



Reflections on Writing Embodied Being

By Jeffrey Maitland, PhD

The 20th century could be characterized as a time when critical thought was ruthlessly directed at its own foundations, calling into question the very cogency of science and the universality of our most cherished values. In the midst of both the turmoil and the tremendous creative upsurge afforded by the depths of this self-examination, the 20th century also witnessed the quiet birth and development of a new field of inquiry known as Somatics. Somatics is both a science and a philosophy but it also includes holistic manual therapy as a practical application of its principles. Because it is a new inquiry into the nature of the body, it demands new eyes and bold forward thinking investigators who have freed themselves from the artificial divisions of the past.

In the wake of this creative upsurge are those who say the Muses no longer speak to us. But the truth is that these nay-sayers have lost their footing and no longer know how to listen. Even when the muse raises her voice and speaks directly into their ears, they remain confounded by the din of postmodernism.

I remember quite clearly how I found my way to philosophy. The girl I was dating told me that I talked like someone who had too many philosophy classes. I had no idea what she was talking about. I was just a naive college freshman. If she had brought muses into the conversation, I wouldn't have known about them either. All the same, I knew enough to know that I had just been taken down a notch. Strangely, her comment unsettled me. Without giving it much thought, I changed my major to philosophy the next day. Eventually I became a professor of philosophy.

The study of philosophy led me to Zen practice and a number of years later I was ordained a Zen monk. Early in my Zen training I experienced what the great Zen teacher, Hakuin, rendered with perfect poetic precision: "This very place is the Lotus land of purity. This very body is the body of the Buddha." Although I did not know it then, this experience was the beginning of my lifelong fascination with the phenomenology of the body. Today I might express my fascination this way: in the end, the mystery of consciousness is the mystery of the flesh, or what I call the sentient body.

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During this time, I developed debilitating back pain and sought the services of a Rolfer. He fixed my back, and somehow he also introduced me to a serenely peaceful state of being I was only able to experience after many hours of meditation. Needless to say, I was intrigued. I trained to be a Rolfer and in due course became an Advanced Roling Instructor.

The confluence of these three profound lines of inquiry is the source of *Embodied Being*. It has informed my life and become my inquiry. Roling practice has given me unique and direct access to the core of suffering—the body. It also provided the means to transform the suffering of others by transforming their bodies. And it has allowed me to turn my treatment room into a kind of laboratory devoted to investigating the nature of embodiment.

Embodied Being practically wrote itself. For years I have worked intensely with the issues found on the pages of my book. In particular, I was concerned with exposing the unexamined philosophical assumptions that often stand in the way of good therapy. One of the greatest barriers to providing effective therapy is the unexamined acceptance of the Cartesian worldview, especially the view that the body is a soft machine inhabited by a ghostlike thing called consciousness. By the time I had reached the end of my book I had come up with quite a number of cogent arguments against the Cartesian way of thinking. I felt confident about my arguments but I noticed to my great consternation and surprise that I often slipped back into thinking and imagining in the deep psychoneural ruts left behind by Descartes' forays into the mind/body problem.

How bizarre. Here I was, using logic to successfully flush out the last fixations of the Cartesian worldview and discovering it still held me in its grip. Logic is a very powerful tool, but unless the flesh agrees, logic is often not enough to command assent. We feel concepts. They affect us. Whether they are well thought-out or not, they mold our flesh, influencing how we think about and perceive our world. I recall a grad student telling me that after five years of intense psychotherapy she discovered that she was most attracted to those philosophic positions that supported her neurosis.

Holding on to your pain can be rooted in a philosophical view of which you are not fully

cognizant. For example, a client I discuss in my book was unable to overcome a painful shoulder injury until she realized she was unknowingly holding on to a particular philosophical position. When she brought the philosophy to full awareness, she dropped it immediately, and her pain was gone in an instant. She had been suffering from a philosophically maintained pain. Other examples of the intertwining of flesh and thought can be found throughout my book.

In my case, I finally cast off the Cartesian influence. I was grateful to have learned firsthand how certain concepts "leave thorns in your flesh" making you vulnerable to their influence, even after thoroughly deconstructing them. I was also grateful to have seen the limits of logic during critical moments in therapy. Struggling to come to terms with these issues when drawing my book to a close made life more difficult. But it was well worth the effort. I was forced to see things differently. As a result, I may have discovered a solution to an aspect of the mind/body problem.

As a teacher of manual therapy, I am very interested in how to answer three fundamental questions that face all therapists: what do I do first, what do I do next, and when am I finished? If you are not content following formulaic protocols, relying on intuition, or working symptom by symptom, *Embodied Being* lays out for perhaps the first time the principles of intervention and how to apply them in creating a treatment plan. Since perception is so critically important to good assessment but notoriously difficult to teach, I developed a self-teaching process based on the work of Goethe and phenomenology. It is designed to train practitioners how to see—to show them how to cease being an isolated Cartesian onlooker who can only look but does not see (holistically).

My book is about a way of knowing and perceiving that goes straight to the heart of the matter, a way neither recognized nor appreciated by Cartesian thinking. It is most akin to aesthetic judgment. Notice that the opposite of the word "aesthetic" is "anesthetic." This verbal comparison is suggestive. It suggests that manual therapy and art are about waking up to our freedom.

Manual therapy is not just about fixing our aches and pains. It can be about self-discovery or a portal to the numinous. Manual therapy works to release our upright body in gravity so that we may dance in the free play of verticality in a world that makes sense and supports us in finding our true home. The event of embodiment is a kind of homecoming, an expression of the freedom that arises when we fully embrace where we already and always are and come home to our body.