

ON BEING IN TOUCH WITH ONESELF – excerpts from a talk by Charlotte Selver

Have you ever wondered, when you woke up in the morning, just in the transition between sleep and waking, at the miracle that you could *feel* yourself, feel whether you were rested or not, feel the warmth of your limbs? that when you opened your eyes you could *see* your room, that the details came to you without your making the slightest effort? Were you astonished by the fact that, with a motion of your hand, you could remove your blanket, get up and *move* through your room?

Did it occur to you as interesting that when you took your breakfast you could *taste* the orange juice, taste whether the coffee was too weak, too strong, or just to your liking? Did you realize when the telephone rang that you *heard* it – without trying to – and that you *knew* it was the telephone and not the doorbell? All this belongs to your biological equipment!

Did you notice your ability not only to distinguish *what* your friend said, but also the *mood* in which he said it, his hesitation, his interest? Have you ever thought about these marvelous capacities of yours? Did you wonder about the fact that *thoughts* came to you in response to what he said – that you *remembered* things? All this is the property of your organism, your living self.

Some people might wonder at the fact that I am including facets of awareness that are often attributed to what is called the “mind”. But I would say that, as I look out from here, I see *people*. I do not see minds, I do not see bodies – but I see *human beings*. I assume you have the same impression when you look around. So I doubt that we could add that until mind and body are commonly experienced and understood as what they really are – one rich, unified organization, functioning as a complex unity – people will continue to be to one degree or another self-alienated.

Our natural potential can best be seen by watching children from infancy to two years, because at that age there is the best chance they are still unspoiled. It is wonderful to see what a child will undertake when he is given the opportunity to move around freely and is not interfered with (whether it be by hindering him, interrupting his activities, or helping him) when no one is ambitious for him, and he is “permitted to live in peace and develop according to his own pace and individual needs”, as stated by the Hungarian pediatrician, Dr. Emmy Pickler.

The young child regards everything with interest; he explores each movement as it becomes possible for him.

When he comes to sitting, he sits in a marvelous posture which nobody taught him. Coming to standing is a tremendous job of balancing. When he plays he gives himself entirely to what he does. It is this wholeness and directness which is so striking in children who are still intact. His muscles and joints give easily; he has a perfect sense for the space he has at his disposal, and – extremely important – he relies on his base of support, whether it is the floor or a rolling stick, and whether he is squatting, sitting or standing.

Even before he can speak, a child can communicate what he wants – and does not want – if the adult would only listen. But what if the mother does not listen, and insists on what she wants rather than what the baby wants? Sooner or later many a child is overruled, either by force or by learning he has to compromise if he wants to have mother's love and approval. All kinds of devices, rewards, and threats will be used by the mother to achieve this. In eating, for instance, what is the result? A dulling of taste, an ignoring of even the clearest messages, such as whether or not he has had enough.

"I don't seem to know; mother knows!"

Some of his spontaneous self-assurance gets lost, and where does the genuine expressiveness of his whole little self go, if not into holding back, or becoming lifeless?

Much scientific work is being done today to determine whether, in functioning and expression, *genetic* factors are responsible or whether *experience-determined* factors have left their imprint. My personal experience is that all too often genetic factors are blamed when actually wrong conditioning has created harmful changes. The emphasis in

organismic-re-orientation is on release of these modifiable elements.

I have spoken about how unfailing children's responses are, and in what basic ways self-alienation can be created, with simultaneous physical hindrances. Other interferences may happen at an even earlier stage and continue to happen throughout our development. For example, insensitive handling by the mother at a time when the baby most needs love and support may make the baby pull back, and lay the basis for feelings of insecurity – which express themselves in contractions, holding of breath, and other malfunctions.

Taboos may be created when the baby explores himself physically and finds there are some regions he is told to keep away from. Also, coaxing to premature physical "achievements" on the part of ambitious parents may result in unnecessary and harmful effort, sometimes producing weaknesses such as bowed legs, curved backs, flat feet and so on, to say nothing of the loss of the feeling of satisfaction and pride which goes with the freedom to explore, and with self-accomplishment.

