



Chapter 1

Feel-Feel-at-Flesh-Inside

A fork in the road

At the age of eighteen I found myself pondering a fork in the road of my life. I needed to make a truly life-changing, either/or decision—and the diverging paths headed in opposite directions.

I could see with some clarity down one of them: I'd been accepted at the University of Toronto to study physics. Certain steps along that journey seemed neatly laid out for me—complete university, maybe do some post-graduate study, secure a job, get married, buy a home, maybe have kids, raise them ... I knew none of the details, but the way stations along that journey were situated with a certain conventional inevitability.

And then there was the other path, which veered from convention into the dark unknown. I was drawn to it in part by my love of theater. For a couple of years I'd been training with a theater company in downtown Toronto run by John Herbert, a director and playwright who is best known for penning *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. Working with his company, I'd been bitten by the theater bug. It had ignited a fever in my veins. I loved it. I loved the way theater places life under a magnifying glass. When you are performing, the sacred space of the stage, the attention of the

audience, and the world of the play you inhabit all conspire to act like a lens that reveals and heightens every impulse running through you. When it's at its best, theater taps into a rare magic that can hold the whole of a character's life there and illuminate it for all to share. To experience this as an actor is to experience a special freedom of being.

Hungry to understand theater, I trained and wrote and read whenever I could, and along the way I discovered the work of Zeami Motokiyo. Born in Japan in 1363, he had, with his father, developed a timeless style of theater called Noh. Reading his secret treatises on the art of the Noh, I was transfixed. With allusion, metaphor, and poetry, they illuminated the very essence of the actor's art. Zeami wrote of "the underlying spiritual strength of the actor," which enables him to enter a "state of mindlessness in which the actor conceals even from himself his own intent."¹ Without entering that mindless state, the actor is a mere puppeteer, manipulating his own responses.

*Life and death, past and present—
Marionettes on a toy stage.
When the strings are broken,
Behold the broken pieces!*²

I was sixteen when I encountered those words, and I was hooked. I found Zeami's writings incendiary. They not only scorched themselves into my mind—they lit up whole new possibilities for me. So when I heard that a Noh play was being performed in Montreal, I hopped on a Greyhound bus for a six-hour ride to see it firsthand.

The play I saw, *Sumidagawa*, was about a mother whose young son had been abducted by slave traders and killed beside a river. Driven mad by this, she returns to the river on the anniversary of

1 Donald Keene, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature* (UK: Penguin Books, 1968), 250.

2 Ibid.

his death. Lingering, she sees him appear repeatedly, only to watch him disappear each time she reaches to embrace him.

I was overwhelmed by the restrained power of the performance, shaken to my core, and utterly mystified by how this formal, austere, six-hundred-year-old art form had unlocked such deepwelling emotions in me. Her longing and her grief live in me still.

Lingering at that fork in the road, I looked down the path to university physics and beyond, dotted into the distance with its various way stations; and down the other path, engulfed in a darkness that dared me to defy expectation and go to Japan and probe the beauty of Noh theater. I think, when all is said and done, I felt more deeply baffled by the mystery of Noh than by the mysteries of quantum mechanics, which says a lot.

The most obvious impediment to my taking the road less traveled was money. I didn't have any to speak of—but I was equipped with the reasoning capacity of an eighteen-year-old, which suggested that if I could get to London and buy a bicycle, and if I started pedaling and was heading in the right direction, and if I didn't stop pedaling ... if I simply did that, I would eventually arrive in Japan, with only a sea or two to navigate along the way.

And just to be clear, I wasn't naïve about the risks. I didn't really expect to make my way unscathed alone on my bike through Europe, the Middle East, India, and wherever else it took me. A part of me truly didn't expect to come back alive. But I knew that if I didn't venture down that path into the dark unknown—if I remained within my culture—I would succumb to a more certain sort of death.

I felt the specter of that different death very specifically as a teenager. I felt that my being was tangled in a web strung with values, habits of behavior and ways of understanding that I had inherited from my culture. That web bound my very thinking, such that I could feel it being pulled into staunchly established patterns. A bias for adhering to those patterns had been seeded into my being before I was old enough to question them, which meant that I myself was the carrier. Within me hid prohibitions

against my own freedom of being and against the experience of my own wholeness. I was compromised by inner structures that interpreted reality for me. Those structures, part of my flesh and my neurology, defined what felt ‘normal’ to me. I knew myself and my world only through the prism of my blinkered culture; and I knew I would suffocate if I remained within it.

Every human culture communicates its own story about reality and our proper relationship to it. Each story communicates what it means to be human. The Story of a culture is as authoritative to its members as a sacred text is to its adherents. But the Story isn’t written in words—it’s written in the myriad particulars of the culture’s architecture, language, hierarchies, customs, values, markets, child-rearing practices, modes of transport, penal systems—everything. The Story of Western culture asserts through those particulars a range of messages: that humans stand as independent of nature as our skyscrapers do; that the head should be in charge of the body, just as a CEO is in charge of a corporation; that we can own trees, land and animals; that self-mastery is the means to success; that what we feel as ‘the self’ lies within the boundary of the skin; that the pursuit of happiness is the primary goal of our lives; and that money buys security.

A culture’s Story shapes its artifacts and structures, as well as the thoughts and experiences of its members. Every culture’s Story about what it means to be human is unique, and every Story hides in the background of its culture, disguising itself as reality so that it remains almost invisible to its members, even as it firmly establishes what ‘feels right’ to them.

And here’s the rub: organizing our lives in accord with the Story ‘feels right’ to us, even when it makes us feel bad. Joseph Campbell referred to such a state as an “organized inadequacy.” And its ‘rightness’ is no more than a feeling. The instructions of the Story aren’t reasonable. They aren’t accountable. They are largely hidden. And they often have nothing to do with the truth of the world. Why, for instance, should wearing a necktie betoken respectability or competence? It’s just a piece of cloth around the

neck. It's a custom we made up. And yet for all its arbitrariness, it directly upholds the Story of our culture: it represents the tacit assurance that the feelings of the body will be held in check, isolated from the thinking of the head by the knot of that symbolic tourniquet. A loosened tie is understood to weaken that assurance.

Because the Story is largely invisible, its instructions rule us without our being aware of it. Nations, economies, scientists, religions and social movements are held in its sway. As the politics of our world amply demonstrate, what 'feels right' to voters is frequently contrary to their interests and immune to logic. The Story they have grown up with is their primary reality and they vote to perpetuate it. They too are prisoners of inner structures that started shaping them in infancy.

Most readers of this book will likely have been raised in some variation of my culture: the consumer-based, patrifocal, reductionistic, technologically driven, information-obsessed, individualistic culture that has come to dominate the world across languages, belief systems and politics. Like me, most readers will feel the effects of that culture encoded in their nervous systems. For the purposes of this book, then, I will refer to that dominant culture as 'our culture'—and, depending on your background, you can take 'our' to mean either 'the culture you and I share' or 'the culture I and others are spreading across the world'.

One of my blessings as a teenager was that what 'felt right' to others in my culture registered in my nervous system as a violation. The deepest impulses of my life—my curiosity, my body's sense of truth, my love of the edges of life—clashed with the patterns into which I was being molded. I felt my aliveness to the world under assault by a Story I could feel but could not point to. I was a misfit. I felt trapped. And I truly felt my life was at stake. Not my continued biological existence, but my aliveness.

Moreover, the adults of my world seemed utterly entranced by the fantasyland they were living in, playing their roles in the Story and inviting me to choose one for myself. None of them seemed free or fully awake. Their lives were contracted by compromises

they seemed unaware of having made. And I saw in them the fate awaiting me: if I didn't somehow wrench free from the harness of the Story, I would perish. But although I railed and fought against its power over me, I also realized I might as well be standing in the ocean like the Irish hero Cuchulain, doing battle with the waves. If I remained, I would succumb. My teenage heart resonated to the description of Tarzan penned by Edgar Rice Burroughs:

In reality he had always held the outward evidences of so-called culture in deep contempt. Civilization meant to Tarzan of the Apes a curtailment of freedom in all its aspects—freedom of action, freedom of thought, freedom of love, freedom of hate.³

So when I looked into the impenetrable dark of the road that held the mystery of Noh theater at its far end, I felt the thrill of possibility and a whispered question asking me what really mattered in my life, and did I dare put it on the line?

The choice was made. I said good-bye to my family, caught an overnight bus to New York City, and found a flight to London in the *Village Voice* for sixty-six dollars. When I next saw my home, almost two years had elapsed.

I don't know how many miles I cycled, but I do know that each one still lives in me. During the countless hours I spent on the road, I was awake to the world around me—smelling it, listening, engaging, feeling. I spent day and night outside and alone—pedaling, eating, sleeping. I connected to my body as never before, but I also newly connected with the world. I attuned to it, because my life depended on that attunement. When I started off in the morning, I had no idea what I would encounter around the bend or where I would be sleeping that night—nor did that trouble me in the least. The sky was my constant companion, showing me its wonders every day; and as dusk began to draw back the curtain

3 Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan the Untamed* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1920), 8.

on the watchful universe, I was—I don't know how else to say this—guided to a place under the stars where I could safely spend the night, no one knowing I was there.

I passed through and interacted with cultures radically different from my own, each with its own Story—and I could feel those different Stories, and adapt to them for a time, and appreciate both the radiance and the limitations of each of them. I didn't experience anything remotely like culture shock until the day I returned home. And suddenly a world familiar to me in its every detail appeared bizarre and arbitrary. What had 'felt right' by dint of my upbringing was thrown into disarray. The 'normal' espoused by my culture was suddenly untenable. I had returned home with the greatest gift of all—the ability to see the strands of the web that had bound me. And seeing them, I could begin to question them.

