

# Body as Prism: Somatic Pedagogy in the Development of Embodied Ecological Awareness

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## *Abstract*

*The body is the precondition of any meaning-laden space of learning. As we are located in environments frothing with life, we engage in meaning making through and with the senses of the body, engaging in the creation of scaffoldings of symbolic, rhizomatic understandings by which we navigate our worlds. Thus, I argue that our embodied subjective lives serve as the boundary through which we emerge into an awareness of our place within a network of moving connections. Situating the argument against the mystic poetry of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī and the animist philosophy of Isabelle Strengers, I argue that in grounding our educational practices within the body, we have the potential to learn in a way that is more meaningful, personal, and relevant to the subjective process of discovery.*

## *Resumé*

*Sans le corps, il n'y a pas place à l'apprentissage. Or, amenés à fréquenter des milieux pleins de vie, nous participons à la création de sens avec les organes sensoriels du corps, de même qu'à la construction de structures de compréhension symboliques et rhizomatiques qui nous orientent dans le monde. L'auteure avance donc que le corps, ce véhicule de nos expériences de vie subjectives, constitue une frontière qui ouvre vers une prise de conscience de notre place dans un réseau de connexions dynamiques. S'inscrivant en faux contre la poésie mystique de Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī et la philosophie animiste d'Isabelle Strengers, elle affirme qu'à l'aide de pratiques pédagogiques axées sur le corps, l'apprentissage serait plus pertinent et personnel, et mieux adapté à la subjectivité du processus de découverte.*

**Keywords:** somatic, education, ecology, Rūmī, Strengers

**Mots-clés :** somatique, éducation, écologie, Rūmī, Strengers

## Introduction

Whether or not I consciously situate myself in relation to the natural world, there is a reality to my living body that acts as a tether. There is no way to create an actual, physical wedge between my material being and my living relationship with the Earth. Taylor describes the malaise of modernity as “characterized by the loss of the horizon; by a loss of roots; by the hubris that denies human limits and denies our dependence on history or God, which places unlimited confidence in the powers of frail human reason; by a trivializing self-indulgence

which has no stomach for the heroic dimension of life” (1995, p. 25). In seeking to transcend this rootlessness, time and time again, I come back to the feeling that our dissociation, alienation, and anxiety drive us toward a return to *origin*. Enlightenment thinkers rightfully rejected the power of religion to dictate reality. We need not return to “God” to find a home within the world. Our search is not for a pastoral or romantic image of a forgotten past, rather, it is a visceral longing for a return *home*. I believe that our bodies are not only the gateway to this connection; it is through our bodies that we may find within ourselves our source within nature. Through our bodies, we find ourselves *to be* nature.

My connection to the natural world, as a pagan, is the focal point of my perspective. In the way I think about and perceive life, nature is the fundamental ground of being. My search for an authentic spiritual identity brought me to a community of practice with people who called themselves Witches, Druids, Heathens, and Pagans. I have participated in and led circle for over 15 years. Having rooted my practice through repetition, it feels embedded within the very fibres of my being. My Métis upbringing also rooted in me an abiding respect for nature. I grew up understanding that everything in the world carries its own purpose. In addition to this, my work as an artist and dancer, a facilitator in both my community and professional practice, made alive for me the way in which our subjective sensations impact the ways we perceive our shared reality. The lessons of art making, which led me to elevate the authentic and individual expression of my lived reality, made clear that our subjective experiences can and should be elevated as legitimate methods of knowing—not just because they inform the process of meaning-making in the world but also because they authentically aid us in delineating our place within the network of life. In so doing, we do not deny empirical scientific understandings. Rather, we add personal depth to our work as academics, researchers, and human beings.

In this piece, I attempt to bring to bear some of my own conceptions of the body, refracted through the work of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī’s, poem, “Body Intelligence.” Throughout this essay, I attempt to complicate the notion of the body with philosopher Isabelle Strengers’s (2012) paper, “Reclaiming Animism,” in which she points toward a way of being that resists generalization and approaches a state of inquiry—one that balances on an edge of continual engagement, allowing for the centring of the mysterious and unknowable heart of all things. In so doing, I engage with the world and the spiritual nature of the world as being an animate mystery that we may seek to comprehend through its impact upon our bodies and, therefore, ourselves.

