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# Embodied Inner-Knowing

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## Embodied Inner-Knowing

*Chelsea Elizabeth Ernst, Western Washington University*

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### **Abstract**

*Our bodies are ecosystems that are just as profound as the complex communities and systems of the forests that surround us here in the Pacific Northwest. Awareness of our bodies as systems and as intuitive beings can facilitate our positive actions towards each other and the environment. Tonight I will provide space for us to explore this awareness through mindfulness practice, storytelling with words, and storytelling with movement. I hope that these practices will lead to more mindfulness of the way we are in the world and of the ways that the systems of somatics, the brain-gut connection, storytelling, ecosystems, and education constantly dance with each other.*

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### **Keywords: environmental education, somatics, embodied learning**

Thank you all so very much for joining me today. Before we get started, I would like to acknowledge the first people to inhabit and move across this valley: those peoples whose ancestors first began moving through this area just after the recession of a mile-thick ice sheet that carved through these mountains 10,000 years ago. I would also like to acknowledge and express gratitude for this place, the area within and around what is currently known as the North Cascades National Park Complex. This place has taught me and nourished my personal growth unlike any other mentor, and has done so for many others who choose to venture into its wildness. Thanks to North Cascades Institute for providing this space, resources, wonderful people, and for facilitating a profoundly important piece of my education. Thanks to my parents, Lynda and Chip Ernst, and my sister, Rachel Ernst, for supporting me, for being here, and for being my very first mentors. Thanks to Joshua Porter for being the “Leader Who is Hardly Known.” Thanks to Nick Stanger for mentoring me and encouraging me through the mire the past two quarters. Thank you to Terril for pushing me to shoot laser beams out of my toes, commit, make it look good, and engage the hell out of my abs. Immense gratitude goes to my Cohort who are my family, my best friends, beautiful enigmas, and the most fantastic and powerful unicorns to grace the land. Anyone I did not address personally just now holds no less importance to my journey and I’m grateful for your presence.



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## **Setting the Space**

This space we are in is very intentional. We are outdoors because it would be very untrue to my experience in this program to be indoors. In life and especially during this program, I have intentionally sought out discomfort in various ways. These discomforts have taught me a profound amount about my body and my mind. It would also be untrue to the way in which I move through life to stage this expression in a climate-controlled room. I also acknowledge the basic human need to seek warmth and comfort. I encourage you take any steps necessary to be as comfortable as you need to be. There is fire, hot water, decaf coffee, and so many blankets, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, and other warm bodies available to facilitate warmth. Please don't hesitate to move, stretch, or stagnate as much as you need or want. You are so invited to come, go, and move about as your intuition calls you.

Referring back to Kevin Sutton's Capstone Presentation, I invite this space as a "Safe Enough" space. I am vulnerable in this space in a very particular way, as are all of you. I want to acknowledge that vulnerability. I encourage my own free expression and yours; whatever that may look like for each individual. Please respect that each of us is on a different step on our own path and each of us comes to this place from a different entry point. None of these steps, paths, or entry points holds greater value than another. I invite you to acknowledge your judgments and your ego. They are important pieces of your self. With that, I invite you to hear the words of philosopher, J. Krishnamurti: "the highest form of human intelligence is to observe yourself without judgment" (Rosenberg, 2015, pg. 28).

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## **Mindfulness Body Scan**

To fully invite you into awareness of your self in this space, I'd like to verbally lead you through a mindfulness body scan. Please settle yourself into the space you are currently in. To begin, bring awareness to the way you've situated your body: what other surfaces you are in contact with, how much of the ground your body is touching, sensations on your bare skin. I invite you to gently close your eyes. Begin to bring awareness to your breath without intentionally changing its pattern. Notice the length of your inhales and your exhales. During this practice, if your mind is wandering, acknowledge those thoughts. Let them come into your mind, and let them pass.

