

Embodying Nature, Becoming Ourselves: An Eco-Somatic Journey

Jamie McHugh

*"The great sea has sent me adrift;
it moves me
like a reed in a great river.
Earth and the great weather move me,
have carried me away,
and fill my inward parts with joy." - Uvavnuk, Iglulik woman shaman*

"Our inner life is complete when it merges into nature and becomes one with it." - D.T. Suzuki

We are elements of nature: our soma and psyche are reflections of the planet, each intricately embedded in the other. In this era of rapid information processing, high-speed technology, and sedentary workplaces in urban environments, it can be challenging to remember this essential relationship. We can lose our ground and our connection to the planet on the freeway of life, especially when our minds juggle so much input, expectation, and obligation. The body and soul often get left behind in this overwhelm as we shut down and tune out to cope.

How do we revive the weary body and the neglected soul? One place to start is through sensory-motor encounters with ecosystems that offer refuge: ocean, woods, rivers and meadows. As a somatic artist and movement therapist, I have witnessed this many times over the past 25 years leading groups into these wild places. The soul of the Earth is powerful medicine, and my job as a guide is to create the conditions for people to connect with place and receive the healing that arises from these encounters. People come to these retreats wound up, depleted, anxious and scattered, and leave nourished, revived, radiant and calm. This approach to regeneration - "Embodying Nature" – features somatic-expressive resources as the doorway into relationship with self, others and the environment. These three unique ecosystems are addressed and overlap:

- Personal Ecosystem of Self
- Natural Ecosystem of Place
- Social Ecosystem of the Group

In the Embodying Nature approach, we transition from the compression of clock time to the spaciousness of Earth time by immersing ourselves in our body's sensory world where attention to sensation, feeling and perception opens the readily available channels of inner communication. We encounter the living dreamscape of the natural world with the preverbal languages and sensory capacities of our animal body. And we form a temporary community of fellow travelers sharing the same focus and elemental languages in this ecosystem, expressing the poetry and personal meaning that arises to solidify our experience.

All three ecosystems are explored with a combination of:

1) The Five Somatic Technologies

2) Five-Part Conceptual Map

1) Breath, Vocalization, Contact, Movement, and Stillness are the five indigenous somatic technologies gifted to us by nature to both access our body wisdom and expand upon it. (For more on these five, see this article [here](#).) The use of these five create the conditions for receptive awareness and expressive response by diminishing the “white noise” of thought. We redirect the ramblings of our mind into the sensory coherence of our body with these somatic technologies. Presence in our bodies gives us a felt sense of security, just enough to temporarily abandon the tried and true ways of habit and allow new information to emerge. I can feel my solidity and my fluidity as I become more aware of the universe in me. Little by little, through the movement of my breath, the benevolent contact of my hands, the expression of my voice and the stillness of contentment, I know where I am in myself. I can experiment and try something new.

One of the pathways I use is based on a developmental movement sequence seen in infants: Yield, Push, Reach, Grasp and Pull. Yielding into sand and allowing full support precedes pushing against; feeling my boundaries and the support of the ground precedes taking the risk of reaching out into space; and going where I want to what I want and bringing it to me, completes the trajectory of this basic imprint. What we did automatically as infants and young children, we now consciously embody as adults - rocking, creeping crawling, rolling, etc. Basic movement re-calibrates our civilized bodies and alters our state of consciousness so we can come closer to our primal nature. This return to the origins of life and a beginner’s mind opens up perception in an unfamiliar way.

2) From this beginners mind of inner sense perceptions and primitive movement, we bridge to an expressive relationship with nature in whatever ecosystem we are occupying by exploring the essence of sky, ocean, rock, and even other people. The input of direct sensory experience stimulates associations, feelings, and images that are made visible in the sensorimotor output of creative responses. Nature can guide us from the outside in as well as from the inside out with the following activities as a map for connecting our inner and outer landscapes:

- Witness
- Contact
- Mirror
- Respond
- Rest

Witness rock – *be still, open and receptive to it. Take at least 3 breaths to receive this particular rock.*

Contact rock - use different qualities of touch and various body parts, i.e. use hands or feet, belly or back.

Mirror rock – imitate and physically become what you perceive. Are you the solidity, stability or density?

Respond to rock – use your voice, movement and stillness.

Rest - letting your mind and focus float in open attention to assimilate and just be.

This is a process of mutual exploration and individual discovery. By creating a container with a focus and multiple activities, people are engaged at their own pace and in their own rhythm - of movement and stillness and of safety and risk. And since we are human, personal meaning always emerges - we do not have to force it to happen. The activities provide the structure for stimulating experience, offering each person an opportunity for creative and emotional fulfillment to arise from within. Satisfaction arises in so many unique ways. For one woman, a highlight was feeling safe enough to fall asleep in the woods; for another, it was about rising to the challenge of submerging herself in the cold, forceful water; while for still another, it was about simple self acceptance – biding her time on a moss covered rock in the middle of a stream while allowing herself to daydream and not feel compelled to do anything.

When we let go and follow the motor impulses, desires, and inputs from all our senses, and allow spontaneous expression to happen without pre-determining the outcome, the potentially inhibitory burden of “being creative” or “being authentic” falls away. This is adult kindergarten - we play with the toys (somatic technologies) and the games (the map) at the playground (the natural ecosystem) by ourselves and with each other. We give ourselves permission to be 5 years old again, alive with the basic openness, curiosity, and wonder of that age as we explore our surroundings. This active imagination in nature and play state of mind opens the portals for uncovering a fuller range of bodily self-expression, from the very delicate and nuanced to the raw and unrefined. Our palette of possibilities is mirrored back to us by the complexity of the environment and all the various elements that make up that particular ecosystem.

This experience of romancing our inner and outer nature in these retreats is a training ground for inhabiting ourselves more intimately, and living responsively as bodies, as creatures of the planet, and as lovers of the Earth. We return to our lives embedded with a deep imprint from the larger body and remember our place in the family of things. This is how I embody, and teach others to embody, the place we call home.