In “Body Intelligence,” Rūmī (1995) communicates a sense of physical experience that resists concretization, one that hints at knowledge operating through an organic process of discovery that leaves ephemeral physical traces. He intimates a form of being that precedes definition, a sense of the a-rational that emerges from the embodied self living within the procession of senses as they encounter the moving orders of the more-than-human world. In an attempt to

grasp this form of relationality, Strengers (2012) notes that an ontological shift towards embodiment is “a matter of recovering the capacity to honor experience, any experience we care for, as ‘not ours’ but rather as ‘animating’ us, making us witness to what is not us” (para. 20). This is not a discarding of Western forms of empirical observation. Instead, it is a situating of knowledge in place as another form of contingent and shifting reality that anchors through a moving body.

Somaticizing education is a way of weaving the self—a self based in a radical form of subjectivity—through sensation and imagination as the felt, material experience of being situated within a sensate dimension. In education, this manifests as an embodied posture leaning into engagement—a posture that centres the body and its products as both the subject and the object of study and thus constructs a mode of teaching and learning whose focus moves through the subjective experience of meaning. The body thus considered provides a kind of informational text where one may read relatedness. As an organic worldly organism, the body then becomes a prism, its sensations serving to refract larger ecological relationships through our encounters with them. The somatic experience of the body grounds the ecological consciousness—a consciousness in relation—by placing importance on the encounter and by acknowledging the fleeting and often mysterious manifestations of the subjective lens.

Smith (2010) summarizes Whitehead’s belief about the world, describing it as “a vast network of experiential entities in relationship with one other” (p. 8). Not only this, but our bodies, Whitehead contends, contain societies in and of themselves, of molecules and organs bound together by a shared affective resonance. Furthermore, our ability to share sympathetic relationships with our environments may allow us to extend this inner social order into a matrix of synchronous social and environmental purposes (Smith, 2010). If we look to our bodies as teachers, we may be encouraged to make the shift toward an integrated life, that is, toward being-*with*-the-world through the process of locating moments of shared affective resonance. By making a practice of being within a body that is within a world, by consciously studying with and through our bodies via the present-moment act of experience, we may begin to see the ways in which our lives are made up of somatically-based dialectics of sensation. These dialectics operate in such a way that as we are touched by the world, we react to how we are being shaped, nudged, pulled, prodded, and pushed by it. We synthesize our sensations, translating them into meanings which then propel us to act in the world. We become then, another ripple among many, affecting and being affected. To be able to facilitate the development of environmental awareness, we must take it upon ourselves to locate ourselves as beings in bodies that are relating to other bodies within the present moment. It is contingent upon us to act as models, to demonstrate our relationship with a world that is grounded in an ecological affect.

## Knowledge of the Throbbing Vein

In Rūmī's (1995) poem, he says:

There are guides who can show you the way.  
Use them. But they will not satisfy your longing.  
Keep wanting that connection  
with all your pulsing energy  
The throbbing vein  
will take you further  
than any thinking. (p. 152)

We may be led to the path of knowledge through education, instruction, or storytelling, but seekers must experience personal connection with the world through their bodies in order to have the most profound encounters with it. We cannot confer upon our bodies the experience of an ecological relation, but we may point them in the direction, hint at the possibility, seduce them toward their own investigation through the revelation of the fruits of our own processes.

It is through education as a formalized process that we begin to forget the body as its functions are repressed through the processes of enculturation. Freund (1988) notes Freud's belief that our "bodily-instinctual repression increases with more pervasive and elaborate 'civilized' social constraints" (p. 843). Freund proceeds to advance the work of Norbert Elias, who argues that the process of remaking society during the Industrial Revolution necessitated "imposing self-initiated inhibitions on the 'spontaneous' display of various kinds of bodily expression (e.g., the show of aggression, toilet habits, vendettas, etc.)" (as cited in Freund, 1988, p. 844). Our hunger, need, and desire must be orderly in order to maintain a top-down, predictable social dynamic. This serves to limit the very scope of our desire. We are led to believe that the world can be known, grasped, and controlled. In so doing, our own natures, by extension, may be satisfied through material consumption. Naturally, we seek to grow beyond our instinctual drives, yet we go further than this, seeking to conquer the body. We take the mystery out of our yearning through our reduction of it to a definitive end, an end which Strengers (2012) would see as a deadening of the liveliness of meaning through encounter. In such a scenario, the subsumption becomes a base reality in which the body is remade into nothing more than a brute mechanism. All feelings and desires that are derived from the body are thus brought to a place beyond intrinsic meaning, where the symbolic has no resonance and of what Strengers might call a milieu in which our personal engagement with the world is explained away by materialist rationalizations.

