The Body Unaware

Kenneth Ravizza

I am a stranger and afraid in a world I never made.
—A. E. Housman

As A. E. Housman observed, tremendous technological advances have induced in man a tragic sense of fear and alienation from his environment. Specialization, complexity, and the transient nature of things have made it difficult for man to feel at home in his world. The pervading economic, social, ecological, and population dilemmas are so vast that many persons are bewildered by them. They feel a sense of helplessness which produces an overwhelming apathy and a desire to avoid the problems confronting them. One method of avoidance is explained by Erich Fromm: "...to give up the independence of one's own self and to fuse one's self with somebody or something outside of oneself in order to acquire the strength which the individual self is lacking." Overcome by helplessness and unable to cope, individuals reach out for some external force to solve their problem. Thus, there are disillusioned persons who simply ignore the manifold problems associated with today's progressive and complex technology. Others, when confronted with personal and/or physical problems, seek solutions that merely gloss over the underlying cause.

The confused state of affairs is revealed in the many individuals who are out of touch with their own bodies. In an attempt to deal with technological developments, man has developed his mental and conceptual capacities, but he has neglected his direct bodily experiences and sensations. R. D. Laing addressed this problem when he stated:

As adults, we have forgotten most of our childhood.
not only its contents but its flavour, as much of its
Individuals do not manifest an awareness of their inner world of direct firsthand experience and the body awareness that contributes to an understanding of it. As Laing points out, persons are aware only to a minimal degree, recognizing when the body is not feeling “normal,” and adopting some external remedy to resolve the problem.

Confronted with a physical ailment, some persons reach for a pharmaceutical product as an instant remedy. Reliance on external products for relief is overwhelming: pills to go to sleep, pills to stay awake, pills for diets, pills for tensions, and pills for depression. “Five thousand pills a year” are swallowed in the United States alone in order for individuals to cope with their problems. Seldom do persons attempt to confront the possible cause and assume the responsibility of working through their problems, whether tension, anxiety, tiredness, overweight. Aspirin does nothing for the actual source of the pain, but it does deaden one’s awareness of the pain.

The nonchalant attitude of relief being only a swallow away has caused individuals gradually to become dependent on external stimuli to remedy their problems. Neglect of body awareness is also reflected in man’s slavery to the clock. Some check the time to discover if they are hungry, sleepy, and the like, according to the appropriate hour of the day. This indicates the widespread unawareness they have of their natural body rhythms.

Reliance on externals reflects the attitude which regards the body as a mechanism that the individual must keep tuned in order to transport him. Rollo May expounded:

As a result of... suppressing the body into an inanimate machine, subordinated to the purpose of modern industrialism, people are proud of paying no attention to the body. They treat it as an object for manipulation, as though it were a truck to be driven till it runs out of gas. They know how germs or virus or allergies attack the body, and they also know how penicillin or sulfa or some other drug cures them. The attitude toward disease is not that of the self-aware person who experiences his body as part of himself. . . .

Physical educators have unintentionally contributed to the conception of the body as an animated machine, viewing it primarily as an object of scientific analysis. In the minds of the public, physical education is associated chiefly with physical fitness—the physical educator is the person who gets one’s body in good physical condition, just as the dentist gets one’s teeth in order. He spends time and energy measuring persons before, during, and after participating in his programs to determine their level of fitness.

Of course, the elaborate body-conditioning programs used in this conditioning of the animated machines do produce results. When students finish the program, they are usually in significantly better shape. But the statistics do not reveal what the students’ physical condition is six months after they have completed the program. Often, persons enroll in physical fitness classes anticipating that the instructor will furnish the motivation for them to work at their maximum. Once the course is completed and the “motivator” is removed, they often regress to their previous out-of-shape state, and the trim new silhouette soon sags. The instructor’s interest is ephemeral, and the student must be prepared to continue the program on his own. In most conditioning programs, the primary goal is to work the student into good shape. But, when do most persons who work out feel good? Usually, an individual feels best when the day’s exercise is completed. It is as though the workout itself is an arduous battle and the victory comes when the battle ends. It is synonymous with the story of the moron who enjoys banging his head against the wall because it feels good when he stops. When the instructor becomes the significant motivating force, it merely reflects another instance when the individual is motivated by an external force.

