

I: DIAPHRAGM ACTION

Getting A Feeling For The Anatomical Fact

This first installment of the somatics workshop uses two avenues toward getting a feeling for the diaphragm—what it is, where it is, how it moves and what it does—from which analogies can be drawn to move us toward writing.

The first avenue is a traditional ideokinesis visualization, which also holds the information content of this installment. Below is a distilled script of that visualization. You can read through, or listen to it as an audio guide, which also includes a preliminary guided relaxation to prime you to receive the imagery.

The second avenue is drawing, using the hand to trace or freehand draw the shape of the diaphragm.

Visualization Script

See the back index for the links to audio guides. The script of the audio guide follows:

The diaphragm is the primary motor of your breath.

With one hand, trace down from your sternum to the place where the arch of the lowest ribs begin. Trace down one side of the rib arch, and then the other, feeling the arcing space where the diaphragm attaches to the front of the body. And as you breathe, try to bring your focus to the diaphragm. Relaxed, it's like a parachute softening upward into a dome, anchored to the spine in the low back, attached to the rib arch you just traced with your hand, and with a column of strong muscle running down the inside surface of the spinal column.

As you inhale, the parachute presses down toward the pelvis, expanding, taut, like a fireman's trampoline. As it contracts downward, the diaphragm pulls the lungs, expanding them downward in turn, to create a volume that will draw in air. The diaphragm's circumference joins with the deepest abdominal muscles, the transversals, as if interlocking fingers with it. The diaphragm is knit into the support structures at the lower spine that join spine to abdominal strength to pelvis and legs.

As you exhale, the trampoline softens upward into the parachute, pressing the air back out of the lungs, and out of the body.

You can also think of the parachute, relaxed in its exhale, as an umbrella doming upward to the base of the ribs, the handle down the front of the spine.

Now see it as a mushroom cap, watch the delicate gills from underneath.

Or as a jellyfish, doming and pulsing.

As the diaphragm releases upward, the transversals, the deepest layer of abdominals, contract.

Imagine them as hands gently squeezing water out of a wet cloth. They create a stability there, underneath the doming. Watch the action of the hands.

The direction of the diaphragm's movement is:

Down with the inhale

Up with the exhale

The diaphragm, besides expanding and softening the size of the chamber of your lungs so that air automatically is drawn in and pushed out, also acts with its push to create a stimulating pressure. Pressure on the gut, the intestines, the digestive system, with the inhale. Pressure on the heart with the exhale. This pressure isn't the tight pressure of anxiety, it's the pressure of a massaging weight. It's the pressure of stimulus, compression and release, ebb and flow.

Like a cat kneading its paws on you, first to the lower regions of digestion, then from under, up toward the heart, like a little cat Michelangelo paint massaging the Sistine chapel.

Drawing an analogy out: Think of experience as a measure of the pressure of the world against us. Reality — knowable only as a pressure we meet. Pressure can be crushing but there are also vitalizing, energizing, massaging kinds of pressure. There is atmospheric pressure. There is tactile pressure. There is gravitational pressure.

The diaphragm as a structure billows and expands, alternately creating space to draw vital air into the body, and pushing the air (and its exhalation byproducts) back out of the body. Simultaneously, as it presses down to expand the internal volume of the body, it presses the gut, stimulating digestion: the use and release of all that passes through us.

Tracing

There are three images from Netter's anatomy. Look at all three, then choose one to trace or freehand copy. You don't need to trace the entire image in detail, though you might. Allow your hand to be gestural or precise, according to your mood today. Use the work of tracing to learn the diaphragm's structure through the joined hand and eye.

Image 1: Bony Structure of the Abdomen –

Pay particular attention to the cartilage arch formed at the bottom of the rib cage at the 10th rib (the 11th and 12th “floating ribs” do not connect into the arch).

