

Introduction

Yet few modern men knew whales as intimately as Brower. Although he eschewed some traditions—he said he never wanted his own whaling song to call a harpooned whale to the umiak, for example—Brower had other ways of communicating with whales. He believed that whales listened, and that if a whaler was selfish or disrespectful, whales would avoid him. He believed that the natural world was alive with animals' spirits, and that the inexplicable connection he'd felt with whales could only be explained by the presence of such spirits.

And he believed that in 1986, a baby whale visited him in an Anchorage hospital to show him how future generations could maintain the centuries-long relationship between humans and whales. Before he died, he told his biographer Karen Brewster that although he believed in a Christian heaven, he personally thought he would go elsewhere.

"I'm going to go join the whales," he said.¹

*Toss aside your map of the world,
All your beliefs and constructs.
Dare the wild unknown.
Here in this terrifying freedom,
Naked before the universe,
Commune with the One
Who knows everything from the inside:
Invisible power pervading everywhere.
Divine Presence permeating everything.
Breathe tenderly as
The lover of all beings.*

~ Vijnana Bhairava Tantra

Since the title of this manual / book is “**Dissociation, Separation, Embodiment, Connection**”, the material covered spans a wide vista. The simple reason for this sprawl is a perhaps over-ambitious intention to approach these topics simultaneously from systemic, experiential, ecological and biological perspectives. As such, the “hard” problem of consciousness is necessarily one central theme - as are many ideas that are somewhat counter-cultural, and which therefore need to be made explicit. The book was beginning to write itself about 20 years ago in a series of essays that gradually, looked at as a complete body of work, took on a recognisable form of its own. Its timeliness within the world zeitgeist of increasing physical and mental illnesses, potential ecological disaster and the apparent incapacity of humankind to change - has given it a rapidly increasing relevance and urgency.

It would be nice and neat to claim, having decided on a title and core theme, that I knew what I wanted to write. Well, that's what I thought, but it's not been quite so simple. What did take some time (about a year) was finding a structure that shoe-horned an essentially holistic, self-referential and multidimensional Gordian knot into a linear framework of successive chapters - without losing sight of the inherent wholeness. The answer to that impossible conundrum required a certain degree of meandering, a construction of an increasingly large canvas onto which eventually the main topic could be painted. Poetry might have been a better format. So there is also a generous sprinkling of quotations to bring the readers attention back to a more expansive field of view.

The second part (Chapters 7 – 10) refused to submit to the shoehorn, for there is no clear dividing line between consciousness, dissociation, embodiment and a host of important secondary details. So they will have to stand as they are – a written reflection of the body's self-referentiality – and each of these chapters relies heavily on the others. Interestingly, the final structure is dissociated. It also took about a year to find a structure to the topic of dissociation that was not just lost. Initially I did attempt a more flowing narrative, but the width of the meanders produced something that looked more like a swamp in the middle of the everglades than a recognisable river that flowed from its many sources to its final destination, gathering them along the way.

It could even be said that the final structure and the various styles of writing and content that it presents are not dissimilar to the Alters – dissociated fragments of personality – that arise as a way to survive early childhood trauma. There is a common theme, a core personality, and the different elements that are presented all eventually can be seen to weave their own common story. The result has taken me/it in very ecological and eco-spiritual directions that were not premeditated, but which feel very natural and appropriate – even necessary. What you have in front of you is also a project written in a very English tradition – that of the Amateur – or Lover. It is a book written out of love of the human body, love of the natural world of which we are an indelible and integral part, and a love of the human spirit and the best that it can express – if it is given half a chance. And probably one of my foremost aims has been to make a small but meaningful contribution to the ways in which the human spirit can be given that half-chance, and become free again.

