

# The Ontogenetic Body

**An Exploration Based on Body-Mind Centering**



*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, reflat. 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.<sup>4</sup> This essay uses ethnographic vignettes to present some examples and descriptions of embodied ontogenetic explorations.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

---

<sup>4</sup> 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) <sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Following ethnographic convention, the subject's name is not used.