

7: CORPSE POSE

The last installments in the somatics workshop is long and maybe even weirder than the last six. We take up corpse pose. The prior installments derived writing prompts through analogies with anatomical facts. In this installment, we already begin in analogy, a temporary identification with a not-yet-true fact: we pose as-if, or in-the-manner-of our corpse. We anticipate our final relaxation.

Ideokinesis And Analogy

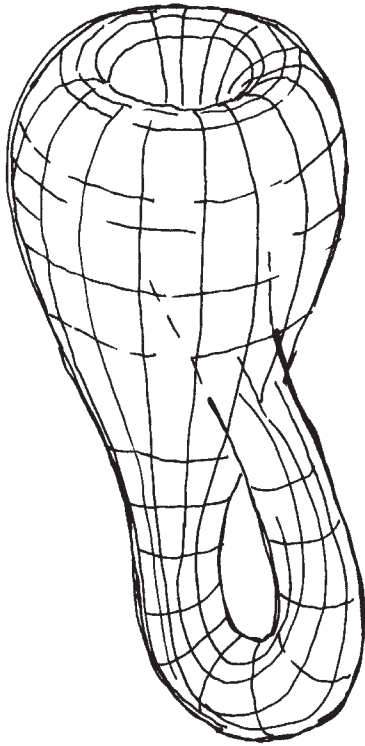
Pause again on idea of analogy in ideokinesis. There are many modalities of somatic practice, and many overlapping methods within those modalities. Somatics as an aggregate field is concerned broadly with experiential knowledge of bodily life via the pairing of exploratory sensation with the organizing, identifying, naming process of language and diagram. In ideokinesis, this pair meets in a picture; the zone of intervention where experience and (abstract) knowledge meet is “the mind’s eye.” Ideokinesis asks you to use the mind’s eye to put an image in the space of the body (imagine your torso is a suit jacket filled with sand slowly pouring out the seams, etc.). I find it useful (and I suppose I betray my 20th century soil here) to think of those images as playing in microcinema, the mind’s eye, the projector (of the suit jacket), and the torso (in this example), the screen. The physiological insight that opened up this whole practice, starting with Mabel Todd is that we organize ourselves toward movement through unnoticed mental pictures: I picture myself grasping my cup as I grasp it.

It’s in this picturing process where Todd proposed an intervention. If I’ve got tension and inefficiency in the habitual way I move to lift my cup, then I can try “playing” an image that organizes my body differently. Maybe if I’m tense up in my shoulders, I could try to see my moving arm as an expanding eagle wing, heightening a sense of the heft down the back. The image, appealing and graspable, is more actionable, more approachable, and critically, more pleasing, than thinking about the anchoring of my scapular bone in the serratus anterior. (Ok, I find the bony image pleasing too, being an anatomy geek, but Todd’s insistence was on the appetites of our imagination for vivid, fictional, appealing images.)

That much as review of the method. What I want to highlight today is the degree to which this practice of playing an image asks us to temporarily identify with that image. My arm is a wing in my mind’s eye, and I temporarily ride whatever intuitive consonance I can find between the structure of my arm and my picture of a wing and it changes not only the complex interplay of tension and ease in my neuromuscular patterning as I reach for the cup (which is Todd’s goal), but also something about my sense of who and what I am. (Todd is famous (among dancers) for her book *The Thinking Body*, but I love her philosophical-anatomical manifesto, *The Hidden You: What You Are and What to Do About It*.)

This installment’s approach to corpse pose is almost entirely concerned with this temporary gliding in the sense of who and what we are. As opposed to other images taken from non-human and non-bodily sources, the image of corpse pose is not entirely metaphorical. Or rather, it is, but it bridges a similitude not between something human and something nonhuman, but between something living and something no longer living—we can think of the divide spanned by the metaphor as either on the temporal plane or the social one between ourselves and other bodies. It is weirdly situated on a true fact, since we will all be, eventually, corpses—although the question of whether “we” are still in any way there in our nonliving bodies is an open and unsettling one. The weirdness of entertaining this image of corpse pose is the weirdness of thinking of our collected bodymatter uncontained by our living identity—of identifying (temporarily) with the matter and not the identity.

Let’s have a picture of a Klein bottle to skate that surface. Then maybe wiggle the weirdness off your body like a dog shaking off water, skull to tailbone.



Anatomical Fact And Entertained Image

Corpse pose in yoga is a relaxation pose that takes place at the end of a practice, done lying on the floor on your back in a neutral, relaxed position, eyes closed. The same supine relaxation, whether at the opening or end of a session, is common to many different physical practices, but I'm particularly curious here about what happens when we call it "corpse pose" rather than simply "rest."

