The Ontogenetic Body

An Exploration Based on Body-Mind Centering

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Abstract

Ontogenesis² describes the developmental journey from our embryonic forms towards our full maturity. This chapter offers an experiential and reflective account of working with an ontogenetic approach to embodied movement practices for performance, with particular focus on material drawn from Body-Mind Centering (BMC).

Grounded in ethnographic examples, the chapter demonstrates that through BMC, a conscious, playful re-encountering of our ontogenesis renews and expands our movement vocabularies and our perceptual ranges; it allows us to shift or expand our sense of subjectivity. Each example offers momentary reflections on particular aspects of the ontogenetic body, showing how the ontogenetic experience shifts our perceptions and hurls us into a confrontation with the unknown and unknowable of human existence and evolution.

It also provokes many, more tangible questions, for example: What happens if we consciously embody our earliest cellular forms and the movement vocabularies that shaped our earliest explorations of our worlds? What might we understand of performance and pregnancy, of movement and creativity if we open a mind's eye to textures, sensations and cognition from the ontogenetic body's point of view?

The ontogenetic body is a way of moving and a mode of perception. It makes us aware of developmental processes and gives us a method for embodying the forms, mind states and movement patterns of our cellular histories. This can challenge the ways in which we see every body and opens our eyes to our interconnections and intervulnerabilities.

Ontogenesis: A moving place, sometimes of origin, a place of spaces, of being becoming and unbecoming, of structures becoming and coming undone, not uni-linear but interwoven layers, generative, inter-generational, multi-directional, multidimensional, patterning in time, through selves.

Yolk Sacs and Amniotic cavities: an exploration

...tiny... starting out... setting up house ...embryonic

J and I begin our exploration by looking at Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's drawings of the embryo in development and how we fold around and 'swallow' the yolk sac. This sac is like an embryonic 'snack pack' that nourishes the embryo in the first weeks of development. It forms to the front side of what will become the body, to the back the amniotic cavity develops, ultimately providing baby with a swimming space.³

We play with large gym balls — one to the front of the body, one to the back of the body. We each have the balls buoyantly supporting front and back. We wedge and wiggle ourselves between them against the wall and the floor and in corners. This allows for a funny floating feeling, a dangling that is supported, a form that is free. We play warm samba music and we find buoyant joy, a bounce and rebound in the built structures transferring supporting weight.

It gives us an intimation of a gravity-free sensation.

Joy: we are tickled by this buoyancy. We laugh. I sneezes, releasing.

Joy: we then play together, holding and rolling the balls, helping each other to feel what it is like to have support to both the front and back of the body; to float, roll, dive, fly in the in-between spaces and then letting those sensations come inwards.

Please refer to this for a detailed explanation of these terms and explorations.

² All terms listed in the Glossary appear, as here, in small capitals the first time they are mentioned in each chapter.

³ This exploration is based on the interview 'The Place of Space' in Bainbridge Cohen (2008).

We feel the pressure and release into it — being squeezed can be a support! We draw, we write, we laugh, we talk it over, and then we go and eat some delicious things. The curious bubbling feelings support us; our buoyancy comes alive, reflated. We learn that we carry our support in ourselves first and foremost, but that a friend can also help us bounce back.

Joy Joy Joy Joy

What is ontogenesis?

The ontogenetic body is the conscious embodiment of ontogenesis. Ontogenesis describes the developmental journey from our embryonic forms towards our full maturity. Body-Mind Centering (BMC) offers myriad practices for embodying this formative experience: through touch, movement, sound, play, imagination and observation. By paying particular attention to our earliest states of being and becoming, BMC maps the embodiment of ontogenetic (human) and phylogenetic (animal) patterns of movement and development. The maps created and explored are cartographies of being; charting internal landscapes and moving structures, they offer many movement pathways. Some may be familiar; others less so. As movers work with this material, they often realise that these patterns have been there all along; with conscious awareness and embodiment of their ontogenetic patterns, they discover new ways of building vocabulary and they experience new articulations and deeper resonances even within very familiar movement practices.

Thinking through and creating with the ontogenetic body is useful in any number of settings from performance practices and creative work to therapeutic situations.⁴ This essay uses ethnographic vignettes to present some examples and descriptions of embodied ontogenetic explorations.⁴ The italic sections interspersed throughout this chapter detail three varied threads of experiential ontogenesis. The first, above, offers an exploration with a choreographer based on BMC's attention to embryonic structures; the next truncates a series of workshops with a film maker which formed the basis for Devising a new project; the third thread describes my own experience of being pregnant.⁵

While disparate, each example reaches for a moment of free-fall, of a dropping-into awareness and presence, of finding openings to free oneself from habitual choices or patterns, to allow space for the paradoxes and complexities of lived experiences and to find ways of opening to creative possibilities. All together they represent a scene of creativity, which ultimately – in both literal and figurative terms – is a birthing: of oneself, of another, of a work, of a world. Pregnancy and performance offer two tangible sites for exploring this ontology. Both exemplify subjectivity in flux as the mother-baby body and the performer-role body vibrate with multiplicities and refuse to remain still. Through BMC, a conscious, playful re-encountering of our ontogenesis renews and expands our movement vocabularies and our perceptual ranges; it allows us to shift or expand our sense of subjectivity. These examples also underscore the way in which movement development happens in overlapping waves, where transitions are not always smooth or easy, where a leap forwards can be surprising and where we might wonder what propels us to the next stage or what draws us back to an earlier impulse or pattern we thought we were done with.

It is not possible to be comprehensive in this short chapter; instead I aim to evoke at least some sense of the lived experience of ontogenesis, to point to possibilities for future explorations, to consider what is possible when we access the ontology of our ontogeny, and further to consider how this relates to

⁴ This essay focuses more particularly on performance-related situations. For a therapeutic approach see Linda Hartley (1995), in particular her chapter on 'Developmental Movement Therapy'. However, the two areas are fundamentally related as Hartley explains: "We find that this re-education of underlying developmental patterns [through Developmental Movement Therapy] not only gives more inner strength, clarity, and aliveness to our movement and perceptual responses, but it also frees more of our energy for creative thought and activity." (p.91) 4 The reflections in this essay are based on my encounters with BMC in courses taken with

Margie Fargnoli at the University of Minnesota and with the Embody-Move Association in the UK as well as individual explorations and group sessions I have led with theatre students and performance practitioners.

⁵ Following ethnographic convention, the subject's name is not used.