Physical educators tend to objectify the body, not only in relation to physical fitness but also in the areas of kinesiology, biomechanics, and motor learning. As a result, individuals are conditioned to relate to the body as an object outside of themselves to be “whipped into shape” or disciplined in learning motor skills. Unknowingly, physical educators encourage the participant to view himself as a duality—a mind and a body. This is confusing because man does not live his existence as separate parts, but as a total functioning being. Sy Kleinman addressed this point when he wrote:

We have come to regard the body as a thing to be dealt with rather than as an existent presence or mode of being. . . . We have divorced the body from experience and we do not attempt to understand it as it operates in the lived world. Rather, we attempt to explain it as
a physiological organism. We don't look at it as it is, but as we conceptualize it scientifically.7

It is the concept that persons are totally functioning human beings and not just physical bodies in the physical education class that I wish to develop. Because many individuals relate to the body as an object, it is difficult to have them become aware of the signals the body is constantly receiving from the external environment. Bodily signals are ever-present, for example, in the contracting of the shoulders in a tense or stressful encounter with someone. Severin Peterson stated: "The less the body is experienced, the more it becomes an appearance; the less reality it has, the more it must be undressed or dressed up; the less it is one's own known body, the further away it moves from anything to do with one's self." It is the conception of the body as an object outside and separate from the self that must be changed.

Although it may be difficult to increase a person's awareness after he has neglected it for so long, a multitude of insights can be gained from daily occurrences, if one is willing to focus attention on bodily experiences. One hindrance is our preoccupation with getting somewhere, we often overlook what is happening to the body directly during the journey. Usually, we begin our day relaxed, but as the day progresses, we confront a variety of stressful situations which gradually result in a tightening of the muscles as this tension is channeled into the body. The body reveals tension through a sore neck, a backache, tight shoulders, and a wrinkled, contorted face.

Another problem confronting the individual who is attempting to develop an awareness of his body is that as man developed his cognitive abilities he began to overlook the significance of firsthand experiences, dealing instead with abstract concepts of direct experiences. It appears that man shifted his attention from living the experience to conceptualizing about the experience. Rollo May stated:

Many disturbances of bodily functions, beginning in such simple things as incorrect walking, or faulty posture or breathing, are due to the fact that people have all their lives walked, to take only one simple illustration, as though they were machines, and have never experienced any of the feelings in their feet or legs or rest of the body.9

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It is lack of awareness of the body that contributes to a multitude of postural and lower back problems that plague millions of middle-aged Americans. Are you aware of how you are sitting as you read this article? Is your spine slouched over the paper? Are your shoulders rounded? Do you want to be in such a tight posture? What is it doing to your body? It is interesting to note that whenever a malfunction of an extremity is corrected (e.g., by knee operation), the patient must consciously feel what it is like to walk again. It is necessary for the patient to focus total attention on the extremity and to attempt to feel what it is like to use it properly.

The emphasis that society places on achieving goals is reflected in an individual's neglect of his body. He lacks an awareness of "process" because so often he holds preestablished conceptions, values, and opinions that the process is painful, or at least uncomfortable. But awareness is hidden in the process and for this reason the person must attempt to focus directly on it.

An example of a process slighted in movement is the common presupposition that jogging is ugly; this may be a valid opinion, especially if the individual experienced or observed jogging being used as punishment in his physical education class. The person has a negative conception of jogging and this accompanies the experience. However, if the individual is encouraged to suspend this negative connotation temporarily and slowly jog at a comfortable pace and to focus his attention on the process (for example, the flow of energy through the body, bodily sensations, personal feelings, and the like) a new positive jogging experience could occur.

