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Using Somatic Awareness as a Guide for Making Healthy Life Choices By Silver Love

In 1973, I was career counselor in a progressive and humanistic-oriented college, Santa Fe Community College, in Gainesville, Florida. People were coming to me in a career center for guidance with feelings of emptiness and confusion concerning their career choices. They were more aware of what the external world, including parents and other authority figures, would find acceptable for them to do with their lives than what they themselves felt they would like to do. In fact, I quickly discovered that most people I counseled had no idea as to what their own inner needs were and how to identify them. Feeling called to explore this problem, my colleague, Robert Sterling, and I spent the next five years developing a process of self-awareness that would be useful in helping people to find a reliable, inner reference upon which to base life decisions.

Using the term *principles* in the same manner that Johnson (1986) uses this term in the original sense of the meaning as “beginnings” (p. 4) or the sources of discovery, I would like to share the underlying principles of our work. These principles were found by examining how we developed our work and the mysteries that intrigued us and led us to

develop a strategy or technique for working with others. I would like to share these principles because they hold a key to somatic awareness that is still unexplored today, yet much needed to understand our true inner nature, both individually and collectively, and to illuminate us in choosing a path of unity, creativity, and health for ourselves and as a human family.

Accessing the Body's Internal Record of Inner Needs

Many people seeking our career guidance expressed to us that they had an inner conflict between what they thought they should or should not do for a career and what they felt about it. To explore the source of this inner confusion, we first turned to Jung's (1959) theory that there are two distinct rational functions of judgment

in the psyche — thinking and feeling. He points out the problem of the one-sided dominance of the thinking function as happening when the feeling function becomes dependent upon thinking. In this case, feeling is merely kept as an accompaniment to thinking, which may learn to operate around an external system of thought that conflicts with the feeling function. Thus, the person's thinking may not be relevant to what is valued internally and may be divorced from the awareness of the body and its needs. In this case, thinking dominates and the feeling function is suppressed. It appeared that many people we were seeing were suffering from the domination of their thinking function and expressing the emptiness that domination caused. We postulated that if a person is overly dominated by externalized thinking that suppresses the awareness of feeling values, the organism suffers because the person's inner needs are not met.

Winnicott (1971) suggests that the origin of the dominance of externalized thinking begins in early childhood. He found that the child creates a false self, hiding the authentic self or true inner being. The child learns the necessity of dominating inner needs and feelings by pleasing others. Combining the theories of Jung (1959)

and Winnicott (1971) points to an understanding that the people we were counseling were having a conflict between their thinking and feelings, and that it actually began in early childhood with a loss of awareness of their inner needs. Our task was then to develop a process that would assist people in recovering the awareness of their inner needs that were lost during early childhood and in bringing this awareness into the decision-making process in the present issues of their lives. This opened up the question of whether there is a record in the psyche of how well these inner needs are met. Is there a stored memory of the consciousness of these inner needs as they were lived and met or not met? If so, how could we access this record? Where in the person would we look for this record?

Certainly this record would not be accessed exclusively through the use of the thinking function, for it was the thinking that dominated the feelings and awareness of inner needs in the first place. Ruling out the idea of merely thinking back to early childhood recollections to find when a person first lost the awareness of having inner needs, we realized that our explorations must include feelings as a guide to access the internal record. But where were the feelings located in the body, which ones should we use, and how would we go about using them to find this record of experiences and inner needs?

The Anatomy of Feelings

We found that as people talked to us about the confusion that they experienced, they often expressed the emotion of guilt, which they generally described feeling somewhere in the solar plexus to the heart area of the body. Many people also described this feeling of guilt as being accompanied by an underlying feeling of emptiness in the hara (the area just below the navel) to the solar plexus (the area where the lowest ribs conjoin at the breast bone). In exploring

this emptiness related to the emotion of guilt, people expressed that it was due to the lack of the feeling of acceptance and was accompanied by a strong sense of aloneness. We postulated that underlying the emotion of guilt, there is a deep feeling of emptiness in the gut region of the body that often identifies the lack of fulfillment of the person's need for acceptance.

Many people also identified to us the feeling of fear and feeling out of control because they perceived that their authentic self had to be suppressed in order to be acceptable to others. When people believed that they had to play a role or over-identify with the persona or mask that they presented to the world, they felt fear and a loss of freedom of the use and awareness of their own innate responses to life. As in the feeling of guilt, we found that underlying the emotion of fear that was generally identified somewhere in the solar plexus to the heart area of the body, people often described an accompanying feeling of emptiness in the hara to the solar plexus. We postulated that underlying the emotion of fear, there is a deep feeling of emptiness in the gut area of the body that often identifies the lack of fulfillment of the need for being in control of one's own responses to life and feeling free to respond naturally.

