



Practices for connecting somatics,
nature, and social change

RETURNING HOME TO OUR BODIES

Reimagining the Relationship
Between Our Bodies and the World

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FOR WHEN THE HEART IS BREAKING

No somatic practice, no story of belonging held in the body will erase the truth and inevitability of loss and heartbreak. Loss is part of living. When it feels like the floor is about to fall out from under you, when it feels like you might be washed away with the intensity of your grief, it may be helpful to remember the breathing diaphragm, the primary muscle of the breath, is right here, ready to hold your tender heart.

When you inhale, the breathing diaphragm pulls the breath into the body by contracting and widening down, away from the lungs. On the exhale, it domes upward toward the heart, a gentle mountain for the heart to rest on. With every breath, there it is, offering a place for your heart to land, no matter how brutal the world may be.

It may also be helpful to know that the heart, this miracle of shimmering muscle, is wrapped in a silvery sheath called the pericardium. The pericardium is multilayered protection for the heart, made of a fibrous layer and a serous layer. The fibrous layer holds the heart in place, anchoring it to the sternum, the spine, and the breathing

diaphragm. Even when life is unraveling at the seams, your heart is stitched into its home in the center of your chest.

Lining the fibrous layer of the pericardium is the serous pericardium. The serous layer of the pericardium generates a serous fluid that offers protection and lubrication to the beating muscle of the heart, called pericardial fluid. Pericardial fluid is made mostly of white blood cells, making it translucent. It protects the heart from infection while smoothing the movement of each heartbeat. Even in the turmoil of heartbreak, the body moves with a sustaining grace made possible by fluid the color of starlight.

You've probably heard your heart described as a sort of pump, tireless and industrious. But you are so much more than a collection of parts, and you are certainly not a machine with a pump. The story of the heart as a tireless muscle is a story made for industry. Everything alive rests, and your heart is alive. Each heartbeat is composed of action, called systole, and rest, called diastole. The diastolic cycle of the heartbeat is longer than the systolic cycle. Your heart rests in every heartbeat, and every heartbeat is more rest than action. The heart rests. You can rest.

When the heart rests, the cardiac muscle cells rest completely. Unlike skeletal muscle cells, which relax to a certain degree but will retain a degree of tone even when relaxed (which is why you can relax in your chair while reading this without going completely limp), the cardiac muscle cells cycle through complete rest and then complete action. The heart rests completely when it rests.

The lungs wrap around the heart. The lungs themselves are enfolded in the pleura, another of the body's bilayer serous membranes. The space between the two layers of the pleura is filled with pleural fluid, another serous fluid, also composed mostly of white blood cells, also translucent, which allows the lungs to glide as they expand and condense with each breath.

The pericardium wraps the heart, the pleura wraps the lungs, and both are innervated by the phrenic nerve, the primary nerve of respiration. Your heart is woven into your breath. No wonder heartbreak takes the breath away.

The pericardium of the heart and pleura of the lungs create fluid that is translucent. *Trans*: Latin for “across,” “beyond,” “through.” *Lucere*: Latin for “to shine.” Each beat of your heart and each breath can glide because of fluid that lets the light shine through. The body is poetry made into muscle and blood.

If you’re ever feeling like you don’t know who or what you can trust or where you can rest, you can let the breath all the way out. When you exhale all the way to empty, the big, doming muscle of the breathing diaphragm rises up to meet your tender heart. Your heart gets to rest, wrapped in protection that glimmers like the moon. The widening of the lungs on the inhale and their condensing release on each exhale are eased by fluid the color of starlight. When you exhale completely, letting the lungs release all the way to empty, the pericardium gets to release ever so slightly, a soft resiliency that wraps your heart. This comes from allowing the breath to leave, which is different than forcing the breath out. When there’s force, we lose softness, and this is a soft rest, a loving release. When you give yourself the time to let the breath all the way out, the undulating, doming muscle of the breathing diaphragm rises up to meet the heart, and the heart can rest.