Bauman describes a 14th-century disciple of Meister Eckhart, which he has excerpted from Delumeau's 1990 book, *Sin and Fear*. The disciple says:

Lift your heart above the ooze and slime of carnal pleasures.... You live in a wretched vale of tears where pleasure is mixed with suffering, smiles with tears, joy with sadness, where no heart has ever found total joy, for the world deceives and lies. (as cited in Bauman, 1998, p. 220)

We are set up to strive against the body as a liar, in favour of a body as the extension of a highly ordered capitalist production force. We cannot, for the sake of the material order attend to the realities of our own yearning, protestations, pains, or alienation, as “work often demands civility and even cheerfulness and sociability in the face of exploitation or of arbitrary use of authority” (Freund, 1988, p. 853). Despite the body’s insistence on rejecting structures of oppression, repetitive heuristic social conditioning may override the body’s wisdom. The artifacts of revulsion toward the flesh remain with us through the embedded structures of meaning. We may reflect upon the use of utensils rather than our hands, the segregation of bodily functions, the legal requirement to cover our bodies, and in more recent history, censure against physical touch in our schools as a response to instances of interpersonal abuse, but that sometimes forbids teachers from any physicality in regards to children, even hugging, comforting, or being a safe physical presence—as well as censure against children touching each other due to a perceived potential for impropriety (Belkin, 2009; Condrón, n.d.; Hopper, 2013). What judgements of a body are contained within each cultural form mentioned here? Possible answers abound: an uncleanness of the hands, even after washing; a private shame surrounding our naked forms; an implication of impropriety respecting physical touch between adults and children and children and other children. When we seek this transcendence of the physical, we forget that there is no life without a body to feel it. It is the prism through which experience refracts and yet, “the pervasive influence of Platonism and Christian Neo-Platonism” (Weston, 2004, p. 32) implies that:

true reality is perfect and unchanging, and “this” world (with the word “this” always a form of derogation) by contrast [is] deficient, degenerating, unreliable and ultimately unreal. It is of the very essence of God—of sacredness, divinity, intrinsic value, say it how you will—to transcend “this” world. (p. 32)

Strengers (2012) would contend that it is the unchanging world that is deficient and degenerating simply because it has become closed off to movement and, ultimately, change. Despite our contemporary commitment to empiricism and direct engagement with the material world through scientific inquiry, we are still encouraged to elevate ourselves above the world we observe, to capture it within systems of empirical classification, to halt the movement of the world and make it into something that we can control. Observation, empiricism, and materialism can often, in practice, exclude the self, the subjective felt emotional present observer and, in so doing, reject the intrinsic relationality *between* observer and observed. Our intellectual traditions further distance us from the material of the body and thus the world itself by elevating a logic that

is unfettered from subjective felt reality. Here, we might contrast Descartes's notion of "I think therefore I am" (Descartes, 1967, Part IV para. 1) with Heidegger's (1953) notion of *Dasein*, which might be understood as something like, "I exist therefore I exist," which postulates something occurring below or before thought. When thought and feeling are seen as opposing forces, we may become turned against our bodies. One might say that an illness is "all-in-your-head." This often means that it is not a "real" illness, but when we look at somatization, the materialization of mental states within the body in the form of pain and disease (Obimakinde, Ladipo, & Irabor, 2015), we can see how the idea of something being "all-in-your-head" treats the wisdom of the body and its cries of pain as immaterial, unreal, and imagined—this despite the fact that the subjective, somatic experience of pain is very real indeed. If we seek to transcend the body, we must also, by necessity, deny the realities of the body as they undergird our thoughts and reason. Baudrillard (1994) says, "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (p. 1). When we make the mistake of reacting to a reaction of a reaction, we begin the process of untethering human beings from the embodied processes of nature. We begin to look inward, remaking meanings out of our own symbolic creations rather than reacting against and with the processes of nature as they impact upon our bodies. In this way, we transcend nature by transcending the real. It is our bodies that speak to us about the relation between the inner symbolic order and the world of movement as it acts upon and through us. In elevating the knowledge gleaned through the body, we are able to respond to the world, to thread the traces of the physical as they manifest through us, into our symbolic worlds.