But before I get to that, here's a guide for experiencing corpse pose:

Put yourself through a period of sustained, hard activity. It should last for at least 10 minutes, preferably more like 40. At the end of your period of activity, lie down on the floor, close your eyes, legs long or knees resting on a rolled-up towel, arms long and resting in a direction toward the low diagonals. Don't hold yourself up at all: let everything flop out. Stay here for at least 3 minutes, preferably more.

You can simply rest, breathe. If you want help sinking into your weightedness, try entertaining this image: imagine your body is a small mountain range, the skin of your front body is the surface of the earth in this image, and below the skin is earth. See the ground of your body fill up with groundwater, percolating up from below. Then slowly watch the water table sink. Fill it up again. Slowly watch it sink. Loop as needed, until you feel heavy.

Then, once you have found corpse pose, entertain the image of your bodymatter uncontained by its identification with you. Of the stuff that is you, unconcerned with you. Of the stuff that is you, identifying itself as stuff. Follow the image in extended time-lapse, as something regenerative, not of a new you, but of new material forms. Invite the fungal angels in.

When you are ready to leave corpse pose, begin with a tiny awakening at your edges, waving fingers and toes. Let the feeling of awakening travel from the periphery to your center, as you curl your spine in, head toward tailbone, and roll over to your right side. Then as you are ready, bring yourself back to sitting.

An Account Of My Own Thinking About Corpse Pose

The first time I started really thinking about the corpse in corpse pose, I was taking a dance class structured around a period of deep rest at its midpoint. We went into this period of rest, lying supine on the floor as I'd done in nearly every movement class I've taken or taught. I guess that day our resting position was called by its yoga name of corpse pose. A dear friend of mine was slowly dying in a hospital a mile or so away. He was in that part of the decline when a person's personness begins to be eclipsed by the fact of their body and its own trajectory toward death.

I remember lying on the floor, trying to find total rest after the exhilaration of long exertion. As my weight dropped, I remember vividly experiencing a sensation of microtonal collapse in the thick strata of my chest, heart, lungs, as if my body was actually compacting. The closest I've ever gotten to describing the texture of the sensation is to liken it to the way a pile of sand with tiny creatures moving inside it sometimes depresses into tiny pockets and cascades little streams of sand, or the way dust occasionally just tumbles off the exposed edges of a canyon wall or dune. I sensed my bodymatter dropping groundward and outward: a formerly compact thing sifting itself apart. In this sensation, I felt suddenly close to my friend, like I could keep him company, somehow, here.

In this delicate sensation, which I often re-conjure, the image that plays before my eyes strikes me as something like a gesture toward the fact of my body as matter. Fact of eventual return to matter not contained by either this individual body or the person I am. Cellular matter that will continue beyond the container of my human body. In those moments, I'm able to entertain an identity with matter—with the lot of it, not just my portion of it. At the same time, yoked as this image is to its initial appearance in imagination as I lay not dying but in the pose of a corpse while my friend lay actually dying, the effacing, swallowing beauty of the identification with matter, with material ongoingness, is tied to a mournful feeling of recession—of being pushed back and away from the vital singularity of my living friend, there on the horizon growing smaller as I recede, and by both analogy and anticipation, from my own singularity as a living person, from me as a temporary festival of sentient animation, and from which my borrowed matter is rehearsing its withdrawal.

So to be in corpse pose and actively identify with the image, for me, produces a two-tracked experience, one looking forward—toward the eventual joining of matter with other matter—the other looking out the rear window, watching as I speed away from a thing with my own name.

Toward Writing

If the vertical posture of standing—our body's generic, navigation-ready neutral—is made possible by active oppositions (gravity and our upward countering thrust), then corpse pose is a time to host only one of the polarities. A condition of non-resistance.

If whatever it is that leaves the body at the moment we die is the thing that makes me me and you you and a person a person—that stakes a unifying claim to all these cells and systems—then corpse pose is a time to be free of that unifying name. A condition of non-belonging to any one scale or unit.

So: take something you have already written, maybe one of the borrowed stories you rewrote for an earlier installment of this pop-up. Or if you want to have an excursion, take something someone else has written and give it an annex. And—

—in the pose:

—If corpse pose relaxes the thing that enables action, then allow the story to move into a period of rest, where nothing is moving, nothing is preparing to move, and the only thing active is the force that comes from outside the story, a force that binds the story to its ground. Then proceed to leaving the pose, below.

—Or, if corpse pose dismantles the container that gives your story a name and a coherence and a singularity, then allow your story to enter a period of time in which it forgets its name, coherence, and singularity, and, if it knows itself at all, knows itself only as stuff to be disassembled and reused in some unknown way. Then proceed to leaving the pose, below.

