

APPLYING BEING IN MOVEMENT® TRAINING WITH SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS¹

By Paul Linden
Columbus Center for Movement Studies
www.being-in-movement.com

INTRODUCTION

Since 1987, I have done a lot of body/movement work with survivors of child sexual abuse and incest. I have found that the method of somatic education that I have developed aids the growth of self-awareness and the process of healing for survivors. It is a useful complement to psychotherapy as well as an effective approach on its own.

In my practice, body/movement work is for me a process of learning to feel and understand the internal consciousness map of one's body. It is a process of learning to sense in and through the body how choice or intention operates to give form to the body and to action. (For an elucidation of this approach to body work, see my paper "Being In Movement: Intention as a Somatic Meditation".) It is a way of learning to feel how thoughts, beliefs and feelings shape and are shaped by muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, movement and use of space.

The forms that people choose for their bodies and their movements -- whether consciously or subconsciously -- are expressions of their sense of what it is to be themselves and their sense of what the world is. By experimenting with simple movement situations, people can discover the nature of the beliefs and strategies that underlie their actions. They can evaluate the efficacy of these choices, discover why they have become committed to them, and try out new movements and new ways of approaching the world. This learning can lead to reduction of strain and pain in action, greater economy and effectiveness in task performance, and personal and spiritual change.

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I'm writing this paper for a number of reasons. First, describing how body work can be applied with incest survivors illuminates how physical elements are tied to deep personality and spiritual patterns in all people. This is something that body and movement workers (as well as psychotherapists and medical practitioners) need to consider. Clients often come for bodywork because of legitimate physical dysfunctions which are in fact the physical manifestations of deep personal pain. Working with just the physical or just the personal elements alone is not sufficient. Dealing with the person as a whole is necessary for real learning and growth. Somatic educators must be aware of the depths that body/movement work can and should touch in order for their work to be complete and completely effective. Second, the issues that survivors face -- such as fear, alienation, and powerlessness -- are the same issues that every human being must deal with; however, in this group the issues present themselves with a starkness and terror that makes them stand out in such perfect clarity that they can be seen with new insight. Third, I would like to suggest that it is important for body and movement workers to be aware of and look for the issues of child abuse that often lie hidden in somatic difficulties. And fourth, I want to share the methods I have developed for working with incest survivors.²

THE PROBLEM

This section will provide a general description of the difficulties that abuse and incest survivors must deal with. The key issue is powerlessness, and most of the other difficulties abuse survivors deal with stem from and contribute to this basic problem.

POWERLESSNESS

Power is the ability to control the environment to maintain one's safety and secure one's needs. The fundamental survival requirement of every organism is an ability to establish a safe territory. Children start off powerless and incapable -- dependent on the adults around them for their safety and for the fulfillment of every need. The primary task of growth is to gradually take over the job of fulfilling one's own needs.

In all too many instances, the adults and older siblings whom children depend on for love, nurturance and support hurt them. When children are demeaned and injured, used by people for their own purposes rather than respected & nurtured, they do not develop a sense of their own power and an ability to defend their own boundaries effectively. Instead they are forced to learn that they are in actual fact utterly weak and defenseless and have no effective boundaries at all. Sexual abuse, especially incest, shoves home this message most brutally because the child learns that even inside her or his skin there is no safety.

² For much greater detail than is possible in a short article, see my book, *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*, an e-book available on my website.

LIVING FROM THE PAST

Even when the abused child grows up to be an adult, the learning incorporated at an early age continues to be a fundamental part of the personality construct. The adult continues to act from the certain knowledge of his or her own weakness and lack of effective boundary defense. Acting from a sense of her weakness, the adult cannot make clear decisions or act with any force, so challenges or threats are hard to handle well. This inability to succeed gives rise to an even greater sense of weakness and fear, and so on.

Situations or people with significant resemblance to the original traumatic events and perpetrators are particularly hard to handle. The person will react to present situations or people as though they actually are the ones experienced in the past; consequently such reactions will be loaded with emotions that are not appropriate to the actual present situations and people.

FEELINGS

The painful feelings and emotions experienced by an abused child are powerful, complex and long lasting. The primary emotion is fear. It is terrifying to be held down and violated, to be hit and physically abused or to be neglected and emotionally abused. It is terrifying to be hurt by the people who are supposed to be loving and caring.

Confusion is also very often felt. It is confusing to a child to experience an adult's sexual arousal and not understand what the adult is feeling or doing. Often the child experiences some pleasurable physical arousal and stimulation. This is especially true when the sexual abuse is "loving" rather than obviously violent, but it can be true even in the midst of clear violence and pain. The body is built to experience certain kinds of touch as pleasurable. It will often do so even in situations that are very unpleasant overall, and this can be very confusing. Also, there can be an enjoyment of the intimacy and attention -- it may be the only time the adult ever pays attention to a child starved for emotional contact. Experiencing this positive feeling in the context of abuse is very confusing to the child. And the confusion itself can be very scary.

There can also be intense grief and rage. The caring relationship is crucial for the child's emotional well-being, and there is a sense of deep loss when that caring is absent. Beyond that, a child may experience a fiery rage, which can stem from a feeling of betrayal or from the need to fight back and destroy the abuser.

The flip side of rage is surrender. Very often the child experiences utter helplessness before an adult's overwhelming power, and the child goes limp, gives up and just waits for the abuse to be over.

Worthlessness, shame and guilt are frequently felt. The child may feel that if she or he is not loved it must be because he is unlovable. Often abused children are explicitly

told that they are bad and deserve the abuse, and they internalize that opinion of themselves. Often abused children are explicitly told that they are bad and deserve the abuse, and they internalize that opinion of themselves. In particular, sexually abused children are often blamed by the abuser for enticing them to abuse.

In addition, sexually abused children often feel bad because they participated in something that on some level they knew was wrong. Very often they don't understand the sexual behavior, but the adult feels its wrongness and communicates it to them subliminally. In addition, the child may feel bad because on some level they enjoy or want the contact with the adult.

Often there is a feeling of having to help or protect the adult. The adult may, for example, be involved in a difficult relationship with his or her spouse and turn to the child for love and sexual contact. The adult may feel a lot of discomfort about the marriage, and the child may come to feel that it is her or his job to take care of the adult and make them feel better.

Another element which contributes to the disempowerment and worthlessness is the secret. The child may be ordered not to talk about the abuse, possibly with the threat of punishment if she does. If the abuse is perpetrated by a family member, it very likely is part of an overall family pattern, and such a dysfunctional family might include an unspoken command not to discuss the family's problems even within the family or especially with outsiders. Often with incest, only the abusive parent or sibling knows about it, and there is obviously a lot of pressure brought to bear on the child not to reveal what is going on. Even worse, when the other parent or some outsider is told, the response is often to discount the tale and say that it couldn't really be happening, it must have been a bad dream. It is very destructive to the child when an attempt to get help is met with denial and isolation. This seems to clinch the point that the child is really not worth much, not even worth helping.

INTERNAL SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

The child who is neglected or abused is faced with a problem in ensuring his or her survival. She really does have very little power to directly defend herself and promote her physical survival and emotional comfort. Instead she must often adopt indirect means of controlling events, and these strategies generally persist in adulthood.

The child must manage internal sensations and feelings. Just as the pain of surgery is made bearable by anesthesia, so the child must find some way to suppress physical and emotional pain -- or be killed by the pain. The child must replace feelings that cannot be handled with other, more tolerable feeling states.

Such feelings as fear, physical pain or longing for love are often suppressed because they are too painful. Feelings of sexual arousal and pleasure are frequently suppressed because they are too confusing and shameful. Often shame and guilt must be suppressed.