Rodrigues (2018), in his work on movement and ecological relation, argues that "intentionality and transcendence" should not set us apart from the more-than-human world. In fact, they might be the glue that cements all beings into a matrix of inter-relationality, or what he calls, "a decentralized, intercorporeal movement of reciprocal existence" (p. 92). In this way, we may contemplate the possibility that neither mind nor matter need claim supremacy over human or more-than-human existence; rather, there is an interweaving of self and other, mind and matter, that makes up the fundamental experience of life. Plumwood (1999) adds to the notion of an interwoven matrix of life on Earth, pointing out that, "Aboriginal thinking about death sees animals, plants, and humans sharing a common life force" (p. 5). In this way of thinking, we are not merely mind and body in dialectical relation. Instead, we are holistic beings in relation to everything else—and everything else is then in relation with us. Traditional societies have approached our interdependence as a kind of shared force that experiences dynamic change as a part of its basic function. Building on this, Plumwood (1999) states that our endeavour to shield ourselves from the process of death and decay, "treats the earth as a lower, fallen realm, true human

identity as outside nature, and it provides narrative continuity for the individual only in isolation from the cultural and ecological community and in opposition to a person's perishable body" (p. 5). Attempts to do away with the materiality of existence are therefore a denial of life itself, a revolt against the interrelatedness of matter that exists in cyclical relation within systems of life and death, growth and decay. It is not a question of whether we can intellectually distance ourselves from the matter of our existence, untangling ourselves from the process of living and dying. Rather, it is a question of whether we need to transcend this process at all in order to achieve the aims of transcendence. Does the desire for transcendence require us to enter into a negation of the very cycles and processes of our physicality, or is there a rather tantalizing invitation to weave these experiences into a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of our humanity?

In looking inward, we begin to find, as cited in Smith, Whitehead's notion of "shared feeling" (2010, p. 9) that expresses itself in such universal experience as the will towards life and the avoidance of death. In looking at the world, we may begin to understand that a fundamental "desire to live and to avoid death [is] inherent in *all* life forms, we may come to understand that in causing malaria the malaria bacillus is merely trying to live life in the way that has been 'given' to it" (Pulkki, Dahlin, & Varri, 2017, p. 216). Not only is movement inherent to the process of being alive, but in this movement, we move on a trajectory that at one stage moves toward life and after that, towards death. As bacteria respond to the conditions of their world from within their containers, so too do we strive, live, and grow within the container of our bodies. Yet, "Since death ... resists the practical measure which human reason is capable of conceiving, all concern with death needs to be *suppressed*. Life needs to be structured in such a way as to make the intractable inevitability of death *irrelevant* to the conduct of daily life" (Bauman, 1998, p. 221). However, this veil that we have placed around the interminable cycle of regeneration and decay presents an impediment. Specifically, we can't easily understand the drive toward life without also understanding the container of our mortality. We are inextricably bound to a lustful drive toward existence even if we are uneasy in acknowledging the untidy matters of the unknown.

In our attempts to come to grips with our present moment living with and within the unwieldy matter of life and death, Rodrigues (2018) helpfully contributes his understanding of the quality of movement that is inherent to life, which "conceives a body, and moving bodies of continuous action, a living body of/ in intentional and immanent movement to/with the world and to/with others" (p. 88–89). A body-based, ecological conception of life, then, would centre movement as a fundamental principle. We move and are moved; therefore, we relate; therefore, we are. Therefore, when we cease to move, life too ceases. All meaning within the sphere of life can then be understood as emerging from that "lived experience, which is pre-thematic, and embodied" (Pulkki et al., p. 221). We do not so much *mean* things; rather, we *live out* our meanings. We move our



meanings into relation, and it is in relation that these meanings become rooted. We come naked into the world. Both “humans and nonhumans do not come with a preconceived agency of what something is or has” (O’Neil, 2018, p. 376). We relate *into* agency, into meaning. Our movements bring us into contact with other movements, who then move us in return. Our relations begin to constitute us from the first undulation, and it is these relations that allow us to see that “I do not simply know. I am also *known*” (Jardine, 1998, p. 96). As Rūmī (1995) so eloquently puts it:

the universe of the creation-word,  
the divine command to Be, that universe  
of qualities is beyond any pointing to.  
More intelligent than intellect,  
and more spiritual than spirit.  
No being is unconnected  
to that reality, and that connection  
cannot be said. There, there’s  
no separation and no return. (p. 152)

We are constituted from the same stuff, the stuff of nothing from which there is no distinction and no difference, from energy to matter and back again.