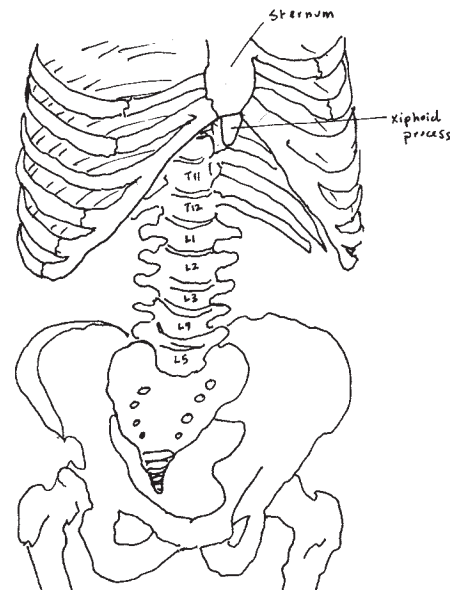


Image 2: Diaphragm: Abdominal Surface —

A view looking up at the diaphragm as if from the pelvic bowl. Pay particular attention to the spade-dome shape and the columnar crura that attach the diaphragm to the lumbar spine.

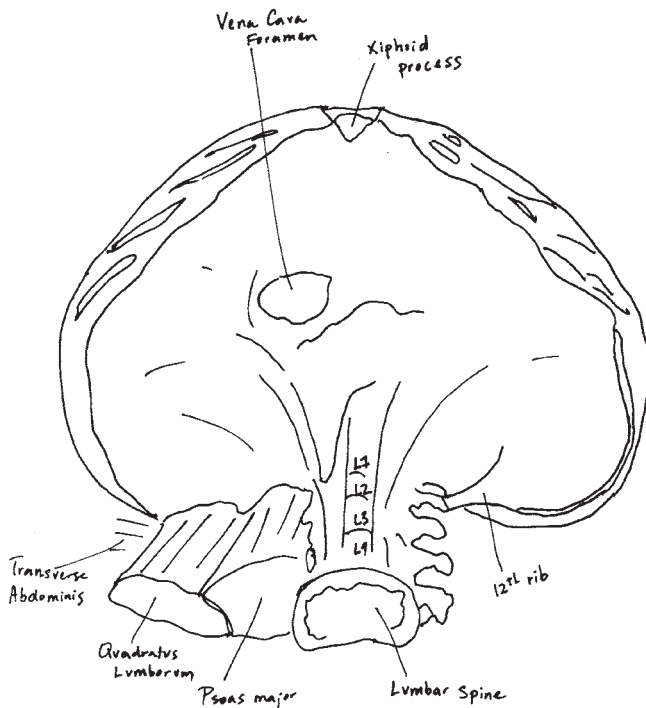
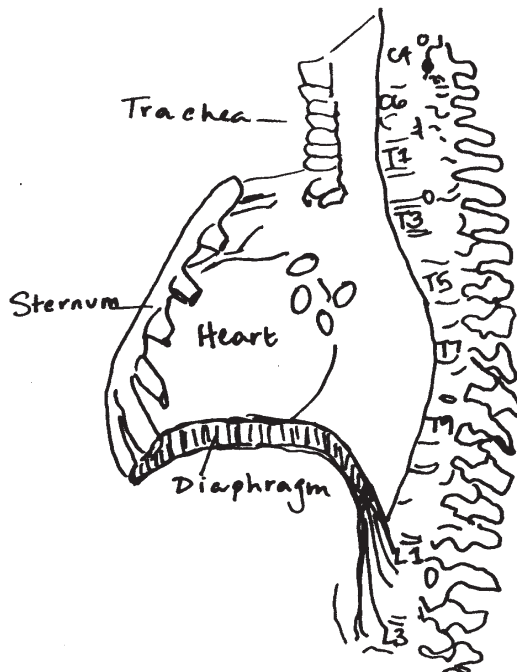


Image 3: Diaphragm, cross section view —

Pay particular attention to the height of the diaphragm (in its relaxed state), rising up to form a floor for the heart, and linked at the back to the interior front surface of the spine.



Non-visual alternative: use your hand to trace the bottom edge of your rib cage, feeling the arch up to the xyphoid process, the bottom tip of the sternum (or breastbone). Then with your fingers on another surface, try to draw the same shape a few times. Learn the shape of the arch with your hand.