Dr. Jonas Salk—who by discovering the polio vaccine saved thousands of children's lives and never sought to profit financially from it—once remarked, "What people think of as a moment of discovery is really the discovery of a question." When I felt stuck as a teenager in the structures of thought and perception of our culture, it wasn't for a lack of answers—what I lacked were the crucial questions. The most difficult thing in the world is to question an assumption you've never consciously made—and the Story hides such assumptions in our language, our architecture, our customs, our institutions and our very neurology.⁴ How do you even begin to question something that is so normal it's invisible?

My favorite example of the ability of a question to penetrate the veneer of 'normal' is the anecdote of Isaac Newton sitting outside in a contemplative mood one late summer's day and seeing an apple fall from a nearby tree. As he explained to William Stukeley,

4 Daniel Everett provides a challenging and precisely articulated view of the wholesale effect of culture on our neurology, arguing in his book *Dark Matter of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) that the brain is not 'pre-wired' with basic rules for language, perception or behavior but that it's effectively a blank slate on which connections are forged by one's culture. Cognition expresses culture. The book's subtitle is evocative: *The Culturally Articulated Unconscious*.

that incident prompted him to ask, “Why should that apple always descend perpendicularly to the ground?”⁵ I don’t know of a clearer example in history of someone questioning what pre-exists for everyone as a given of normal experience. Gravity never changes. It always just is. We never escape it: we are born into it, live in it all our lives, and die in it, as have all the generations before us. Newton may well have been the first person in history to ask, “Why do things fall?”—and it led him to name and formulate the force that holds the planets in their orbits.

To me Newton’s true genius was being able to question gravity without ever experiencing anything else. I had it much easier—I could step beyond my culture. And because my bike trip took me so radically outside of it, and left me so open to the worlds through which I moved, I was able to appreciate how radically the Story lived within me. In the years and decades following that trip, whatever else I have done in life, I have focused on one issue: to understand the nature of the Story of our culture, to discern how it shows up in my body, and to acquire freedom of choice in the matter. The traction that enabled that mission to move forward was provided by questions I discovered, one by one—each directing a new light onto phenomena as familiar as gravity, or my own senses. And for me, one of the most provocative sources for sparking such questions continues to be the light afforded by cultures other than my own.

The sense of balance

Our culture interprets all aspects of our reality. It teaches us that matter is made of atoms, which are like little solar systems. It teaches that our thinking happens in our heads and that our brains are essentially personal computers that process information. It

5 Amanda Gefter, The New Scientist Culture Lab, “Newton’s Apple: The real story,” <https://www.newscientist.com/blogs/culturelab/2010/01/newtons-apple-the-real-story.html>.

helps us distinguish between a ‘thing’ and a ‘process’. It teaches that knowledge is communicated in bits and pieces, which we call ‘facts’. And it teaches us to identify human intelligence as the ability to reason in an abstract fashion—something we can measure with an IQ test.

We also learn what to value. Knowledge is valuable, for instance, and ignorance is a flaw. Without necessarily being aware of it, we learn the value system that says ‘up’ is good and ‘down’ is bad, so that if we are told, “Things are looking up,” or “John is feeling a little low,” there is no ambiguity. Similarly we understand heaven to be above us in the ‘good’ realm, and we place hell beneath our feet in the ‘bad’ realm, which happens to be mother earth. In some circles, the ‘highest’ goal you might strive for is to ‘raise’ your consciousness—because, as we have learned to experience it, ‘up’ represents good.

These facts and values are popularly considered self-evident in our culture—and that makes it difficult for us to step back and see that each of them is merely a part of the Story of what it means to be human in our culture. More crucially, each of these beliefs happens to be inconsistent with reality, and some of them are downright damaging—as we shall soon explore in some detail.

For now, let’s start with one clear fact we learn from our culture: we have five senses, which pretty much everyone can name—touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight. As obvious as this seems to us, it is actually not a fact but a cultural construct. People in other cultures recognize different senses, and even have different concepts of what senses are. These differences matter enormously, because the senses are what activate our intelligence. If we had no senses, our intelligence would literally remain asleep.

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Imagine, if you can, a baby born without any touch, sight, hearing—without any senses at all. Lacking sensory stimulation of any sort, the baby’s intelligence would remain dormant and the world would not exist for it. In fact, its own body would not exist for it if there were no senses with which to feel it.

If the senses activate our intelligence, though, it stands to reason that different senses would activate it differently. As children are being taught by their culture what their senses are, they are actually being taught how to pay attention to themselves and the world—which affects how they think about it and respond to it.

The Anlo-Ewe⁶ culture of West Africa has an understanding and experience of the senses that differs radically from ours, and the contrast it provides helps us understand how our selection of five senses—the Chosen Five, we might call them—affects our very experience of the self and the world around us. For instance, the Anlo-Ewe consider balance a primary sense and they devote themselves to its cultivation and appreciation. This appreciation extends beyond the purely physical skills of balance to include what we might call a balanced deportment in the world, or a balanced personality. The emphasis on balance begins in infancy: before a baby can even stand up, she is held by siblings or relatives in a standing position and encouraged to “Balance, balance.”

Kathryn Linn Geurts studied the senses of the Anlo-Ewe and wrote a book on the subject called *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*. As she explains it, children growing up in this culture learn that balance is “an essential component of what it means to be human.”⁷ Someone’s balance shows up in the way she stands, the way she walks, and the way she carries something; and it expresses who she is in a fundamental way: “your character, your moral fortitude is embodied in the way you move, and the way you move embodies

6 “Anlo-Ewe” is pronounced AHNG-low EH-vay.

7 Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 18.

an essence of your nature.”⁸ When one woman declared that she couldn’t walk if she were carrying a baby in her arms, Geurts attempted to prove her wrong by picking up the woman’s granddaughter and carrying her across the room. But “walk” means something different in the Anlo-Ewe culture—it means moving in full-bodied grace; and that quality cannot be preserved while carrying a baby, or anything else of substance, in one’s arms.

In the Anlo-Ewe culture, babies are traditionally carried on the back and loads are traditionally carried on the head. When you “head-load,” as it is called, as opposed to arm carrying, your balance is not merely preserved but is felt more keenly. Graceful movement is not only possible; it becomes necessary. Geurts relates that a group of children helped fill her water barrel by making numerous trips from the well, carrying buckets on their heads. And she remarks that even the youngest of them, two-year-old Peter, helped out on every trip by carrying a small pan of water on his head. How many two-year-olds in our culture could make six or seven trips from a well, balancing a pan of water on their heads? For that matter, how many adults could? Anlo-Ewe speakers consider it normal. Such examples illuminate Geurts’s claim that “culture does not only affect the mind. It changes the body.”⁹

The Anlo-Ewe culture flushes out an oversight in ours. Why don’t we recognize balance as a sense? We speak about having a ‘sense of balance’; we have a sense organ for balance—the labyrinth of the inner ear. Why do we not consider it a sense?

The answer to that points to something essential in our culture’s larger narrative—because the Chosen Five support the Story as surely as the necktie does. To call balance a sense, it turns out, would contravene its narrative. If you consider what is common among the senses we legitimize, you realize they all conform to the same model: a stimulus from the outside world crosses the boundary of the self and arrives at a receptor. For instance, light passes into the eye and stimulates the retinal cells. Food passes

8 Ibid., 76.

9 Ibid., 230.

into the mouth and stimulates the taste buds. Heat and pressure from the outside world stimulate the sensory neurons of the skin. Sound passes into the ear and stimulates the eardrum. A scent passes into the nose and stimulates the olfactory receptors.

What each of our senses supports is an aspect of the Story that is foundational to its message about what it means to be human: *the self is contained within a boundary*. As we define it, a sense receives stimuli from the outside world that traverse our personal boundary, and it then sends a signal to the brain for interpretation. As Geurts observes, we think of senses as “physical instruments used for assessing the external environment.”¹⁰

But balance doesn't work like that. It doesn't impute a personal boundary. Balance relies on the felt relationship between your center of gravity and that of the earth. We maintain an aligned relationship between those centers or we fall over. We maintain it without thinking, but it's actually a very sensitive relationship. If you stand still and upright, you can feel how even a slight shift in your body's weight will take your center out of alignment with the earth's. The earth itself is massive but its center is precisely located. To appreciate that, look sometime at a plumb bob wavering not a hair's breadth to one side or the other but hanging dead still, pointing directly at the earth's center.

Your sense of balance similarly tells you where that center is and what your relationship with it is. No boundary is imputed; there is no stimulus delivering information to you from the outside. Rather, you live in the field of the earth's gravity, as it lives in yours, and your sense of balance illuminates that dynamic partnership. The very process of balancing, then, presents us with a model in which the self is not encased within a boundary but is oriented in the world by a fluid, felt partnership.

10 Ibid., 46.

Deliver nothing, experience everything

Geurts compiled a provisional list of nine senses generally recognized by Anlo-Ewe speakers. One of those senses provides an even sharper rebuke to the boundary of the self than balance does: in the Anlo-Ewe culture, speech is considered to be a sense. I heard Geurts in an interview explaining that when she was first told this, she felt that she had failed to convey what she meant by a sense—because if you understood that category, how could you possibly place speech in it? The distinction is obvious to us: a sense receives information, speech delivers it. But Anlo-Ewe speakers see it differently. Speaking is an experience that is felt in the mouth and the body; and they feel spoken words as something that could be directed “with the intention of hitting a mark”¹¹ as your senses might direct an arrow.