Yet, we are also deeply embedded in the matter of our bodies. It can be felt that “the body responds to colours and tones with subtle differences in tension and rhythm, corresponding to nervous and muscular processes normally taking place below the level of conscious experience” (Pulkki, et al., 2017, p. 224). Our bodies respond to the colour, shape, and tone of our experience through an affective script. There is a complex formulation of tension and movement that creates the felt reality of the outer world becoming constituted within. Lewis (2000), in his description of the *climbing body*, helpfully notes that, “the body has the propensity to physicalize and convey its own sensibility, to become a matrix of, and for, inscription” (p. 74). Experience of the living world reverberates throughout our being with every breath, in every reaching limb. As we live, our bodies intelligently respond to the physical topographies of life. We do not merely think—we also, primarily, feel. It is our feelings that offer us the tone and resonance of our thoughts and which precipitate our actions. It is our feelings that constitute the felt materiality of our reality because we cannot actually reach out and bring a willow tree, branches stretching to trail across the water, into our very being. We can merely catch the light in our eyes as it refracts off the water, feel the vibrations in our eardrums as its shivering leaves rustle in the wind. The sensations we experience through our bodies are a kind of intelligence, an intelligence that speaks with the world around us. And this is achieved not merely through the interior logic of our thoughts, but by our



reaching out into the world of interrelation, making reverberations in the living, moving undulations of being that exist all around us.

These unfathomable layers of synchronous order, contained in these feeling, bipedal organisms, bely level upon level of even greater complexity: of ecosystems upon ecosystems, of connectivity frothing with living movement just under the surface, of what Smith (2010) describes as Whitehead's social orders of varying magnitudes. To extend the homeostasis of our bodies into the world, we cannot sanitize and control our environments because in so doing we cut ourselves off from the seemingly chaotic connections that spontaneously form in the creation of greater organic orders. As Strengers would contend, we cannot possibly comprehend the totality of being and thus we must limit the pursuit of certainty, of closure. It is in the apparent disorder that we are inexplicably connected, through patterns that remain inaccessible to the machinations of our reason or that may simply be incompatible with the drive toward a human orchestrated sense of order. We may, simply, not be large enough to hold all being and nature within our grasp. The rhizome, under a level surface, exists as a network of interconnected systems, sprouting and connecting at seemingly random intervals, without any interruption in the ability to communicate (O'Neil, 2018). Like the rhizome, we are limbs of the world, being born out of the felt moment, touching, being touched, reconfiguring, learning, and growing. We are building and maintaining a scaffolding of meaning constructed out of subjective narratives that spring from felt moments, and every time we meet with a new experience, we are adapting and organizing those connections (O'Connor, 2018). An organic assemblage is more adaptable than a monument with columns and straight lines. As we are continually faced with new experiences, these combined affective resonances make messy, organic networks that we use to process our interactions with the environment. They are activated even before we can grasp them into conscious relation with known meaning, sense, or purpose. This doesn't simply relate to our individual perceptions of life events. Instead, "the productive and restrictive function of the social structures, as well as of the subsequent emotional dispositions, strongly link the emotional habitus to social relations of power" (Leledaki & Brown, 2008, p. 310). Our bodies and their feelings are situated in relationship to structures that are well beyond the scope of our individual lives, within social and ecological orders that have no *creator* per se, but rather, exist as waves of movement undulating through living relationships. Strengers (2012) would highlight the importance of engagement without a given end, of experience without explanation. It may be that by focusing on the quality of our connections, our subjective and personal experience of touching and being touched, we may be able to find ourselves most tangibly in the imminent relationships that emerge. It may be in those moments where the "emotional habitus" becomes directly accessible, and in being able to access the foundation of our felt reality, we may begin to comprehend a potential method for encountering power where it is rooted.

Our societies may develop a habitus that serves to separate us from the world. However, when we are inevitably thrown into what Bauman (1998) calls “marginal situations,” such as an encounter with death, we may have our previous perceptions of life thrown into relief by the fact that “death radically challenges *all* socially objectivated definitions of reality—of the world, of others, and of the self” (Berger, 2011, Religion and World Maintenance). One often awakens to one’s connectivity when facing the material reality of a mortal life, of a living body with boundaries that are made of borrowed matter. We are not outside or above life; we are *within* it. When facing the margins of our life as it is, within a body in the Earth ecosystem, we are forced into confronting the reality of being in the living-world.