Bring your awareness to your toes, the soles of your feet, and heels and any sensations lying there. Relax into those sensations. Bring awareness to your lower legs: your ankles, calves, shins, and knees. Moving up to your quads, gluts, and hamstrings; notice any tensions that lie there. Continue up through your torso, becoming aware of the sensations in your belly. How is your food affecting those sensations? Is there movement? Warmth? Tension? Notice how your breath moves your body: down into your belly, down through your lower back, through your upper back and your chest. Feel any sensations and tensions affecting your shoulders, neck, and shoulder blades.

We often hold tensions here. Bring awareness up from your neck, through your spine, to the base of your skull, up through the top of your head. Bring awareness to your face: the way your jaw sits, any tensions in the eyes or forehead, where your tongue sits in your mouth. Finally, bring awareness back to your breath. Has its pattern changed? Have your inhalations and exhalations changed in length?

When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.

Thank you for joining me in that practice.

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### **Organic Intelligence**

For several years, my interests outside of my studies have aligned with holistic health and alternative medicinal practices. Through my formal educational studies, I have focused on art, biology, ecology, and environmental education. The past two years in study with North Cascades Institute and Western Washington University and in life have been an incredible learning and unlearning process for me. As a result, I understand my unique skill set in all of these areas and the role they play in my journey as an environmental educator. Our bodies are an ecological system that is just as profound as the ecosystem we are sitting in right now. Our body's systems are constantly dancing with the systems of our environments. The only way they are separate is where we hold them in our minds. Our bodies are the place that teaches us the most and we are in them most of the time. Everyone's body teaches them lessons, whether or not they acknowledge those lessons.

Our bodies tell stories to us and to those around us constantly, regardless of whether we consciously acknowledge those stories. Our bodies often react to their environment before the mind even consciously acknowledges it. An example of this might be meeting a person for the first time and feeling stomach upset, rapid heart rate, sweaty underarms, and inability to express one's thoughts clearly in verbalizations. In this situation, we may not be aware of danger on a cognitive level, but our body has already queued a sequence of neurophysiological responses that initiate defensive behaviors. These behaviors are often referred to as "fight, flight, or freeze" response (Porges, 2011, pg. 12).

Similarly, the body's structure can tell a story about a part your life more accurately than you remember it. For instance, your spine curves slightly to the left as a result of an old knee injury for which you barely recall the mechanism. The way in which your spine curves affects the way you move through life physically in ways that you may not even notice anymore. Or perhaps the skin on your thighs is slightly loose from a horizontal growth spurt your freshman year of college, one that you may wish you could forget. Maybe you can think of a personal physical characteristic that tells your story in a way your words cannot.

As a result of the stories in your past and the way your environment has shaped your thoughts, you may react to certain events, instances, phrases, words, or stories in ways you cannot exactly explain. Perhaps every time you look into a dark-haired man's eyes, your heart rate increases and your shoulder blades tense. Or maybe every time you hear the word "moist" you feel inexplicably uncomfortable. Perhaps when you express your true emotions, you feel a lump at the base of your throat.

Bodies also tell stories through dance, performance art, or through movement better for many folks than they could ever explain in words. The way one expresses oneself physically without conscious effort tells a huge story in itself. In the same way this is true, the way people receive your physical or verbal expression without conscious effort says a lot about them as a person. There is no way to tell how any given word or movement you make will affect another.

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**Activity: Bodily Reactions to Words**

I would like to play with the idea of the body reacting to words in an activity. In this activity, we will be in pairs. I have here two sets of lists of words. Each pair of people will receive both lists. Do not show your lists to each other. Each person will read their list aloud to the other person. While you are reading, give space between each word and notice what part of your body feels a reaction to that word. Do you feel it in your gut? Your heart? Your head? Your big toe? Your vocal chords? Nowhere at all? While you are being read to, notice where you feel that word, perhaps closing your eyes if that helps. Feel free to add a word or two to the list that are particularly powerful words for you personally. Please spread out around the area if you need space. You can now get into pairs. I'll pass out the lists.

Words on lists:

moist	radiant
glacial	toxic
putrid	succulent
companionship	Bernie Sanders
Donald Trump	environmental

## Debriefing this activity

What did you notice? Were there any notable bodily or physical reactions to particular words? What were those? Were there any unexpected observations? Did the combinations of words on those lists prompt and tensions or observations? What does your observation say about your own story or your own body?