The very idea of speech as a sense is so contrary to our experience that the notion invites exploration. Our view that someone speaks in order to communicate what she knows is a reinforcement of our cultural belief that the self is contained within a boundary: our thoughts exist inside us, and speech is what we use to deliver them across that boundary to someone else. This model seems not only right to us but axiomatic—and it also happens to perform the same important job as our model of the Chosen Five: to reinforce the boundary around the self.

In reality, though, speech is not a delivery system—it is a means of discovery. It enables a speaker to give spontaneous, tangible form to her thoughts and feelings. Graham Wallas was pointing to this when he wrote: “The little girl had the making of a poet in her who, being told to be sure of her meaning before she spoke said, ‘How can I know what I think till I see what I say?’”¹² A sentence spoken in conversation is an improvisation—who knows at the outset what the last word of it will be?—and it

11 Ibid., 59.

12 Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926), 106.

is generally moved forward by a desire to elucidate a thought that may be no more than half-sensed as the sentence gets under way. Each word or phrase serves to light the way forward for the next; like stepping stones, they trace out the full shape of that thought. In that regard, speaking is analogous to the sense of touch: it enables you to feel your way forward through the metaphoric dark towards a beckoning idea, just as your hands might enable you to find your way forward in a dark room.

So speech can be thought of as a sense that facilitates discovery. When you understand it in that way, the whole of your being is invited to be present to your act of speaking. By contrast, if you believe, as our culture's Story has it, that speech is a means of delivering your ideas, your concern will not be on discovery—it will be on the task of presentation: presenting your ideas, your opinions, and even yourself. This draws you into what I call the 'presentation mode'.

The primary concern of the presentation mode is to elicit a certain response in the person, or group of people, you are addressing—you want them to like you, to agree with you, to comply with your way of understanding something. So your underlying desire is actually to manipulate a certain reaction in them. It's a somewhat deluded mission, though: you can't control what someone thinks or how they react, however cleverly you orchestrate your delivery. And here's the catch: that orchestration requires a conductor—a part of you that takes charge of your delivery, wanting it to be effective. So presentation mode puts you in a divided state: one part of you supervises the other part to manipulate the desired response in your audience. And so it is that presentation mode turns us into puppeteers of the self: "Behold the broken pieces."

Presentation mode is the default option in our culture. If we imagine that speaking is about delivery, it can't be otherwise. So presentation mode can take over even as you meet a friend on the street: before you can feel what it means to be present to her in this moment, before you can allow yourself to experience

whatever it is you are actually experiencing, you are arranging your expression and presenting your greeting.

An extreme version of presentation mode is found in public speaking. And for anyone who understands speech as a delivery system, public speaking can seem like a nightmare—to stand within the isolating boundary of the self, trying to manipulate the right response from a group of strangers when your own body is straining under your frantic supervision: sweating, pumping adrenaline and stiff with tension. It's the nightmare of being burdened with trying to control the uncontrollable.

Every time you speak you face a choice: you can be in presentation mode or you can be present. If you allow yourself to receive the Present,¹³ and receive the listener, and sense your way forward as you speak, you will be giving language a chance to reveal its magical ability to help you discover and clarify your truth, that you might stand in its resonance. And you will quickly learn that if you are present to your truth, the listener—if she wishes—will be able to feel it and resonate to it as well.

To steer myself clear of presentation mode, I have adopted a little personal motto: “Deliver nothing, experience everything.”

Seselelame

We feel ourselves held within a personal boundary that keeps our life separate from that of the world. It's hard to appreciate how strangely normalized that state of ours is until we look to other cultures for comparison. When we seek to promote our personal well-being, for instance, we might think about taking the right supplements, eating organic food, exercising regularly and sleeping well. I have no issue with any of that—but it's based on a

13 I cannot feel the present objectively; and when I truly feel it, I feel it as a tangible, borderless, intimate intelligence. Because of this, I am unable to distinguish between the divine present and the Divine Presence. For that reason, I capitalize the word 'Present'.

limiting assumption that health will be achieved by doing the right things to the body. So our focus is on the self as an isolated entity, as though it were a machine requiring upkeep.

For Anlo-Ewe speakers, well-being is something quite different. It has to be, for they experience the self as porous rather than enclosed. For instance, the Anlo-Ewe sense of personhood is described as having a “nonboundedness and a lack of the kind of unitary wholeness of being that is characteristic of Western psychologies of the self.”¹⁴ This reflects the Anlo-Ewe understanding of being itself: “Not stable, being is highly changeable, always in transformation.”¹⁵ They have also been described as having a “radical indeterminacy of the person.”¹⁶ In keeping with this, well-being is understood to be dependent on transactions between the self and others—transactions that include “the flow of energy, matter, substances and information throughout many aspects of the individual’s world.”¹⁷ In short, well-being is sustained by dynamic relationship.

We aren’t too keen on personal porosity or exchanges of energy. We generally prefer to keep the self in its private container, while the Chosen Five intermittently keep us apprised of what’s going on outside it. But the Chosen Five provide information about just one realm we are able to sense. There are another two realms recognized by neuroscience, which are unacknowledged by our popular culture and often minimally felt.

Neuroscience organizes human sense into three categories: exteroception, proprioception and interoception. *Exteroception* includes all the senses that inform us about the world outside the body, such as our Chosen Five. *Proprioception* tells us where the body is in space. *Interoception* monitors all that is going on within the body, and it’s a lot: we feel the heart, the breath, the

14 Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 170. This comment was made by researcher Judy Rosenthal.

15 *Ibid.*, 142.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 169.

immune system, hunger, muscle tension, sexual arousal, emotional signals from our gut (which at times we might call ‘gut feelings’), a full bladder—all of it.

Geurts has commented that in our culture, the senses that make up interoception seem to be at odds “with a deeply held belief that something can be considered a sense if and only if it is a bodily function that provides knowledge of the outside world.”¹⁸ The Anlo-Ewe culture, by contrast, places the realm of “internal senses,” or interoception, front and center. In fact, the culture has no word that corresponds to the English word *sense*. Instead they have a word that has no English equivalent and acts as a meta-sense that embraces categories we hold rigidly apart. That word is *seselelame*.

An Ewe linguist translates *seselelame* as “feel-feel-at-flesh-inside.”¹⁹ The word refers to *what is perceived through the sensations of the body*. It can refer to the sensation of happiness or sorrow within the body, or cold, intuition, sexual arousal, walking, balance, the sense in the body that you are getting sick, as well as the senses of seeing, hearing, smell, taste, physical contact or speech. All of these inner sensations—whether emotional, sexual, psychic, intuitive, kinesthetic, systemic or sensory—are instances of *seselelame*. And only some of them are instances of interoception.

Seselelame includes what we would call exteroception and proprioception. Every sense is felt in the body’s resonance. The Anlo-Ewe don’t just hear sounds; they feel them through the body. They don’t just see sights; they feel them in the body. So while we have only the Chosen Five—each an exteroceptor that imputes a boundary around the self—the Anlo-Ewe have *seselelame*, an inner realm in which all the world is felt.

Since teenagehood I have felt gratitude to all the cultures that have helped me gain perspective on my own. Their unique ways of understanding what it means to be human have helped me experience my own reality more fully. The subtitle of Geurts’s book on

18 Ibid., 252.

19 Ibid., 40.

the Anlo-Ewe, *Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*, is a case in point. Our culture doesn't really recognize bodily ways of knowing. In our modeling the body doesn't know—the head does.²⁰ An anthropologist writing about us might subtitle her book *Bodily Ways of Gathering Raw Information About the Outside World So That It Can Be Relayed to the Almighty, Stand-alone Brain and Processed There*. The way we describe the body—as something we 'have', as something we 'listen to', as something we 'have problems with'—is not just a semantic choice; it speaks to the core of how we segregate our thinking from it.

What the body knows

Because the senses activate our intelligence and orient us to the world, a selected set of senses will privilege a certain way of attending to it. As a child learns her culture's model of the senses, she is learning how to perceive herself, others and the world around her, as well as how to assign value to everything. She is also learning what not to sense. In short, by teaching its members a certain set of senses, a culture teaches them a certain way of being.

The exclusive emphasis on exteroceptors in our culture places great value on what the head knows and demeans by omission what the body knows. We don't even name that inner realm of the body's knowing, except with an obscure neuroscientific

20 Often, as in this instance, when I talk about 'the body' I am referring to what lies below the head. I do understand that 'the body' technically includes the head, but we have no word for the portion of us below the neck from which we have estranged ourselves, apart from our colloquial practice of referring to it as 'the body'. And this is a practice that, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes clear, has been in our language for hundreds of years: that is, to understand 'the body' as what lies below the neck, as distinct from 'the head', which is understood as "the seat of intelligence and guidance." The conceptual division between head and body has been around much longer than that—at least since Plato, who wrote in his dialogue *Timaeus* of "the head, the divinest part of us which controls all the rest," and of the body as "a convenient vehicle."

term. Nor do we understand that the outer world can be most intimately experienced there. Our neurology has been shaped to support a bias expressed by Plato, who praised “the man who pursues truth by applying his thought to the pure and unadulterated object, cutting himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body.”²¹

John Coates, a former Wall Street trader turned neuroscientist, has done some seminal research that throws that ancient bias into question. In his days on Wall Street, Coates had noticed that there were times when he was identifying a good trade and “I just knew when it was going to work, there was something different about that train of thought. I wondered what that something extra was.”²² As a neuroscientist, he returned to the trading floor to find out. He selected a group of traders and studied them while they were at work. He measured both their bodily response to a potential trade and their conscious assessment of it.

By teaching its members a certain set of senses, a culture teaches them a certain way of being.

He discovered that the body’s responses—especially the release of cortisol, which is the main stress hormone—had a very high correlation to volatility in the market. This held true whether traders were losing money, making it, or just looking at the screens, taking the information in. By contrast, their conscious assessment of the market had no correlation to its volatility or anything else of importance that the researchers could identify. So the traders’ bodies were tracking the market’s volatility minute by minute, without their even being aware of it.

