"The practitioner visualizes ‘a state of rapport in the fluid continuity between the physician and the patient’ (Magoun 1976) by ‘melding the hands with the head’ (Upledger & Vredevoogd 1983). With training and practice the practitioner feels a subtle motion, much like the respiratory excursion of the chest, sensed as a broadening and narrowing of the head between the hands. This type of palpation represents a harmonic signal of several senses, including temperature receptors, mechanoreceptors and proprioceptors (McPartland & Mein 1997)."

The Long Tide

Sarah wanted to talk to the birds. The lady in the bird sanctuary had told her that the way to talk to the birds was to drop into the ‘long tide’, the rhythmic primary respiration breath with the tiny incremental cycle- half a cycle per minute. The lady seemed sure that this would help with the birds. People talked about how the lady healed birds, even ones that were really damaged. So when Sarah got home, she went out back and lay down on the deck and began to slow her breathing down. She lay on her back, arms by her side, and breathed slowly and carefully.

“How do I find it? This long tide,” She had asked the lady.

“Look inside,” the lady had said. “Feel it. You have to be able to tolerate your insides. Get to know them.”

It brought to mind her last therapy session. “Interoception”, her clinician had said. “Learning to know our insides. Feel your heartbeat. Don’t hold your pulse, just feel your heartbeat inside. That’s interoception. We are often wrong about the way we offer meaning to our inside feelings.” She made a note to ask him about the long tide.

Out on the deck, Sarah closed her eyes, which had mysteriously opened. She noticed that her relaxed state had left her, and she was lying tense on the ground. Her thoughts had moved her body into a new position without her noticing. She consciously relaxed again, head to toe. Breathing. Now try to feel the long tide. Half a cycle a minute. A cycle of what? A tide they say. She started slowing her breath again.

It was about the birds. The cardinals had settled in the cedar trees at the bottom of the garden, and she had loved that. She had gone to stand by the trees and introduced herself, and thanked the cardinals for coming. Then one day she saw the flash of red in the grass, and the male lay dead on the ground. The female was shouting at her, scolding. She apologized, but said, “You can’t nest down here by the road! It’s too dangerous! Come to the back where there is protection!”. But the birds didn’t come.

Sarah had been told before that her thoughts were wild. When she said she wanted to speak to birds, her father had suggested she never tell anyone that, and that she pay more attention in math class.

It was the discovery of the writing about inner worlds that had excited her. Beginning with Kant, even, and his ideas that we come to the world with shapes already in place. Space, time, and the categories of understanding (like chronologicity and difference) exist in us as schema – mental structures that form our experience and help us create meaning. The thought was dazzling. That had sent her into cognitive psychology, where she learned to understand the importance of attentional blinks, where our minds take a snapshot of the world as we see it, and temporarily block out changes and developments while we digest. Create enough of these minute impressions and we create the persistence of vision effect that is why film works. Our world is seen in flashes and breaths. She remembered phenomenology. Heidegger thought we had shapes that we poured reality through, like a mental mold. Husserl thought it defied categorization and had to be maintained as an experiential process. Now, people were beginning to include the body in the mind, and to recognize the impacts of our physical bodies on our experiences. It all gave her hope. She kept these thoughts in a secret place in her mind. It wasn’t Cartesian, it didn’t speak to the fixed reality defined by math that her father held so sacred. But it told her that other people, important people and scholars of thought, had experienced the world in subjective ways and that it meant something.

Sarah realized that her breath had sped up again and that she was now lying on her side curled up. She lay again on her back, and resumed the deep breathing.

This whole breathing thing was new information. Who knew that breath itself was a part of meaning-making? Who knew that breath and the cycle of energy in our bodies was an integral part of our understanding. Sarah tried a summary: “Understanding is a verb not a noun. Identification of the meaning of the thing is not static and finite, but a process of experiencing it, where some energy emanating from the thing interacts with the surge of energy that is me and we co-create the experience of connection. Inevitably I have to experience it as a human, and luckily what a human is is a constantly broadening - an increasingly sensual, cerebral, and transcendental thing.” A guy she once sat with by a fire on the Crow reservation had told her that we are not permanent or material, but are born into a swirl, and that every so often we kind of form in existence, just so there is something to see or touch or talk to. “Most of the time,” he said, “we are just swirling in the swirl. The meanings we make of moments of existence are part of our being.” Sarah wondered if household chores like laundry were part of the meaning or part of the swirl. Phenomenological existentialism might be exhausting.

The lady in the sanctuary had told her that the long tide is called the ‘breath of life’. When we go to the long tide rhythm we are open to communication from animals, because they live in the long tide. We meet them at that basic level, that breath.

“My body is the planet that I carry with me, Sarah thought. “Water, blood, breath, and the gateways to consciousness: smell, taste, sight, sound, touch, and, she thought, as I understand now, breathing.” She realized that the task wasn’t just to breathe slowly, but to somehow encourage the comportment of her atoms such that they could receive bird communication. She thought about her ‘to do’ list for the day and wondered if she would be able to sink into the primal rhythm before the need to go and buy dog food overwhelmed the opportunity for inter-species communication at the molecular level.

The woman in the sanctuary had had trouble drawing breath. She had sat down on the low stone wall and watched the birds pecking in the soil of the raised beds nearby. She had made crooning noises to the birds, who had looked up with tilted heads. “See!” she had exhalted. “We speak!”

Sarah wondered, ‘How does illness change the internal body experience? How does the conversation with birds change if we are ‘ill’. Is that why dogs and cats can smell cancer? Because our internal landscape somehow drops into a rhythm that they recognize? What is the energy of disease? Does disease speak to us at the long tide? Is that what traditional healers do? Do they meet us in the long tide?” She thought about medicine, of the swallowing, piercing, loading, breathing in of energies that are trying to reconfigure our nervous systems, to activate the healing part, and restore that working being who can float on the universal tides. If we drop into the long tide, can we speak to our own bodies? Is breathe the long tide medicine?

Sarah realized that she was running out of time. She sat up and brushed the leaves from her hair. Then she saw the cardinal. The female. Sitting on the rail of the deck, chattering away at Sarah. Sarah tried to breathe as deeply as possible and to keep as still as possible. She listened to the cardinal. The birds voice became louder and more agitated. Sarah continued to listen and breathe. She did not feel that she had talked to the bird but wondered if some part of her had, and if the point, in the end, was to carry with her the meaning she made through the interaction, and then slip back into the swirl.

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