

Body's Way of Knowing

**Sometimes you're the Windshield
Sometimes you're the Bug**
(Mark Knopfler)

PART I

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*This piece was written for Professor Vivian Darroch-Lozowski's
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INTRODUCTION: THE SOMATIC EXPERIENCE

The telephone rang and the voice at the other end began to speak. I sat down as per the directions. As the voice continued, my heart started to beat faster, my throat began to close and I was holding my breath taking in only minute amounts of air afraid that my breathing would be too loud and might drown out the voice. I needed to hear the words. In slow motion, I felt my solar plexus contract, like someone had taken their clenched fist and jammed it in between my rib cage, my breath drew high and stayed there. I felt dizzy. What was holding my throat? My arm moved across my body to hold it as I crunched down into myself, my legs moved up and I squinted my eyes trying to make the blurriness of the room go away. Where am I? In my kitchen, sitting on the stool just like I was told. "Sit down," the voice said, so I did. Control. I need to get control. Start to breath, try to breath. I'm sure I said something, didn't I? "Okay, I'll be there?" I must have. The unexpectedness and suddenness of this bodily sensation made my once familiar body all the more strange and difficult to control. The voice stops. What time is it? Where are the girls? Who can I call? I'm crying now, I'm still not breathing, I'm gulping the air. I hang up the phone and slide to the floor. The fist is still in my gut and the whole area from below my navel to my throat and all across my middle to my back feels like one hard block of ache. I must breath to make it loosen up so I try to breathe steadily. Stop gulping air. I try to gather my thoughts and I breathe and I cry and I breathe but the fist won't go away. Another force takes over. Sensibility gurgles up through the puddle of my mind. *Don't call Steve, he has to drive all the way home from Mississauga, too dangerous for him to drive upset. Wait until he comes home. Where are the girls? I'm supposed to be picking them up at school. Call over and have someone send them home. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Don't let them see you crying. Get it together. Keep breathing. I can barely speak with air and tears and words all balled up together in my throat. I pick up the phone to call the school. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. That's all I can do right now.*

PART I

Anyone who has faced death will know precisely...because the irreversibility of death focuses our thoughts sharply on the monumental scale of the human minded life. It should not take death, however, to make anyone sensitive to this issue. Life should be enough to make us approach the human mind with respect for its dignity and stature and, almost paradoxically, with tenderness for its fragility. (Damasio, 27)

It would be good if, as Antonio Damasio points out, we could all focus our thoughts to our bodies without the threat of impending death or demise, but alas, I have not found it so. For the most part we thoughtlessly carry on using our body as a medium to all emotions and duties without giving thought to it, unless of course, there is pain. Then we pay attention and say, “Life’s getting to me”.

Life has a funny way of “getting” to all of us. Our ability to rationalize ceaseless activity is mind and body boggling. We ignore the little intuitive voice that creeps into our mind saying “pay attention”, or “give me a break”. And as life can and will, if you ignore the little voice long enough, your body’s big voice will click on, loud and clear. In my case, my body’s big voice said *breast cancer*.

The earliest memories of my breasts come from my years in junior high school. I was not allowed to wear a bra and it was a source of great shame to me on gym days. I already wore glasses and had more hip and bottom than breast so gym days only magnified my inability to get comfortable in my skin.

Breasts were an integral but not unique part of my body. They were part of the early fumbling at love-making, they grew when I went on birth control pills and they ached at the

beginning of my monthly cycle. Breast pain hormonally related to a woman's cycle is considered a normal part of many women's lives. Some women experience such pain that they can not wear a t-shirt, lie on their stomach or tolerate hugs. (Love, 86) There is very little research done on the hormonal fluctuations, so the cause of cyclical pain remains a mystery (Love, 83).

*But sometimes the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.
It is the source of all true art and science. (Albert Einstein)*

When I had children, my breasts provided them with milk. Their first sucking caused my uterus to begin contracting back to its normal size, a bodily connection I have never made. These contractions caused a pain worse than labor for me. But with them came my daughters' first nourishment and it was a natural part of motherhood. This breast pain could perhaps be considered "good" pain. It hurt but for all the right reasons.

In health, we experience our embodied selves in an unselfconscious way, taking for granted and paying little attention to processes such as breathing, or the position of each limb in relation to the rest of the body or even the little pains. It is as Drew Leder calls it, *The absent body*. (Madjar, 2) When our body becomes unfamiliar due to disease, accident or illness, it is another story. Illnesses are such that [people] feel overwhelmed, unable to see beyond their present situation. (Madjar, 6).