It can feel counterintuitive to think of the breathing diaphragm as moving down when the breath comes in and moving up when the breath goes out, especially because so many of us were taught to take deep breaths either by pushing the belly out or lifting the shoulders up. But this is how the breathing diaphragm moves: down on the inhale, up on the exhale. Sometimes it’s called “the bellows of the breath,” but its undulations are more like a jellyfish in the ocean of the body. The jellyfish of the breathing diaphragm lets us breathe like we are made of water, like the oceans we are. And by giving our attention to the billowing motion of each breath, we can find support for these tender hearts, even when life is heartbreaking.



Life includes heartbreak. No amount of deep breathing will take away that fact. And being in deep relationship with the world means

being in relationship with the despair caused by violent systems and broken people.

When I am pummeled by the waves of grief, this relationship of heart, breathing diaphragm, pleura, and pericardium pulls me back from the abyss of despair, back to the truth of loving. Even in those storms of grief there is ground for me to rest on. When I have been wronged, or when I am wrong, my heart is held. My heart can rest. Being held by what lives within me means I can seek softness with those I would otherwise blame, even if the softness requires a firm boundary. The body knows selective permeability, as we explored in the poems held in the cell membrane. Within that selective permeability, some things are a clear, firm no. Firm and rigid are not the same.

When I let my heart release into the undulating support of the breathing diaphragm, and when I feel how my vulnerable heart is wrapped by the pericardium, then I can stay in the difficult conversations longer. I can believe in the possibility of forgiveness that does not require anyone to shrink or shatter; I can believe in healing in ways that center ease, rather than wounds. I can find the beauty in a sunset or the rainbows held in the dew on the grass even as my heart is breaking. I can drop my own suffering down to an appropriate size, not to deny that I am hurt, but because sorrow lives alongside joy. Even when I am at my most heartbroken, I can turn to the joy of my loved ones, and I can let my heart rest in their joy, however numbly, rather than feel like their joy is proof that my own life is cursed and irrevocably broken. And perhaps most importantly, the softness this gives me means that, come what may, whether systems change or people are open to the process of repair and healing, I can grow into a more whole version of myself. The breaking doesn't have to be into pieces; I can break open.



The support the breath offers the heart does not allow us to avoid suffering, but it can help us find comfort and belonging within the inevitability of loss. The practice of breathing soft and slow and deep

with a focus on the way the body inherently meets trust with support is different than breathwork that promises a certain physical benefit, like less stress or better sleep. It's not that breathing in this way can't offer some relief from stress, and I have heard from many people that this practice does help them fall asleep. But this sort of transactional approach will only get us so far. The paradox here is that to receive the full grace of the heart resting in the breath, we have to drop any desire to get anything from this, and simply breathe.

It takes time to breathe in this way. It takes patience and persistence to unlearn the patterns that have been so thoroughly engrained in us. It also takes time to breathe in this way because your lungs are surprisingly big. I have found that many people are a bit shocked by just how big they are. Let's find them.



Take your hands along your ribs until you find where the lattice of rib bones gives way to soft belly. With your hands on the bottom of the ribs, you've now found the bottom of your lungs, as well as the arching dome of the breathing diaphragm. Putting your thumb on your back ribs and your fingers around the front, you'll get an idea of how deep the lungs are from front to back: your thumbs are on the back of the lungs, and your fingers are stretching around toward the front of your lungs. Your lungs are wide.

Then reach your hands up to your shoulders, cupping your hands over your collarbones. If you gently press your fingers into the soft flesh just above the collarbone and just to the side of your neck, you are only a few delicate centimeters from the surface of the upper lobes of the lungs.

Keep one hand cupping the top of the lung at the shoulder, and move the other hand to that bottom of that same lung, at the bottom of the ribs. The lungs are big. No wonder it takes such a long time to breathe all the way in, and then to let the breath all the way out.