Descriptions of these neurophysiological reactions have over time become cliché phrases that sometimes lose their meaning from overuse. These phrases include, “The hairs stood up on the back of my neck,” “My heart wasn’t in it,” “I had a gut feeling,” or “I could feel them watching me.” These phrases originate with an observation. We make decisions constantly as to whether to remember and act upon these observations, to ignore them, or to acknowledge them and later deem them unimportant. This is our body trying to tell us a story. Are we listening?

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## **Researching the Body’s Story**

There has been a lot of talk recently in the medical community, within a variety of fitness and wellbeing communities, and in the media about the “brain-gut” connection. This idea has become immensely popular; spawning the popularity of fermented foods, yogurt, probiotic and prebiotic supplements and a general focus on one’s internal ecosystem. To me this is incredibly interesting, as it seems to dive into an area that medicine and science cannot yet fully explain, but for which there are a host of fascinating theories. Our body is an incredible ecosystem, filled and covered with microscopic beings whose numbers are beyond my fathoming. Folks are beginning to acknowledge that these beings, the harmful bacteria *and* the beneficial beings, have a profound effect on our bodily functions. In addition, we are beginning to understand their effect on our cognitive functions. It is a common understanding that the bacterial cells of our bodies outnumber our human cells 10:1. A study that came out in January of this year estimates that ratio to be closer to 1:1 (Sender et al., 2016). This knowledge makes it challenging to ignore the possibility that these creatures that move and dance around our immediate ecosystem affect our cognitive behavior. Recent studies at UCLA show that changing your gut bacteria with prebiotic and probiotic foods directly affects brain function (Champeau, 2013). Other evidence shows that over 90% of serotonin, a hormone responsible for mood regulation, is produced in the gut (Paddock, 2015). This brings the phrase “I had a gut feeling” to mind.

The public’s recent fascination with this information is not coincidental. We are fascinated to relearn what our perceived societal separation from the ecosystem has allowed us to forget. We are relearning that what we surround ourselves by and introduce to our system affects everything, from our bathroom schedule to the way we respond to the stories of our partners and friends.

The concept of the brain-gut connection draws my attention to the roles the subconscious mind and nervous system play in how we act—or don't act—upon our intuition. It calls upon those stories in my life when my body begins to respond before my conscious mind comprehends the reason. Becoming conscious and aware of these moments has been key to better understanding my stories and myself.

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### ***Intuitive Response Story***

It took me quite some time to settle upon one story to share with you about my body's response to intuition, to a "gut-feeling." The more I ponder the concept, the more stories I see unfolding before me daily. The one I would like to share with you, the first story I think of when I think of following my intuition, is about a mountain lion.

Two summers ago, I lived in my car for a month and drove from Asheville, North Carolina to this place. On this journey, I let my intuition guide me to various magical locations across the country. One of these places was southern Utah. During my stay in Glendale, just east of Zion National Park, I met a man called Tom who cooked dinner for me on his back porch where dozens of hummingbirds buzzed around feeders, nearly landing on my face more than once. Tom shared his stories of adventures around the country and shared directions to some of his secret places in Zion. Among these places was a trail to some secret pictographs, which I was advised not to miss.

The next morning, I drove to the pullout Tom told me about, grabbed my water, and found the trail. I had never hiked alone in the desert before and I was very aware of this as the distance between my body and the trailhead increased. The morning sun was hot. It was already about 90°. The trail surface varied between sand that was difficult to differentiate between trail and stream washout and swirling coral pink and orange sandstone slabs. I saw varieties of juniper and sage I'd never seen before, watched curious lizards doing pushup dances on smooth rock, and saw small unidentified songbirds dart in and out of small, gnarled bushes. About three quarters of a mile in, I began to feel freedom and content, with brief images of that film *127 Hours* where James Franco gets his arm stuck under a boulder only rarely flashing through my mind.

As I climbed down over the top of a chunk of sandstone, I noticed the noise from the road has disappeared and I was on my own. I felt fantastic. My skin was cool and dry and the sun warmed the top of my head. My breathing felt clear and even in the dry desert air. My pace quickened in anticipation of finding the pictographs under the sandstone ledge Tom described.

