to focus immediately on the body, asking them to become aware of how they were sitting, what it felt like

and if they could feel any expression in it. If this developed into an interesting awareness I would stay with this and follow what arose; otherwise I would follow the body process which began to emerge - instantly in most cases - and invite the person to bring awareness to movement, standing, walking or lying down - following their body's sense of what wanted to happen.

The 'bodywork' techniques used were

- attention to the body and away from 'talking about' process feeling into posture, allowing or following movement
- breathing deeply and exhaling fully, sometimes using sound (disrupting 'neurotic' breathing pattern)
- drawing attention to a particular place of 'holding' or contraction
- making physical contact and encouraging the breath/awareness into this place
- supporting the process of catharsis, release and integration

Doing the body interviews I felt I could focus on the interviewee's physical/emotional experiences in a way that is not possible in a therapeutic relationship, where it is important to follow the client's process, linking in to where this process takes them following a bodywork session; the client is at the centre, and their relationship needs are paramount.

In these research interviews I had contracted with the person to put their body process at the centre, and as a result it was possible for us to be interested in it together. I found this quite liberating, allowing a pure awareness of the bodymind, not concerning myself too much with relationship dynamics or holding long term themes and perspectives in mind.

Following each interview I asked the participants to simply notice what they felt and what experiences they had. I suggested they pay particular attention to their dreams, as a way of accessing their unconscious response. I asked them to contact me by e-mail with any responses they had immediately, and arranged a follow up interview about a week later.

Results: bodily experiences

All eight subjects reported feeling in touch with a different experience of their body. Feeling 'great' and 'fantastic' physically and energetically was also associated with feeling 'spaced out' by two people, while another felt a 'strange dreamlike quality' and another described both 'feeling unfocussed and *at the same time* clear headed'. I am familiar with this kind of experience, and find it one of the most interesting to arise out of a more embodied consciousness. It seems to describe something I have experienced as a kind of 'clarity of being' when one does not have to 'focus' or 'concentrate' to be present – a state of keeping mentally alert which requires effort. There can be an effortless being which is

nonetheless very present and alive to the moment.

Jungian analyst Robin Van Loben Sels tells us that 'when we establish rapport with the emotional experience ceaselessly taking place in our bodies, we do not need to think as much or in the same way' (Sels 2005:234) and she quotes Mark Epstein stating that when we get back to primary feeling states 'we get out of our heads and return to our senses. A different experience of mind is then possible.' (1998:112)

Betty Edwards (1982) describing working creatively with the right (non dominant) side of the brain talks of feeling 'alert, but relaxed ... unaware of the passage of time ... absorbed,' (1982:57) and she says that using the right hemisphere of the brain, such as in artwork, one induces a changed state of consciousness which has some of the qualities described here.

Another subject reported feeling 'more relaxed than she could remember for a long time' and later on felt quite 'high' and 'giggly'. Another reported feeling 'overwhelmed by my sensations ... a flood of information...' while yet another had a 'unifying feeling...bits of me brought together...I felt something opening up in my back, and now when I start to tighten up I am breathing into it automatically.' Another had 'a great sensation of lightness and ease in my chest and ribcage that made me wonder that I don't recognise how restricted and tight they normally feel' and 'for a very brief while after that I felt a huge surge of what seemed to be immense physical strength, so

that I imagined what it felt like to be able to run a marathon effortlessly or push over a lorry ... a good feeling while it lasted!

One subject said 'I can't believe I've let go' and talked about 'feeling new-born, wobbly legs ... more physically aware, tingling in arms and legs ... as if I had been a very long way away, and come back with a real sadness; recognizing something I had not recognized before ... saying goodbye to my defences ... it's like a loss.'

Three people reported feeling 'very hungry for good food' ... 'not just any old sandwich' and a 'physical craving ... ravenous for food ... love that feeling' ... and 'following my body more and eating when I want to eat ... wanting to eat more naturally ... I know what I should eat, in my head but usually I don't follow it ... this felt like what I wanted ... my sense of taste felt more acute and I could eat well.'