The breathing diaphragm rests just underneath the lungs. If you now run your fingers down along your sternum, the shield of bone over your heart, at the very bottom you will be able to feel the xiphoid

process, just at the tip of the sternum. It might be tender to the touch, but you don't have to push on it. If you gently touch your fingertips to the xiphoid process you might even feel it move with each breath, a tiny fluttering movement as you inhale. This little piece of bone anchors the thin, doming muscle of the breathing diaphragm as it pulls with each inhale and then releases gently upward with each exhale.* Touch the fingers of each hand together, forming an arch. If you place the tips of your fingers just at the level of the xiphoid process at the base of the sternum, and now cup your hands along the bottom edge of the ribs, your hands will be at about the level of the breathing diaphragm, and a rough estimate of its size and shape. As you take a few breaths, widen and flatten your hands as you inhale. Then, dome the hands upward and together on the exhale. This is the movement of the breathing diaphragm, widening out and down on the inhale, and doming in and up on the exhale. See? It moves like a jellyfish. This movement is much more an undulation than a bellowing.

You've found the lungs and breathing diaphragm. Now, let's find the heart.

Take your fingers once more to the xiphoid process at the bottom of the sternum. Walking your fingers up from the xiphoid process toward the clavicle (the collarbone) your fingers will come to a wide, flat bone just before the collarbones branch out to either side. This flat bone is called the manubrium (ma-NEW-bree-um). Say the word; it hums. If you gently touch the tip of your first finger and thumb, the space made by your fingers is about the size of this wide, flat bone. I think of it like the inside of a pearly oyster shell or abalone that glows with the colors of the moon. This is where it is so luxurious to be more poet than scientist. Of course your bones are the colors of the moon. Of course they are.

* At birth, the xiphoid process is pure cartilage. Between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine the xiphoid typically joins onto the bone of the sternum with a fibrous joint, and then around age forty the cartilage ossifies into bone. Look at how much you are changing. Look how growth and maturity is a slow and ongoing process.

If you loosely clasp your right hand, and place it over the center of your chest with the thumb of your hand just below the manubrium, and the curl of your pinky just at the level of the xiphoid process, that's about the placement of your heart. Cup your right hand with your left, and the size of your two hands held together will be about the size of your heart. You can hold your own hands, and place their warm weight on your own heart. I find it helps, when I'm feeling alone, to do that.



“Repetition is holy,” like Nikky Finney told us.³² So let's repeat what we've found, and add some more. The heart nestles behind the sternum, between the lungs and above the breathing diaphragm. The lungs are covered by the serous membrane of the pleura. The heart is covered by the serous membrane of the pericardium, and the pericardium anchors the heart into its place in the center of the chest, as well as offering glimmering, sliding protection to the heart as it moves with each beat. The pleura and the pericardium both generate a translucent fluid made mostly of white blood cells that protects the lungs and heart from infection while also helping these organs glide through each breath and each heartbeat. The pleura wraps the lungs and the top of the breathing diaphragm.³³ The pericardium is contiguous with the central tendon of the breathing diaphragm, meaning the structures have similar origins and similar molecular makeup. They are different in the ways a stream is different from a river, but they are the same in the ways water knows the path of the entire watershed. We can respect and learn from the ways these two structures fulfill different roles in the body, while also returning to the wholeness of the body, which weaves the heart into the breath.

Understanding the stories of anatomy offers us a guide as to how we might be comforted by the body, even in the midst of grief and the confusion of heartbreak. The relationship of the pericardium into the central tendon of the breathing diaphragm shows us how we might rest the heart. The diaphragm contracts and widens on the

inhale, using that pull to fill the lungs with breath. The diaphragm then relaxes and domes upward on the exhale, rising up toward the bottom of the heart. Exhaling is a passive action, meaning it does not take muscular effort. It requires us to release into the emptiness of the breath. When we release into the emptiness of the exhale, the breathing diaphragm will rise up to hold the heart. When our hearts are breaking, we can find comfort in the exhale. Letting go completely means the heart is more completely held.

To exhale all the way to empty is easier said than done, sometimes. To offer ideas as to why it can be difficult to exhale completely requires a careful stretching toward possibility without making the overreach to say “this is why this happens” because, of course, bodies are vastly different, and our physiology is a frontier of scientific understanding, even with all we already know. So I won’t offer a list of reasons that it can be difficult to exhale completely. But I will offer you a story from my own experience.