There are moments when the soul takes wings

What it has to remember, it remembers

What it loves, it loves still more

What it longs for – to that it flies

Fiona McLeod

Over the past 15 years the psychological flood gates have increasingly lowered to provide a steady outflow of knowledge and techniques on resolving Trauma and PTSD. Which is simply an acceleration of the growing convergence between bodywork, biology, medical research and psychological therapies over the past 30 or so years - due to the improved models of exactly what is being treated and the best ways to do that, along with a recognition of the holistic and integrated nature of what can only be described as the body-mind. The works of William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Pierre Janet, their contemporaries, and their students (e.g. Reich and Adler) – and *their* students (and so on) have had up to 100 years to diversify, fuse and mature. They have combined with body-oriented therapies, (including the breath and somatic approaches that fled to the USA from 1930's Germany) and other very different ways of thinking. Feldenkreis, Alexander Technique, Rolfing and many other flavours of physical and movement therapies have contributed. Jung's later work included an Alchemical approach to the human organism that contains Western energetics and mysticism, and this has been complemented by influences on my thinking that derive from AT Still, the 19th century founder of Osteopathy - who in turn was strongly influenced by (again) European mystical tradition via Swedenborg, Rosicrucianism, and Masonry along with a strong exposure during childhood to Native American (Shawnee) culture. And increasingly since the 1970's the West has been influenced by millenia-old healing systems from India (including Ayurveda and Yoga) and China (Traditional Chinese Medicine / TCM, which includes Acupuncture). Most recently significant scientific contributions to understanding the human body-mind have been made in the fields of Genetics, Physiology, Biology, and particularly Evolutionary and Developmental Biology (EvoDevo). Really, it's a vast, diverse and infinitely rich melting pot that is hardly recognised or acknowledged by mainstream medicine. However, the progress that has been made in rediscovering the whole body-mind nature of humanity (and the resultant convergence of bodywork and psychotherapy

and science is quite extraordinary – if one is prepared to read between the lines.

And there are countless other authors and sources from every field of human activity – architecture, philosophy, literature, etc - who also have something important to say about human freedom. Spiritually, we also live in remarkable times. The past 100 years has also seen previously secret and closely guarded traditions from other cultures gradually and deliberately made increasingly available in a manner unprecedented in history². Although globalisation may have negative effects, this enrichment of human communication, culture and spiritual understanding is one very positive outcome. We live in interesting times. The human race has largely separated itself from the environment in which it evolved, created its own ecosystem and that ecosystem is now proliferating in exactly the same way that all ecosystems do when under survival pressure. In the largely abstract ecosystem of ideas and beliefs, cultures and lifestyles - birds of paradise live next to dodos and archaeopteryx. Civilisations rise and fall like species and genera in the geological record. Languages adapt, adopt and merge like the RNA of proto-life.

It is, indeed, ironic that one of the problems faced by the 21st century human being is an excess of information – not all of it trustworthy; and an excess of choice in all matters – leading to twenty different types of tomato sauce on a supermarket shelf, a hundred different immiscible versions of each religion, and thousands of differing opinions as to what all these might mean. My personal experience of navigating through this maze is that my greatest asset has been well-considered and cautious trust following Edward de Bono’s “Po”; closely followed by a need for simplicity. The only way to get to any worthwhile content in any spiritual system (or in fact, anything in life) is to go deep, and that requires commitment and an unwavering focus. But all the noise of ideas and opinions (and choice) out there creates confusion. There is increasing misinformation and half-truth disguised as fact. There are changing cultural perspectives and many of the changes are unhappy ones. In particular, popularised sound-bite science has created an entire belief system, most of which is a complete anathema to science (and scientists); and which itself creates certain unhelpful and abnormal relationships between the mind and the body and from there feeds back into the popular culture that science and its practitioners is embedded in. Much of this popularised (skeptical humanist) science is also contradictory to basic human experience, if only humans would take the time and patience and even courage to truly experience for themselves rather than trusting someone else’s (i.e. an “expert”) opinion in a book or on the internet. Even scientists are swallowing this populist myth, which is particularly worrying. This information age provides us with so much information that it has created a confusion as to what to take in and what to reject; and mental and spiritual indigestion.

One direct result of the mistaken “scientific” denial of human experience and conversion of science into a belief system is a proliferation in conspiracy theories and off-the-wall science such as the Flat Earth theory. One might consider Flat-Earth theorists to be a little crazy, but actually they are playing by the same rules as everyone else – they have turned science into a belief system (and vice-versa) and have defined a set of people who they trust to give correct information about the world they live in. And then have made that into a basis for their personal identity. Which ought to say

something about how much we should reasonably trust (i.e. believe in as if it is part of our very identity) *anybody's* opinion or theory. These issues become more and more complex and harder to pin down as the focus shifts from physical sciences to life sciences, and particularly to topics associated with consciousness. If you want a lively debate in which everyone is an expert and in which nobody agrees (and you don't want to engage in politics or religion) all you need to do is do an internet search for "what is consciousness?"