Frequently, anger is suppressed because fighting back against the adult would anger him/her and lead to further abuse.

Very often abused children suppress any sense of personal power. The way their abusers treat them convinces them that power is necessarily abusive and that power is often synonymous with anger. If they feel any anger or power within themselves, they feel that they must be like their abusers, and the thought that they might abuse others as they have been abused is too painful.

Beyond suppressing particular feelings, often the abuse is so harsh that the whole memory of it is suppressed, and the person has no conscious awareness at all that any such thing ever happened to him or her. It takes a lot of energy to maintain this suppression of memory, and it generally leads to a lot of emotional and physical pain. At the furthest extreme, especially intolerable and long-term abuse can lead to multiple personality. Some survivors construct alternate personality fragments that are kept separate from each other. Life experiences, knowledge, memory and feelings are divided among many self compartments so the burden is shared and life is maintained.

EXTERNAL SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

Abused children also develop strategies for controlling their environment, and generally these strategies persist in adulthood as well. If the abuse is perpetrated by an adult caregiver, then the child may need to please the abusing adult just to ensure that the adult will continue to provide her or his basic necessities. Often children are explicitly ordered to stay still and make no noise while they are being abused, and any movement or sound is punished. In both these cases, the child may learn to use passivity as a way to handle abuse or threats. Often the child becomes quiet and unobtrusive so as to avoid drawing attention and abuse to herself. Or she might learn to conform to the adult's ideas of correct social behavior and demeanor.

The opposite is possible as well. Sometimes the abused child adopts patterns of aggressive or disruptive behavior designed to antagonize people just to keep them far enough away that he feels safe.

TEACHING

How can a person be helped to notice what they have become and how they act? How can they be helped to find new and better options? Body and movement awareness exploration is very effective in starting people moving in the direction of self-awareness and empowerment because this work is so concrete and explicit.

MOVEMENT EXPERIMENTS

The way I teach is based on setting up experiments for the student to work with. In structuring lessons, I work with safe, controlled situations as solid metaphors for or

limited representations of real life challenges or difficulties. Underlying the structure of the movement experiments is a challenge/response model of behavior -- which stems in large part from the attack/defense model which has been part of my martial art training.

In setting up a movement experiment, I find some simple body or movement situation which presents a challenge, and I have the student demonstrate how he or she would deal with the challenge. I teach the student how to monitor his or her responses, how to evaluate them, and how to construct new responses to try out.

The experiments are suggested by what the student brings to the lesson. They may come in with a question about how to handle a particular situation in their lives. They may come in with a question about why some part of their bodies hurts or about why some movement is difficult. They may simply tell me about something that happened to them and what it felt like. Or they may come in with no particular sense of a starting place for a lesson.

In any case, I look at what they are doing as they talk to me. If they are describing something that happened to them, they will be replaying that event somatically, and I can observe their real responses to it. If they are asking about improving their body or movement, I can directly observe the difficulties they are talking about. If they have no particular questions, I can ask them to walk around my office and observe whether they compress or twist themselves as they move and how they relate to the space they move through. All of this gives me a sense of what shape they are in, literally, and offers a place to start the teaching process.

I start by finding some simple body or movement situation which will capture and magnify the response patterns that I see. Sometimes I start with seemingly trivial, irrelevant movement situations as teaching devices because they offer a starting place which is not threatening, and sometimes I start with situations that are clearly emotionally significant. The situations may be simple physical tasks such as balancing a pencil on a finger. They may be imagery processes, for example, imagining standing up on a street corner and announcing that their father raped them when they were five years old. They may be role playing situations such as telling some sleazeball in a bus station to stay the hell away from them. They may be actual skill practice, for example, learning a defense technique for escaping from a choke. The way the student meets the challenge offered by the experiment reveals her internal and external strategies of action.

CONCRETE THINKING

Concrete thinking is the key to using body and movement work to reveal and elucidate patterns of perception, thought, feeling and choice. Thinking concretely means pinning down thoughts, feelings, and intentions by defining them in terms of observable, physical response patterns and tangible physical sensations.

Normally, people are so used to feeling themselves as “mental” and “emotional” beings that they don't notice the physical substrate for mental and emotional events.

However, emotional and mental responses can be defined in physical terms. Thus, for example, rather than thinking of anger as something in the mind, you could look at anger as a complex physical action, which might include clenching your fists, tightening your jaw, breathing more rapidly etc. The mental aspect of anger, then, would be what is felt or experienced when these physical actions are done in the body.

Defining feelings and habits of behavior this way accomplishes a number of purposes. Physical thinking allows a person to pin down the specific meanings he or she attaches to the broad, vague words we use to name emotions. Beyond that, by allowing comparison of the meanings different people attach to the same emotion label, it also allows people to achieve more precise communication. Thus, for example, someone who uses the label “anger” to denote an emotion which includes holding the breath is operating from a very different emotional place than the person who experiences anger as increasing the rate of breathing.

Physical thinking also anchors people in the lived experience of the present moment. Rather than allowing them or encouraging them to go off into memories of the past or verbal statements about their lives, physical thinking forces them to keep up a running pattern of self-monitoring, focusing on the current details of breathing, muscle tone, posture and movement. This forces people to feel their feelings by getting them to notice just exactly what they are doing as they do it. It also forces them to notice that their feelings are actions that they choose and do. It forces them to assume responsibility for themselves.

Concrete thinking offers a clear and distinct avenue for creating internal change. Once people can experience mental, emotional, energetic, intentional and behavioral patterns as lived physical configurations/actions, they can identify the configurations of dysfunctional patterns and then deliberately construct more positive patterns as replacements.

RESPONSES

Once I have structured a situation which elicits a response authentic and strong enough to be interesting yet weak enough to be tolerable to the student, I have the student observe, describe, analyze and then evaluate his or her responses. When a response is found to be inappropriate, we go on to try out new responses and find some that are better.

There are a number of levels of response monitoring, each of which builds on the prior levels. The first involves noticing simple details of muscle tone, breathing, body alignment, and rhythms and qualities of movement. The second level has to do with helping the student notice the gaps and inaccuracies in her body image and how they shape her or his physical responses. The third level involves understanding how the emotions called up by the experiment manifest themselves as physical changes in the body. The fourth level involves discerning what old memories or feelings of prior situations are called up by the experiment.

In teaching a person to monitor her responses, I have her learn to specify what she is feeling by giving detailed and complete statements of precisely what she is feeling in her body and where in her body she feels it. I have her go through her body part by part and notice whether anything is occurring there. That forces the student to notice the actual sensory content of her experience, and it allows her to begin taking a new relation to it. Rather than thinking her feelings are some intangible, involuntary vapor, she begins to experience them as discrete, physical, controllable actions. And rather than being overwhelmed by them, she begins to stay focused on remembering herself and maintaining some perspective on what she is doing inside of herself. However, once a person can maintain this physical sense of his emotions, then he can include the more usual mental sense of them as well without getting distracted or overwhelmed.

There is a basic axiom I work with in helping people discover the meaning of their response patterns: The effect of an action is its purpose. This is really just a working hypothesis since side effects do exist, but it serves to focus people's attention. If, for example, I observe in a student a postural pattern which stiffens his chest and stifles his breathing, then it can be very informative to assume that the student is adopting that pattern in order to achieve those results. Having him move into a new posture which softens his chest and increases his breathing will bring new sensations to the fore and frequently these sensations will point directly at feelings and issues the person has been suppressing.

Once a student can monitor her responses, the next step is to help her understand and evaluate the effects of those responses. Evaluating the responses means discovering whether or not the responses are the most effective and comfortable ways of handling the challenge. I find that usually the best way to help a person evaluate her natural response is to help her construct for comparison a response that I know will be better, both in terms of comfort and task effectiveness.

