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Embodied Embodied Writing

Presenting the Body in Somatic Research

Writing

Part II:

Using Embodied Writing in Literature Reviews, Data Collection and Analysis, and Presentation of Findings

by Rosemarie Anderson, Ph.D.

My own experience with embodied living began early in life. My Scandinavian parents believed that children ought to be outside all day, all year long, even in New Jersey. My mother taught her children to dive into icy waters after a torrid sauna, pronouncing that these steamy, frigid rituals lent themselves to vigor and resistance to all disease. Aligning myself with my mother's notions, I wrote my dissertation in the 1970s at a picnic table on the porch in the winter in Nebraska because outside my writing became more vivid and detailed.

Similarly, when I began to study Celtic mythology in the 1990s, the most enriching aspect of my "studies" was traveling to Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, walking hundreds of miles until my body and psyche seemed to sense what had happened in these lands long ago.

"Taken by the current of meandering days and chance happenings, my body finds a slower easy pace. Sometimes skipping, sometimes with a promenading air, I walk lightly—each step like touching a piano key with a note to play, a sense to sound. In nimble gestures the earth and I seem as one dance: landscape sashaying toward

me step upon step, the hills and valleys beckoning and nodding to me even as I walk toward them. I slip into a contented rhythm that even my thoughts and emotions cannot ignore" (Anderson, 1998a, p. 3).

These inward gleanings allowed me to read the myths anew with a seeming insider's understanding. Such an embodied way of being in the world is key to understanding what embodied writing claims to do in the art and science of gathering and analyzing data and presenting findings (Anderson, 2001). In asking researchers and participants to be fully present and report what is occurring in the moment in their bodies, embodied writing requires an attunement to living in the present moment, however frightening the prospect. As a research technique, embodied writing allows researchers to collect and analyze data close to the raw, lived experience itself, and encourages readers to relive the writer's experience as though it were their own by way of sympathetic resonance with the writings (Anderson, 1998b, 2000).

Embodied writing seeks to bring the finely textured experience of the human body back to research praxis and writing. Rich subjective experiences

known only to the individual, including sensorial, visceral, proprioceptive, kinesthetic, and intra-psychic observations, are actively reported and presented. In augmenting conventional third-person data, objective data with bodily descriptions written *from the inside out*, embodied writing seeks to bring the fuller understanding of the human experience to the conduct of research.

Jay Dufrechou (personal communication, July 11, 2001) writes of his experience using embodied writing in research:

"The discipline of embodied writing tends to put the researcher in touch with the creativity of the body . . . seem[ingly] to magnify the contents or results of research. It is not simply that embodied writing allows a more effective communication of results that would have existed anyway. Rather, the use of this form of research has everything to do with what is learned and understood. . . . [T]he form of the research aligns with the product of research. Particularly regarding transpersonal topics, the research and the experience tend to converge."

Because embodied writing tries to make present the experience in the

writer while writing and in the reader while reading, I am not so much going to *tell* you about embodied writing, but I will *do* it as I go along. Rather than pointing with words as though from a distance, I will write from this full-bodied perspective from the inside out as best I can, even in the didactic sections to follow. Much of this article contains examples from doctoral students at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology who have used embodied writing for studying spiritual and transpersonal topics from an embodied perspective. Our collaboration in developing and using embodied writing began in 1996 and continues to the present. Many of the procedures described below are now well honed.

Enlivening Literature Reviews with Embodied Writing

In using embodied writing, researchers invariably give personal accounts of the origins of their research topic. Usually in the literature review, they provide an embodied description of a pivotal life experience that prompted their interest in the topic. In a dissertation on transformative experiences in sailing, Rosie Kuhn (2001) describes her own encounters with life and death while sailing the open seas on the sailing vessel *Tree of Life*. In an ongoing study on embodied reading, Robert Walker describes his own experience of reading Satprem's book on Sri Aurobindo, *Adventures in Consciousness*, and suddenly feeling as though Aurobindo were speaking directly to him: "My head and mind feels as if it is being electrified, expanding outward with my mind. For a moment, I feel a strange sense of calm followed by a surge of joy never before experienced. . . . Reading will never be the same" (p. 20). In an ongoing study of mountain climbing and mystical experiences, Richard Hill (2003) portrays aspects of his own experience in high-altitude climbing to introduce his research topic. In a dissertation on investigating the experience of grief, weeping, and other deep emotions in response to nature, Jay Dufrechou (2001) describes his own experience of truly "hearing" the rain for the first time, a familiar experience turned deliciously unfamiliar.