21 Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, Hugh Tredennick, tr. (London: Penguin, 2003), 127.

22 Hugh Son, Bloomberg Markets, “Traders in Tune with Their Heartbeat Make More Money,” Sept. 19, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-09-19/are-you-interoceptive-traders-in-tune-with-heartbeat-make-more>.

It was clear to Coates that the preconscious mind has an ability to process clues from the environment that are undetectable by the conscious mind—and that what the preconscious mind knows shows up in the body. He illustrates this by describing the experience of a fictional trader he calls Martin, an “Olympic-class hunch athlete”²³ who senses a change in the market as he casually glances at the screens: “Unbeknownst to Martin’s conscious brain, a subsonic tremor has just shaken the market, and silent shock waves radiate from the screens, reverberating in the cavern of his body. Something is not right.”²⁴

There are many examples of the body knowing something, or the preconscious knowing something, before conscious awareness does. The reactions of many athletes depend on that. As Coates reports, it takes 100 milliseconds for an image on the retina to register in the brain, then 300 to 400 milliseconds for an elementary cognitive assessment, and then a further 50 milliseconds for a motor command to be communicated to the muscles. So our fastest conscious reaction time is about half a second. Yet there are lots of athletes—sprinters, cricket players, boxers, tennis players—who rely on reaction times of significantly less than half a second. Those reactions are not consciously made—they arise from what the body knows.

Coates’s research left him with an interesting question: if a trader’s body tracks risk more accurately than his²⁵ conscious assessment, high-frequency traders who are more aware of their bodies should make more money. Coates decided to test that out. He enlisted some traders and devised a simple benchmark to determine their level of interoception: How accurately could they feel their heartbeats in the course of a day without monitoring their pulse points? Some traders simply couldn’t feel their

23 John Coates, *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf: Risk Taking, Gut Feelings, and the Biology of Boom and Bust* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 131.

24 Ibid.

25 All of Coates’s subjects in this study were men.

heartbeat and had to guess; others could feel it quite clearly.

The study revealed two striking results. First, traders with greater sensitivity to the inner life of their bodies had made significantly more money in the previous year. Second, the more years a trader had been working, the greater his interoception, as though the trading floor were selecting for that trait.

Coates's research demonstrates that what your being as a whole knows offers a more reliable assessment of reality than does your head's reasoning. Pure reason, such as that praised by Plato, excludes the body's sensations. But what the body knows includes what resonates through the Present as well as experience, reason, knowledge, memory, skills and understanding. It integrates all of that. So someone arriving on the trading floor for the first time, however in touch with her body she was, wouldn't have a clue about the risk of a trade; but a trader relying on her head and out of touch with her body could be just as clueless.

Coates's findings are potentially paradigm shifting. As he observed, "Within economics, there's a belief that we wander around with this supercomputer in our heads that is unaffected by the body and has the ability to calculate returns, probabilities and the optimum allocation of capital. But of course the science doesn't support anything like that."²⁶ That belief is prevalent not just in economics, but in our culture at large: we have long held that reason is our supreme faculty and that feeling is not only secondary, but subjective and misleading.

How long have we subscribed to that belief? If you go back to early Greek philosophy in the period around 500 BC, you will find Parmenides, who is generally recognized as the earliest formative ancestor in the genealogy of Western philosophy. Parmenides issued a warning that we have heeded ever since: *Don't trust your senses—they will deceive you. Only reason can lead you to the truth!* Now, 2,500 years later, Coates has shown

26 Kate Kelland, Reuters Money, "Trader Turned Neuroscientist Explores Risky Highs," Oct. 10, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-neuroscience-risk-idUSBRE8990GR20121010>.

that, even in a highly abstract environment, what the senses tell us—especially the interoceptors—is more reliable than our conscious reasoning.

That’s a very long time for our culture to have given its allegiance to an erroneous assumption, and it has precipitated a strange way of being we accept as normal. We have almost perfected the separation of our thinking from our being, our consciousness from our body and our sense of self from the world. Our bias for what the head knows habitually distances us from the personal truth of our being and orients us instead to the abstractions of status, dogma, money, control and security.

In our culture we habitually subjugate the senses to serve the head’s desire to gain objective knowledge about the world around us (e.g., “That house is red. That is a maple tree.”). Such information requires perception and classification; it doesn’t require feeling. We don’t have to *feel* the red of the house, for instance. Objective knowledge is disembodied knowledge. In our typical quest to understand the world objectively, the body is an afterthought.

I don’t believe it will be possible to heal ourselves into wholeness—to feel reality and accord with it—without augmenting the Chosen Five with a new set of senses. We need to recover what the body knows. We need to awaken to the perceptions that, as Coates puts it, reverberate in “the cavern of the body.” Feeling those impressions of the world living within the flesh is the necessary first step if we are to come into harmony with it.

The Anlo-Ewe aren’t encouraged to isolate the senses we recognize as exteroceptors from the body’s experience—their culture alerts them to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations of the world as they are felt through the body: “feel-feel-at-flesh-inside,” as *seselelame* is literally translated. But they also recognize what it means to see or hear independent of the body’s intelligence. *Esia kple to*, for instance, means “to hear with the ear”;²⁷ but that experience of hearing is distinct from a *seselelame*

27 Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 42

experience of hearing. *Seselelame* is an umbrella or ‘uber’ sense that feels reality reverberate through “the cavern.”

Seselelame doesn’t just bring attention to the body’s sensations as a combination or assortment of separate senses—it is a holistic, synthesized, noncategorical, subjective wakefulness to the world as it is perceived through the body. Coates urges us to recognize “that body and brain act as a single functioning unit, that they form a parabolic reflector collecting signals inaccessible to the conscious mind.”²⁸ To recognize that is merely to recognize that the whole of your intelligence is more astute than any partitioned portion of it could be.

So consider for a moment what it might mean not merely to see with your eyes, but to feel the sights of the world in your body. Or not merely to hear with your ears, but to feel the sounds of the world in the core of your being, subtly attuning you to the Present.²⁹ When the body ‘knows the world’ in this way, it is not relying on the abstractions of language: its knowing is nonverbal, unmediated and direct. Its thinking is sensational. The flesh is experienced as a medium that resonates not only to the world around it, but at the same time to every current of your thinking—conscious and preconscious. As you increasingly honor the body’s sensations, you increasingly understand them to constitute a language of thought that is distinct from how the head knows. What the body knows is based on a patient clarity that enables you to act from the whole of your being. But that knowing is inaccessible—and may as well not exist—when it’s been eclipsed by the driven, anxiety-laced, contracted intelligence of the head.

28 Clive Cookson, *Financial Times*, “Man v machine: ‘Gut feelings’ key to financial trading success,” Sept. 19, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/79e8b8fc-7c33-11e6-ae24-f193b105145e>.

29 In his book *Surfing with Sartre: An Aquatic Inquiry Into a Life of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), Aaron James presents surfing as a potent metaphor for life, and identifies the essence of surfing as an “adaptive attunement.” For me, that also summarizes how we come into relationship with the felt Present: we enter a dynamic, ceaseless, adaptive attunement that informs us as surely as the wave informs the surfer.

Our primary wound

We are out of practice with embodied knowing—so it may be difficult at first to appreciate how radically different it is from the habit of knowing that makes us feel separate from the world. If you taste merely with your tongue, for example, then a doughnut may taste great—that’s precisely what it’s been engineered to do by people who live in their heads. If you taste it and allow the whole of your body’s intelligence to be present to the experience, the doughnut might go uneaten.

Because our culture places so much value on what the head knows and so little on what the body knows, we tend to either

Rather than ‘feel-feel-at-flesh-inside’, we are teaching ‘think-think-at-head-inside’.

downplay or pre-organize what we are feeling. We judge, calculate, modify, plan, anticipate and strategize in response to what is happening around us; and we may barely notice the discomfort created by our fevered obsession to know what is happening in the abstract without feeling what

is happening in the Present. What sustains that obsession is a fear over what we might lose if we allowed our awareness to come to rest in the body and attune to the Present. To forsake our abstract vigilance, we tell ourselves, would mean losing control. And in fact, we are partly right: it would mean losing the illusion of control. So even as we appreciate the injunction to ‘live in the Present’, our one and only way of knowing puts abstract ideas in charge to try to get us there. Similarly, even as we affirm the importance of our emotions, the supervisor within is often busy helping us feel the ‘appropriate’ ones.

Living your days in the abstract knowledge of things rather than in the intimate companionship of the world promotes a sense of disconnection and anxiety, and is consistent with an underlying schism in our culture: the separation of your thinking from your

being. To be raised in our culture is to carry this wound within you to some degree. It is so ingrained in the Story that we accept it as a given of human nature: thinking and feeling are separate. We come to believe that our thinking will be clearer if we disconnect from all the noise of the body's sensations. This belief is instilled in us systematically in childhood. Of all the lessons we learn in the public school system, the primary one is to subdue the energies of the body and maximize the facility of the head for manipulating verbal and symbolic information.

When you consider the demands placed on a child by our primary and secondary educational institutions, this tacit lesson becomes clear. A child is typically required to sit still at a desk for hours at a time, for five days a week, for almost ten months of the year, for twelve years. It is an environment in which the sensations of being—its energy and intelligence—are considered liabilities except in nonacademic and 'secondary' subjects such as gym, theater or music. Elsewhere the primary lesson is unambiguous: if you can fill your head with information and learn to retrieve it successfully; if you can pay attention to the teacher at the head of the class and put the thinking of your body to sleep; and if you can learn to inhabit and animate that abstract realm atop your sleeping body; if you can do all that, you are on your way to success. If you can't comply with those demands, you risk being penalized with low grades, and disciplined to correct your behavior.