Writing Prompt

Note: All the prompts in this workshop are going to retell or replay a story. Consider choosing a single story that you can “play” as if it is musical instrument, using it serially across the different prompts. In somatic work as it feeds into dancing, different places of attention are explored through a constant architecture: the skeletal frame (simplifying a bit, but let’s just let the skeleton stand for the body). So the question that drives the process of transplanting somatics to writing is: what could play the role of the skeleton in these writing prompts? What could be a source structure you come back to time and again, with new intentions within its particular array of mobilities?

My guess is that this workshop series will feel grounded if you can tie it to something that’s highly specific. I recommend choosing a very old story that holds some fascination for you, something that feels like no single person’s story (though it could be fun to crib something too). And for each prompt, try to inhabit the story differently: occupy it with a different tone, a different mood, a different set of active questions and so a different attention. Be open to the story veering off into new places, as you retell, or to only addressing yourself to a limited portion of it. Let it be there simply as a resource to draw on.

Prompt

Retell a borrowed old story following one of the prompts below. You can write a corner of it, a digression from it, or try to write its event sequence from start to finish—but maybe with the today’s focus on the diaphragm, allow yourself to focus less on how it moves from point to point as story, more on how it feels to be inside it. Give yourself permission to write only a fragment or a glimpse of the whole. There are three options. Option 2 is probably the least weird, if you’re feeling afloat in these.

Option 1

Retell a borrowed story. As you write, illuminate a mechanism at the core of the story whose automatic, continuous, alternating action—of reaching or pushing down to a depth and lifting up to a billowing, doming ease—gives the story its breath. Maybe this mechanism will manifest as an image in the story (even a very literal one—don’t be shy of being utterly literal-minded), or maybe it has to do with the narrative voice—what it lingers its attention on, or how it moves in time. Or maybe something else. If you don’t know how to make sense of it, start writing the story and just stay alert for any moments when the mechanism can appear. Be receptive to its possible growth in the story.

When this mechanism is in its downward action, it puts a pressure on the story to process and eliminate its waste, in the process separating waste from nutrition. When it is up, it gives pulse to the story’s tempo, its rhythms, its flow.

Option 2

Retell a borrowed story, focusing almost entirely on the present tense of the experiences being had by beings in the story. Let the present tense be marked by an alternation in pressure: an expansiveness that draws material in, followed by a release that pushes material out. Perhaps linger on your efforts to understand the tone of that release:

the space compresses, forcing material out, like a soft collapse, a tent billowing inward as the poles are removed. The compression is a release of tension, and what's being pressured can freely escape.

If it feels hard to know where to start with this, let the expansion and compression perhaps take place in the narrator's attention, expanding to include periphery or expansive digression, compressing to focus on the task at hand.

Option 3

The deeper the breath, the less the body (of the story) is primed for activity, the more it allows itself to rest and digest. (That resting and digesting nourishes the body (of the story) for when it comes time to move.) In this option, focus on the digestion process. For everything that has entered into the body (of the story) digestion separates out what it needs to keep and what it needs to pass out of itself.

If you don't mind going there, consider the form that the story's waste takes, and the story's mechanism for getting it out of the body (of the story).

Note:

You can do any of these prompts in a paragraph or two, or spend a few days writing a story. If you need some story inspiration, track down Alan Garner's "Collected Folk Tales." You might also plunder a different source – the news, gossip, memory. But there's something excellent in the raw material of very old stories that doesn't always align with the regimes of sense that you might be accustomed to, so I think they offer a good playground.

Allow the frustration of the riddle (i.e. the semi-impossibility of actually following any of these prompts) be just a friction that helps you somewhere new. Don't worry about whether or not you're doing it right. There is no right, this is just a game to help you write something new from an angle of approach you might not have found otherwise. I'm a great believer in doing the exercise wrong if a wrongheaded approach announces itself to your imagination. Whatever you do, write to give yourself pleasure, write to feed yourself what you need today.

On Pressure

"For the philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means. It is only partly got from books; it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos."

—William James, from *Pragmatism*, Lecture 1