It is not difficult to see the effect of the constant admonition of parents, teachers and important adults to: "Speak thus and so! Sit straight! Put your shoulders back! Chest up, buttocks tucked under!" Advice like this, if followed (and who has not at least tried?) blocks spontaneous motion and stifles natural behavior.

And what about such advice as: "Pay attention! Answer quickly! Make an effort! Think hard!" Have you thought of the psychosomatic conflict and confusion which such remarks must create?

The sad thing, and at the same time the telling one, is that most children give in, often with anger and a feeling of defeat, and with a blotting out of the protest which is both psychological and physical — and with this they drift away from the true language of the organism. They give up, without knowing the great value of what they are giving up.

So, we can understand how various attitudes develop toward what we call “body”. Often the “body” is taken for granted. People say, “It is best when we do not feel anything of our body.” They mean that when they do not feel anything, it is working smoothly; but when they do feel something, that means trouble. Either they feel discomfort, or have wishes they do not dare to give in to.

Many people use “their bodies” as a means for competition in regard to strength, appearance, sex-appeal — often patterning themselves after current idols. Others, who have been overprotected in childhood, regard “their bodies” with utmost concern, afraid to enjoy living for fear something may happen to “their body”. *Another prevalent attitude is that our head is our only source of information about ourselves.*

To be in contact with ourselves physically is for many a waste of time in a civilization in which everything circles around “doing”, “getting”, “succeeding”, “gaining”, “competing” but with hardly any room for *existing* — existing in a biological sense, simply *being*.

What we *do* for what we call our body is more or less routine: we groom ourselves; we use cosmetics; we diet; we exercise; we take our daily bath. But do all these activ-

ities come from a real sense of self? This indifference to ourselves as living beings does not work.

Such self alienation influences at every moment those who have been exposed to unwise conditioning. In standing or sitting we may hold ourselves according to an image of how one should look in these “positions”, an esthetic idea which has little to do with the laws of nature and where everything is put and posed — or superimposed. We may hold ourselves upright, constricting the abdominal region, with tissues strained — an unnoticed waste of energy — or we may collapse, pulled down by our own weight, and call it “being comfortable” rather than realizing the lack of reactivity, the lack of sensitivity toward the life-activities within us. We make similar discoveries in those basic activities in which we constantly find ourselves, like lying, standing, walking, etc. — any kind of movement and expression.

The primary aim of our approach is to make it possible for a person to re-experience himself as a totality, to bring him back to the degree of aliveness and receptivity of which he is capable. The tool for this process is sensory re-education, or *conscious sensing*. It is that natural activity of the organism which happens just like seeing or hearing. Our organ for sensing — the sensory nervous system — spreads through the entire organism by a multitude of nerves, including the skin. So we really cannot help but be sensing to one degree or another as long as we are awake. *The question is to what degree we allow it, or hinder it, in our daily lives.*

To study sensory phenomena, people need quiet — an

atmosphere of peace and concentration. But many people, when they first come to me, are disturbed about just that quiet. They come to be "exercised"; they want to be "told"; they expect to be "shown". The air is full of questions like, "What is *proper* breathing?" "Where *should* I put my arms?" "What am I *supposed* to do in standing?" "How should I bend?" There is no end to the "shoulds" and "hows" and "supposed tos".

To discover that one can find out for oneself is a revelation. There is a great difference between "knowing" I have a head, "seeing" it in the mirror, and actually *sensing* one's head. It is usually a surprise to the person that he can learn directly, through his own sensations, that right within him is the best source of orientation. Thus, learning to sense opens a whole new world.

In the beginning, some people are looking only for pleasant sensations; but often when I ask, "What do you feel of yourself?" the answer is, "Nothing; nothing hurts me." Only a disturbance is registered by these people. With time, the student becomes less disturbed by his "trouble" signals, as he realizes that feeling a disturbance means that deep down he knows that something else would be more satisfactory — and demands it. He therefore gets interested in what creates the disturbance, and what he could allow for change. Gradually his sensations get clearer. He becomes more aware of what "his body" has to tell him: what feels better, what not so good; where he is alive, where too lifeless; where he rests and where he contracts or presses; where it feels free and where not. This means that he begins to get more in touch with himself.