### Your Distance to the Sun

Scully (2012) points out that, “the privileging of a static ahistorical ideal of ecosystems and of culture has, at its heart, an agenda that is fundamentally out of touch, perhaps even dysconscious” (p. 152). And yet, despite the destructive qualities of these systems, the mythology of human progress as disconnected from the natural world persists. In fact, these mythologies may be attributed to lingering drives of colonial expansion, appropriation, separation, and control. Reflecting on this, “our places of learning have their own emotional contours that serve to legitimize and delegitimize ways of being; including ways of feeling” (Alsop, 2011, p. 615). Inside institutions of learning, our children are taught to be, think, and feel in ways that help them to live in *our* world *as it is*: the world of the self-referential and the hyperreal. It is the human world, the discontinuous world, that we are taught to live within. In this context, “the disposition is to treat bodily practices as secondary to epistemological, cultural and linguistic practices” (Alsop, 2011, p. 615). In Canada, despite recent shifts towards an interest in the integration of Indigenous educational practices, perspectives, and cultures into school curricula (Kabatay, 2019) as well as place-based-education, experiential learning, and environmental educative practices, which all serve to do the important work of connecting learners within the felt world, our institutions of learning continue to come under the pressure of neoliberal drives, making schools into places where individualism, competition, private and/or corporate interests, and the strategic training of students to meet the demands of the labour market reign supreme (Hales, 2014). We continue to highlight that which helps us to thrive within the worlds that we have made for ourselves. We could easily go so far as to say that “alienation from the physical environment is seen as one key element in producing environmental devastation” (Pulkki et al., 2017, p. 214). Our schools effectively wall children off and away from not only the natural world but the human world as well. The school becomes “almost always about external facts ‘out there,’ almost never about what goes on ‘in me’ and in my lived-body” (Pulkki et al., 2017 p. 215). To potentially

correct our course, we must look outside of traditional educative settings for inspiration, beyond traditional accreditation, to those who are preserving and cultivating adjacent systems of knowledge. Indigenous storytellers, anarchists, activists, and environmentalists, mothers, fathers, neighbours, and friends. Education itself should be woven into the fabric of our communities and the lands that they are situated within. It is, of course, much less messy to deal with systems that are cordoned off from the, at times, maddening changeability of the world-at-large. Yet, we can see the devastating consequences of this attempt at control. We see:

an industrial eater as one who sits down to a meal confronted by a platter beyond resemblance to any part of any living thing. Both the eater and the eaten are thus exiled from biological reality. The result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, purely a commercial transaction between eater and supplier, and second, as a purely appetitive transaction between eater and his/her food. (O'Neil, 2018, p. 367)

Is the creation of atomized relations happening for the nefarious purposes of hegemonic control or as the product of traumatized subjects within a process of historical violence? Wherever we look, we may see hints of our dissociation from the physical plane of our experience and from the subjective, material personification of that experience in our bodies.

Rūmī (1995) says, “You and your intelligence / are like the beauty and the precision / of an astrolabe. / Together, you calculate how near / existence is to the sun!” (p. 151). I think he means that we should be skeptical of the institutional dogmatisms that constitute our educational stories. We can feel for ourselves our relationships with the world around us as meanings unto themselves. Rūmī was educated in the Muslim faith, and became an instructor of Sharia Law. It wasn't until his mid 30s when he encountered his spiritual mentor, Shah Shams Tabrizi, that he was able to truly reach beyond the constriction of his early education, finding space within his tradition for greater insight without the need to throw over the entirety of his traditional learning (Mojeaddedi, 2017). We too are tasked with the pursuit of looking beyond the narratives of our cultural institutions but also those of our families and communities—not to outright reject their teachings but to allow ourselves the ability to see that which our traditions cannot encompass. It is not that we should not have narratives or containers within which to create meaning and purpose, but that we should not use our containers as blindfolds. We can see the distance from ourselves to the sun as measured by science, and we can feel its proximity as we turn to face it.

More so than ever, through the challenges of a disintegrating ecological order, we are invited to reach beyond the collective habitus that blinds us to the material of our own senses, to look to nature and our bodies as our teachers. We can *physically* experience the effects of air pollution, of our inability to drink water from our rivers even when we are thirsty. We can feel the heat of the sun

on our heads when there are no soothing leaves to shade us, when the concrete sizzles and we are choked by the fumes from gasoline combustion. Our bodies are able to communicate to us the distress of the natural world. Through our own distress, which validates the material of our physical senses, we can become vessels for those mute aspects of our world, allowing for their voices to be understood by those who do not speak their language. Drawing the body into our learning is not difficult, but it may require a deep shift. The slowness and attention of a mindfulness practice, the ability to focus on and elevate emotion through poetry, the ability to express ourselves through dance, through the wonder of imaginative play—all of these practices and more can strengthen our teaching and call the body into our work.