However, even when I have in mind an idea of what a better response pattern would be, I confine myself to teaching students to perform physical actions, and I make a point of not telling them that I think the new actions will be better. I believe it is very important that they perform the experiments and then evaluate the results themselves on the basis of what they feel and the results they obtain. This way they are empowered to be their own teachers rather than simply depending on me.

DE-CONDITIONING

At this point in the experiment, the student has discovered that her natural response to the challenge was actually ineffective and uncomfortable no matter how reasonable and comfortable it seemed at first. (Naturally, many responses a student will make will be appropriate, but of course it will be the inappropriate ones that we will spend time on.) She has tried out a new response pattern that felt unfamiliar and probably awkward but turned out to be comfortable and effective. The next step in the learning process is de-conditioning.

The dysfunctional patterns of behavior learned through the abuse are triggered by situations that are reminiscent of the original abuse in some way or in some degree. The more similar the present situation is to the original abuse situation, the more likely is the elicitation of old habits and the stronger the response is likely to be. In many cases, responses that originally were connected to specific triggers from the abuse event have gotten generalized so that a large number of stimuli also call forth the response.

Once a student can create and hold a new, more powerful and effective pattern, I set up situations which mimic the abuse situation to trigger old habits. I have her deliberately refrain from doing old behaviors and do something new and better instead. This weakens the old learning and allows the gradual construction of a new habit. Once a student can perform a new response in the artificial environment of the lesson, the next step is for her to watch for instances in her daily life when the old dysfunctional body and movement pattern pops up and then deliberately replace it with a new one.

This is clearly an educational model of personal change. Somatic education is effective in helping a person create changes because it offers concrete reality tests. Somatic tests offer quick ways to break through denial systems and overcome the state of powerlessness which is the basic difficulty faced by survivors of abuse and incest.

POWER

The clearest way to explain the process of empowerment is by describing a number of the basic exercises I use.³ I begin with a somatic definition of power. Weakness involves patterns of body sensation, posture and movement which are small and uneven. (For more details on the body shape of powerlessness and power, see the paper *Being In Movement: Intention as a Somatic Meditation*.) These body patterns are constricted or collapsed, and they are lopsided or twisted. Power is expansive and symmetrical. The empowered, centered state is open, bright, vigorous, soft, smooth, fluid, massive, light, balanced and even. This state is at once a physical, emotional and spiritual state. Empowerment can be taught by helping people learn to use physical procedures as the handle on the overall state.

The problematic feelings and survival behaviors maintained by abuse survivors have persisted because they seemed like the only way to handle the pain and survive. The system won't let go of the feelings and behaviors until it is provided with new options that are clearly more effective and more comfortable as survival tools. The goal of empowerment work is to teach people how to create a centered state and use it in place of their habitual patterns of fear and weakness.

³ For detailed instructions on how to do the basic breathing, body awareness, and centering exercises I teach, see the file *A Downloadable Script for the Eight Core BIM Exercises* on my website, www.being-in-movement.com.

CHEST PUSH

A simple challenge to help people begin testing their sense of their own power is for me to put my hands on their shoulders and have them try to walk forward against my resistance. (It is important in working with abuse survivors to describe any movement experiment before doing it and ask for their permission to proceed. Survivors should always know that in the educational framework they have a choice about being touched or pushed.) I ask the students two questions. What are you doing? What does it feel like to do this? The work in this lesson is to get them to notice finer and finer details of their posture, their means of initiating the movement, and their ways of sustaining the movement. Beyond that, they have to notice the concomitant emotional responses that pass through them.

When I tried this exercise with one woman, her immediate response was to drop her head, cave in her chest and tell me that she'd always been unathletic and weak, and that she knew she wouldn't be able to do it. Sure enough, she couldn't budge. I had her make a list of the ways she held each body segment, how she breathed as she did that, and what she felt like. Then I helped her into a more upright expansive posture, one in which she felt her feet on the ground, was aware of her pelvis as the support for her spinal column, and in which she allowed her breathing to become fuller and deeper. In that posture she actually found it easy to push forward against my resistance -- which really astounded her. She realized that she also felt much more positive about herself in the new posture.

In this experiment, I had gotten the woman to notice that she could, quite easily, access power which she had thought was totally beyond her. I got her to experience that she was choosing weakness and that she could choose strength. Naturally, I had to reassure her that it was not her fault that she customarily chose weakness but that she had been conditioned to make that choice as a little girl. I had gotten her to notice that her external actions arose from her internal state and that she could choose a very different constellation of inner feelings and outer responses. This lesson allowed us to break through her feeling of helplessness. It was quick and simple. In the next lessons we elaborated on the experience and methods of attaining power. The following exercises are among those we used.

PAIN CONTROL AND BREATHING

Helping people examine how they deal with pain lets them gain insight into what their lives have been like and what new options are open to them. By pressing into a nerve point, I can generate intense, non-injurious pain that stops as soon as I release the pressure. This is a considerably greater challenge than just being pushed on. People generally jump out of their skins when I first apply the pressure (even though we have discussed the exercise beforehand and they have decided they wish to attempt it).

Usually people's awareness is totally dominated by the experience of pain and they don't have any awareness at all of their physical responses, but generally after a few repetitions they can detail their responses. These ordinarily include fear responses such

as inhaling suddenly, raising and tensing the shoulders, tensing the neck, and leaning away from me. It also frequently includes facial changes such as raising the eyebrows and widening the eyes. There can also be anger responses such as tightening the fists or glaring at me. Often I have people magnify and exaggerate their responses to get in touch with what they are doing and how that feels.

Next, I have the students stand up and alternate tightening their bellies and letting them plop out. Then I have them release their bellies without doing a preliminary tightening. People generally experience a noticeable release even though they had not first tightened their bellies consciously, and they realize from this that they had been unconsciously holding themselves tight and that they probably hold themselves tight all the time. I have them touch their bellies and experiment with their breathing until they discover how to soften it and drop it into the pit of their bellies, expanding both the belly and the lower back as they inhale. This is just the opposite of the pattern of breathing involved in the fear/startle reflex or in anger.

Once they have grasped this new way of breathing, we go back to the nerve point pressure, and I have them keep their breathing in their bellies as I press. When they do this, they experience that the pain is really not that bad and that they can handle it. I may have them tense their throats and their breathing in preparation for my pressure and feel how that brings back and even increases the pain. Having them alternate between the tensed and relaxed states convinces them that being in mental and emotional control and being able to handle pain is really a very concrete process of placing the body in the right state. Finding that feelings are so easily changed by making physical changes goes a long way toward convincing them that the mind and body really are literally the same thing. This radically changes their view of what the self is and gives them an undeniable experience of their ability to use simple, concrete tools to make changes in themselves.

INGUINAL POWER

Two related exercises focus on body sensations in and around the pelvis and the effect of different states of pelvic organization on emotional states and external actions. The first exercise has to do with pelvic rotation. I have a student sit toward the front edge of a flat chair and attempt to resist me as I push on the his or her chest. Generally people strain to do this and get pushed over backwards anyway. Then I show the student how to anchor herself in her pelvis.

This anchoring process involves feeling how the pelvis rotates around the hip socket and learning how to differentiate two ways of producing forward rotation. (“Forward rotation” means tipping the pelvis so the guts in the pelvic bowl would spill out over the front edge.)