The individual may begin to experience jogging as more than just physical conditioning and a painful experience. He may use it as an opportunity to focus his attention and become aware of the strength, endurance, natural rhythm, and flowing qualities that he possesses as a moving being. Instead of running to get somewhere and constantly attempting to ignore the process, the individual can look at the experience as beneficial and not only at the long-range effect of jogging. By removing the negative connotations surrounding the process, it would make the actual jogging more enjoyable and he would be more apt to continue.

Another way to develop an awareness of process is to encourage a student to adopt temporarily a different perspective on the activity. In football, a defensive end could gain insights into his position if he could view him position from the offensive end's perspective. By discussing his perception of the opposing player,
defensive end may be better able to visualize his own task and relation to the total team effort. Athletes could suspend some of its set ways expressly to allow them to observe and become aware of diverse aspects of their participation that were previously noticed. When a player’s only concern is the final outcome, he misses many pertinent new insights and discoveries inherent in the process.

Awareness of the body is an integral aspect of the process of healing. Alexander Lowen addressed this when he stated:

Self-awareness is a function of feeling. It is the summation of all body sensations at any one time. Through his self-awareness a person knows who he is. He is aware of what is going on in every part of his body; in other words, he is in touch with himself. For example, he senses the flow of feeling in his body associated with breathing, and senses all other spontaneous or involuntary body movements. But he is also aware of the muscular tensions that restrict his movements, for these too create sensations. . . . Not being in touch with his body from within, it feels strange and awkward to him, which makes him feel self-conscious in his expression and movement.

One may develop an awareness of body by becoming totally absorbed in what one is doing. So often in the classroom, students are not totally “there”; their bodies are seated in the proper position, but their minds are wandering—thinking of a tough actice session that afternoon or a big party the next weekend. Maybe as you read this article you find mind wandering? Where are you?

Integrating mind and body so as to focus on what is happening the present increases one’s awareness; the experience is intensified as a result of full attention being given to the experience. One can view the experience as if one was focusing a camera. The individual is zoomed right into what is happening. Eleanor Criswell scissed this different kind of concentration.

The first thing you have to do is to learn the trick of undivided attention or concentration. By these terms, I mean something quite different from what is ordinarily meant. One “concentrates” on writing a chapter in a book, or on solving problem in mathe-
Another technique that may be used to develop a student’s concentration is to alter his sense perspective so that he is forced to take a new “outlook.” This may be done by “closing off” various senses. While working with beginning wrestlers, I found it beneficial to use blindfolds on the wrestlers to aid them in developing the bodily feel for when to execute certain moves. The wrestler has to become more aware of his body because he cannot see. Clearly, a great deal of exploration, creativity, and experimentation is possible and needed in this realm.

The technique of focusing attention on the present and bringing mind and body together will enable the athlete to concentrate on an awareness of his body. This concentration is common in athletics as evidenced by the psyching-up process. The athlete often prepares for a game by narrowing his thought process on the immediate contest. He dismisses all thoughts that are irrelevant to the actual playing of the game. His concentration is intense and centered only on the game. The player is not consciously thinking about what he is doing; he is just doing it.

When a player has his basic skills under control, he begins to react spontaneously to the situation as it presents itself. He does not have time to think things out, instead he experiences the event directly. At the beginning of a game, there is a period when the player attempts to pick up the tempo of the game. A player does not conceptualize and categorize this, but experiences it and feels it directly. He knows what the tempo of the game is being part of it.

Another technique one can use to develop awareness is to develop a feeling of being “centered,” then move and experience from this center. A centered position is a balanced, stable position. The person moves, directs his energy, gives, and flows with the experience from this place. By exploring his inner space, he may locate this center. Charlotte Selver explains how one can find this center by becoming aware of one’s position in standing.