In a study on bringing the wilderness experience home to everyday life, Laura Riordan (2002) presents embodied descriptions of her own ascent of Mt. Shasta to give her literature review

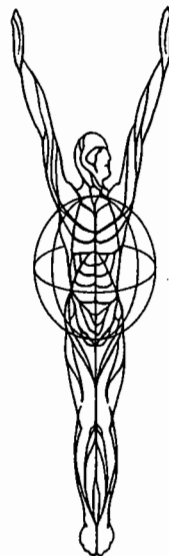
an embodied integrity. She reports that embodied writing helped her to discover her own body's voice as well as to access and integrate anew a wilderness adventure that took place two years before. She journeys into her own body, "expressing in words what her body is sensing, not what it feels like, but what it is actually experiencing." In the first section of her literature review, entitled "Why Do People Go on Adventures?" Laura describes her own peak experience in climbing Mt. Shasta in northern California. The following quote appears in italics and precedes a conventional review of the empirical literature on peak experiences:

"It is 4:00 a.m. on a cold Labor Day. The cold is not due to the time of year, but rather because we awoke at 10,000 feet, and the waning summer heat has not penetrated this dark and rocky environment. Stars, small blinking red satellites, and intense quiet surround the mountain. Our seven bodies, wrapped in down jackets and sleeping bags, gather for a hot breakfast. We dress in silence, lacing up our rented plastic mountaineering boots in preparation for the final ascent to the 14,300-foot summit of Mt. Shasta. I scramble to attach the cramp-on harnesses to the slippery soles of my already uncomfortable boots. The rest of my body joins my feet in their plea against my will to return to the tent and surrender to the mountain. But I

share the same goal as the rest, to get to the top. This climb awards us the experience of climbing on snow and ice, as well as a 360-degree view. What we cannot foresee is how much this experience will change us. Our chilly pre-dawn wake-up call is just a prelude to a universal peak experience" (pp. 11-12).

Using Embodied Writing to Gather Qualitative Data

Both Jay Dufrechou (2001) and Laura Riordan (2002) made extensive use of the internet to recruit research participants and solicit embodied writings from their research participants. Jay recruited most of his participants by contacting and networking with leaders of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) learning communities by using the e-mail addresses available on the IONS website. He described his research project to approximately fifty IONS learning community leaders and asked them if they knew individuals who might be interested in participating in his study. Prospective participants were given a description of embodied writing and some examples, and asked to write embodied descriptions of their encounters with nature. Furthermore, in order to enrich these descriptions with rich sensory and emotional detail essential to embodied writing, Jay engaged in ongoing online dialogues with forty research participants to help them develop their em-



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bodied descriptions. Typically, these exchanges involved inviting the participants to be more specific about what was really happening in their bodies. His goal was not just to understand the experience in an analytic sense, but also to convey an intuitive, body-level sensation of the experience of encountering nature, hoping that future readers would resonate with the experience themselves, body to body, so to speak.

Via an online questionnaire distributed through outdoor adventure/education electronic list services, Laura Riordan (2002) recruited sixteen exemplar participants known for their contributions to the field of outdoor and adventure education, either in practice or in research. As Laura's study focused on the integration of wilderness transformation into everyday life, her online questionnaire asked research participants four questions about their wilderness experiences and the integration of those experiences, and requested that the participants use embodied writing in answering the questions. In so doing, she received rich, textural descriptions that lend her dissertation a lively, conversational quality. Laura also hoped that using embodied writing would help her participants to integrate their wilderness experiences while writing rather than merely to report experiences that had happened in the past. Participants were given an example of her own embodied writing and asked to write straight from their physical sensation, expressing in words what the body was sensing.

In an ongoing study of receiving guidance through direct contact with the presence of Spirit, Bryan Rich (2003) is using screening interviews and his own embodied discernment to assess the appropriateness of a prospective participant for the study. In an interview with a woman who felt that she did not have spiritual experiences, Bryan asked a simple question that evoked a powerful and immediate response from her: "Can you think of a time when you just felt like you came into contact with something that you just felt was real, without any thoughts about it?" (p. 24). As she spoke, her demeanor became animated and vivid, speaking as though the past experience were immediately present to her. Bryan, too, felt the change in her and in himself, as though he were experiencing her recollection in his own body. His embodied response to her al-

lowed him to affirm that the woman's experience with Spirit was appropriate for his study.