Often the seemingly least-significant sensations turn out to be most significant. There is no "right" or "wrong", just sensations which come to consciousness and from which we can learn. To be able to get clearer messages, it is necessary for the total self to become awake, receptive and ready for the slightest changes. Yet, most important, there is no need to *do* anything. *Changes will happen by themselves when the organism is allowed to assert its needs.*

Let me repeat, sensing is the tool for all our experiments; through it we become aware of many important things — the functioning of breathing, for instance. It is interesting how many theories of "correct" breathing have been proclaimed. What one learned with one method has to be unlearned with the next. We turn the tables; instead of our educating breathing, we learn from it.

Breathing is the most intimate indicator of our personal condition — something so utterly fine and honest that it should be treated with more humility. In sensory awareness we study breathing in rest, in motion, in our daily activities. We learn to feel and obey its varying rhythm.

What we are constantly dealing with is *reality*. As long as we live, we must breathe. Breathing indicates life. It has an important job to do; it cleans us out, it replenishes us. Imagine what it means for a person to experience this more fully! There is a two-way reactivity — the musculature, by and by, becomes more reactive to breathing, while breathing adjusts itself to the demands of the organism.

In our experiments we learn a lot about our musculature — and about our structure — not as abstract knowledge, but in practical work. We learn through experience

that we have many joints and that they are meant to be used; to give, and not to be rigid. We learn through experience that the spine is a very flexible structure. We learn through experience that seeing happens by itself, that straining of the eyes in order to see only results in strained eyes and impaired – rather than better – vision. We learn that straining to think blocks rather than improves thinking. We learn that stretching our muscles does not mean straining them – that our muscles can expand or contract freely and, in fact, *are meant to give in every motion*.

We learn a lot about our attitudes; we begin very early to distinguish the difference between “doing” and *letting happen*. We become conscious of how we use our energy, conscious of *effort*, and that effort impedes rather than helps us in our tasks.

In our experiments there is much play about *too little* and *too much*. Our days are made up of activities demanding various amounts of energy: we open a letter; we carry a package; we close a window; we wash our dishes; we write or type, or speak, or drive a car. We can exhaust ourselves with the way we handle these tasks (many people do) or we can be stimulated – regenerated – by them, simply by being tuned in for what is now required. *We learn that to be more in touch with ourselves means to be more in touch with what we do*. Then the needed amount of energy is available – not too little, and not too much. Imagine how valuable this information can be in daily life.

Also, in this freeing process long-forgotten memories may flare up, and the origin of hindrances become clear. We may gradually realize that, as adults, we do not need

to stay hampered with these old hindrances, that we can relate *anew*, with shutters more and more open. When a person experiences how good it feels to cooperate with the laws of nature within himself, instead of interfering with them, he may – by the gratification he gets – realize that he is meant to be *open* for life and there is no need to protect himself *against* it.

At the beginning, I spoke of the child’s relation to the earth, the floor, the base of support. He is at home on it; he can rest on it. In using the floor’s good hardness which gives support and offers resistance, he grows strong through it. He moves over it, he learns to act in space. *And he is always supported*.

As we gradually give up our holding back, we adults become increasingly aware that there is something under us inviting us to comfort, always there to support us in everything we do. That something is the earth. We have returned to our home; we are once again children of the earth – related but free. As the young child trusts, and acts in accordance with natural law, which operates both inside and outside of him, couldn’t we, as adults, rediscover what we have not really lost – our natural heritage? Being in touch with natural law as it is working through us is nothing less than being in touch with ourselves. Is this not a wonderful invitation?

The CHARLOTTE SELVER FOUNDATION, a non-profit, educational corporation, was formed under New Jersey law in January of 1971. The purpose of the foundation is to support the work known as sensory awareness as it is taught by Charlotte Selver, and make it better known in its general content.

In pursuing this purpose the foundation plans to publish and disseminate material which would widen the interest in and deepen the understanding of the work. This includes the transcription and editing of existing tapes of workshops and classes, and the recording and filming of future workshops and classes. It plans to: set up a Center or Centers to provide sustained study for those who want to go more deeply into the nature of this practice; make the work more readily available to interested people by offering additional workshops, classes and introductory lecture-demonstrations; answer inquiries regarding the work and where and when it is available.

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