While people expressed many emotional feelings related to what was happening in their objective world, the feeling of emptiness in their gut area seemed consistently to be more basic to the overall state of their organism. We postulated that the gut area response of emptiness and fullness is a gauge of whether the organism is getting what it needs in life or not—whether a person is on the path of being fulfilled in terms of innate needs and purpose, or is on the path of being empty and unfulfilled in terms of innate needs and purpose.

Emptiness was not identified by the people we were seeing as having a conceptual aspect, as did emotions like guilt and fear. The awareness of emptiness was expressed as a purely somatic feeling

without a logical cause or predicted outcome attached. The experience of emptiness in the gut area seems to be related to what Gendlin (1981) calls the felt sense, the body's sense of a situation or event. While the felt sense is pre- conceptual, it holds the meaning of the inner experience. Emptiness in the gut area, like Gendlin's felt sense, was not usually described to us as a sharp feeling like an emotion. In describing the felt sense, Gendlin points out that although an emotion might seem dominant at a given moment, "below it and behind it lie something huge and vague"(p. 35). He points out that this hugeness and vagueness is not something that we experience by the mind but by the body. Emptiness was expressed to us as a general state of the organism that was felt in the body and could not be dominated by the thinking function.

The idea that there could be a felt sense like a gut feeling of emptiness or fullness underlying the emotional feelings, is reflected in theories of emotion that include an awareness of feedback from one's own body as contributing to the experience of emotion

(Laird & Bresler, 1990). This is not to say that our emotions are based on our physical reactions alone. Emotion theorists argue that our perceptions of a situation also have an important effect upon our emotions (Viscott, 1990). From the responses people were giving us, we postulated that the emotions are developed from the awareness of a combination of a person's perception of a given situation and the feelings of emptiness or fullness experienced in the gut area. As the person begins to think about why the feeling in the gut is empty or full, emotions like guilt and fear are formed as a combination of thinking and feeling.

Because the thinking function could be influenced by the views of others, an emotional feeling could be a logical attempt to express the organismic state of being from an external rather than an internal view. This external view could be completely void of the

awareness of the inner somatic needs of the person and support a misinterpretation of the essence of the organism itself. We found that these emotions, or psychosomatic feelings, were usually described by people as being experienced in the solar plexus to the heart area of the body; whereas, feelings of emptiness and fullness were described by people as being experienced in the hara to the solar plexus. We therefore postulated that there are two levels of feelings — emotional feelings and purely somatic instinctual feelings — with the solar plexus being the meeting point.

The Instinctual Response Center in the Hara

For the people seeking our guidance, the lack of fulfillment of either the need for acceptance or control of one's own responses seemed to register as a feeling of emptiness; fulfillment of either need seemed to register as a feeling of fullness. In order

to understand how this occurred, as it may seem like an illogical equation, it is useful to imagine that our response center in the gut area is much like the gas gauge in a car. While empty and full are on extreme ends of the gauge, there seems to be fullness and emptiness that is relative to these extremes. If the gas gauge on a car is on empty and we pour into its tank even a gallon of gas, we can be elated in the fact that we can keep driving down the road, at least momentarily. We found that as long as people perceived that they were moving in the direction of gaining a balance of acceptance and control of their responses, they experienced a feeling of fullness, even though it may be relative fullness. Similarly, if people perceived that they were moving in the direction of a loss of a balance of these two basic needs, they experienced a feeling of emptiness, even though it may be relative emptiness.

We found that it is necessary for people to continually replenish

the needs of acceptance and control of their own responses. They are vital needs and the emptiness and fullness that register as a gauge of how well these needs are met, is engaged in the moment of experiencing. The somatic feelings in the hara to the solar plexus area of the body reflect the sense of the moment. Just as eating a meal today registers a feeling of fullness that only lasts for a number of hours and we feel a need to eat again each day, the needs for feeling acceptance and being in control of one's own responses are cyclic and require regular attention and maintenance to be fulfilled. For example, we may feel somewhat full if we perceive that we already have acceptance, but there may also be a nagging feeling of emptiness due to lack of being in control of our responses and feeling free to respond naturally. Then from some new act of expressing the authentic self, we may begin to feel an increased sense of fullness from the additional experience of feeling in control of our own responses. In this case, we feel a greater sense of fullness with a balance of both needs for acceptance and control being met. This sense of fullness may be somewhat lasting, but the need to continue to feel in control of our own responses will surely become apparent with a growing feeling of emptiness if we do not continue to take the freedom to respond naturally. Likewise, if we perceive a sudden loss of acceptance from important people in our lives, we could plummet with a growing feeling of emptiness.

While the need for acceptance and feeling connected to other human beings is more clearly understood, the need that we found people to have for the feeling of being in control of one's own responses requires some clarification. We found that feeling in control was the opposite of controlling one's responses and feeling out of control. Feeling out of control was expressed as complying with one's perceived external demands of the environment, both social and physical. Consistently, people expressed that they experienced great effort in complying with what they imagined were the demands of others. In contrast to the experience of

controlling oneself and feeling out of control, there was an effortlessness expressed in the experience of feeling in control and following one's natural responses.