In a study on peak and mystical experience in Aikido, Brian Heery (2003) employed embodied writing in the interview phase of his study. Specifically, he read an embodied description of this own experience of Aikido to an Aikido master in his study. Doing so seemed to "... evoke memories of similar experiences for my co-researcher and it helped foster a deeper more open and meaningful interaction between us. It felt like some invisible protective barriers came down and we were able to communicate more fully and with greater trust and intimacy than earlier in the interview. It does make sense that going more deeply into my own experience and sharing from that place helped my co-researchers to move more deeply into their own processes and more easily share the deeper layers of meaning in their experiences" (p. 144).

Bringing an Embodied Perspective to Data Analysis

Embodied writing also invites an embodied perspective to data analysis regardless of the specific research method used. In Laura Riordan's (2001) use of grounded theory to study the integration of wilderness encounters, Laura reports that the embodied writings that she had collected from her wilderness adventurers allowed her to "grapple with and create analytical codes for actions and events on a deeper level than descriptions more typical of qualitative data in which participants are simply reporting their experiences" conventionally (p. 131). In a heuristic study on peak and mystical experiences in the practice of Aikido, Brian Heery (2003) indicates that embodied writing helped him more deeply explore his own experience with three Aikido masters than would have been possible with more conventional means of interacting with data because he was inspired to embody the experiences of others for himself. Similarly, in a phenomenological and heuristic study of sacred weeping (Anderson, 1996), my own experiences of profound weeping, occurring several years prior to studying those of others, allowed me to understand the experiences of others as though from the inside, even when their experiences were quite unlike my own. By resonating to the experiences of others, my under-

standing stretched into the experiences of others somatically, thereby allowing my discerning mind to understand aspects of the data I had previously ignored.

Rather than using embodied writing per se, other researchers have used an embodied perspective to analyze data by resonating through movement with their research participants' experiences. For example, in a phenomenological study of dance as a spiritual practice by Jan Fisher (1997), Jan wanted to stay as close as she could to what she calls being-movement, an unstructured and free style of dancing and moving with an inward focus of attention like that of Authentic Movement or Emily Conrad-Da'oud's Continuum. Throughout her study she danced and moved in response to each participant's being-movement and interview in order to imbue her understanding kinesthetically with what she was actually studying. After moving, she produced a creative response in the form of prose, sculpture, or drawings to give a non-analytic, uninterpreted representation of her intuitive experience of the participant's movement. Finally, Jan included being-movement in her data analysis in two ways. First, after viewing all the creative responses produced by the participant, she responded to them through movement and then produced spontaneous, written summaries of the interview transcripts. These summaries are a key orienting feature to her subsequent phenomenological analysis, giving the analysis an intuitive, non-verbal dimension. Second, while conducting the phenomenological analysis of her interview transcripts, she engaged in being-movement repeatedly in order to continually inform her analysis with the somatic, nonverbal dimensions of dance and movement she was studying.

In a study of sculpting with clay as a spiritual practice, Kat McIver (2001) both analyzed transcripts for major themes and created a sculpture in clay for each participant. She presented a color picture of each sculpture in her presentation of results, allowing readers to interpret the image for themselves prior to reading her thematic analysis. An important aspect of her analysis involved taking on the shape of the sculpture with her own body and maintaining that position for a period of time while meditating. Kat embodied the sculpture as a way of know-

ing. Finally, she provided a written description for each participant called an "embodied response" that relays her own experience while embodying the sculpture. In response to one sculpture, she writes:

"This sculpture depicts how I feel when I do not express, and things get held in my body. The image itself helps me to move through that part of myself and see where I am tied up and bound. It is my voice, and makes me aware of my need to speak my voice, or change a behavior or way of being. . . . I also feel it expressing the archetypal scream of women to be heard" (p. 200).