Sleep, dreams and images

Several people reported 'deep dreamless sleep' on the night after the interview. One person said she had a 'very black dark sleep for a few days' and since then had 'lots of busy dreams which seem really vivid when I wake up'. One reported 'I felt as if I hadn't moved all night for two nights, like I used to sleep. Woke up feeling great - energized, alive and awake' and another said 'I woke up with feelings.'

Several people had dreams that they felt connected to the interview. One had a dream image of 'someone in a bed, very enraged and turning from side to

side ...' in exactly the same way as she had moved in the interview. She said 'it seemed to me like a view of someone inside me unable to move but angry and struggling'. Another reported a dream where 'someone had rearranged my kitchen ... it had been subtly changed, bits of furniture moved ... I had had no say ... everyone wanted me to like it ... I was speechless with fury - I hadn't given my consent'. This subject had used the same words about her bodily response to the interview 'something had been rearranged ... I was surprised by what happened, I wasn't in control.' The dream suggests a connection which I chose not to explore more deeply in this context, but it alerted me to the issue that bodywork can go 'underneath' ego control and a person can feel a loss of conscious choice.

Another said she had a dream which 'showed a theme of new directions, new levels of intimacy ... I feel a strong desire to go further and deepen something'.

Two people had animal dreams ... 'white horses dancing around me ... one horse came behind me and put his head - heavy and soft - on my shoulder ...' and one dreamer reported animal symbols. All these suggest a connection with the 'animal self' or a more instinctual level of being. Another participant said she had dreams with a background narrative 'as if I was being spoken to at some level that did not engage my head'. Six out of eight people had dreams following the interview and three of these regarded their dreams as connected.

The transformative power of dreams has been a major source of interest to Jungians, and as stated earlier, there is a resurgence of interest in the link to the body amongst modern Jungians. Van Loben Sels (2005:230) tells us 'the body anchors our waking and sleeping mind. Dreaming is as physical as breathing...dreams are in the world because body is in the world.'

Connection to the environment

Ecopsychologists suggest that distancing or alienation between self and environment is a 'repression of cosmic empathy; a psychic numbing we have labeled "normal"' (Roszac 1995:11) and environmental philosopher Paul Shepard speaks of 'the self with a permeable boundary...whose skin and behaviour are soft zones contacting the world instead of excluding it.' (Roszac 1995:13)

Some of my participants' experiences illustrated this - for example:

'Horizons were more expansive... felt more accessible to other people, to my environment... more open, expansive.'

'It wasn't a different connection to the environment, but I stopped and gave it time...'

'I was acutely aware of smells... cut grass... lavender ... I couldn't get enough of it.'

'I saw my little grand-daughter that night and I felt as if I saw things as she does, closer to them somehow.'

'I felt spatially aware...there was no edge between me and my environment.'

One participant said they felt 'sensitive and vulnerable...lost outside in the environment - it felt too big and open.' Six out of eight participants registered an experience in this category.

Spiritual connection/ awareness

'Spiritual experiences' are hard to define and are subjectively recognised, but participants were very willing to share their connections such as 'it made me acutely aware of other dimensions, and opened me up...' One thought for a long time and considered...'not sure what I mean by spiritual, but in the sense that I felt more "in" me or "at one" ... yes ... I felt more connected, and more open to others ... these are the things that are important to me, spiritual connection is not solitary for me, it is also about feeling more intimately connected to others...I felt I had a more permeable boundary.'

Another participant described it as being 'present in eternity, not limited by time and space.'

One person had an acutely physical experience which she described as 'a feeling that something in my belly button has started to open up...some kind of passion is being born ... acceptance ... recognising who I am.' Seven out of eight participants identified experiences in this category.

Touch

Most participants enjoyed the touch and found it 'helpful' 'non threatening' and 'supportive'.

One said 'I'm not usually comfortable with touch, but it didn't feel threatening'. For one it 'by-passed some other connection....I would never have got to the grief if you hadn't touched my back in that way' ... and for another 'this was a most important part of the experience... when I got panicky towards the end feeling your hand on my back calmed me down fairly quickly.'