—leaving the pose:

Traditionally, you are guided out of corpse pose by gently alerting and activating at the periphery of the body before curling to the right side and then slowly returning to sitting. How do we gently alert and activate that periphery of a story? Where are its far edges?

In considering what movement can happen at the periphery when everything else is in some kind of sympathy with death, I want to offer this long passage from an essay by John McDermott. Writing about thinking through William James in his own experience with alcoholism and recovery, he articulates a pedagogy of nourishment. As I read this, I see connections to the idea of small action at the edge of something as its path to awakening from an excursion into some kind of death or non-being.

Prompt first, then passage.

—If we come out of corpse pose through a nourishment at our edges, then grow something at the very margins of your story that can bring it back to its coherence, back to its standing, back to its capacity to move. It needn't forget everything it found when it was in corpse pose, but it does need to get on with its day.

This is a really long passage but given that it addresses the cumulative impact of tiny events of growth at the edges, I find it useful to follow the longer, slower thought rather than zero in on the pith. An URL for the whole essay can be found on the back page. (NB the phrase “the sick soul” comes from James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and is James’ ecumenical description of a person unable to connect with the full field of the living.)

John McDermott, from “A Jamesian Personscape”

*Yet, all may not be lost. James has counseled us that separateness, loneliness, is a continuous transition. Continuous with what? we ask. With the fringe, with the more, with the “fact” that “there can be no difference anywhere that doesn’t make a difference elsewhere.” Surely, our explicit situation is dreadful. We must turn to the implicitness both awash and hidden in everything, everywhere. In “A World of Pure Experience” in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, James writes: “Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds.”*

William James is not telling us that our abject loneliness should reach out for a “more,” a relational buzz. No. He is telling us that our loneliness has its own “more.” To have this “more,” look to the edge, follow the relational transitions, however spare, however pale. This is the “slow.” More than likely, nutrition, even if ever so slight, will show its hand. He continues:

... Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, cannot, I contend, be denied.

Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more emphatically, as if our spurts and sallies forward were the real firing-line of the battle, were like the thin line of flame advancing across the dry autumnal field which the farmer proceeds to burn. In this line we live prospectively as well as retrospectively.

The second promise given to recovering alcoholics is that “we will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.” All of our experiencings speak, not only to us but within the stream itself. And how is that possible? Because, mirabile dictu, our experiences are “cognitive of one another,” for the “knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience.” Loneliness is cut, for we are not spectators looking out at a vast abyss, so characteristic of the sick soul. Rather, we are participants in the “knowledge of sensibilities,” as “made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.” However halting, sparse, bare, this ongoing relational manifold is at the beginning of recovery; it is nonetheless, a Jamesian “perch” in the rush of sensorial makings and unmakings. Following James, this knowledge is not knowledge “about,” as in the conceptual or formulaic, notably characterized by distance between self and world. Rather, for James we speak here of knowledge by “acquaintance,” by direct experience, prehensive, hand over hand. And our loneliness is further ameliorated by the rush of hunches, hints, and surprises as these relations speak to each other, and slowly, richly, speak to us. Contrary to common wisdom, I do not think that in recovering, the amelioration of systemic loneliness occurs in a flash, a burning bush as it were. Rather, it “works if you work it.” But if James is on to something, as I think he is, then the will to believe in possibility can unlock that “frozen sea” so terrifyingly depicted in his chapter on the sick soul.

The turn toward recovering is less than an act of faith, but it is more than an act of hope.

I do not speak here about “smelling the roses” (although I can be testy about that oft-cited quick fix for a deadly malaise). No, I point here to pedagogy found initially in the Periphyseon of Johannes Scotus Erigena and subsequently in the tradition of the vestigia dei as found in the medieval Franciscans, the Victorines, Bonaventure, and on into Jonathan Edwards’s Images or Shadows of Divine Things, Horace Bushnell, Ralph Waldo Emerson on Nature, and the radically empirical metaphysics and pedagogy of William James. (The capstone of this tradition is found in the first three chapters of John Dewey’s Art as Experience.) Only semi-canonical, this tradition embraces a pedagogy of nutrition, one in which all counts, everything speaks, and although loneliness can never be absolutely abrogated, we become able to connect it to flourishing.

The turn toward recovering is less than an act of faith, but it is more than an act of hope. Absorbing the message of a famous torch song, perhaps we can say that recovering is “taking a chance on love.”

It is a day and you are alive and maybe writing. Enjoy it.

So ends the Somatics Workshop.