Presenting Research Findings through Embodied Writing

From the very start of the collaborative process that created embodied writing, we had hoped that embodied writing would invite readers to relive the experiences described in their own bodies and psyches through a form of sympathetic resonance (Anderson, 1998b, 2000). Therefore, researchers typically provide samples of embodied writings from their research participants to give the report of results an embodied dimension. Jay Dufrechou (2001), Rosie Kuhn (2001), Laura Riordan (2002),

and Brian Heery (2003) provide excerpts quoting their research participants' own words directly. For example, one of the participants in Rosie Kuhn's (2001) study of the transformative dimensions of sailing describes learning to feel the boat: "Over time becoming one with the hull and the sails as extensions of myself like a bird's wings. Repeated sailing ingrained these into my tissues, so that I feel one with any vessel I am aboard" (p. 224). Research interpretations usually follow the presentation of the research participants' own embodied voices, so to allow readers an opportunity to experience the participants' writings prior to reading the researcher's interpretation.

Cortney Phelon (2001) uses embodied writing to describe the healing presence of a psychotherapist in her own words. Cortney (personal communication, September 14, 2001) tells us how she wrote her research depictions.

"When I wrote in an embodied way I willfully entered a state [in which] I observed the stream of my thought and allowed the richly detailed terrain of experience to flourish simultaneously. This created a spacious container within me, which both allowed and

protected the parallel processes of experience and thought. In this open space I could sift through words until one had the ring of accuracy."

Likewise, in a heuristic study of peak and mystical experiences in the practice of Aikido, Brian Heery provides a series of embodied writings of his own evolving understanding of spirit awakening in the human body. Brian is an accomplished Aikidoist himself, and much of Brian's study involves interactions, interviews, and Aikido practice with three Aikido masters who are the primary participants in his study. In his creative synthesis, he writes of the elements of earth, air, water, fire, and void in the practice of Aikido as he experienced them himself in the course of the study. His embodied description of the element of fire allows a non-Aikidoist to feel some of Aikido's fiery tension:

"A warm ember is alight in my belly, a reminder of the fierce flames and roiling heat that that have consumed my body intermittently over the past few years. My arm extends towards my partner, her fingers reaching to grasp my wrist. I can feel her desire for my wrist and resist the temptation to draw back or strike out prematurely. Instead



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I allow her intention to grasp my wrist to penetrate my arm, inviting her to grasp me fully, allowing the warmth of her intention to spiral into and up my arm, down my spine, and into my belly. As soon as her warmth touches my belly, her physical hand still a moment away from contact with my wrist, my awareness expands. Air rushes in igniting the embers in my belly. Instantly every cell in my body is consumed in an inferno of white heat, erupting in a spiraling tornado toward my partner. She draws back, rolling with the force of the tornado as my physical body moves in behind the tornado to fill the vacuum created" (pp. 132-133).

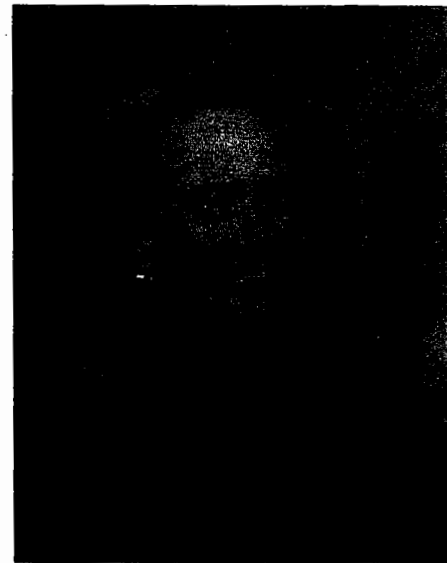
In responding through resonance to the embodied writings of others, we deepen our understanding one body to another body.

Conclusion Using Embodied Writing

Years ago an elderly Japanese man explained to me that a piece of calligraphy becomes a masterpiece when the brush strokes compel the human eye to move as though in a dance, stroke to stroke, character to character. To truly know something, we must become a part of what we know through engagement. A beautifully crafted Chinese character is never static.

So, too, with embodied writing. A beautifully crafted sample of embodied writing is never static. Form and content merge. Such is the purpose of art throughout human history. What we understand is intricately involved in how we learn it. How we learn is intricately involved in what we come to understand. In resonating with another's writing, we expand our knowing beyond what we can know within our individual spheres alone. When readers respond to another's writing, as best they can, embodied writing becomes a source of knowing. As a research procedure, embodied writing is easily integrated into conventional research methods. But, do not miss the shift in ideological paradigm. Unlike conventional methods, embodied writing operates from a post-modern perspective. Like art, embodied writing both honors the present moment and points to the future through engagement and movement, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph. In embodied writing, research is *both* art and science. ☺

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