So I'm explicitly asking any readers to be open and curious, and to be prepared to test out what you read here for themselves *through your own personal internal experience*. If you do that, then it will be very useful to you, whether you end up agreeing with me or not. Furthermore, I have a wide range of interest so what is contained here will almost inevitably be unpalatable in parts. The material based on scientific research will inevitably be difficult for people who think more symbolically, and the symbolic, mystical and experiential material will not sit comfortably with the scientifically minded who require some scientific proof. Well, that contradiction and lack of communication between these two possible and seemingly irreconcilable worlds is one of the problems at the heart of Western culture; and as I describe later, it is also one of the biggest difficulties we face as individuals, and is one cause of dissociation itself.

There are many versions of this set of essays "out there". Whatever the source of writing, the distilled meaning of human freedom almost always comes back to something resembling "self-actualisation". One way or another, all authors talk about what that *feels like* as an experience, how to achieve that experience (or at least make it more likely to be experienced), and what baseline conditions have to be in place to make it most easily attained. Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" displays that in its most black-and-white form (even if Maslow himself never drew that particular pyramid we all attribute to him). He more or less follows the advice of the Greek Stoics that one must be cushioned and even separated from the nitty-grittiness of life in order to be capable of finding the inner peace and stillness necessary to become aware of the good that lies deep inside - and to be able to be aware of the nuances and deeper resonances of the Life one has separated from. In the words of a Qigong teacher³ (as myself and the rest of the class looked longingly out through a window at a beautiful sunny day) ... "*You're in here [learning Qigong] so that one day you will be capable of being fully out there ...*"

However, Maslow's pyramid is a logical linear system ... "when A, then B... etc", and life does not work linearly at any level of its manifestation unless it has been forced, trained or "educated" to do so. His observation is really about the way our state of perception - how we see the world through cognitive and subconscious filters - dominates and in-forms our experienced reality. This way of seeing (the beliefs we hold that create the reality we perceive) are so powerful that they arbitrate life and death. People have undergone voluntary spiritual fasts and emerged feeling energised and more alive - for far longer periods than it has taken others to starve to death. What was the difference? It certainly was not their (common, human) available physiological resources of body fat. Rather it was a "mere" difference in *expectation*. It is more than a little shocking that positive or negative expectation and attitude can be so potent an arbitrator of life and death. It begs the question... If a feeling of hopelessness can

unnecessarily kill us in a “survival” situation, what effect does our day-to-day perception of ourselves and the world – our thoughts and beliefs - have on our day-to-day state of health?

Embodiment (the opposite of dissociation) necessarily leads towards internal experience – and here we hit a major problem, in that one man’s way of describing experience can well be another man’s view of insanity⁴. The difficulty is that words themselves are multi-layered and rich in subtle and secondary meanings, the deepest of which are held in the very personal internalised sub-associations of the word (which resonate largely unconsciously) as well as the overt public meaning found on the first line of a dictionary definition. This emotive personalisation of meaning is often deceptive, the cause of much conflict and strife, and in some ways it is right that the last hundred years of academic philosophy has been repeatedly bogged down by linguistics. So communication and the derivation of meaning are topics of importance – because both internal and external/societal dissociations/dislocations arise from a breakdown of communication, which is often founded on different *meanings* being assigned to the same raw information. I have devoted a whole Chapter to “Meaning” because of its largely un-noticed importance in the activity not just humans but of every living organism, no matter how small.

Resilience is another recurring theme. Returning to Maslow, it is the living experience of many people that a sense of beauty and connectedness does not necessarily arise out of spare time – but on the contrary, are often the source of strength that sustains in times of extreme hardship. A friend once related to me how the rainbow colours of soap bubbles in washing up water had given her a sense of meaning, joy and hope in an otherwise intensely dark and difficult period in her life. Another told of the way that a totally unexpected and almost overpowering sense of reassurance and grace enveloped her in the bath during a near suicidal moment – and how the memory of that few tens of seconds of experience has sustained her for decades. The darkness of WWII saw many candles shining even brighter in its gloom. Here are a few words from the concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl :

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth-that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world may still know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when a man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way-an honourable way-in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfilment. For the first time in my life, I was able to understand the words, “The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.”

“Man’s Search for Meaning” by Viktor E. Frankl

So I would like to re-interpret Maslow and say that he was referring to circumstances which increase a persons ability to step back out of a dominantly fearful existence *once fear has already taken hold*. Of course, I am being slightly disingenuous, in that there is also a rear exit to the rabbit hole of fear. A small number of survivors of the Dresden firestorm and Hiroshima (or some other total devastating catastrophe) do/did not descend irrevocably into fear and shock, but rather are/were able to walk through the valley of fear into a different, sunlit realm. They were inexplicably overcome by an immense and overwhelming sense of *Reverence and Awe* and a personal experience of the infinite. However, once fear has gripped the core of the body-mind (and the experience is purely terrifying rather than having enough accompanying reverence to be awe-full), then there is ONLY survival or death. Leading to organic overwhelm and a progressively increasing tendency towards dissociation. This is discussed in the context (or through the lens) of the Autonomic Nervous System in Chapter 7.