Standing is the starting point of greatest potential for physical activity, from which walking, running, fighting, dancing and all sports begin and to which they return. It is the specifically human activity, which is exploited by all the less civilized people and by children who have not yet abandoned its uses and pleasures for the chimera of “relaxation.” Easy and balanced standing, in which our inner reactivity mobilizes precisely the energy needed to counter-

balance the pull of earth, permits a full sensing of total organism.

By moving from the center one gathers oneself within and moves from this space. The person moves to the outside from a place of strength and not merely from a diffused position within. The natural athlete is the player who unconsciously moves from this place; it is natural for him and may explain why he can adjust to so many sport movements. The centered position grounds our awareness, and it is from here that we can tell when we are off balance or some part of our body is tense and needs attention.

The centered position can be developed by having the student unbalance himself to the right or left, front or back. He can also become aware of the centered position by stretching various muscles and then contracting them and observing where the center is when they return to normal position. For example, pull your eyebrows out to the side and notice where they are when they return. That spot is a centered position for the eyebrows. There is a centered position in the body, but as we tense and contort it throughout the day we become uptight and often lop-sided and off center.

It is important to learn centered position, for it will enable us to live and experience the body from a constant space. In a world that is ever-changing, a constant space within ourselves may become like a safe harbor to a battered ship.

In summary, one can develop an awareness of body by first suspending personal values and viewing participation in sport or movement from another perspective. An integration of mind and body also contributes to this development, for the person is more involved in what is happening to him directly. Moving from a centered position with one’s awareness focused on what is happening at the present moment is the final way awareness may be increased.

Many of the examples given in this chapter are related to participation in sport, but physical educators have other students who are in dire need of developing their awarenesses and sensitivities so that they can better cope with the pressures and tensions of today’s world.

By becoming aware of body, individuals can learn to conserve energy and use only the energy necessary to complete a task. This conservation would eliminate the energy wasted by constant overexertion. If this energy can be saved, it may reduce the exhaustion experienced at the end of the day. For example, how-
much strength do you need to pick up a piece of paper? How much do you use? How much energy do you waste lifting improperly?

Second, if an awareness of the body is developed, we can become aware of tension and deal with it immediately. So often we just hold this tension in and exist from a tense perspective until we reach the gymnasium and physically work off this tension. There is no reason why we cannot deal with the tension right at the moment and release it by stretching and letting it go. Is there a rule stating one can only exercise and get release in a gymnasium? Hugh Prather stated:

For several months now I have been stretching whatever wants to be stretched, making up how I do it as I go along, letting my muscles and joints tell me what they need, doing it whenever and for as long as it feels good. The effect, especially as compared to routine body-tightening calisthenics, is so mentally releasing that I believe it somehow nourishes my psyche, just as eating exactly what my stomach tells me it wants nourishes my flesh.11

A practical application of this technique is dealing with headaches. If one can "catch" a headache once it starts and work at releasing the underlying tension, one need not wait until the pain builds up and a pill is the only means of combating it. Another example of this letting go is discussed by Graf von Durckheim in relation to relaxation.

We need to learn to relax ourselves—not only our bodies—in the right way. This entails far more than a relaxation of the muscles. Dropping the shoulders and letting go of one's self in the dropping of the shoulders are two fundamentally different movements.8

This is a distinction between merely physically letting go and totally letting go. Graf von Durckheim is not concerned with just the relaxing of the body; he is an advocate of the total integrated person letting go and releasing the pent tension, releasing the psychological, social, and other pressures that often accompany tension. This is what he means by "letting go of one's self in the dropping of the shoulders."

When an individual is fully aware of the body, immediately

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adjusts to the tension and messages that rise from within, he is not fighting himself; he is not holding in great amounts of tension. Instead, he is open, living in the present, integrated, and flowing directly with his experiences. Indeed, he is better prepared to deal with the pressures and forces at play in our technological world so that he need not feel as Housman expressed: "I am a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made."8

REFERENCES