Learning this anchoring skill starts with feeling how slumping and sitting up straight are done. Most people think that straightening up is done by throwing the shoulders back or by straightening the back, and practically no one notices that the whole process is built around pelvic rotation. When the pelvis rotates backward, the stack of vertebrae has no

foundation on which to rest and it slumps down. Rotating the pelvis forward in the appropriate way provides a foundation for the spinal column and the torso as a whole and creates upright posture.

The less effective way to rotate the pelvis forward involves the use of the superficial muscles in the back to pull upward on the rear edge of the pelvis. I have students experience this by pulling their shoulder blades and back pockets together, and they feel how their backs arch and their postures become tense and top heavy.

To find the more effective way, I ask students to slump and notice that when they do the pubic symphysis (the bone in front of the pelvis, just above the genitals) points upwards. The more appropriate way to rotate the pelvis forward involves moving your pubic symphysis forward and down so that it points toward the floor. This uses the iliacus and psoas muscles (which are muscles deep in the front of the body) to do the movement. (Some people will need more help than this brief description provides in order to discover how to achieve this new way of sitting. For much greater detail, readers can consult my books.)

In this new sitting posture, horizontal pressure on the chest is redirected into a pressure which moves diagonally downward through the rear of the pelvis and into the chair. The pressure on the chest is resisted without any sensation of strain. As more pressure is applied to the chest, the pressure into the chair increases and the position becomes more stable (up to the point where there is so much pressure that it overcomes the stability and weight of the body by brute force). This effortless stability produces a physical sensation of exhilaration and power. That is a very strange sensation, and it is hard experience to deny. People have to accept that they can actually find tremendous power in themselves.

PELVIC SOFTENING

A further step in the development of power involves releasing the tension in the pelvic floor musculature. This can be done by focusing on a spot on the perineum half way between the anus and the genitals. Letting this spot melt and glow results in an opening of the hips and a distinct grounding of the whole body.

Along with this, softening and opening the anus and the genitals is important in releasing tension. Most women find it relatively easy to release their vaginal muscles when they think of it, though often they initially feel uncomfortable doing so and cultivating this as a normal state requires a lot of practice. An image that I've found useful in working with men is that of jumping into ice cold water and feeling the scrotum contract upward. Releasing this and letting the scrotum hang loose gets at the sensation of genital relaxation.

Releasing the perineal point, the genitals and the anus creates a state of fluid, grounded power that is very new to most people and which vastly alters their ways of meeting threats and challenges.

FEET WALKING

Once students have begun to be able to use these internal skills, it is useful to experiment with their applications in larger movement situations. One important place to start is with the biomechanics of walking and with a consideration of walking as a fundamental way of making contact with the world.

If you ask people why their bodies move forward across the floor, most people would answer that it is because they pick up a leg, move it forward, and then drop their weight onto it. To develop people's awareness of just what they are doing when they walk, I have them stand and push on a wall, with their feet far enough from the wall that their bodies incline forward quite a bit. Usually people experience that they push on the wall with their arms and shoulders, and they don't notice the contribution of the legs and hips. One way of clarifying this is to have them bend their knees quite a bit and then straighten their legs rapidly as though they were trying to push the floor backwards away from the wall. As they do this, they experience that the force transmitted to the wall by their hands increases.

I then ask what they think would happen if the floor were suddenly transformed to super slick ice, and they generally reply that their feet would slip out from under them. That helps them begin to understand that the traction of the feet on the floor and the shove back and down with the legs is what creates the forward shove on the wall. This transforms their awareness so that they experience the lower half of their bodies as active and powerful. To amplify this, I ask them to maintain a steady push on the wall and rotate their pelvises so that they move from tucking their tails to arching their backs. As they do this, I have them search for the particular orientation of the pelvis which maximizes the transmission of power from the feet to the hands. Feeling this gives them a clear experience of how the legs and the pelvis generate force.

Having them walk with this awareness transforms their walking. Having them step forward by an exaggerated pressing down and back with the ball of the back foot gives them a new experience of walking. The back/down energy reflects off the floor into a forward/up movement of the body. They have a ground to stand on, a foundation for themselves. Their posture opens upward. Their walk becomes more erect, clearer and more energetic. Before, when they conceived of walking as falling down onto their forward foot, rather than springing up off their back foot, they sagged and fell downward as they walked. Their energy drooped. This new way of moving is mechanically more efficient and powerful. It is also much more confident and alert.

One of the key elements that I emphasize in teaching is verticality. It is no accident that we say the goal of moral development is to lead an upright life. And it is no accident that the primary meaning of the word "attitude" refers to the posture or position of someone or something, though our most common use of the word now refers to a person's psychological stance. Depression, anger, fear, self-doubt, self-hatred and such negative emotions all create twisting, cramping or collapse in the body. Learning to feel that and

learning to find a natural openness is a very powerful tool in healing old wounds. Helping people gain experience of and skill in creating and maintaining the vertical line in walking is part of the process of helping them elucidate their inner patterns and finding a clearer and stronger way of being and doing.

WALKING THROUGH

Taking this new experience of walking further, I will have a student experiment with what commitment to reaching a goal is. I have him or her pick a goal, say a picture on the wall, and walk toward it. As he does, I put my arm out at about chest height and try to prevent him from walking forward. His job is to walk straight toward the picture without getting stopped by my arm or circling to evade it, and I ask him to examine how he reacts to being prevented from attaining his goal.

People often get limp and shrink away from my arm, or they get stiff and try hard to push through the barrier. In either case, they begin focusing on my arm and lose concentration on the goal, which disrupts the fluidity and power of their movement. To help a student experience this more clearly, I have him turn his back on the goal and walk away from it, all the while mentally imaging the goal and really feeling a desire to go toward it. When I try to stop him as he does this, he is clearly much weaker. He can feel that splitting his movement and his mental focus creates a state of weakness, and noticing this suggests that unifying the movement and focus will create a more powerful action.

When the student uses what he has learned about breathing, muscular relaxation, pelvic orientation, and efficient walking movements, he can create an internal state which is relaxed, alert, powerful and focused and maintain that state even when confronting a challenge. In that state, the student will simply sweep through my arm, brushing it aside by remaining in his own power. Feeling what this is like is a powerful experience for people who have lived scared and weak.

LOVE

The next step in the development of power is rather surprising to most people. I start by asking people to imagine a situation in which they have to deal with a boss who is antagonistic and critical, and I would have them note the physical changes this produces. Generally it creates tension in the chest and shortening of the breath as well as other tensions throughout the body. Then I have people imagine someone or something that makes their heart smile. This not only reverses the changes created by imagining the uncomfortable situation but also produces sensations of relaxation, warmth, softness and openness in the chest. (I learned this exercise from Stephen Levine, who works with meditations on the heart. See his book *Who Dies? Conscious Living and Conscious Dying*, Anchor Books, Garden City, 1982.) These sensations of being “warm-hearted” are the bodily manifestations of love, compassion or forgiveness. Not only does the chest soften, but the whole body becomes freer and more unified, and this improves the coordinated delivery of power in any action.

Power and love, contrary to the model that our culture uses, really are inseparable. In fact, they are the same. Love without power is limp and ineffective, and power without love is rigid and harsh. In either case, love or power is diminished to the point where it becomes just a shadow and not true power or love at all. Power is the foundation for the ability to love, and love is the foundation for wise use of power. This is not mere philosophy but is simply a shorthand method of stating that the body and the self must be soft and receptive as well as integrated and strong in order to function well.