When I was first learning to relate to the body in this fluid way, and first learning to allow the breath all the way in and all the way out, I was terrified of the very bottom of the breath. It wasn’t the sort of terror that would have me gasping like a horror movie; I’m being a bit melodramatic by using that word. And yet, when I would get very quiet, and allow my breath to become very still, I would find that when I was nearly empty of breath, my body would tense, unwilling to let that last little bit of breath out. It took a long time, several months of soft practice, before I could trust the space at the bottom of the breath, and allow the exhale to go all the way to empty. But isn’t this a good use of our limited time? To learn how to trust the earth enough to hold us, so we might release completely into the exhale? Learning how to trust the vulnerability by finding the support of the exhale has been central to how I’ve learned to trust the vulnerability and find the support of being in deep, sustaining relationships with others, even creatures as notoriously fickle and flawed as humans, and even being such a fickle and flawed human myself. It took time to trust the emptiness at the bottom of the exhale. But I found it. I learned to trust that the

next inhale would come. And in that emptiness at the bottom of the exhale, I found soft ground for my tender, broken heart. It changed my life. I suppose that's why it was so terrifying. Change is inevitable, but the change that comes with letting go takes a special sort of bravery.

It's easy to say this now, on the other side of that effort. And just as I am far from perfect in the ways I relate to other people, I'm far from perfect at letting go; some days it's harder to trust that what I need is coming. But when I was learning to breathe in this way, my body would begin to tighten even as I just prepared a space on the floor to practice. I didn't want to let go, of anything. Letting go felt dangerous. Clinging on to even the illusion of control was the only way I felt safe in a world that so often proves itself to be untrustworthy. Taking a full inhale was fine. That felt good. I liked the feeling of my lungs stretching to hold as much air as they could (I was of course breathing too forcefully, but that is perhaps a story for another time). But when it was time to exhale, I would only get so far before my body would tense around the breath, unwilling to let go any further.

If you find this is true for you, I won't presume to know why it is. But for me, it was a fear of vulnerability. The space at the bottom of the breath is dark and quiet. It is, in some ways, a little death; we are born with an inhale, we die with an exhale, and I have found that each exhale, if it is complete, can carry the slightest whisper of the release of death. Understandable, then, that in a culture that lives in fear of dying we would have trouble letting the breath all the way out. Understandable, then, if life has shown itself to be filled with danger, that it could be frightening to let the breath all the way out. Understandable, when faced with the grief of loss of any kind, that it would be tempting to try and grip onto any feelings of control we can find, and confuse the illusion of control with safety.

It can, of course, be a little simpler than that. Forgive my melodramatic talk of death and vulnerability; we can blame my many placements in Scorpio. It can be as simple as just not yet having the muscular tone in the diaphragm to be able to exhale completely. That can come with practice. So, we practice.

There are many ways to practice, but here is my favorite:

Lean back on something. A chair, a wall, a tree, a boulder. Find something solid that you can trust with your full weight.

Loosen any tight, restrictive clothing. Tightness anywhere will be felt everywhere; if you're going to truly soften into the exhale, it's best to be in soft, loose clothing, or at least to unbutton anything tight.

Even open, the eyes can be soft. Let the muscles of your eyes relax, and let the physical weight of your eyes rest in the orbits of the eye sockets. Softness anywhere will be felt everywhere.

Soften the tongue now. Let it rest also, dropping into the cave of the mouth. You can even soften the weight of the brain in the skull, allowing the brain also to drop into the constant, continuous pull of gravity.

With soft eyes and a soft tongue and even a softly resting brain, observe the cadence of your breathing. It may be fast or slow, shallow or deep. There's no need to change anything. Noticing is more than enough. This too is easier said than done. Often, because we know that breathing deeper is "better," we'll be quick to breathe more deeply in an effort to be "good" students, to get it "right." And sometimes, when we turn our attention to the breath, it becomes clear that we haven't been breathing deeply enough for some time, and a few long, loud sighs or quick bursts of staccato breaths are almost inevitable. But that's just the beginning stages. Eventually, the breath will settle into a natural rhythm. All you have to do is give yourself the time it takes to breathe all the way in, and all the way out.