On a perceptual level, even totally safe situations may then become tinged with the threat of annihilation. However, a person who is well resourced and resilient (and this arises through a high quality of Embodiment) is more immune to fear, more attuned to Love, and lives a life more independent of the strictures of Maslow - because s/he is less in need of that hierarchy to be in place. Which is why Viktor Frankl has so much to teach everyone. As we shall see later, Love is the most important and powerful integrating force that can neutralise fear and reinstate our independence from Maslow's ladder of Stoic⁵ circumstantial dependency.

Love itself has also become a dreadfully misunderstood and distorted shadow of its true self, - to the point that recovering a proper relationship with this fundamental emotion is for most people a non-trivial and lengthy exercise in self-discovery. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin recognised this invisible gap (we all like to think that we can love, but how many of us are able to Love?), and looked forward to the day when humanity would cross back over the bridge and once more would be able to see the world and itself through very different eyes...

"Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

This statement clearly expressing the opinion that Love was not a very universally understood phenomenon. The idea of discovering Fire "as if for the first time" gives some indication of the power he sees could be unleashed by this realisation. And Love is not a theoretical thing that we can read in a book or have passed by a lecture or some erudite pamphlet or romantic novel. It is an intensely personal experience that leads to a different form of connection to everything else in what we mistakenly call "out there", or "the natural world".

Being personally free of any particular academic affiliation and not being in any particular recognised profession (such as medicine or psychology) has given me a certain freedom to express and bring together a set of ideas that are not particularly mainstream; and to go about that in my own somewhat eccentric and eclectic way. I

have not written this (online version) to be an easy read, and on reflection am not completely sure what its audience is – most likely physical therapists or psychotherapists who deal regularly with trauma and dissociation. But ecologists will probably find many aspects familiar, and it might possibly be of some use to political scientists and economists, or even a few random people in other professions or no profession at all. It could also be something of a workbook on how to become more embodied, but my intention is to eventually follow up with publication of a simpler, shorter and more user-friendly version - that is less likely to cause indigestion.

In part, I am by nature a researcher, and so you will find that some of the approach is quite academic. I have also been inexorably drawn to the Phenomenalist style of Goethe (though Husserl's Phenomenalism was only invented some 200 years after Goethe's death)... So I consider the subjective experience of and in my own body, mind and senses to be potentially as valid as any scientific theory and (if used intelligently) as valid a source of data as any scientific instrument. Individual experiences provide a vital personal “user” dimension to any understanding of the workings of a body-mind and everything else that it connects to. Out of this subjective way of understanding the world the conclusions and main themes and evidence presented here are deeply coloured by my very human experience, by my observations of the non-human “natural” world, and by the very human experience of my friends and patients. In fact, one of the central themes running through most chapters like letters through a stick of Blackpool Rock is that we are experiential animals, and pure rational objectivity is illusional. Instead, there are other, more experiential and subjectively honest forms of “rational” investigation that have been recognised for millennia. These alternative philosophical systems value participation and immersion as a way to find knowledge. In contrast, the post-Cartesian Western myth that we are all familiar with says that - to study and better understand eyes, it is necessary to remove them and look down a microscope at them (with eyes); and read a book by a learned expert on eyes who has also used this method. That reductionist approach has some value, but is also – as you will see me argue – one of the roots of endemic cultural dissociation and loss of any real relational presence in the so-called “natural world”. David Abram makes this argument far more lyrically!

Looking back at the first 60 years of my life, I can see that much of it almost conspired towards bringing me into the position of writing this manual / book. My first three or four decades were clouded and made difficult by frequent episodes of dissociation and depersonalisation, so when describing dissociative states I do literally know what I'm talking about. Dissociation is odd in that – whilst it is a shut-down of some aspect of sensory awareness / “presence”, it may also be accompanied by an increased awareness of more subtle layers of human interaction (albeit that these may also be distorted), the reasons for which I will go into on some detail. At some point I realised that although so-called extra-sensory experiences were useful in some ways, they were only useful in so far as I was able to remain embodied and capable of using them – i.e. *resilient-enough*. So I began to seek out resilience, in the knowledge that the resilience would provide a foundation for everything else; and that everything else supported by resilience would take care of itself. That instinct has proven itself to be correct in many ways. It's been quite a journey of discovery, and one important aim is to encode some

ideas that might be generally useful in attaining mental, emotional and physical resilience.

