

Peter Lawrence

“How to be at Home”

based on my experience in a sensory awareness workshop

After nine hectic weeks travelling in the U.S.A. last year, observing, listening and talking, I desperately needed to come home. Not to Australia, but to myself.

I hoped to do this in a ten day Sensory Awareness workshop in July with Charlotte Selver and her husband Charles Brooks on Monhegan Island, Maine. I had read a couple of short articles by Charlotte, and Charles Brooks' book on Sensory Awareness. I had heard audio tapes of one of Charlott's workshops. They had whetted my appetite. So sensory awareness and 'taking time out' was the pull to Monhegan.

Travelling east in a Greyhound bus I was surprised to hear a professor of forestry enthusing about this island, unknown to me, as the second most beautiful place in the U.S.A. I never discovered what the first was. So as well as time to absorb my experiences and be with myself, there was the bonus of a beauty spot.

The bus journey took 3 days and nights from Fort Collins through the mid West, New York and Boston. With tired eyes and a weary, unwashed body, I looked forward to Monhegan and sensory awareness as an oasis. I slept overnight and washed in a guest house in a small fishing village at Port Clyde (where lobsters abound) and then embarked on the 'Laura B' for the one hour \$7 ferry trip to Monhegan, an island used in summer by returning residents and New York artists refreshing themselves in nature. To this setting for 4 weeks every year come groups of Charlotte's 'breathers' as the locals affectionately call them, to do their sensing and breathing in the school house and to 'wander on high' over the island. I had arrived. Now I was a 'breather'.

Charlotte has been doing this work in the U.S.A. since 1940. She describes it as "the gradual unfolding and cultivation of sensibility, of greater range and delicacy of feeling, which brings about concurrently the awakening and freeing of our innate energies. The work is practised through the activity of sensing in an atmosphere of quiet and peace." Now I knew why Monhegan was chosen. "The aim is to sense more clearly what is happening in your organism and to give yourself freedom to explore sensitively and to learn from this."

The goal is to find your natural functioning. To put aside your 'second nature', your conditioning, and discover your naturalness. How do you do this? Essentially by being awake to what you are doing, by losing your ideas about your behaviour and instead, by feeling how your behaviour is. By allowing your

organs to function in their own right without interfering with them. By valuing your senses as guides to your living because your senses are clear but your mind is stale and cluttered up with conditioning and learning. Fritz Perls gives a similar message when he advises: "go out of your mind and come to your senses." 'Don't push the river, it flows by itself' conveys a similar message from Barry Stevens of being guided by your sensations and not going against them.

"The four dignities of man: sitting, standing, lying and walking" were activities we explored in the workshop. All of these involve our relationship to gravity. Charlotte says we do not learn these activities, we discover them through our sensing; and our sensing includes experimenting, readjusting and allowing changes to take place within us and also in our relation to the ground and gravity.

Two of the workshop activities which enabled me to return to my natural functioning were touching and slapping. You can touch and slap others as well as yourself.

Touching mobilizes or soothes you: it makes sensing easier; it increases your emotional reactivity; and it allows your inner changes to come about more easily. The touching is the kind that gives contact to another quietly and without overt manipulation. Charles Brooks says touching is simply coming into "full permissive contact with another person. There is work in touching, working to try out our hands not as agents of our will but as organs of perception. To come to the other quietly and without overt manipulation is normally very moving to the person touched. The toucher is apt to feel something of subtle movement of living tissue. To permit contact is to permit and necessarily to experience the natural reinforcement that the living has for the living."

The process involves you touching for a time, for example, another's knee arm or head without disturbing what you feel is living there and without lessening your connection to that living part.

Slapping part of yourself or another person says: 'Wake up inside, wake up and refresh yourself.' Tapping does this too. The quality of your slapping is constantly explored and is not determined by your conditioning but by your sensing of what is appropriate to you and to the other person. What is appropriate to the tension you sense, or the tissue you are in contact with, or how the person receives your slapping. "How do I know where and how to slap? I can sense it." After slapping has stopped, you allow the experience to continue like the vibrations created after a bell is struck and allowed to continue without interference. Charlotte vividly illustrates this by striking a brass pot with a cushioned drum stick and allowing the vibrations to continue. In contrast she strikes the pot again and then places her hands around it, stopping the vibrations.

Try slapping yourself in response to your needs when sitting, lying or standing. You know what you need. You know where there is tension. You know where

there is a call for adjustment. You know where there is a call for attention. Stop in response to your inner demands. Digest your slapping and allow adjustments to occur. Then if you are working with another person and you discontinue the slapping, tapping or touching, then depart cleanly and clearly from the other person with no other message, frill or magic. Allow these actions to continue in your partner and in yourself without any extra movement or words.

In this work of discovery, you attend to changes you permit in your breathing. If you allow changes in your breathing, how then do your organs and other bodily activities want to be? If you allow changes in your body and activities how does your breathing want to be? Zen followers come to discover that 'Breathing is what one is.' Charles Brooks comments that "There is always breathing if nothing more in your living." Breathing is living and living is breathing.

Here is an example of an experience offered in the workshop:

Pair up with a partner. . . From standing bend over forward with your arms hanging. When ready, signal your partner to start slapping along your spine up to your shoulders, neck and head.

How does your hanging feel when it becomes more and more comfortable? How is your breathing when you allow your hanging to become comfortable?

Then your partner, when he senses it is appropriate, stops slapping, and you both allow the experience to continue within you.

When you are ready and with eyes closed come up to standing. Experience a gentle return without holding back anywhere in the process.

*Feel where you land.
Where does everything want to be now? Do you allow things to be where they want to be?
Where do your arms want to hang? What adjustments do you allow?
What adjustments do you allow in your breathing? Discover your standing.*

After this experience, share if you wish.

Talking of aches and pains, Charlotte comments "It is not a question of this or that ache but a question of mistreating ourselves. Of not understanding why something is disorder. It is disorder because you don't fulfil what you are doing. People become tired when they are standing not because they are standing but because they are not standing. People get weak backs when they are sitting not because their backs are weak but because they are not sitting."

In relation to the world, Charlotte sees our sensory organs as entrance doors through which sensations (odours, tastes, sounds, light) enter us. There they are received, absorbed and digested by the whole self for the process of 'becoming'. She illustrates by contrasting seeing with looking, hearing with listening and suggests giving up the effort to look and listen and instead letting the sensations come into your eyes and ears.

For me the workshop and the process of discovering my natural functioning was a gentle unfolding of who I am and being aware of the energy available when letting my self and my body do what they know what to do. I was not caught up with where this process might lead (i.e. skeletons in my cupboard) but was filled by the process itself. The distribution within me moved towards balance, evenness and spaciousness. My head did its own work - head work, my back did its own work - back work and I was surprised to discover that they and my other parts knew how to function. And my breathing adjusted to and assisted these changes. The workshop gave me a taste sufficient to continue the process of discovering my natural functioning.

For me the paradox is on the one hand hearing and seeing Charlotte and Charles and in my mind conceptualising what I sense as wisdom and the proper direction for my growth, and on the other hand after digesting all this, hearing them say in each session: "Throw away all you learned from us and be guided by your own sensations."

Oh to be a breather and a senser and to pay homage to my living. I recommend it, But forget what I say. Allow your own senses to inform you.

References

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