Once a student gains some skill in constructing the physical-emotional state of love, I set up situations in which she or he has to employ that state in movement tasks. I might, for example, ask her to hold her hand two or three feet above a jar and try to drop pebbles into it. Meanwhile I would be making derogatory comments about her and her ability to succeed, or possibly throwing crumpled sheets of paper at her. If she gets irritated or distracted, it will hamper her performance, but remembering to breathe and create both power and love will enable her to stay in her own center, cease being a victim, and succeed.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is a further extension of love. Forgiveness is a process of using power and love to let go of past wounds. It is a process of creating the psychophysical state of power and love to supplant whatever physical state is produced by the remembrance of the wounds.

An incest survivor has a lot that he or she must eventually let go of. Forgiveness is about letting go of the effects of the abuse so a person can find their own power and get on with their own life. Forgiveness is more about the relationship to the self than it is about the relationship to the perpetrator. In particular, one of the hardest things for abuse survivors (or anyone else, for that matter) to do is to let go of self-doubt and self-loathing and maintain the physical state of love and power when they think of themselves and the things they have experienced and done.

BONKERS

There is an exercise which incorporates all of the foregoing work and helps people get a clear perspective on the ways they have been taught to live their lives. A bonker is the name I use for a light plastic golf club tube. It is about three feet long and ordinarily is used for keeping golf clubs separated in golf bags.

In the first part of the exercise, I will hit a student with the club and challenge him or her to stay clear and present and maintain both power and love. The plastic is light enough that when someone is hit on the leg or arm by it, the tube bends and produces a loud thwack but no injury at all. Frequently it takes a good deal of discussion of the fact that the strike produces no more than a trivial stinging sensation to get people to

differentiate this objectively trivial present event from the past events toward which they constantly orient. This is very, very difficult for someone who grew up being abused, but succeeding at it is a tremendously rewarding experience and sign of progress.

For many people, the second part of the exercise is even worse. I give them the bonker and ask them to hit me. Often abused children were so well-trained in passivity that they can handle being hit but cannot hit back. They learned that when they did hit back, it was useless or, even worse, escalated the violence against them. Also, since their experience of power led them to believe that power is necessarily abusive, in order to avoid becoming abusers themselves, survivors of abuse often refrain from manifesting any power at all.

A major change takes place when people learn that they can stay in their power and love while hitting me. It often takes a good deal of work for people to get the idea that hitting me is trivial, meaningless event. They are not hating or hurting me. They are simply doing an action. Once they can break the connection between the present action and past events, they discover that they can exert power without losing control and becoming abusive and that hitting someone does not make them bad people. And they learn that they have the right to defend themselves in the appropriate circumstances.

I generally move from this exercise with bonkers into some practice of self-defense techniques. When people feel how they can as adults actually defend themselves against the specific situations they couldn't handle as children, another major healing occurs. It is important for their healing that survivors know in practical, realistic terms that no one will ever be able to repeat the abuse. Without real skill in self-defense, there will always be a part of the survivor that will still feel helpless and afraid.

SIX DIRECTIONS BREATHING

The six directions breathing exercise is a way of putting all of the work on body awareness, power and love into an easily practiced whole. I have people sit quietly with their eyes shut. First they adjust their posture and breathing. Next they inhale into the core of their body just below the navel and employ a regular progression of exhaling outward into the six cardinal directions. With one breath for each directional focus, they gently exhale down, up, right, left, forward, backward, and then in all six directions at once.

This exercise is a way of practicing keeping an open, even, symmetrical awareness of the whole body. More than that, it is a way of contacting the feeling of being in the world. Any fear, anger, suppression of feelings, etc. produces dim spots or twists and asymmetries in the feeling of the body's field of energy/attention. Finding those gaps in the field and breathing life back into them is a way of remembering to live fully in the body, in the present and in the world. It is the basic process of empowerment.

Once the basic evenness of the field is created, one can do the exercise projecting simultaneously from the heart as well as the belly, enlarging the focus to include the

source of love as well as the source of power. Beyond just the shape of the breath, it is also possible to add qualities of energy to the projections. Such qualities as firmness, silkiness, or sharpness can be superimposed on the shape projection to vary the feeling of the body as a whole. This would be a way for a person to try out various personal qualities and gain skill in constructing qualities that are unfamiliar. (For more details on working with qualities of intentions, see the paper *Being In Movement: Intention as a Somatic Meditation*.)

This exercise is helpful because it gives people a sense of the fundamental level at which choice or intention operates to structure the body and behavior. It gives them a tool for practicing different ways of being. And as they build up skill with this tool, they can use it unobtrusively during stressful situations to interrupt old patterns and substitute new ones.

For the sake of clarity of exposition, this section described a somewhat artificial progression of exercises focusing specifically on empowerment. In actual work with incest survivors, contacting power and dealing with the defenses that people erected to handle the abuse they experienced as children would not be separate. They would be interwoven and would proceed together. With this description of empowerment as a basis, the next section will examine the various defenses and ways of dealing with them.

DEFENSES

To deal with the chaos and pain of their lives, abused children develop as defenses various internal states and external strategies of action. However, even though these coping mechanisms are useful to people as children in helping them survive, continuing to operate with the defenses as adults generally exacts a heavy cost in inner suffering and external ineffectiveness. It is because people were not powerful enough to defend themselves directly that the indirect defenses evolved. Once they start feeling empowered, they can begin to dispense with the defenses.

This section will describe a number of defense patterns, examine their somatic basis and look at somatic methods of dealing with the defenses. The key to understanding the somatic aspect of defense patterns lies in understanding how the processes of attention and intention create patterns of posture and movement. It is important to be able to perceive the shapes and qualities of people's intention and movement and to have a sense in these terms of what human action can be at its best. The optimum state of intention and movement is simultaneously symmetrical and expansive, free and open, and firm and grounded. This state is a process of being fully in contact with the self and the world around.

Each defense involves some particular deviation from this optimal state. Each defense involves deploying attention and intention within and around the body in lopsided, constricted or collapsed ways in order to reduce the intensity of intolerable sensations or withdraw from or deal with some aspect of the world.

Defining defenses as intentional/body patterns provides a direct means of change. It brings the concept of “defense” down to earth. It provides a direct sensory definition of the action of doing the defense and thereby also points toward a practical way of ceasing to do the defense and doing something more comfortable and effective instead.

With the body configuration of empowerment as a basis for comparison, people can bring into consciousness and clearly feel the body configurations of their habitual defense patterns. Then through altering their physical processes in the direction of symmetry and openness, and power and compassion, people can begin to stop doing their habitual defenses and substitute more powerful, effective and comfortable ways of being and acting.

The intentional/body state of power and love is the opposite of every form of constriction or collapse. As such, it is the basis for working with every form of defense.

MUSCLE TENSION

One basic defense mechanism is the use of high levels of muscle tension to reduce physical sensitivity to both internal and external stimuli. Muscle tension as a defense often arises when a child is forced to submit to sexual touch but learns how anesthetize his body to avoid feeling the touch itself or his responses to the touch. Tensing the chest and pelvis and reducing breathing is a very common form of this defense.

Muscles can be tensed directly simply through contracting them, or they can be tensed indirectly by adopting a postural pattern which is unstable and requires constant muscle tension to maintain. Consciously practicing physically opening themselves to more intense sensation while keeping their breathing centered and stable allows people to work at breaking the defense pattern of muscular tension.

There is a very easy way to help people experience how muscle tension reduces sensitivity. I have them stand up, and I stroke their bellies lightly a few times. I ask them to note how it feels. Then I have them lean back from the waist and feel how that produces strain in the abdominal muscles and decreases the breathing. When they are in that position, I stroke their bellies again and let them feel how greatly the sensation is reduced. The touch generally feels less distinct and farther away. In order to help people experience how tactile sensitivity can be increased by muscular relaxation, I have them stand and lean very slightly forward at the waist and let their bellies relax and plop out. In that position, they will feel the touch on their bellies in a much more sensitive way. Doing this gives people a new awareness of how they usually hold themselves and what that is for.