A nurturing of *seselelame* is nowhere to be seen in our formal education of children. Rather than 'feel-feel-at-flesh-inside', we are teaching 'think-think-at-head-inside'. That is, inarguably, I think, the primary lesson that the classroom, the curriculum and the institution of lower education have been designed to instill. We are teaching our children that it's better to think with a portion of their beings than to think with the whole of their beings. So successful has this campaign been that most adults in our society, it seems to me, no longer even know what it is to experience the thinking of their whole being. 'Think-think-at-head-inside' has so

effectively divorced our thinking from our being that they are experienced as separate and sometimes even antagonistic entities.

Perhaps the most dramatic outcome of that divorce is that it has separated us from the core understanding of all that the body knows: the understanding that *it belongs to the world, expresses the world, is held by the world and shares in all that happens to the world*. That knowledge lives in our every cell, and is a demonstrable truth on every level. When our thinking unmoors itself from the body, it cuts itself away from that embodied knowing; and then we come to feel and believe that we are superior to the world and distinct from it and that the fate of humanity is somehow sealed and independent from that of life on earth. This delusion is capable of dooming us—and it is a direct consequence of our choice to think-think-at-head-inside.

The boundary and the borderless Present

If the segregation of our thinking from our being is the primary wound of our culture, it also goes largely unnoticed. Like *sesele-lame*, ‘being’ doesn’t much occupy our attention. We rarely speak of it. So someone facing a problem isn’t typically encouraged to feel it with the whole of her body’s intelligence—she is encouraged to think the problem through from different perspectives and find a solution. ‘What the head knows’ takes charge, and ‘what the body knows’ is largely kept on the back burner.

Another reason we tend to overlook the wound between thinking and being is that our understanding of ‘being’ is so contracted—in keeping with our bounded idea of ‘self’ or the senses. If we can move beyond those conditioned confines—if we can feel the illuminations of ‘being’ rather than merely its shadow—we will ultimately sensitize ourselves to a different world. And I think that as individuals we long for that: to open to life and feel it rather than holding ourselves in check until we figure out how to respond to it.

When our thinking contracts from our being, it carries our sense of self with it. So what we experience as ‘the thinking self’ retreats inside a boundary—the same boundary that is so essential to our cultural sense of personal identity that it is upheld by the Chosen Five, and by our idea that speech is a delivery system, and by our insistence that the head should be in charge. But now the nature of that boundary becomes a little clearer: its function is actually to separate our thinking from the sensations of our being—which also effectively separates our thinking from the presence of the world. It does that by diminishing the flow of energy in the body with patterns of tension held in its tissues. When energy does not flow, it cannot inform.

So tension diminishes sensitivity. It sets up the boundary of the self the way surface tension

holds a drop of water together. Your self is actually held in its reality by the world to which it belongs—but when your surface tension disrupts your sensitivity to that embrace, you create your own container: you devise and recite a story about

The segregation of our thinking from our being is the primary wound of our culture

‘who you know yourself to be’, and you try to lock the reality of your self within that story. When you commit to that story, you don’t need the *experience* of who you are—the *seselelame* of who you are. You don’t need your being. Your thinking can sort it all out.

The experience of being is affiliated with feeling. The experience of thinking is affiliated with knowing. Knowledge has a limit, a boundary; it is discrete and circumscribed, just like the bounded self it creates. To believe you can know the world, or know the self, is to deny the wholeness of each, for wholeness has no boundary. The Present is similarly without a boundary. It can’t be objectified. It will never be a known entity. It’s not something into which you can reason your way, try

though you might. The practices that enable you to be present are practices that bring you back to the body and to what is felt through it. They are practices that carry you beyond the wound of separation and into a seamless experience of reality. Your body hums to the Present—and as you become aware of that, you feel the Present living within you. When it is embodied in that way, all sense of separation fades. The embodied Present is the lived Present.

When you turn away from the embodied Present, your thinking enters an alternate realm that represents the world symbolically, abstractly and theoretically. This realm consists of ‘what the head knows’. But it’s important to acknowledge that ‘what the head knows’ has its roots in embodied knowing, and that our impression that abstract knowing owes nothing to the body is illusory.

For instance, you might look around a room and see a chair, a door and a mug and know what they are; but your knowing is based on what you have discovered through the body. You know how the mug would feel in your hand, its slightly cool touch, its ceramic smoothness, the weight of it either empty or full, and how it would feel lifted to your lips. The same holds true of the chair and the door. Occasionally the body’s foundation of knowing is betrayed, as might happen if you picked up a papier-mâché rock expecting it to be real. Louise Barrett explicates the brain’s inseparable dependence on the body in her wonderful book *Beyond the Brain*: “most of our understanding of the world is grounded in—and built up from—our ability to act in it, so that even the most abstract of ideas (not excluding mathematical thought, according to some authors) reflects what our bodies can physically achieve.”³⁰

30 Louise Barrett, *Beyond the Brain: How Body and Environment Shape Animal and Human Minds* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 113.

Known relationship, felt relationship

The body feels the currents of reality in all their yielding, rich and changeable aliveness; by attuning to those currents, the body attunes to the relationships that guide the unfolding of the Present. It feels those relationships as part of a subtle web in which every thread holds and answers to every other. This web is reality: nothing stands independent of it; there is only unfolding interrelationship. When we are feeling the Present we are feeling through the specifics of the world into the humming whole.

If the body's intelligence situates us in a realm of *felt relationship*, the secluded intelligence of the head situates us in a realm of *known relationship*. The intelligence of the head has a special orientation to the world: it looks at it from a distance and assumes, as we have seen, that its knowing has no need of feeling. Because of this, whatever the head's intelligence turns its attention to will appear to be something that can be known in and of itself, independent of relationship. This ability to assess things as though their wholeness resided within a boundary, independent of the rest of the world, is the ability to see things in the abstract. And that is the specialty of the intelligence of the head: its ability to think abstractly.

Abstraction is properly understood as the act of removing something from its associations and its living context, and considering it independently of all that, on its own. The root meaning of 'abstract' is "to draw away." We are encouraged to believe that when we draw something away from its context and consider it on its own, we are somehow zeroing in on the essence of its reality. After all, that's how we experience ourselves: ill at ease with the body's sensations—our one connection to the world—we feel our personal reality contained within the surface tension of the thinking self that holds it separate from the world. So then why shouldn't reality in general be found within the boundaries of its isolated bits?

This view is consistent with our culture's conviction that

analysis is the most reliable way of getting to the truth. So art, myth, poetry, intuition or religion—all of which tend to illuminate a truth within a felt whole—are considered less reliable and less accurate in disclosing the truth of reality than the analytic art of science. ‘Analysis’ is the opposite of ‘synthesis’ and it comes from a Greek root that means “to break up.” We are raised to believe that only if we can break wholeness into its smallest independent units will we be able to lay bare the cause and effect of how things work. Analysis reveals cause-and-effect relationships brilliantly—but it reveals *only* such relationships. That is its limitation. It deals with the parts of a broken whole.

But here’s a truth our culture has yet to accommodate: the essence of something is not a quality that sits within it, sealed off from the world: its essence is found in its relationships with the whole. Those relationships are infinite and cannot be comprehensively analyzed; and wholeness itself has emergent properties that are not material and do not exist in its parts, even though every part participates in them.

The results of the scientific project are astonishing—but when it hijacks the thinking of our culture, the approach of science disseminates a strategic flaw: its primary focus is on the cause and effect among the independent units of reality—and in reality there is no such thing as an independent unit. There is no such thing as independence, period. Quantum mechanics ran into this fact head on: the very concept of independence is a fantasy. It’s a fantasy that has the American psyche in its grip and is felt throughout the developed world—but it’s a fantasy nonetheless. The quality of independence simply doesn’t exist in our universe. No example of it can be found anywhere. Everything affects and depends on everything else. Everything leans on everything. As soon as you imagine otherwise, you contract your ability to be informed by the reality to which you belong.

Of course, we do imagine otherwise—we see the teacup and the table on which it sits as objects that exist independent of each other and do not belong to each other. That view feels right to

us because our way of knowing is disconnected from the body, and from the wholeness of the Present living through it. When we partition the self, we partition our awareness of the world—and then it merely looks like a shattered assortment of bits and pieces.

Things and processes

There is certainly some truth in saying that things have boundaries: my teacup and the table are distinct entities. Where we go astray, though, is in believing that a boundary can contain the whole of what something is. The teacup and the table are changing and being changed by each other, even as they participate in a dance with the whole of the cosmos. Both of them are processes—they are slowly changing with every second, and they are changing each other with every second. They are changing more slowly than the banana on the table, but they are changing nonetheless with fluctuations of temperature, vibrations, molecular interactions, and other factors. They are not static, fixed ‘things’ with an independent existence. Nothing fits that description. It is a mere figment of the way the head knows the world—and it’s not an entirely benign figment.

Take a tree, for example. We tend to see a tree as an object among other objects in the world. But if we reflect on that, we see that such a view is a little like calling a whirlpool a thing. A whirlpool in a river, of course, may have a form that is fairly consistent from day to day, but the form is sustained only by the water that constantly flows through it. No part of the whirlpool is a static ‘thing’. If you could imagine a tree over an extended time frame, you’d understand that it too has a fairly consistent form that is sustained by an unending flow cycling through it. That flow consists of water, minerals, sunlight, carbon dioxide, oxygen and sugars, among others. So the tree itself is in flow—its bark, its roots, its foliage continuously changing. Unlike a whirlpool, though, that flow enables the tree to grow. As

it grows, its form expresses its dance with the Present—the tree rings, for instance, expressing the rains, sun and cold of the changing world it has partnered with. So a tree, far from being a static thing, is actually a process, like a whirlpool.

