

# Sara K. Schneider's Skin in the Game

*The role of the body (virtually everyone's got one) in culture, learning, work, and spiritual practice*

October, 2009 - Vol 1, Issue 2

## In This Issue

- \* Listening to the body
- \* A practice in listening to the body
- \* Jill Bolte Taylor's My Stroke of Insight

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## Quotes

*When Michelangelo was asked how he sculpted the David, he said, "It was easy. I just eliminated everything that wasn't David."*

--as told by Matt Taylor

*I have remembered how to seem myself.*

-- Alan Bennett, from his play  
*The Madness of King George III*

## Links

[Website](#)

[Sara's most recent book: Art of Darkness: Ingenious Performances by Undercover Operators, Con Men, and Others](#)

[Esalen workshop February 26-28, 2010](#)

## Your Responses

To "Your Life Hove onto Your Back": *I also have stared and wondered how woman in Africa can carry the weight on their heads like they do. ... My friend and I each had quite a sizable suitcase and a*

## Greetings!

Welcome to the second issue of Skin in the Game, a monthly e-zine about life in the body.

This month's issue is on the full and partial expressions of the body, on bodily truths and lies.

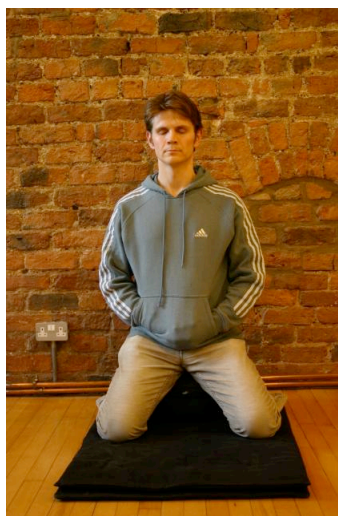
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However, if, like me, you have just about as much email--even good stuff--as you can handle, feel free to limit your subscription. (See top of this page.)

With all good wishes,  
Sara



## Listening to the body



I've marveled at the many times I've been urged to "listen to

*carry on for our trip. At one point when we were taking a train, we hired someone to carry our suitcases up several flights of stairs to the train. He placed the two very heavy and large suitcases on his head and balanced his weight by holding the two carry-ons. We couldn't believe he was able to walk up the stairs like this!*

--Phyllis Gottlieb

**To the Hands Practice:** *I sat here (in plaid pajama bottoms and a gray tank top... haha) on my cushy couch pressing my palms together and smiling.*

--Kara Grasso

**To "Ventricle to Ventricle":** *It's so true that dancing cheek to cheek, two people can lose each other in the dance and not realize they're sharing so much intimacy.*

--Panayiotis Karabetis

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your body," as if what sounds like a reminder would restore me to a habitual practice. Nearly always, I draw a startled blank and feel a slivered bolt of anger at the person trying to help me. What could my body have to "say"? Would its communications even come in language? And, if so, why must it whisper so maddeningly faintly?

The contemplative, or listening, prayer that monastic Thomas Merton taught--with its roots in the medieval Christian mystical as well as the Buddhist and Hindu traditions--asks for the creation of a silence that allows for what is left, or free to arrive, after the noise has been stilled. Merton said, "Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence, an expectancy." Listening becomes silencing. In contemplative prayer, the believer accesses that inner knowing, or that voice of God, that in silence's embrace can finally be heard.

Listening that is directed specifically toward the body is perhaps less verbal, less auditory. Bodily sensations may "read" or make themselves available for notice for meditators and spiritual seekers, for medical patients and those trying to stop smoking. Massage therapists, weight-loss consultants, alternative-health practitioners, and New Age workshop leaders all exhort their clients, students, or patients to listen to their body, which may mean, to direct their attention inward, toward the information available in their internal feedback system, that might help them learn to relax muscles, to decline food when they aren't hungry, to sense when their breast milk has come in, to know how much social activity they are ready for while grieving a loss, or to select from an array of treatment options for a life-threatening illness.