Often people tense muscles in very specific, meaningful ways. If they have been touched or hurt in a specific spot, they may tense the muscles there to control the memory of just that specific event. Having them focus on and open up the specific patterns of muscle tension is important, both in the overall process of healing and in recovering and re-experiencing memories and feelings.

PELVIC CONTRACTION

A very specific form of muscular tension has to do with rigidity in the pelvic floor muscles (the muscles around the genitals and the anus). Sexual abuse often leads to a pattern in which the person clenches his or her sphincter muscles to reduce painful or pleasurable sensations there or to attempt to shut themselves and prevent further penetration. In many cases, people who have been sexually abused will have chronic back or hip problems because the constant high degree of tension in the pelvic floor muscles generalizes up into the muscles of the lower back and hips and creates compression and stiffness there.

Often feelings of being wide open in the vagina or anus are felt as intolerable vulnerability. I had one student who came to me with severe back problems. She'd been to a neurologist and an orthopedist and they'd found nothing medically wrong, though they did say that her spinal column looked twenty years older than it should have. As I started working with her, I felt how she resisted my moving any part of her body and how she tensed her muscles wherever I touched her. After about twenty minutes, I asked her, choosing my words very carefully, why she constantly kept my touch from penetrating into her muscles. She immediately started telling me about childhood incest.

I had her get up, deliberately clench her vagina as tightly as she could and start walking. She felt how strained and awkward that made her gait and how tense it made her back. I suggested to her that she had spent the last thirty years tensing her vagina to keep her father out, and that was what was impacting on her back. She was in psychotherapy, but naturally her therapist had not worked with her back problem since that was a “physical” not a psychological problem. It was equally inevitable that her physicians had not dealt with the incest since that was a “psychological” not a physical problem. However, the physical and emotional difficulties were actually one and the same. The real issue was one of traumatic learning and a dysfunctional somatic/emotional coping action.

In the next half dozen lessons, we worked with basic empowerment exercises until she was ready to deal directly with the meaning of the pelvic clenching. I then had her assume a karate stance in which the legs are spread quite far apart, the feet turned out a bit, and the knees bent. Her automatic response was to tuck her tail under to keep her vagina closed, but I showed her that the ease and stability of the stance depends on rotating the pelvis in the opposite direction and arching the back a bit. She found that very threatening because it held her anus and vagina wide open and accessible. In order to make that position endurable, I showed her a breathing exercise for cultivating a sense of dense, fiery power.

Once she felt powerful in that position, I asked her to block my hand as I went to smack her in the chest. Her automatic response was to cringe and close herself. That response was based on ingrained feelings of inability and took all the power out of the block. It created a feedback loop in which her feelings of weakness produced a weak response which in turn reinforced her feelings of weakness. We kept working with the

stance until she could stay in her wide open position and maintain her stability of breathing, and at that point she was able to block my hand with ease.

In this exercise she felt that closing and constricting herself reduced her power and that she was most powerful and effective when she felt most vulnerable. That paradoxical piece of understanding gave her a whole new view of how she would have to confront her past pain. She realized that being wide open was her only realistic option for staying safe. And it also relieved the tension in her back.

The issue of vulnerability is a crucial one for survivors of abuse, and it is important for them to experience that being wide open allows them to perceive and act in a freer, more powerful way. Learning that as an experience rather than just a concept is the key to breaking the pattern of compression. Vulnerability is about more than just external threats. It is also about the threats posed by internal elements such as physical sensations, emotions and memories. Survivors have to learn that only by being fully open to everything that seems so dangerous can they really protect themselves and achieve healing.

ANGER

Anger can also work as a defense. Anger generally involves a lot of tension in the arms, shoulders and chest. The muscular tension built up in dwelling on whatever is the focus of the anger can serve to override and cover up sensations of pain, fear and vulnerability. Anger can also be used to help people mobilize enough energy to get up and function rather than staying huddled and immobile in fear and pain. In addition, people who have been traumatized are often so afraid of any close contact that they use anger to create a barrier of unpleasantness to discourage anyone from coming close to them.

As with any defense, the solution to the problem of anger is to help people experience that whatever they are trying to do can be done better and more comfortably from a more centered place. The first step is to help people understand and feel the body configuration of their ways of doing anger. Next it is important to examine whether anger works. I often will have people stand on a sheet of paper and do anger as a way of mobilizing enough strength and solidity to keep me from shoving them off. However, the anger makes them inflexible and top heavy, so they are easy to push off. Standing with soft power works much better, and that experience goes a long way toward convincing people to let go of their anger.

HYSTERIA

A frantic, hyperactive feeling also works well as a somatic defense. The body will be tensed in various patterns, breathing will be inhibited and shallow, and movements may be constricted or quick and jerky. The swirling, chaotic energy can reduce the clarity or intensity of contact with oneself and one's feelings. Again, power and love are the solution to compression and restriction.

EATING

Another area of defense has to do with food. Some people become fat enough to feel totally undesirable sexually. This serves to control the feeling that another person will want them enough to rape them again. Another use of food is to eat enough to keep the stomach a bit over-full. This creates enough tension in the guts to override sensations of fear, sexual arousal etc.

A very interesting defense has to do with transmutation of sensations. I once worked with a woman who was quite overweight. In one lesson, we were examining the physical sensations she had when discussing her father. She was getting in touch with feelings of wanting him to love and comfort her when all of a sudden she became ravenously hungry. She'd eaten a big lunch just before the lesson, so she knew she couldn't actually be hungry. As we explored the physical patterns she was running, she felt how she actually took the incipient body actions of doing loneliness and moved them elsewhere in her body so they became the physical actions of doing hunger. She realized that as a little girl she couldn't afford to feel the loneliness because in actual fact no one was there to comfort her. So she learned to transmute the unassuageable longing into one she could satisfy. However, it didn't quite work, and she kept on eating trying to satisfy a hunger that wasn't for food.

Another woman that I worked with kept complaining of feeling fat. As we explored the physical sensations she attached to the label "fat", she realized that "thick" was a better term. And then she realized that the thickness was a buffer zone she used to reduce the intensity of the sensations on her skin. The thickness was a somatic action not fat tissue, and knowing that made an important difference to her sense of herself and her ability to let go of the ineffective buffer zone.

SMOKING

Smoking can also be used as a somatic defense. Imagine yourself walking down the street and suddenly being engulfed in a cloud of smoke from burning rubber tires. The body's natural response to inhaling noxious fumes is to retch and cough the fumes out, but smokers have learned to override this reflex and force themselves to inhale. This creates a strained, rigid pattern in the chest and breathing. It operates to override other sensations, and I have worked with people who have come to realize that that is a major purpose in their smoking. Working with breathing and centering gives people another way to handle threatening sensations so that they can dispense with the smoking. Learning to relax and open the breathing also directly inhibits the sensations that smokers associate with needing another cigarette and helps break the smoking habit.

DULLNESS

The defenses we have examined so far have been based on constriction as a means of control. It is also possible to use collapse as means of control. This involves reducing the energy available for feeling by creating states of dullness and limpness. It is possible to dull spots on the body or become distant from them in one's perception, and being able to sense a person's field of attention or intention makes it clear which spots have been excluded from their sensory map. Often in a lesson, I will touch a student on two spots and ask which one is farther away from them. This is very confusing to them since they will experience that one spot does feel far away yet they know that both spots are *them* and therefore equally close.