If a tree is correctly understood as a process, where do we draw a line around that process to distinguish where the tree ends and the rest of the world begins? Certainly the boundary of a tree would include its roots—but the soil, rocks, microbes, fungi, insects and moisture around those roots are also inextricably part of the process of the roots, and therefore of the tree. And the soil, rocks, microbes, fungi, insects and moisture around the roots are themselves processes affected by the humus on the ground around the tree and the ways it decomposes and leaches into the earth, and by the plants and insects and animals that contribute to that humus by shedding, dying or excreting.

The rain that falls is also part of the process of the roots, as are the hills and mountains that cause clouds to release their moisture as rain, and the water in the lakes and oceans that evaporates to create the clouds, and the sun that fuels that evaporation. And the process that is the sun is likewise held and guided by and part of the process of the galaxy. So if we wish to draw a boundary around the process that is a tree, that boundary will eventually extend to include everything, right to the outer fringes of the universe. The process that is a tree implicates and reveals the entire cosmos.

The experience of reality

Similarly, if you wished to draw a boundary around the process that is you, that boundary too will extend to include everything: your life in this moment implicates the cosmos. And the process that is you is also like a whirlpool through which the world passes. This is certainly true on the basic level of our physiology. Steven Cole, a researcher who specializes in social genomics—the

study of the effect the social environment has on gene expression—points out:

*We think of our bodies as stable biological structures that live in the world but are fundamentally separate from it. That we are unitary organisms in the world, but passing through it. But what we're learning from the molecular processes that actually keep our bodies running is that we're far more fluid than we realize, and the world passes through us.*³¹

Consider breathing, for instance. The air that fills your lungs carries oxygen that was produced by photosynthesis. You are breathing in the exhalations of forests. The oxygen that passes into your lungs and into your blood, and eventually becomes part of every living cell in your body, is born of the touch of sunlight on leaves. When breath passes out of your body, it carries carbon dioxide into the world to eventually nourish and become part of trees. So your experience of breath is literally an experience of the world passing through you, sustaining the reality of your life, which in turn transforms it to help sustain the life of the world.

Spiritual traditions the world over have developed disciplines and practices to bring attention to the breath—for it puts you in touch not just with your life, but with the life coursing through the moment. Similarly the words *animal*, *psyche*, *spirituality* and *inspiration* all trace their roots back to words meaning “breath.” Your experience of your breath is foundational not just to your life, but to your experience of life.

Again, you have choice in the matter. You can choose to experience your breath carrying the world through you or you can

31 Deborah Blum, ed., *The Best American Science and Nature Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 25. This book is a collection of articles, and the one quoted from here is “The Social Life of Genes” by David Dobbs. It was originally published in *Pacific Standard*, Sept. 3, 2013.

inhibit your experience of it. Any tension you carry in any part of your body—any internal clenching or bracing, any part taken out of the flow of the Present and buffered from it—will initiate a cascade of effects: it will diminish your body’s availability to the breath, inhibit feeling, compromise your experience of being and contract your sense of reality. So your experience of reality is upheld by the experience of your breath passing through you.

There are many more ways in which you experience the world passing through you. If you bite into an apple, for instance, its flesh will pass into your body to become your flesh. In a short time much of that apple will no longer be identified

Your experience of reality is your experience of the world’s energy passing through you—diminish one and you diminish the other.

as ‘apple’ but as you—as part of your eyelashes and capillaries and nerves. Over the years every molecule that once belonged to the apple and then became you will be carried back out of your body to nourish the living earth—or at least such offerings used to nourish the earth before toilets were invented.

Like the whirlpool, you are a process. As Steven Cole noted, “the world passes through us.” Your reality is sustained by an exchange of gifts. And the apple doesn’t merely become your flesh. When you breathe, or run, you experience the energy from that apple passing through you as your energy, helping your muscles do their work. In that regard, the heart cannot beat, the tongue cannot speak, the brain cannot think but for the gift of the world’s energy passing through you.

The nature of every one of your senses—not just the Chosen Five—is also an experience of reality passing through you. And as we’ve seen, there is no experience of reality without the senses. So the world’s light passes through the iris into your eye, and that light becomes energy coursing through your being. Tastes and

smells arrive as molecules on the tongue and in the nose, and those molecules become part of you, and the information they carry stimulates the body's chemistry. Similarly, the world's sounds and textures, heat and cold, vibrations and pressures all pass through you and become you and inform you. Gravity passes through you and hugs you to the earth. By flowing through your senses, the world's energy enables you to experience its reality.

There are still other ways in which you experience the world's energy passing through you. When you meet someone you love and your heart opens to them, you feel the energy of their presence move through you. Similarly you might feel your heart open to a stalk of grass, a star in the firmament, or a line of poetry—and as you do, you will experience an exchange of energy. Or you might cross paths with someone you'd rather not meet and feel yourself stiffen somewhat in her presence, bracing yourself against her energy. In such an instance, by choosing not to experience her energy, you are deliberately diminishing your experience of her presence; but you are also diminishing your presence.

So your experience of reality is not, as we might imagine, a phenomenon in which a fairly static you notices what lies beyond the boundary of your self. You cannot experience reality without becoming sensitive to your very real porosity to it. We might say, then, that your experience of reality is your experience of the world's energy passing through you—diminish one and you diminish the other.

Don't fence me in

When you speak of what you feel as 'your being', then, it's clear that it cannot be considered as an entity contained by your skin. It is more accurate to understand the reality of your being as a process that is affected by the world to which it seamlessly belongs, even as it inescapably affects that world in turn. For simplicity's sake, we might consider that *your being includes all*

that you discover when you are fully present—for everything to which you are present is a part of your presence, and so is also a part of the process of your being.

To redefine and understand and feel ‘your being’ in that way has implications for what it means to think with the whole of your being. To establish any kind of boundary between the self and the Present is to contract your thinking from your being—from “all that you discover when you are fully present.” Again, we have been taught to understand ‘thinking’ exclusively as abstract reasoning—and our culture’s deep commitment to that premise makes the notion of thinking hand in hand with the Present seem far-fetched rather than being seen as the simple reality it is: the sensational, tangible, enriching nature of human experience. That experience is taken for granted by cultures that understand that they depend for their survival on being in harmony with the world around them rather than on their ability to control it.

To deeply and personally understand these two intertwined aspects of your very being—that your experience of reality is your experience of the world passing through you, and that your being is what you discover when you are fully present—and to let that understanding settle in you even as you read these words, is to facilitate a shift in your allegiance from the abstractions of ‘known relationship’ to the presence of ‘felt relationship’. And you may even feel a “porosity” and “radical indeterminacy” of the self, phrases that describe the Anlo-Ewe experience. Such an availability of the self to the Present, informed and changed by its subtle currents, is what makes felt relationship possible. It is how the body knows: its intelligence feels What Is, and is indivisible from it.

Our culture conditions us to inhibit our porosity and hold our bodies in what might be termed a ‘radical determinacy of the self’—a mental and physically habituated independence from the world, held apart from it by surface tension. So deeply is the bounded self a part of our understanding of what it means to

be human that our culture reinforces it at every opportunity. We reinforce it in the way we present ourselves and our ideas; in the way we define our senses; in the way we eat (my placemat defining the boundary around ‘my space’ that you are not allowed to reach through); in the way we move (feeling most comfortable in a car, hermetically sealed from the world outside); and in the way we sit in public spaces (my chair defining my territory). But nowhere is it more clearly evident than in our need for fences—dividing ‘mine’ from ‘not mine’ in the same way we hold on to ‘me’ to keep it separate from ‘not me’.

When I cycled from England through Europe, the Middle East, India and Japan, I was always able to find a place to sleep outside at night. Three years later I cycled from Toronto to Tennessee, but even in the vast open stretches of farmland it was a huge challenge to find a place to sleep at night. Every bit of land was fenced off, owned and defended—reminding me that our word *fence* is a short form of *defense*.

In the same way that we erect barriers between ourselves and the currents of the world, and between ourselves and the currents of our own being, we insanely erect barriers against the currents of life moving across the land. I recently watched a herd of elk struggling to get over a wood rail fence in rural Colorado. This was a fence around a two-acre private residence. The fence served only one purpose: it announced “This is mine. Stay out.” Being four feet high, it was insufficient to deter anyone who wished to climb it—so a two-foot fence would have marked the boundary as effectively, and it would have enabled the herd to stay together, young and old alike.³² But the symbolic value of a two-foot-high fence is simply insufficient for the needs of our boundary-dependent egos. And so we choke the energy of the

32 Joe Hutto, who has famously lived with a herd of mule deer, noted that “More mule deer are killed and injured by fences in a week than are killed by predators in an entire year. ... Most go no longer than a month without receiving some sort of injury from a barbed-wire fence.” From an interview in *The Sun* magazine, “A Walk on the Wild Side,” by Al Kesselheim, May, 2017.

land the way we choke the energy of our own bodies, and erect fences, fences, fences. Our need for a radical determinacy of the self becomes the need for a radical determinacy of what is ‘mine’.

When we cut ourselves off from felt relationship, we divert our thinking from What Is to the endlessly complicated subject of What Might Be. This is the primary focus of the enclosed intelligence of the head—and it happily branches out to include What Might Have Been and What Might Be Done. Our thinking obsessively speculates on these subjects, hashing and rehashing a planned course of action, a regret, a recent success, a promising solution, or a formulation of our goals. When the thinking of the self is held in the head, we can carry on in that mode for hours, days, weeks even, without ever attuning to the Present, coming to rest in its companionship and allowing its companionship to come to rest in us. When this obsession becomes a habit, that companionship eventually disappears from our awareness and we forget that it exists. And then ‘think-think-at-head-inside’ becomes not just our normal way of being, but our only option.