### Silence in the Face of Artistry

Rodrigues (2018) suggests a structure “for theorizing ecopedagogy,” the foundation of which is organised around “the need for understanding that the concept of naturalization presumes a complete unawareness of the naturalized structure by the individual (incorporated habitus) or society (collective habitus)” (p. 96). The structures themselves, though they may be felt, may not always be accessible to our attention. We perform within structures that have become so embedded in our understanding of being that they have become functionally invisible. So, our work must begin by bringing these hidden depths into the light. For, “if modern enactments of the self rely on habits, practices and affective geographies which solidify these dualisms, non-modern ontologies of affect are vulnerable to the sensate, embodiment and otherness” (Carvalho, 2017, para. 20). This is a call for a re-examination of the minutiae of our lives, of the small moments of touch that occur between our bodies and the world. A massive shift may take place in a landscape when one removes a tiny pebble. We may send the entire mountainside skidding by brushing away a bit of rubble. A massive project need not shift the mountain itself. It is enough to simply shift one stone at a time, to pick away at the pediment of industrial alienation. It may be enough to understand that:

learners’ physiological responses should not themselves be conceived as arbitrary or for that matter random. They might more fruitfully, I suggest, be thought of as *acts-of-resistance* in which the body emerges as an antagonist to remind us of overly disembodied reasoning. (Alsop, 2011, pp. 618–619)

Depending on how you look at it, we may begin to reinvigorate the practices of teaching and of learning from the perspective of either the *deeply human* or the *deeply inhuman*, which meet at their extremities. It is that which is hidden, physical, and personal that we wish to bring forth into proper importance. In this way, we must remember that the mind and the body are synonymous. There

is no *real* distinction between physical and mental, and so “a powerful image interweaves curricular content with human emotion and, possibly, a physical or somatic experience” (Judson, 2014, p. 5). The places of the mind are no more separate from the world than we are. Thinking in this way, we may respond to Macfarlane’s (2015) pleading query, “where are your dictionaries of the wind?” (para. 8). We may begin to construct them by learning to engage with and comprehend our felt experiences. For untold years, poets have used words to evoke the somatic experience of place and self. Words, texts, and images may become artifacts of the body if we wish them to be. As Judson (2014) asserts, “images that evoke the senses help us to encounter the world more holistically,” adding that, as a result, “we can become more alert to how our bodies are connected with our surroundings and we are more likely to feel a sense of immersion or embeddedness in the world” (p. 9). To know the world and to be able to feel it, we have to be connected to our capacity to attend to and comprehend our senses. Our pursuit is knowledge of the senses, including the imagination—a pursuit of how the material of our study becomes grounded in our stories, our feelings, and our lives.

Practices of contemplation are a powerful approach to grounding ourselves within our experience, to “affiliating with the world and its ‘flesh’” (Pulkki et al., 2017, p. 220). The act of attention is a study. How else do we come to know something except by paying attention to it? We may seek to confront the pain that Carvalho (2017) says arises as the body’s resistance to a changing habitus. When we resist the avoidance of this pain, we may then begin to “implement a new habit of the self” (para. 15). Sensation is the text to be studied. Yet, it is not pain alone that we must study but rather the feelings and emotions that emerge as a response to engagement with and in the world. Rodrigues (2018) suggests that “if a ludic experience is defined as one where pleasure of joy/happiness gives meaning to the lived experience, we can associate pleasure or joy/happiness to an ideal *flow* of intercorporeal-environmental synergy where an expected positive interaction is anticipated” (p. 92). Joy and pleasure are also important feelings to attenuate ourselves to. As we move about, we may begin to “develop the ability to identify in the environment metaphorical bells of mindfulness, allowing external reality—such as trees, the sky, the steam generated by boiling water—to become meditation teachers, reinforcing their contemplative status” (Carvalho, 2017, para. 2). Everything in the world is our teacher. By watching the world, we treat the physical manifestations of it as our instructors. MacEachren (2018) speaks of traditional Indigenous teachings as happening where:

Elders engaged with materials gathered directly from the land, and conversed as they worked in order to share lessons with younger people. They seldom seemed to just lecture or just talk; rather their hands were always busy. Often they would demonstrate something without verbalizing, expecting others to learn through careful observation and their own thoughts. (p. 92)

Our own bodies, as observed through their movement in and with the world, can become teachers, but so too can bodies in nature be observed by us—their movements assembled into meanings within us. In our movements, we provide others with the opportunity to reach out the tendrils of their awareness, to take us into themselves and make what we are doing a part of who they are. It is possible that “opportunities to witness skilled experts working at their craft fine tunes both the reflective processes and an awareness of what the body is capable of” (MacEachren, 2018, p. 96). In the study of mirror neurons in the brain, the same physical structures fire whether we are physically performing an action or observing that action being performed by someone or something else (Jeon & Lee, 2018). We may become spontaneously excited by movements we recognize around us. Even in our own stillness, in witnessing the world, we engage in its movement. As it is happening outside of us, it also dances within. In Adrienne Maree Brown’s (2017) book, *Emergent Strategy*, she suggests that this latent interconnected movement and sensitivity could very well be the key to creating holistic, organic social change. She compares human organization to the organization of birds as they flock:

Birds don’t make a plan to migrate, raising resources to fund their way, packing for scarce times, mapping out their pit stops. They feel a call in their bodies that they must go, and they follow it, responding to each other, each bringing their adaptations (p. 13).