Interestingly, breast cancer, rarely causes pain (only in 10%). It is sneaky that way. Pain in our breasts is most often a sign that everything is normal. I had no specific pain and until the little lump appeared, I was unconscious of any trouble. Once felt, it cannot be not felt. (Madjar, 5) And so the doctor took a needle and drew out a tiny stream of cells from the area in my breast that was now lump. Under the microscope it was clear that my lump was not just a boring lump

like a cyst or a fibroidenoma but a highly “suspicious” lump, filled with danger. The taken-for-granted reliability of my body was shattered as surely as it might be shattered by sudden burn trauma, as hot wax accidentally poured down a woman’s arm. (Madjar, 5)

The bodily sensations that I experienced during the initial telephone call from my surgeon are chronicled in the introduction. Once I was breathing again. I went upstairs and stuck four Band-aids to my breast in a box that went around the lump. I chanting in my mind to the lump “stay there” “stay there”. I knew that if the dangerous cells stayed in the box and didn’t spread, I had a good chance of surviving. If it spread, well, the news was not as good. I knew the little lump had to stay in the box even though part of me was not totally sure that is *was* dangerous, part of me knew, for sure, that it was. While my limbic system was being assaulted by shock and worry, I concentrated on maintaining strength and control to keep healing as it’s main focus. While the thoughts of cancer, surgery, chemotherapy, death, and disaster were constant distractions, I strived to maintain a sense of centeredness and tranquility which I knew was one of the keys to my survival. It was then that I became acutely aware of a mind/body/spirit connection and its power within my body.

Sleeplessness, anxiety, terror, energy filled my body in the days before surgery.... I was not able to compose myself. I felt sick. That fist was still firmly planted in my gut and I needed to move my body, to breath deeply, to expel the air that seemed to be building up throughout me. I thought I would explode and began to hyperventilate and weep. I went outside into the cool air, each cell felt the coolness. I ran back and forth again and again on the road trying to relax my body, to tire out my muscles that were so taut I feared they would spring apart. My cells were out of control and I had no way to rein them in. I could have run miles, I think. The energy was immense. I so desperately wanted to be tired.

Although I can't be sure because of the anesthesia, I have a deep feeling that I was well cared for during surgery, that there was love and care around my body as I lay unconscious on the table. The surgeon made his cut and removed lump from my breast. He handed it over to the pathologist who quickly froze it and sliced off a small section, like pickled ginger. He then peered into his microscope looking at the cells. If they were normal, I would be sewn back up. If the cells were ominous, two layers of lymph nodes would be removed from my armpit to test for any spread of the disease.

When I woke up later I felt groggy but not sick. My arm was sore from the IV and also, as I found out, from the drain they had put under my arm to drain the lymphatic fluid that was now building up due to the loss of my lymph nodes. It was quite amazing really how the *words* impacted on my body. The words *lump* and *cancer* created embodied physical reactions all their own and none of them were very pleasant. But once the lump was gone, my body/mind gained control far more than when the lump was present, filled only with uncertainty. Then the lump was limbo and it was awful.

Like 70% of women diagnosed with breast cancer, I had no family history of the disease. Familial genetic mutation was out and so I wondered, how I was to have come up with breast cancer. I ran down the list:

too much beer,

too many cigarettes,

not enough church,

too many red jelly beans,

too much sex,

a broken heart,

birth control pills,

too many x-rays

As I became more knowledgeable and my vocabulary of disease grew, I wondered if there was a glitch in my P53 gene (tumour suppressor) or a mutation of somatic tissue. (Love, 191) Was I now the beginning of a line of genetic mutation where one break in the train of generations and me and my particular, idiosyncratic DNA sequence was condemned without hope of reprieve? (Sagan and Druyan, 91). Or was it a severe form of cellular disharmony caused by a section of the cellular symphony that had forgotten to play with the rest of the group? (Pearsall, 102)

Lessons are given in imagery and breathing to help facilitate birth and ease the pain of labor. I was blessed with quick labors and deliveries and never really had to rely on the tricks of the trade to get through the “good pain”. Although I had no pain associated with my breast cancer and only minimal pain after treatments, I used all the lessons I had gleaned from childbirth classes and reading to maintain my tranquility. In the beginning, what hurt most was not my wounds, but my mind and my soul. The unceasing ability they had to run wild with thought and sensation was terrifying. I strived to stop worry and concern. I created rituals, carried around precious stones and charms, listened to beautiful music, looked at beautiful pictures and read short inspirational. Each cell in my body seemed to instinctually know what was good for it and what was bad. I looked, listened, smelled, touched and felt with all my heart those I loved as profoundly and deeply as I could while the physical manifestation of their energy and mine was still mine for the feeling. (Pearsall, 111) Each experience in my day affected me deeply.

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