Despite being largely associated with quieting and stilling oneself, the notion of "listening to your body" also comes up in distinctly active settings. In a recent *New York Times* column on preventing severe running injuries, after a runner made a misstep in judgment during a marathon that caused him to persist on top of a torn calf muscle, he rued: "I should have listened to my body. It wasn't just talking to me; it was screaming at me." Marriage researcher Dr. John Gottman recommends listening to one's body when locked in conflict with a partner. The counsel to become receptive audience to one's own body even surfaces on a webpage on safety while shoveling snow (<http://www.ext.nodak.edu/snow.htm>)!

Listening has become the peculiar dominant metaphor for attending in our language-centered culture, even where the body is what we're being asked to listen to. Yet listening to the body may merely consist in becoming conscious of a global,

gut-level feeling, or else in stilling the small self--drawing the chaff of mental chatter away from the wheat of deep knowing, recognition, or receptivity to divine will.

Our eyes readily shift from merely seeing to actively looking. Our hands receive touch only through theirs. One might taste or smell what remains in the "still, small" space of knowing, but there, in either smelling or tasting, we have little experience of being able to sustain attention, perhaps essential to good listening. The ear alone, as a fundamentally receptive organ, claims no power over the received nor does it adopt a perceptually active stance.

So who or what is "talking" to us when we "listen to our bodies"? And, is what is "said" speech? Try the practice below for yourself.



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### **A practice in listening to the body**

*Try this:*

Find a few minutes to sit in a comfortable position, and try a few thought experiments on what listening to your body could feel like. Allow your breathing to come as low into your belly and back as possible, and to be wide and deep. Find that your inhalations and exhalations are long and even.

As you relax into your breath, try tuning in either to parts of the body you've worked particularly hard or those whose needs you've ignored lately. (For extra challenge, you might direct your attention to those parts of the body you can't even feel--parts that have numbed out or that operate on automatic, parts that lodge so deeply within the body's cavities that neither their surfaces nor their depths yield anything up in your everyday being.)

As you quiet, you may find there is in fact a "voice" to the parts to which you give attention. Or you may find that what comes to you through your listening are not words at all, but rather specific sensations, musical notes, colors, or quite global sensations: gut feelings.

Now, switch your awareness to the body as a whole, to the volume it occupies in space, to the three-dimensional shape it makes in the room or the terrain in which you're sitting. Can you feel your body as an entirety? As you do so, are there parts that continue to pull at your attention? What is it like to dwell in the body as a whole? Where does your attention want to go? Where are there moments of stillness? What, if anything, emerges from

such stillness?

*For reflection:*

- How does your experience of your body in parts compare with that of the whole?
- Do your impressions come in the same "voice," the same form?
- How do you discern for yourself whether this voice, these impressions, are your body's truth?

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*Interested friends?*



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## **Body-lying**

They say that the body doesn't, or can't, lie. I'm not sure I agree--at least as regards its meanings or intentions in social interactions.

A skilled body can misrepresent a state of mind, misdirect an interlocutor, or dissimulate felt emotion. Even a desensitized body can lie. Many times, as I debrief a party with a close friend on the way out, he'll say, "You were having a great time in there." I wheel around: as an introvert, I rarely enjoy large parties or formal gatherings. I am taken aback, not only because my friend can't read me, but because my body, on automatic, contravened my boredom, irritation, or desire to escape.

Whether or not you have known bodies to lie, it seems entirely possible to lie socially *about* the body. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* reported more than a third of patients lie to their doctors

about their health habits, resulting in some dangerous clinical decisions (<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jun/08/health/he-lying8>). Patients misrepresent their health, their lifestyles, or how they're complying with doctor's orders, concerned about the doctors' judgment, invasions of their privacy, and potential conflict over the proper course of treatment to take--not to mention making disclosures that could affect their ability to obtain health insurance.

Of course, doctors sometimes lie about patients' bodies, too, as when they elect not to tell a patient he has a potentially life-threatening diagnosis, so as not to have to deal with the range of emotions that could come up in the patient--or in themselves. In the clinical encounter, where a professional takes responsibility for the care of the body-mind of another, perhaps the most significant body fib in the doctor's office is one of omission--that the doctor's body is not an integral part of the story of the doctor-patient encounter. The qualities associated with the doctor's own embodiment, her very way of manifesting her presence with the patient--using as barometer her own visceral responses to, and intuition about, the patient's condition and his underlying concerns--are at the heart of the clinical encounter.