A deep and abiding understanding of our bodies and their communications may be the very thing that allows us to form ourselves into sensitive, responsive, and organic social movements, able to respond to change at a moment’s notice. When birds flock in the sky, they look like smoke, like tumbling river water. There is a beauty in the complex and interrelated nature of their connections. We are like birds. We can aspire to be like water, like smoke, like tumbling patterns of beauty.

Rūmī (1995) reflects this sensibility in his lines, “Observe the wonders as they occur around you. / Don’t claim them. Feel the artistry / moving through, and be silent” (p. 153). He suggests that we need not speak to the beauty we observe in the world but, instead, we may merely know it in the silence of the encounter. We can immerse ourselves in a motion that exists beyond us, a wave that we can allow ourselves to be caught up in. We need not distinguish ourselves as something separate to be something of divine beauty and importance. I am suggesting that what we seek to achieve is a permeable body, a body that is sensitive to communication. Our bodies are a set of eyes that can see, ears that can listen, taste buds that can savour, noses that are capable of detecting odours, fingers that are able to reach out to touch, limbs that are able to dance, and a deeply felt affective resonance that can make sense of all this. The body itself is a lively organ, a text with a language all its own, a language that we must learn to read. In learning this language, we must be sensible to the ways in which:

the elements are constituted in the flow of their interactions, creating specific meanings in each moving encounter—to the person lying in the beach, the cold is the sand (not the feeling of cold that comes from the object “sand”), the blue is the sky (it is light, not something seen in the light) and the wind is its feel (not the touch of an object). (Rodrigues, 2018, p. 91)

There is something *of* us in each of our perceptions. We cannot escape our particularity, and in attempting to revolutionize our relations, we cannot forget to examine the self within them.

As our bodies become more porous to the world around us, we may develop a practice that inspires “a biophilia revolution towards affinity of all life” (Pulkki et al., 2017, p. 216). Through observation, study, and especially through joy, we may begin to love the world. We may fall in love with the world if we can learn how to live within its rhythms. We must learn to be in the world, to function within its systems of reciprocity, of life and death, growth and decay. Our pursuit must be nothing less than a “third-order change,” which is “an ontological change in how humans and the material world relate” (O’Neil, 2018, p. 365). This is not about doing things differently, but rather of *being* different and allowing our actions to come from a new centre. If we are, in fact, entangled within the ecological relationships of the world, we may say that “in embodied human consciousness, nature become conscious of itself” (Pulkki et al., 2017, p. 221).

## Conclusion

Everything in my environment is *the* environment in which my body resides, including my students. I am not a mind communicating to other minds, but an embodied life in relationship with other *lives*. In attempting to teach, I also face up to the latent requirement of becoming transformed by my experience of other subjectivities. I am continually placing myself in the centre of a kind of storm of thoughts, experiences, feelings, and emotions that has the potential to send me drifting out into the ocean, untethered, and dis-coherent. I think of myself as a kind of anchor, the weight of my experience, skill, and confidence grounding me at the centre of this storm and grounding all of us together in a shared experience. I see my job as continually drawing us back into relationship with each other and with the world outside of our little classroom—the human and the more-than-human world both. All worlds exist outside of our little room but also within it and within *us*. I have the responsibility to draw into focus different aspects of our experience as they emerge. My work as a teacher reminds me very much of my work as a storyteller. I draw into relation those elements of our collective experiences that relate and that say something about the lives we are living in this very moment. It is the story that makes sense of our experiences, but the story itself is formed out of the base material of our loves, hates,



fears, and desires. We are able to be touched by the world because we have bodies that exist in relationship to the world. And when we can summon our bodies to speak, we can draw into our learning spaces the vast wisdom of our bodies, to add shape and dimension to our stories.

I am an aspect, a facet, a fragment of something complex and pervasive. I am within this, whatever it is, and my senses are what allow me to know it. It is only through my subjective experience of the world that I may understand what it is to be alive. My subjectivity is the key to my understanding of being, but that subjectivity is not a totemic kind of independence. Rather, as I begin to relax, to attend to the sensations arising within the body that is me, I become permeable to the meanings and movements of the world. I become caught up in those movements, responsive to cries of pain as much as of babbling brooks. I am a being of the world and as such, my body is an ecological text; it is a prism. In studying my body, I know the Earth.

### Notes on Contributor

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