We found that the basic needs for feeling acceptance and in control of one's responses seemed to function much like a teeter-totter, with one need on each side of the scale. Often one need was given up for another, but the human organism was consistently trying to find a balance of these two needs. We saw from reflection on somatic feelings with people that a struggle for a balance of these two needs was present in behavior from infancy throughout the entire span of adult life. Because these two needs were found consistently to be present in people with a variety of ages, gender, and ethnic backgrounds, we viewed them as possibly shared universally by all human beings, and thus instinctual in the human family.

The duality and paradox of these two instinctual needs lies in the fact that there is really no such thing as acceptance without feeling in control of one's own responses. It is from the combination of both feeling acceptance and being in control of one's own responses that a person experiences the freedom to be oneself, and thus fulfill their life purpose. People coming to us often would say *I want to be loved for who I really am*. And people found that when they felt perfectly free, they desired most to share their experiences with someone else whom would accept them as they truly are. Viscott (1992) posits that the most fulfilling relationships are those in which people are free to be themselves. He views that when there is a feeling of loneliness in a relationship, it is the longing for the sacrificed part of oneself given up for the relationship. We found in our counseling that if the instinctual needs of acceptance and feeling in control of one's own natural responses do not feel like they exist in balance, it feels as if they do not exist at all, and people feel empty. People expressed to us that their lives were in constant transition, and that they were often

experimenting and yearning for a balance of these two instinctual needs.

It became clear from the communication with people in our counseling experiences that the instinctual needs for acceptance and feeling in control were rooted in the somatic experience. In our experience with people, the gauge of the fulfillment of these two instinctual needs, like the biological need for food, was located in the gut area. The feelings of emptiness and fullness that were experienced as signals of the instinctual needs of acceptance and being in control of one's own responses were easily confused with somatic feelings related to the biological instinct of hunger. With its attendant sensations of emptiness and fullness, this confusion concerning the similarity in feeling of these needs in the gut area seemed to explain why there was a propensity for some people toward over-consuming food. People expressed to us that they attempted to fill empty feelings in the gut area with food. This caused over-consumption and a denial of the real needs of the person that could result in food addictions, as well as other unhealthy life choices.

Reassessing the Meaning of Experience through Somatic Reflection

We found that in order to get in touch with their instinctual feeling responses of emptiness and fullness, there was a need for people to reflect back on somatic feelings to a much earlier time in their lives. It seemed sensible to trace the feelings in the present back to the earliest possible experience so that the original source of the issues of the need of acceptance and control of one's own responses could be worked out. We often found that people were more aware of emotional feelings than the somatic instinctual feelings of emptiness and fullness. Because the emotional feelings are directly connected in the solar plexus to the more purely somatic level of

feelings in the hara, we used the awareness of them as a signal and starting point to become aware of the feelings of emptiness and fullness.

Reflecting on the instinctive somatic feelings of emptiness and fullness— on the impact of life and its meaning to the person— gave people access to the record of their inner awareness. People were often amazed to find that a reflection on the awareness of somatic feelings, rather than thinking back through the details of life events, gave them access to recover memories of both sensory information and the awareness of their inner instinctual needs. We found that when the logical function of the ego became directly aware of the instinctive somatic feelings of emptiness and fullness in the hara to the solar plexus, the person often experienced a reevaluation of the importance of their inner needs and a feeling shift occurred within them from an empty to a full feeling. The awareness of their instinctual needs often helped people to see the reasons for their behavior as children trying to fulfill these needs and overcome the emptiness of not having them met. They often found in somatic reflection that the assessments they made as children about their behaviors were ones that they were told by authorities in their lives and were made with a child's limited information about the social and physical world. In the wisdom and light of adulthood, the new assessments of the reasons for their behavior were usually quite different from the ones they learned about themselves at the time of the early experience.

With a profound new awareness of their instinctual needs and the essence of their inner being and human nature, people expressed a feeling of compassion for themselves and others. This was followed by a release of tension in the body and a return of vital energy. With a greater feeling of self-acceptance, people indicated that they felt free again to be themselves and to make decisions about their lives. It was at this point that we found people began to experience a lack of confusion and a union of their thinking and

feeling functions, consistently reported that they felt calm and centered with body and mind as one, and experienced a greater feeling of caring for themselves and others. People then expressed a feeling of a flow of creative energy and intuitive thought concerning what they wanted to do with their lives, and they were able to make career decisions and other personal choices that lead them toward healthy growth and development.

Note: The principles in this account, as well as a detailed protocol for the use of the technique Robert Sterling and I developed called the Somatic Reflection Process (SRP), is explored further in a conceptual study and depth inquiry with myself and five other people in my Sonoma State University thesis for the Depth Psychology Master's Program (Love, 2005).

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