We are born into two forms of thinking: one is allied with wholeness and the other with parts. Each is necessary. Each has strengths to offer the other. Each specializes in a different kind of knowing, which might be distinguished as ‘abstract knowing’ and ‘embodied knowing’. If this book seems to favor the thinking of the body, or to demean abstract thinking, please understand this is not my intent. My concern is with wholeness, and my aim is to think with the whole of my being, which includes its abstract knowing. But in our culture we have grown as dependent on abstraction as an addict on her drugs—and we have fed that addiction at the expense of the earth and of our embodied experience of life. So if I seem to lean in the direction of embodied knowing, it is merely my attempt to counter a deep imbalance that affects us all.

I hope the book itself is a testament to the value I place on a clarity of ideas—but I believe that the fruits of abstract ideas can only be fully realized when they are integrated. The traders who

do well do not ignore stock reports, acquisitions, hostile takeovers or commodity prices—they have learned to integrate that abstract knowledge, so it informs what Coates calls the parabolic reflector of the preconscious.

The integration of ideas, though, requires that our thinking be brought into contact with our being. And that requires the body. An idea cannot be integrated with analysis. Analysis—which means, remember, “to break up”—is the opposite of integration. The genius of the body—whether you identify it as the preconscious, as John Coates does, or the emergent awareness of one’s being, or the attunement of the pelvic bowl³³ as I often experience it—shows up most clearly in its facility for integration. When you disconnect from that integrating genius, all you can do is put unintegrated ideas in charge of your life and your plans. Being unintegrated, they inflict damage even when the intention is benign. How can we harmonize with reality if we cannot feel its harmony? How can we connect with reality if we do not connect with the part of us that feels its resonance?

The inescapable mystery of the whole

The very idea that reality can be objectively known is dangerously seductive. As we have seen, reality isn’t an object but a seamless web of processes, each affecting all others, each implying and held by the cosmos. What we feel as ‘reality’ is the interplay of unfolding relationships. To claim to know reality objectively is to betray a severely contracted sensitivity.

If reality cannot be objectively known, though, we should appreciate that it *can* be felt. It can be experienced. It lives through you. To feel the Present as a whole is to feel your being as a whole. The

33 The “pelvic bowl” is so named because the bones of the pelvis create a structure like a bowl, forming the base of the torso. You can see its bowl-like structure if you look at a skeleton. The top of the pelvic bowl is generally two or three inches below the belly button.

whole is implicit in every flutter of your heart. In fact, the intimacy of your exchanges with the whole is inescapable, because the whole is all there is. It's the one reality. Everything in the cosmos participates in the whole, belongs to the whole, and expresses the whole. Nothing can break away from it, because wholeness is all there is.

Wholeness, then, is the primary, inescapable nature of reality. The whole cannot be known or controlled; cannot be named or itemized; cannot be measured or predicted. It lies utterly beyond the scope of any perspective. The quality of wholeness emerges through the relationships of its parts, but it cannot be explained by its parts. And because the whole lives through each of its parts,

Feeling the whole isn't just one more virtue to add to our list of things to pay attention to. To be desensitized to wholeness is to be desensitized to reality.

its parts cannot be known with any finality, because such knowledge would necessarily require a knowledge of the whole.

So despite the arrogance that tells us otherwise, we live in a mystery that will never be pinned down. That mystery moves the world's events, even as it carries your individual life forward. And although it will never be known, that mystery can be felt suffusing

the Present, and it can be felt as the Present. In fact, to feel the Present as a whole requires that you feel the mystery that makes it whole; to feel yourself as a whole requires that you feel the mystery that makes you whole.

So wholeness is not something you can achieve. It doesn't need achieving; it already, irreducibly exists. But even though you can't step out of or divide yourself from it, you *can* desensitize yourself to it. Wholeness is felt through wholeness. If you segregate parts of your intelligence, privileging some and endarkening others, those divisions within the self will have the effect of a crack in a bell: your ability to resonate to the whole will be compromised. Unable to feel it, you will eventually have no reason to believe it exists.

Feeling the whole isn't just one more virtue to add to our list of things to pay attention to. To be desensitized to wholeness is to be desensitized to reality. If you cannot feel reality—if you feel only its parts—you can only speculate about reality. And the tenor of your speculation will be a fantasy about things that have an independent existence. And any actions based on that fantasy will weaken the harmony of the whole rather than deepen it. We see how that plays out in our personal lives and in all the world around us.

If the idea of *achieving* wholeness is meaningless, though, we might recognize that you can *surrender* to wholeness. Undertaking that surrender—what Joseph Campbell calls the “self-achieved submission”³⁴ of the mythic hero—carries you into a softening of the divisions that partition you from yourself, and a softening of your self into the borderless Present to which you belong. Surrendering to your wholeness, you surrender to the sensational mystery that holds you. And the effect of that surrender is not to mystify; rather, it will ease you into a wakeful sensitivity that guides your every step, as surely as caring hands do for children learning to walk.

The template we live by

Wholeness attunes to wholeness. There can be no renewal of our relationship with wholeness, then, without a broad appreciation of the divisions that live within us and how they are reinforced by the Story.

The messaging that has instructed us to cloak the body's sensations in darkness lives invisibly in plain sight all around us. To disclose it is to undo the power of the Story to desensitize us. A look at language tells a lot. For instance, consider the differences in meaning between a ‘head count’ and a ‘body count’: a head count tells us how many people are present; a body count tells us how many people are dead. We accept this, chiming as it does

34 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 16.

with the familiar messages to vacate the body and consolidate our awareness in the head. After all, our culture assures us, the body is without intelligence—why should we inhabit it?

I have mentioned that our everyday language has neither a word nor a concept for what is perceived through the body (feel-feel-at-flesh-inside). We tend to notice the body primarily when it's not cooperating with what we need from it. Or when it complains. For instance, we become aware of the belly when we have indigestion, or it looks out of shape, or it feels hungry. That's about it. On the other hand, like the fabled Inuit lexicon for "snow," we could assemble an extensive vocabulary for what's going on in the head: we reason, remember, analyze, mull, balk, philosophize, contemplate, consider, plan, reflect, cogitate, space out, evaluate, anticipate, daydream, deduce, surmise, feel light-headed, feel headachy or feel distracted, just for starters.

Our idioms similarly indicate where the real action is. If someone's capable, she's got a good head on her shoulders. If she faces a problem, she'd certainly want to use her head: she might put her thinking cap on and try to get her head around the issue. She might be headstrong, or have a swelled head. If she's smart we might call her heady; if she's not, we might call her an airhead, accuse her of being a few rafters short, or comment that the light in the attic is on but no one's home. If we say she's "out of her head," we don't mean she's embodied—we mean she's gone mad. The head is mission control—to leave it is to risk disaster.

It's clear that culture changes the body. The value the Anlo-Ewe culture places on balance, for instance, affects how its members stand and walk. We might equally appreciate, though, that *our relationship to the body shapes our culture*. In fact, as I explain in *New Self, New World*³⁵, I believe that our relationship to the body is our fundamental relationship, and is the underlying template for all of our other relationships. Once you recognize that we have established a divided, controlling,

35 Philip Shepherd, *New Self, New World: Recovering Our Senses in the Twenty-first Century* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

isolated, top-down relationship with the body, you can see how that shapes all the relationships of our culture. For instance:

- **We relate to the body as though it contains our wholeness within its boundary.** And so we tend to imagine that the wholeness of everything is similarly contained within a boundary—from atoms to trees. Consequently, we see a world of things rather than processes.
- **Living in our heads, we feel separate from the body—and so we similarly feel separate from the world.** We experience the world in a subject/object duality—one that estranges us from our environment and obliterates the companionship of the Present. And just as this duality is created when the center of our awareness is located in the head, it disappears if that center comes to rest in the body.
- **When we live in our heads, we experience them as the center of our intelligence.** When we organize our institutions, we similarly see the center of their understanding, judgment and decision making located in ‘head office’, or ‘headquarters’, or the ‘capital’—a word that derives from “head.”
- **When we segregate the intelligence in the head and privilege it, it deems the body to be without intelligence.** Similarly, when we privilege the intelligence of experts, and segregate them, they fail to recognize and integrate the intelligence of the ‘body politic’.
- **Living in the head, we see the brain as the sole organ of our intelligence.** So whatever has no brain is deemed incapable of intelligence—not just the body but also trees, ecosystems, ant colonies, microbes and nature herself.
- **When we live in the head, we feel the body as something**

that is not quite us—it’s something we ‘have’. We similarly see nature as something that is not quite us—nature is something we visit. When we speak of “the animals of the earth,” we exclude ourselves: we are not animals; we are humans. They are not our brothers and sisters; we are humans.