Another mile or so in, I noticed the silence again. Not only could I not hear the road, I also had not heard or seen any wildlife in several minutes. I noticed a tension in the space between my stomach and my heart and my hands now felt clammy despite the dry air. I recognized these responses in association with fear. My pace completely

halted. I stood in a hot, slabby valley, cooking between the coral-colored sandstone. I stood, unmoving, for about 10 minutes time.

After a while, I heard the familiar chatter of songbirds flitting through the juniper. I drank a sip of water. In the company of my bird friends, my breathing regulated and the sensation in my gut slowly lifted. I began walking again. A few hundred meters down the trail, I came into a washed out sandy area shaded by large rocks. The junipers here were slightly larger. On an overhung slab about 30 meters away, I could see the pictographs Tom described. As I approached the rock, a strange smell came to my awareness: a smell similar to ammonia. About 20 meters from the pictograph rock, I noticed that along the right side of the trail, parallel my footsteps, in the shade of a juniper tree, were the fresh tracks of a very large cat.

After living in these woods and experiencing a similar sensation on a backpack with my Cohort, I learned that this sensation is common knowledge in correlation with experiencing the presence of a mountain lion. And that the smell is commonly associated with fresh mountain lion urine. My body was producing neurophysiological reactions to fight, flight, or freeze in the desert that day. My intuition told me to stay put: protecting me from or keeping me respectful of what I did not know lie just ahead of me on the trail.

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### **Story Share Activity**

When we pay attention and listen to our inner-knowing, powerful things can happen. Expressions can manifest physically or verbally. Take a moment to think of a story that your body told better than your words or your conscious thought pattern. I'll give you a moment. When you have a story, turn to a partner and share that story. Take about three minutes each. I'll let you know when three minutes have passed.

### **Debriefing this activity**

What did you notice? When you told your story, did you notice any sensations in particular places in your body? Any unexpected sensations or reactions? What does where you felt that story say about you?

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### **Conclusion**

We each have a countless number of these stories we could tell. We could speak them, sing them, dance them, scream them, or keep them silent until every inch of our fascia is crawling to tell the story itself. We have heart stories and we have body stories, but what happens when we don't consciously connect the two? What happens when we



don't recognize our inner knowing? We are all highly intuitive beings. How many of us actually utilize that sensitivity?

Much of what I've shared with you complements the practice of Somatics. This is a field of alternative medicine that emphasizes sensation-based movement and awareness. Thomas Hanna from the Somatic Systems Institute defines Somatics as, "the field which studies the soma: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception. When a human being is observed from the outside -- i.e., from a third-person viewpoint -- the phenomenon of a human *body* is perceived. But, when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human soma" (1986). My experience in environmental education has been tightly tied to my observations as perceived from within: connecting with the ecosystem through a deep connection with myself. It follows that I strive to provide space for others to find that connection.

These themes of somatics, the brain-gut connection, storytelling, ecosystems, and education are in a constant dance with each other, weaving in and out of each others' systems, acknowledging each other, then forgetting, acknowledging each other and acting upon each other, and sometimes completely ignoring each other. Finding my learning style and my calling has been an intuitive process: a process of unlearning in order to relearn my inner-knowing. Much of this has been facilitated for me through movement: somatic movement, dance, and lots of physical activity. My constant ally in life and especially through the past two years has been bodily expression. Learning my environment through exploration, intense activity, climbing hot rock and jumping in frigid water. In addition, practicing aerial fabrics with the Bellingham Circus Guild when I moved to Bellingham last August strengthened my body and improved my balance between intuitive movement and remembering to point my toes. I face a fear every time I express my mind through my movement. That is especially true through art and through dance. Through these outlets, the body can express so much the mind could never put into words. And sometimes there is no need to. I would like to share an expression of movement that is both intuitive and not, and I invite you to watch, to judge, to feel, to listen, and to ask yourself: where do I feel this story? What does that feeling say about your story?

*(Performance art story on aerial silks, choreographed and performed by Chelsea Ernst)*



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