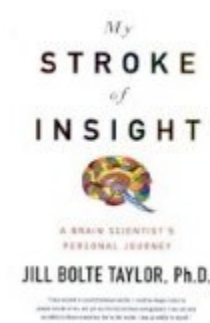
Even if--and perhaps *especially* if--her body can lie.



### Film, Video, Book, and Audio Selections

#### Book: *My Stroke of Insight* by Jill Bolte Taylor (2007)

A Harvard brain scientist who suffered a massive stroke in her late 30s, Jill Bolte Taylor has unique qualifications to understand the decimation of many of her left brain's functions as each occurred. Once she recognized she was having a stroke, she exclaimed to herself, "How many scientists have the opportunity to study their own brain function and mental deterioration from the inside out?"



Ironically, the very capacities Taylor would need to use to make sense of her condition were the very ones to be damaged, some for years to come. In her memoir of the stroke, Taylor retells, blow-by-blow, the collapse of the brain functions associated with recognizing and producing language. What she gains through her stroke is a mystical experience of the unity of all creation, which she postulates can only happen once the left brain is quieted.

Thus, the book offers what could be considered both a participant-observer's account and a scientist's analysis within the emerging field of neurotheology, which attempts to associate precise, "objective" locations in the brain with mystical experience. Blogger Elizabeth Kadetsky (<http://happydays.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/08/living-in-the-moment/?emc=eta1>) likewise remarked the similarity of her mother's state of mind, once Alzheimer's disease had set in, to the state aspired to by Eastern and Western yogis alike and celebrated in Patanjali's first yoga sutra, often translated as, "Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind."

As she realized she was having the stroke, Taylor recognized she was losing the associations between bits of knowledge she knew she possessed. She then dropped a perduring sense of her purpose in phoning for help, and finally lost the ability to recognize the numbers on her doctor's

business card as anything but squiggles. Yet in her debilitated condition, Taylor was at war. Part of her wanted never to return to the land of language, to the argumentative, even arrogant, scientist she characterizes herself as having been. For what she experienced, as her consciousness centered largely in the holistic perceptions of the right brain, was the sense of the reality of her being, the fluctuating boundaries of the self. No longer taking as real either her own personality as Jill Bolte Taylor or that personality's attachments, she found she felt no obligation to be "Jill Bolte Taylor." Rather, she realized, "I am a fluid."

Gradually, through years of rehabilitation and tender re-parenting by her mother, Taylor miraculously recovered her full capacities, learning how to perform as she had once done Jill Bolte Taylor once again in her public speaking engagements by studying previous performances on videotape.

In *My Stroke of Insight*, Taylor relies heavily on her scientific background and her perceptions from within the stroke state. While she gives credit to the findings of analytical brain scientists, she heroicizes her own brain's adventure, never acknowledging those experimenters in the direct experience of reality associated with both Eastern and Western meditation practices. Yet, in addition to documenting their own experiences in first-person accounts and in guides for practice, Buddhist meditators have had their brain patterns while in meditation widely studied in the Western laboratories Taylor champions.


The pioneering achievement of *My Stroke of Insight*, therefore, is not its evocation of an enforced state of consciousness similar to self-realization, but rather its systematic portrait of intellectual and perceptual breakdown—uniquely undertaken by psychonaut Taylor.

**In November ...**

\* The rituals we have "left" in American culture

\* The power of mutual gaze

\* A practice of looking



Thanks for joining me. Comments, suggestions, dialogue, and new interested friends welcome!

Sara K. Schneider



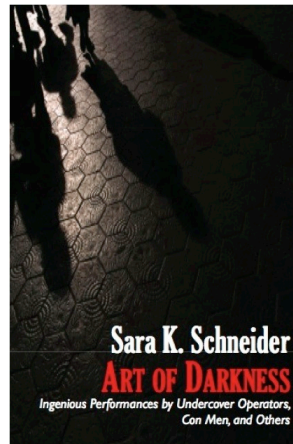
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