The lungs are big, as we've discovered, so this will take some time! It takes time to breathe all the way in, and all the way out. You have plenty of time. You widen time by being soft and slow with your breath.

As you breathe in, feel how the weave of the muscles between the ribs expand to allow the breath to widen. Without any need for force or pushing, the breath will expand through the body. You can help by guiding the breath to the back and sides of your upper body.

Remember, your lungs are wide, and deep, and long. Let the breath widen the base of the lungs at the bottom of the ribs, the middle of the lungs near the level of the heart, and the tops of the lungs just underneath the clavicles.

At the top of the inhale, there is a pause. A moment of liminal space before the soft pull of the inhale becomes the tender release of the exhale. When the body is ready, the exhale comes. The exhale requires no force; you only have to let go. Let go.

The exhale is a release. As you let the breath go, the breathing diaphragm will relax and dome upward toward the heart. At the very bottom of the exhale, the breathing diaphragm will rest against the bottom of the heart. The heart can rest. Whenever it feels like the ground is being swept out from underneath you, a deep exhale can bring this quiet support of the breathing diaphragm up to meet your tender heart. This is the solace the body offers. Even when the world is cold and cruel, even when others are hurtful, however much they don't mean to be, the heart is held by the breathing diaphragm, wrapped by the breath and fluid the color of starlight.

It can be difficult to trust enough to let the breath all the way out. Force doesn't create the necessary softness for trust; you can't force yourself to let the breath go. So if you find it difficult to soften into the emptiness of the exhale, try to soften into the support of the chair or wall or tree or boulder that holds you. Lean back into that solid support. Soften into it. Little by little, it becomes more possible and more pleasurable to exhale all the way until the lungs are empty. When the exhale is complete, the diaphragm is completely relaxed. The weave of the central tendon and the pericardium can find a little bit of ease in the fibers as the breathing diaphragm rises up to meet the heart.

In my own body, this feels like a deep permission to be gently present with myself as I am. In each exhale, my heart and the silvery sheath of the pericardium can soften as the tension from the inhale and all the incomplete exhales of my life melt away. The next inhale, when it comes, rises like the sun over the horizon, gently glowing and inevitable.

Finding this soft support of the breath within the muscular act of breathing is a way we can practice being soft with one another, even when we're pushed up against the edges of our vulnerabilities. Relationships are not always easy. There is vulnerability within intimacy. Intimacy is a process of deepening with another person, inviting them into our innermost worlds and secrets. It's inherently vulnerable, which means it is incredibly brave.

Not all relationships with other people can or should be continued. Sometimes, the most loving word is *no*. But any no can contain a yes: a yes to what we are choosing, a yes to love even through loss, a yes to allowing love to shapeshift, to love at a far distance if need be, to love ourselves so completely that we have to say no to someone else. We can keep the focus on love without losing ourselves in the loving. If we can rest the heart and say yes to ourselves, then when we say or hear no from someone else, there will be a yes there. We can find the yes within the no when we know how to rest the heart.

And, of course, sometimes the loss doesn't come by choice, certainly not by our own. Sometimes the loss is drastic and sudden and dizzying. Sometimes the loss is deep enough to awaken stories held within blood memories, the brokenhearted weeping of ancestors merging with our own.

Even here, the heart is held. Even when it feels like the ground is swept out from underneath us, even when we are staggering in our grief, the heart is held, bathed in protective fluid the color of moonlight, woven into the breath, held by a muscle that moves like a jellyfish in the ocean of our bodies.

Maybe you haven't yet known this kind of grief, the kind that shreds and rips and leaves you gasping. Perhaps it feels distant and foreign to you, nothing more than a wailing on a screen, a performance of heartbreak. If you have never had to visit this land of loss, then any description will fall flat. But if you know this chasmed landscape where the wind howls in desolation, then my wish for you is that you also know the solace of the way the heart is held. Even in something as mundane as exhaling we are constantly reminded that we are never alone. We are always held by the home of our bodies.