Another said that the touch felt very positive...'when you held my feet it had a big effect' and another said 'I felt happy with it... it felt natural... afterwards I thought "it did something!"'

One participant had a powerful experience of coming back into her body with the touch. This arose out of being on the floor face down – a place which she had gravitated towards in following her body process – where she saw herself in a cot in the nursery; when she felt my hand on her back she reported 'the image or sensation of being outside myself and coming into myself...I was fuller, not outside myself. I want more of that level of contact.' She associated this 'space' or sense of herself with a more 'spiritual' experience which she finds on retreats, a 'peaceful space, completeness, connectedness.'

This raises interesting questions as to the nature of a so-called 'regressive' experience where the body returns us to an early

state or stage of being, and its relationship to a 'spiritual' sense of being. (Wilber's pre-trans fallacy, 1983, 1991; Rowan, 1993; Staunton 1993)

New avenues/direction

Seven out of eight participants registered some kind of new awareness or avenue.

'Getting angry, wanting to break out. I want something different... sex?' Lifting repression perhaps?

The interview brought one woman's insight about her therapy relationship and how she is afraid of her energy and holds back. This became clearer after the experience of 'letting go' and 'making noise'. She did not have to 'take care' of (the other) and this was different from her usual experience in relationships.

One participant who suffers an ongoing illness said 'I got the idea that I have to take it easy... I can't just dive into things... I feel more respectful of myself and my feelings.'

For another it put her back in touch with a direction that she had taken, following illness, of being more interested in her body and energy, giving herself time. 'It put me back on track'.

Another simply reflected 'I want more of this way of being..... no words... to play more with this world'. It seemed to touch a deep longing, which I too can feel in entering the experiential world of my body process. This reminds me of the notion I am developing of the body as a 'transitional space.'

Another said 'I know what to do if I listen to myself properly...I have not been listening. I need to trust my instincts'.

General responses

Generally there was the feeling of 'opening up' and expanding through connecting to the body and emotional responses were various; anger was felt by one while another said she was 'sad, but thankful' and yet another felt 'sadness, loss and longing'. Another commented that she felt 'humble' after the experience.

One said that 'there was a hopefulness...a deep quiet joy...the opposite of the despair and depression that can be there...for some time I was in touch with my vulnerability....it was ok.'

Another commented 'It was a pleasure to just *feel*...to feel that the body could tell its own story...something to do with *me* that I didn't recognize....strange and frightening...but pleasurable."

One participant who suffers ongoingly with an auto immune condition, had a complete remission, which she felt sure was contributed to by the connection to a sense of aliveness in her body. Following the interview she said she was 'enjoying her body' and felt a 'deep change' happening. Candace Pert in her outstanding work on psychoneuroimmunology, (1997:171) discovered a chemical link between the brain and the immune system, supporting the notion, emerging for my interview participant, that increased breathing and mood

lifting could influence the autoimmune system.

This same woman told me 'my body tells me what I'm feeling ... it's facing up to it that's hard. I have a baseline of intolerable anxiety, and I use my body to lower it to a tolerable level...I hold my breath, I bite my jaw....I have never felt I could let go completely'. This is a Reichian statement if ever there was one! Reich's thesis is exactly this - that the 'neurotic breathing patterns' bind the anxiety into the musculature so that it is no longer consciously experienced - the physiology of repression. (Reich 1968, 1970,1972) When these senses and images arise naturally from the unconscious, it is a re-affirmation of theory, and conversely theory is only relevant when it comes alive in the consulting room.

Many of the findings in the 'body interviews' were familiar to me from my own experience of working in this way and my clinical experience in the field. I was impressed by how much it was possible for my interview subjects to gain access to 'body consciousness' and the profound effects this experience had on them.

I felt satisfied that the results provided a baseline description of 'features' of 'body consciousness' which has been referred to and delineated as a concept elsewhere, but not expanded on clinically.

I found this an enjoyable first piece of research, reconnecting me to my previous work but also

reframing and enlivening it. An offshoot of the study is my decision to train in cranio-sacral therapy, to deepen my own body's journey. I am certain it will add interesting dimensions to the 'body of experience' represented here.

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