- **Because we prefer the privacy of the head to the porosity of being, we seek the familiarity of that experience in the worlds we create.** We love the car for that familiarity: it is a head on wheels, a private space sealed from the world by a clear boundary. Three ‘head’-lights would illuminate the road better than two, but as we have two eyes, the metaphor of the head on wheels requires two lights. We similarly want to close the door on our homes and feel secluded within them. We erect fences to signal that no one is allowed to be in ‘our space’.
- **To value what the head knows and demean what the body knows is implicitly to turn against not just human nature, but nature itself.** The major projects of our urban architecture express just that. When you stand back from a modern skyscraper and take it in, you can see that the primary message it has been designed to announce is that nature is irrelevant. Nature has no place on a skyscraper, unless deliberately planted there for decorative purposes. Untouched by the seasons, the skyscraper is intolerant of the merest bit of moss growing on it. Even the rain is hidden away. It could be gathered and allowed to run down the building in a celebratory waterfall—but no, the skyscraper refuses to celebrate nature. It insists on standing apart from it, just as the humans who built it do. And we find that impressively reassuring.³⁶

36 There is a wonderful exception to this premise of skyscrapers: Boeri Studios designed two award-winning residences in Milan that are known as Bosco Verticale, or Vertical Forest. And more are appearing

- **Living up in the head, we feel superior to the body. Eventually that superior position comes to feel safe and familiar.** Naturally, then, the tallest building in a city asserts its status, and the most expensive, most desirable suite to own is the penthouse. Far above the messy energies of the street, we can take in its remote little happenings while securely out of reach of them. We are spectators of the world, observing it without belonging to it, which is a comfort because that's the effect of sitting in our heads—observing the world without belonging to it, watching it from on high, buffered from any need to experience it.
- **Our cultural relationship with the body is a top-down relationship: we sit up in our heads and supervise the body from there.** Deaf to its intelligence, we decide what's good for it. We decide how to fix it when it doesn't look right, or when it sends us signals of distress. Top-down decisions feel good because they put us in charge, and so we carry that practice into everything we do: organizing our lives, planning our careers, managing our relationships and challenges—it's all top-down. And beyond that, we apply the same hierarchy to corporate management, political leadership and trying to fix the terrible toll we are exacting on the biosphere. Top-down decisions are all we know or trust because that's how we relate to our bodies.
- **Deaf to the intelligence of the body, and viewing it primarily as our means for getting things done, we generally judge the body—the source of our deepest knowing—as either useful to us or a problem.** Similarly deaf to the world's intelligence, we generally judge nature—our most intimate teacher—as either useful to us or a problem. Like the body, nature is useful for what it can do: entertain us

in China. Do check out the inspiring photos of them: <https://www.stefanoboeriarchitetti.net/en/portfolios/bosco-verticale/>.

with vistas, or cute animals, or fierce beasts as depicted on nature programs. Or it can provide us with resources: food, lumber and minerals. Nature is a problem when it gets out of control, going where it's not wanted (ants in the kitchen, mildew in the shower, weeds in the garden, floods on the street) or threatening human lives. Our recourse is to learn more about nature that we might control it better. Our recourse never seems to be to learn *from* nature—just as we are not inclined to learn from the body.

- **Our disconnection from the body's intelligence carries an implicit value judgment that it is inferior, not worth listening to, second class and incapable of worthwhile insights.** The relationship we have with our body celebrates one part of our intelligence (what the head knows) and demeans another part (what the body knows). It celebrates the part that is able to abstract, disconnect, systematize, gain perspective, establish known relationship and seek control. And it demeans the part that is able to come into felt relationship, integrate, attune to the Present, know things without words and feel wholeness. If it's true, as I deeply believe, that we are all endowed with gifts of both male and female strengths within us, we might see the abstracting strengths of the head as an expression of the male side of our consciousness, and the sensitized attunement of the body's intelligence as an expression of the female side of our consciousness. Again, all of us are endowed with both male and female strengths, however we might identify our gender. But if a primary feature of how we relate to the body is that we demean the female strengths of our intelligence and exalt the male, we would expect to find that reflected in how we relate to the world. And indeed, in our culture 'maleness' has bizarrely been held up as the standard for a normal human being and 'femaleness' has been considered nonstandard, unreliable, inferior, weak,

not worth listening to and certainly not fit to be in charge. It is a heinous, ludicrous cultural imbalance—and the seed of it lies in how we have come to relate to the body.

My primary reason for the preceding elaboration lies in its corollary: if indeed how we relate to the body sets the stage for all other relationships, then how we relate to the world won't fundamentally change until our relationship with the body does.

'Being' as knowing

As the Anlo-Ewe culture teaches that to be human is to be balanced, ours teaches that to be human is to isolate your thinking from your being. It teaches us that they are separate. Even our gestural indicators carry this message. When someone speaking of her being says "I" and points to herself, she generally points to her chest; when she says, "I'm thinking," she points to her head. The story is clear: her thinking is divided from her being. And although this gestural referencing seems natural and even inevitable to us, the division it points to is entirely a cultural matter.

Carl Jung tells a story in his book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* about discovering this division in himself in a meeting with the chief of the Taos Pueblos—a man called Ochwiay Bianco. Jung was forty-nine when they met, and as they talked together, the Pueblo chief expressed his puzzlement over the whites and their lack of ease in the world. They were always wanting something, always seeking something, but what? He admitted that the Pueblos didn't understand the whites and considered them mad. When Jung asked what he thought it was that made the whites mad, the chief replied, "They say they think with their heads."

"Why of course. What do you think with?" Jung asked him in surprise.

“We think here,” the chief replied, indicating his heart.

This exchange affected Jung profoundly. As he put it, “This Indian had struck our vulnerable spot, unveiled a truth to which we are blind.”³⁷

A similar exchange is reported by Zen master D. T. Suzuki, who described the visit of an American scientist to an aboriginal tribe. When the scientist conveyed to the tribe that his countrymen thought with their heads, the tribe thought the Americans were surely crazy. “We think with our abdomens,” they explained.³⁸ They would have done well on Wall Street.

Our culture has cast such a shadow over the body’s intelligence that we require help from other cultures to shed a little light on it. You cannot unite with its intelligence by sitting in the head and noticing its sensations, as though you were separate from it. As the Pueblo chief and the aboriginal tribe knew, it’s only when the center of your thinking drops out of the head and merges with your body’s intelligence that you can think with the whole of your being. And only when that happens can the body’s intelligence awaken to the world.

The help I received from Japanese culture as a teenager was truly formative. When I headed off on my bicycle to make my way from England to Japan, I was determined on the one hand to shatter the fetters of thought and action that my culture had bred into me; and on the other, I was determined to plumb the mystery of Noh theater, and its power to reduce me to tears without my having any sense of how that had happened.

When, after more than a year on the road, I eventually cycled into Tokyo, I settled there to study Noh. And over time I gradually discovered why I’d been unable to account for the power of my first experience watching Noh. The secret lay in the Japanese concept of *hara*. This is the Japanese word for “belly”—but the

37 Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 247–48.

38 Erich Fromm, D. T. Suzuki and Richard De Martino, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Harper Collins, 1970), 53.

cultural meanings of those two words is a study in contrasts. In the West we typically regard the belly as a somewhat troublesome area—prone to weight gain and bouts of indigestion. It's sometimes a source of mild embarrassment, although if it can be held in a clenched array of well-defined bumps, it can also become a source of pride. *Hara*, by contrast, defines a realm of consciousness as much as a region of our anatomy. It is considered to be the place in the body where you come home to yourself; it's where you rest within yourself; it's where you come in contact with your deepest understandings and most resonant truths; it's where you most keenly feel yourself cradled in the Present and attuned to your life.

Language shows up some interesting differences in otherwise equivalent statements. In our head-centric culture we might call someone “hot-headed”; the Japanese would say, “Her belly rises easily.” Where we might remark that someone has “a good head on her shoulders,” the Japanese would say, “She has a well-developed belly.” The difference is not merely semantic—it is rooted in fundamentally contrasting experiences.

In the Japanese culture, *hara* is particularly important where the arts are concerned: performing arts, graphic arts, martial arts, the tea ceremony—they are all informed by and grounded in the unique intelligence that is found in the belly. And that explains why I'd been so baffled at the age of seventeen when I saw Noh theater for the first time. I had never witnessed a body attuned to that profound intelligence; I had never before seen a gesture guided by its coherent sensitivity; I had never watched a head turn and see from its still depths. That experience not only shook my world—it planted seeds that eventually led to the writing of *New Self, New World*.

It turns out that many, many cultures speak of experiencing their thinking in the heart or the abdomen: Japanese, Mayan, Incan, Malaysian and various indigenous North American nations. In China there is a traditional recognition of three *dantians*, or energy centers, in the body. These centers are foundational to

Chinese arts, medicine, martial arts and religious practices. The lower dantian is in the belly, the middle dantian is at the heart, and the upper dantian is in the head and is specifically associated with the pineal gland. Each is necessary for overall harmony, and each has a different function; but the lower dantian is emphasized as the foundation of them all—the energetic center from which one thinks and acts. In order to remain grounded, the middle and upper dantians must be in relationship with the lower center.

Interestingly, these traditional centers of mindfulness, which occur across a vast range of cultures, match the three brains in the body: the gut brain, the heart brain and the cranial brain.³⁹ In fact, of all the cultures I've read about, I've never encountered one that experiences thinking in the throat, for instance, or the thighs. A culture's center of thinking always seems to align with one of our three anatomical brains. This is even true of the English language, in which vestiges linger to suggest that other forms of thinking are available to us. We might ask someone, "What does your heart tell you?" or advise her, "Listen to your gut." These phrases are common enough, and the experiential reality to which they refer correlates precisely to the body's brain centers.

Again, our culture has made the choice to think with a portion of our intelligence—the one that is encased in the cranium. Unlike 'bottom-up' thinking, which is holistic and includes abstract knowledge, 'top-down' thinking excludes what the body knows. Placing itself in a silo, it sees only a shattered world of parts and devotes itself to assessing them. By electing not to think with the whole of our being, we are rejecting wholeness; we are rejecting its attributes of ease, harmony, spaciousness, balance and humility; and we are rejecting reality itself, which is inescapably whole. If our culture seems driven by compulsions and fantasies that are out of touch with reality, then I believe that this way of being in the world, to which we are so deeply habituated, is the source of it.

39 I write about these three brains in more detail in Chapter 2.