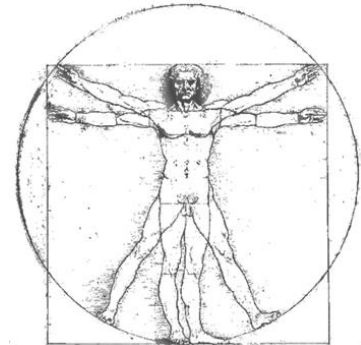


Coaching The Narrative Of The Soma

In this article, I explore how our body holds our 'self-story', and how we can help people change these deep unconscious narratives.

'Soma', from the Greek, means the living body in its wholeness, or for those of a more neuroscience bent I might say the 'distributed brain in action'. It is our head, heart and guts – all our physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual energies in relationship.



Every soma tells a story, a unique embodied experience of culture, family and personal experience organised upon the framework of our evolutionary inheritance. Modern science is now clearly showing that life experience starts to shape our patterns of identity and behaviour in the womb and during our early years, prior to the development of our explicit memory and our speech and language centres. Our learning at this time is primarily sensory and movement-based, meaning our early story and established patterns are not readily accessible via the conscious mind. However, they are most certainly present in us, stored within our body-mind.

The deeper activated narrative of humanity at the moment, particularly for those of us living within the western mindset, is increasingly one of disconnection, division, separation, fracture and opposition. This carries through into individual experience and embodied patterns of stress, armouring, 'over-efforting', tension, and feelings of inadequacy and, despite the West's affluence, of scarcity. These patterns are embodied and habituated, so they are mostly out of our conscious awareness, especially since many of us in this culture live disconnected from our body in one way or another.

We create narrow dimensions of existence as a strategy to face a challenging world. This both reflects and causes constant firing of our fight-or-flight survival system: over time, we develop armouring and muscle-tension in ever-readiness to fight or flee. This is highly energy inefficient. Triggered, we react rather than act. We find ourselves following our embodied scripts rather than reflective conscious choice. By engaging the body in coaching we can reveal these patterns and develop more resourceful alternative responses. Sometimes the mind cannot change the mind, because the mind is not aware of this deeper patterning. Under stress, our deeper out-of-conscious patterns of the body win out over more thoughtful actions.

The current narrative is certainly out of balance. Living systems are not just interconnected but interdependent: within ourselves, with others and with nature. The world is at last recognising this, at least ecologically. This has been evident recently through the well-publicised strikes by schoolchildren in the name of climate change, global protests by Extinction Rebellion and the vibrant speaking of Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg, which has caught the public imagination.

The issue, as in seemingly all aspects of human life today, is to re-establish the creative, sustaining and enhancing engagement with life's experiences and dynamics. The body functions on 'stabilised instability': we lose our balance to find our balance. Positions are not held but are in transitionary process. We are in co-creative conversation with our context. In this way, the mind can facilitate the body's release from old patterns and the development of new one through use of the imagination.

As the poet David Whyte* says, we need to get into our *full* body and thereby into the imagination before we tap into the intellect of the strategic mind. This calls forth a completely different identity from what we might be used to and comfortable with, even as we may fear we will lose our intellectual capacities if we connect with the body.

PUTTING AWARENESS INTO PRACTICE

I practice and teach a form of tai ji (chi) that encourages creative freedom within the form. The form is the context for exploration within which a person can discover their own tai ji. We explore the *complementarity* of 'opposites', not their confrontation. We discover creativity and fluidity through curves, not straight lines; through the dynamic interplay of the peripheral and the immediate; the masculine and feminine; the right and left brain; of yinyang.

In this world we tend to value fast over slow and are taught to be hard not soft. But the body-mind learns through increments and through softening. I find that many people (including coaches) find it a real challenge to release their embodied tension and the need for speed. Research at Case Western Reserve University¹ has found that when the brain's analytic network (which is focused on doing) is engaged, our ability to appreciate the human cost of our action is repressed: so we have a built-in neural constraint on our ability to be both empathetic and analytic at the same time. The doing body strives and in so doing becomes a 'tension body'. We start to identify with our tension body, and thereby lose sensitivity to our inner word and our outer world. In my experience so much of this is invisible to people.

One pharmaceutical executive recently said to me, "I feel genuinely empowered with a more embodied awareness of my tendency to see others as 'resistors' and then engage in resistance myself, which is a futility exercise. It occurred to me this weekend that with many of the things that 'come at me' in life – emails, needs from my team, family demands (or perceived demands) – I over-engage, I invest in addressing such items, at a cost to my greater purpose/needs. I've a hunch that my excessive busyness, taking the place of self-care and 'peace' in life, is because I get lost engaging in this 'resistance' versus staying on purpose.

The starting point for exploration is to become aware of how we shape ourselves according to the contexts we are in, especially when we feel under pressure. As mentioned, many patterns run deep and were created before the development of our conscious memory, but they are held in our unconscious and revealed through our body and behaviour. To see a body in action, sitting or standing, one can see a psycho-emotional world at work. In the embodiment-coaching I practice, I often use gentle partner work and also role-play in group coaching situations. These aim to reveal reactive patterns and to develop and embed more resourceful psychological, emotional and physical pathways. The stimulus must always be light: too much pressure and the body-mind goes into overwhelm and reaction, resulting in no learning being achieved. It goes without saying that such work must always be contracted for between client and coach.

SMALL CHANGES, BIG DIFFERENCES

People are often surprised at how they respond in these activities and how this opens up fresh exploratory conversations between body and mind. Having just experienced their response and finding it recurs in response to repeated stimuli, a person cannot deny what just happened and they get curious. While there may be generalised meanings to apply to certain reactions, one must view any response alongside the reactive patterning of the rest of their individual system.

For example, one client had their head tipped forward, which put them in a slightly bowed position; this was energetically protecting their heart and themselves from being visible. Raising their head a fraction to look forward and open up, they found themselves contravening a lifetime's submissive pattern, provoking gentle tears. Another client's head tip reflected their expectation of hitting resistance, as if always walking into the headwind of life. Raising their head, again but a fraction, released tension throughout their system, and a new ease and orientation to putting their ideas and themselves forward. Small physical differences can create big shifts in energetic and resourcefulness.

Greater creativity and freedom are enabled when we shift from being contracted, separated and oppositional in our response to a perceived threat and move to being open, energetically extended and inclusive of the triggering threat. In this openness we come into relational conversation – responsive and creative – and can develop a capacity to be with what is present without judgement. Through the support and shaping of the body we can gradually learn to be open and centred in situations where there are greater and greater amounts of energy and disruption.

This is the essence of somatic coaching and embodiment work: to know our baseline embodied patterns, not necessarily with the intention of changing them, rather to learn the transition pathways to embodied shaping which builds clear perception, compassion and confidence and creates new choices of being in the world. Ultimately, rather than turning away or armouring, this work strengthens our capacity to be willing to turn and face and be what is. It fosters our capacity to engage with the world as 'self', whose wellbeing, interdependent as it is with our own, may be nourished alongside our own healing.

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First published by Association for Coaching in Coaching Perspectives magazine July 2019.

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1. 'fMRI reveals reciprocal inhibition between social and physical cognitive domains'. *NeuroImage*, Vol 66, 1. 1 Feb 2013. 385-401