This experience can be very helpful in starting to overcome the defense of dullness. Normally people try not to notice areas of reduced body sensation since the whole purpose of the defense is to reduce awareness. When they do feel the dullness or distance they are creating, they often realize that they knew all along what they were doing. Knowing that they know takes the usefulness out of the defense.

People who have been sexually abused often pull the awareness out of the lower half of their bodies and move it up into their chests and heads. They can do that either by dulling their bottom half or by tensing their top half. This suppresses old memories/sensations of pain and intrusion and arousal. It also often suppresses any current feelings of sexuality, which is important since allowing those feelings could remind survivors of the old violation and force them to re-experience it.

DEPRESSION

Another collapsed form of defense is depression, which can be a very effective way of managing internal sensations. Rather than reducing sensitivity by decreasing energy in isolated spots, the depressed person drains the "juice" out of his or her whole system. Observing the overall patterns of body attention, it is easy to see that there is a general loosening and collapsing of the body.

The pain control exercise offers a handy way of illustrating this to someone who is depressed. I press into a nerve point and have the person notice his response. People ordinarily are very startled, but a depressed person may not feel the pressure as very painful and may have only a minimal physical response. In order to know that his response level is depressed, the depressed person must be given a non-depressed experience as a comparison. To do this, I have the person learn how to sit more erect, breathe more fully, and put more attention into his feet and pelvis. As I press the nerve point again, the student will experience much more pain. There is more energy in the system, it is not so shut down, and the physical sensation is more pronounced.

If I then continue into the belly breathing and inguinal power exercises, the person will pump even more energy into the system and learn to use that energy to create a sense of inner power. This state will also minimize the pain, but it is a very different state than

the original depressed one. Suggesting to the student that he is worthless and that any sensation of pain by such a worthless, screwed up person is really unimportant in the scheme of things will usually remind him to use his habitual defense mechanism and choose depression rather than empowerment as a form of sensory reduction. Alternating between the two ways of reducing pain will give the person the opportunity to compare the two states and decide for himself which is a more comfortable, functional way of living. Repeating the insult and having the person work at staying centered rather than being suckered into choosing depression will help to break that habit.

PASSIVITY

Passivity is a limp smallness in body and movement. It is a collapse back into the self. Passivity can stem from a child's experience of fighting back and being completely defeated by an adult's strength. The child learned that the only way to get through the abuse was to give up and become limp. Passivity can also be a way of suppressing rage and the urge to hurt and destroy. Very often people who have been abused suppress such feelings because they identify anger with abusiveness and they don't want to feel that they are as evil as their abusers. They may also want to suppress such feelings because their own anger reminds them of their abuser's anger and therefore of the abuse itself. People may also adopt a passive role in order to reassure themselves that they were passive in the sexual abuse itself and therefore not to blame for it.

Very often people who were victims of sexual abuse as children get raped one or more times as adults, and it is to a great extent because their passivity attracts predators and prevents effective action for self-defense. (In saying this, I do not mean to be blaming the adult victim. I am simply describing the dysfunctional responses they were forced to learn by the abuse.) Of course, the adult rape tremendously increases the difficulties left by the childhood trauma.

DISSOCIATION

This defense mechanism is another way of decreasing sensitivity, and it has very interesting attentional geometries. One way of doing dissociation consists of focusing one's attention or body consciousness up and diagonally away from the body. This attention/intention pattern is usually observable in the direction of eye focus and is a way of separating oneself from what is going on in "down here" in the here-and-now.

A second way of doing dissociation involves pulling back away from the world. Some people suck their words back into themselves or pull their gaze back into their eyes. They collapse back into themselves even as they go outward to communicate or perceive. This may sound strange, but it is easy to experience. Pick a spot on the wall to look at. Then imagine that you are being forced to continue looking at something that you want with all your heart not to see. You can keep your focus on the spot yet pull your gaze back into your head by a certain physical strain. A similar thing can be done with the sense of hearing or the act of speaking.

Dissociation is a very powerful form of psychological anesthesia, and it is very addictive since it offers a quick and easy escape from any difficulty. I once worked with a woman who remembered being a little girl and being smacked in the head so hard she was picked up and hurled across the room. She said that when she came down, she felt just fine. She learned immediately that being dazed felt much better than feeling what was really going on, and any time she felt uncomfortable her eyes would veer off into the distance and she would smile in contentment.

It is easy to help people experience the means by which they create dissociative states. Again I go back to the pain control exercise to set up a situation to elicit a dissociative response. Once a person learns to control his or her responses and can maintain his breathing in his belly during the pressure on the nerve, I have him deliberately construct a dissociated state for comparison. I ask him to sit on a chair, look up toward the ceiling and diagonally off to the side, and put his mind up and away from his body. I ask him to keep his mind as far away from the area of physical pain as possible. That reduces the pain significantly, but at the cost of an overall dullness and a feeling of being lost. Learning to deliberately choose centering and refrain from using the dissociative pattern is important in beginning to find more present and powerful ways of living and acting.

COMPARTMENTALIZATION & MEMORY

Beyond simple manipulation of internal sensations, a further extreme in the range of defenses has to do with compartmentalization of feelings and memories. In one way, this compartmentalization is perfectly normal. We all have distinct self states that we use in different situations as they are appropriate. For example, you may use one way of acting and feeling when you are at a party and a totally different way of acting and feeling when doing a presentation at your job. In the defense mechanism, the compartmentalization is carried to an extreme and communication between the different compartments is severely restricted. Various feelings and memories may become inaccessible to the conscious self.

I have worked with many people who have been severely abused and have later totally forgotten the abuse on the conscious level. As one example, one woman I worked with had been sexually abused by both parents and lent to their friends for sex up to the age of eighteen when she left for college. But at the age of thirty, when I first had contact with her, she had no conscious memory of this. When you first run into this phenomenon, it is hard to believe that memories of such significant events that took place at such a late age can be totally unavailable to a person, but it is not uncommon.

By working with the physical patterns of constriction or collapse, it is possible to deliberately search for and bring into awareness unavailable sensations and images. It is important to note that for the purposes of doing body awareness and empowerment work, it is not necessary to decide whether images and experiences that present themselves to people as “memories” of forgotten abuse really are actual memories rather than dreams or, if they are memories, how accurate they are. Without independent

corroborating evidence, no clear decision as to accuracy is possible. However, I will use the word “memories” to refer to experiences that present themselves as memories.

There are some important points to consider about “memory” work. To begin with, any work must be neutral and non-suggestive so as not to lead people into thoughts, images and feelings that are not their own. Moreover, people often find terrifying images associated with painful sensations in their bodies, and these images appear to be memories of previously suppressed events. Without objective evidence to substantiate the images, there is no way to say that these images are in fact accurate memories of real events. However, through working on the empowerment necessary to deal well with the painful images, people find healing and wholeness in their lives, and that is what is truly important. It is not, for the purposes of body work, important to decide whether the events in the images actually happened. However, since the images do take the form of memories, it will be simplest to call them memories.

There are two prerequisites for this tracing of memories. First, through fundamental body awareness education, the person must be reacquainted with her or his body and helped to feel and notice physical and intentional sensations. This is so since all of the tracing of memories and accessing of layers of the self operate through body sensing. Each memory to be worked with includes its own unique physical configuration, and the procedure for tracing memories operates by following patterns of sensations back to the events which gave rise to the sensations. Second, a lot of centering and empowerment work must be done. This is crucial since the reason that memories are suppressed to begin with is that they are too painful for the person to handle. In order for the system to allow such memories to surface, it has to know that the person has been strengthened sufficiently to be able to face and survive the memories. It is impossible to make the past events different than they were, but it is possible to make the person stronger than she was. Though this, the experiences will become relatively easier to handle.

The system itself will indicate when these two prerequisites have been met by mobilizing feelings and images that point to hidden areas of the self. At that point, body and movement work can be used to access buried memories. One way of doing this involves being sensitive to the cues included in a person's physical bearing and setting up situations to amplify these actions. As one example, I was working with one woman who mentioned that she'd always hated having men ejaculate on her. As she said that, I saw that she was doing a lot of rigidity and fear in a specific spot on her neck, so I had her lie down and close her eyes, got a container of hand cream and squirted some on that spot. As soon as I did that, she had a flashback to an image of sexual abuse that occurred when she was a very little girl.

A more systematic procedure for tracing memories is based on a combination of imagery and body processing. Often people will describe some event or person that seems unusually disturbing for no obvious reason. They might react strongly to a physical posture, action or task. Or they might recount a dream that bothered or puzzled them. In any case, the important element is that some situation produces some discomfort. I have them describe the situation out loud a number of times and note the

specific physical sensations that arise as they do. I have them give a detailed description of the physical sensations they feel and where in their body they feel them, and then I have them state what they feel emotionally as they do those sensations.

This list of physical sensations is the path in to the sealed compartment, but it takes a special act of consciousness to follow the path. To help people discover this act, I have them lie down on their back, shut their eyes, center their breathing in their belly, and look straight up and out into the distance. Looking off into the distance at the same time as they focus on breathing into their belly creates a “space” in consciousness in which normally non-conscious self-compartments can be accessed.

I have the people notice how different the sensations are of looking at something close to them or looking off into the distance. I point out that there is a part of them that knows how to shift from looking close by to looking into the distance, and in the same way there is a part of the self that knows the similar physical sensation of looking into the distance of their own past experiences.

I then have them focus on the body sensations we had previously identified, and I ask them to let the part of them which knows how to look into the distance of their past experience look through all their old experiences and find that time and place in which those body sensations first came into being. At that point, whether they are consciously aware of it or not, the scanning part of the self has identified the required time and place. By asking questions, I have the person recreate the rest of the physical sensations that accompanied the sensations they have conscious access to. I might ask whether it is dark or light around the person. I might ask how tall they were, whether they were indoors or outdoors, what kind of surface they were on, etc.

It is important to ask logically empty questions, that is, questions in the form of “You may or may not notice whether it is light around you, or dark, or possibly something else.” This kind of statement/question is logically empty because it cannot be other than true. It is certain that the person either will or will not notice something, and it is certain that it must be light or dark or something else around them. Starting by giving explicit permission to not remember makes sure that the system knows it has control over what is going on and does not feel threatened. It also makes it impossible for the person to fail and takes the pressure off, making success more likely. Using logically empty locutions avoids leading questions and prevents the construction of false “memories”. It allows the person to home in on whatever details have felt significance rather than being bound by the questioner's frame of reference.

Once another detail becomes linked up with the original sensation, the rest of the scene will usually follow a piece at a time. It is usually necessary to go beyond verbal prodding and physically help the person re-experience or act out whatever emerging sensations present themselves. For example, if the person tells me she feels a sensation of pressure on her chest, I will press down on her chest. That might lead to her recalling an emotional response to that pressure, then to recalling movements she made to get rid of the pressure, then to remembering it was a person who was pressing down, and then to

being able to recall seeing the person's face above her. If she says she feels that someone is holding her wrists, I might hold her wrists and ask what her response was to being held. If she said she struggled, I might have her struggle against me and tell me what the result of her struggles was. Each sensation will elicit more sensations and questions. Gradually one experience will lead to the next until the whole event has been relived.

It is important to keep the person grounded in physical sensations so that she will have a living experience of what she is remembering (even if it comes in such a form as visual images). It is also important to remind the person to keep her breathing centered even as she relives pain and terror. Centered breathing is like an anchor for a boat tossing in a storm on the ocean. As long as the anchor holds, the boat can be allowed to toss freely and no harm will come to it. With the anchor in centered breathing, a person can do two opposite things simultaneously -- stay in control and let herself be swamped by out of control emotions. Without that anchor, re-experiencing the trauma will retraumatize the person. With it, the reliving is a process of empowerment and deconditioning. In addition, if the person loses her center and goes back to such defenses as depression or dissociation, the whole experiencing process will stop. It is also important that the person stay centered so that she can terminate the recall experience at any moment that she wishes to.

This physical method of recall is a very rapid and powerful way of getting people in touch with themselves. As one example, one woman came to me because she had severe jaw pain as a result of TMJ dysfunction. She'd been under treatment by a dentist for four years and had gotten a lot of relief, but she felt there was something more that was necessary. She had previously done a good deal of body exploration, so she was very quick to pick up the empowerment and body techniques that I work with. In the first two lessons, I helped her experience how the twist in her jaw was part of an overall pattern in her whole body and how feeling her feet and dropping her breathing into her belly let the pattern begin to relax.

Generally, once I have helped a person feel what they are doing, I start working on why they are doing it. I have them savor the taste of the action and discover what it feels like to want to do it. In the third lesson, we were examining the feeling of the twist in her jaw. The focus seemed to be on the left side of her neck. When I touched the right side of her neck, there was nothing remarkable happening. When I touched the left side, however, she felt as though she were trying to twist away from my touch. In order to help her magnify what that felt like, I sat down on her right side, sitting so close to her that it was distinctly invasive. I asked her to push me away, and she did so. When I sat down on her left side, she felt that she couldn't push me away and could only twist around trying to evade me. I had her lie down, keeping hold of that sensation of twisting away, and focus on feeling it more and more. Within just a few minutes, she relived being a little girl of five and being raped by a friend of the family. When she opened her eyes, her first words were, "That son of a bitch stole twenty-five years of my life." She realized that not only her TMJ but many other areas of fear and discomfort were the residues of her buried trauma.

It is important to immediately follow experiences of traumatic events/images with empowerment and self-defense work. In order for healing to occur, a bridge must be built between the old powerlessness and the new empowerment. By experiencing right away that they can indeed triumph over what had previously defeated them, people walk away from the experience feeling invigorated and alive. Once better survival strategies are available, rigid defense patterns can be dispensed with and the self made more fluid and more integrated.

CONCLUSION

Working with incest and abuse survivors means coming in contact with and attempting to heal the raw pain and spiritual torment that is hidden and widespread in our society. I have seen estimates that as high as fifty percent of the children in our country have been sexually abused. Work with abuse survivors in an area in which somatic education has an important contribution to make. Either alongside ongoing psychotherapy or, when appropriate, by itself, it gives survivors access to important aspects of their experience.

Beyond the importance of helping individuals, I have begun to wonder whether our civilization's indifference to human suffering and environmental damage is really rooted in alienation and deadness of feeling that stem from child abuse of one form or another. Helping people to experience themselves as living bodies on the living earth is crucial in saving our planet. Helping people contact their power and love is necessary in achieving any solution to the problems we all face. It may be that working with people who were wounded as children will be the key to saving everyone.

PAUL LINDEN is a somatic educator, founder of the Columbus Center for Movement Studies, and the developer of Being In Movement® mindbody training. He holds a Ph.D. in Physical Education, is an authorized instructor of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, and holds a fifth degree black belt in Aikido as well as a first degree black belt in Karate. His work involves the application of body and movement awareness education to such topics as stress management, conflict resolution, performance enhancement, and trauma recovery. He is the author of *Comfort at Your Computer: Body Awareness Training for Pain-Free Computer Use* and *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*. He can be contacted at the Columbus Center for Movement Studies, 221 Piedmont Road, Columbus, OH 43214, USA. (614) 262-3355. paullinden@aol.com. www.being-in-movement.com.