The opposite of Dissociation is Embodiment, but the fact is that – if you're dissociated, such simple facts are sometimes not easy to realise. People told me to “ground and centre myself” (*OK – but how?*) or to “be in my body” (*Yes – I am – I'm alive... what do you mean?*), and other well meaning nuggets of utterly useless advice, such as “pull yourself together”. The fact that we have these very everyday phrases in English is itself an indicator that being ungrounded, un-centered, out of body and fragmented are common everyday experiences. There is no mainstream medical “cure” for disembodiment, other than extreme psychoactive medications that are prescribed in extreme situations – medicines which recipients report have the effect of encasing oneself and filling the spaces in the brain in heavy dull cardboard. Although these can bring about a version of mental stability, the price may often be that they replace a drifty dizzy ungrounded and maybe over-sensitive but nevertheless vital disembodiment with a bereft, numb and two-dimensional one. It's true that I have met people who have not had this numbing experience, but they have been in a minority. This kind of medication may still be the best available option when the mind is becoming chaotic and a mental stability is fast disappearing into a bottomless well of distress. But it is still a bodge-it patch made in desperation rather than a cure in any sensible meaning of the word. I consider myself lucky not to have ever been (or had to be) prescribed medication that might have numbed out and covered up some of these effects. This allowed me to observe and experience with increasing clarity and to eventually dig my way out – in part by somatically feeling the right direction to go in. Some people attempted to physically ground and embody me with Spiritual Healing, Meditation exercises, Acupuncture, and other various techniques, and I tried a zillion different methods myself. Eventually, another realisation was that if I could feel the physical presence of my body more continuously with greater qualitative detail (as opposed to focussing on the fuzzy dissociative wooze), then that brought about more psychological resilience. However, there was also a limit to how much of a good thing I could tolerate before some kind of fuse “blew”, and I lost more than I had gained. So embodiment and resourced-ness appears to be something that has to be acclimatised to, and cannot be bestowed by some powerful benefactor wielding a magical wand. Rather like as someone who had survived on a zero protein diet for some time might find their digestive system rebelling at the first small piece of greasy meat.

I particularly noticed that the more forceful “do-ing” attempts to impose embodiment by myself or others usually had the reverse effect to the one intended, and left me feeling like I had been run over by a bus. “Being run over by a bus” syndrome was a phase that lasted about 10 years. Over this period I only just about hung together a job in between lying on my back for hours at a time (because I was physically, mentally and emotionally incapable of anything else) - until I found someone who was not forceful. The fact that one of the main treatments that worked for me was actually a Birth Process therapy (i.e. focussed on the period from conception to a few months after birth) is notable in its own right, and will also be discussed in later chapters. One of the biggest lessons was self-compassion, and until that was taken in even a tiny bit, the prospects were not good. However, compassion is one of the colours in the

spectrum of Love, is either real or not real (i.e. cannot be faked) and so is not something that you can learn by reading a book or by wishing it into existence. It is experiential, and like a treasure map sellotaped under a particular filing cabinet in a room that you've lost the key to – is not so easy to retrieve but at the same time immensely familiar when it has been grasped.

I also see this in my patients, in that the ones who will not be kind to their bodies and treat their physical being like a horse that is going to be whipped into submission – don't really make a lot of progress. As time progresses, my capacity for self-compassion and Embodiment has increased, to the point that I'm now more embodied most of the time in most circumstances than most people I come across (and sometimes not). It's a work in progress. Just like Love, Embodiment is a non-trivial pursuit. Full embodiment is almost never seen in Western culture. If you do ever encounter someone who is fully embodied, you will recognise it by the sheer force and effortless charisma of their physical and psychological presence. Not as a glamour such as the one projected by David Bowie on stage, but something far more deeply visceral, powerful and life affirming in its effect on your sense of your own being. One of the few fully embodied human beings I have ever encountered was a Himba tribesman near the Cunene River in Northern Namibia.

CST treatments have also been useful in this journey back into my own body. Professionally, I have worked as a Craniosacral Therapist (CST) since about 1994, this becoming full-time from about 2003. CST is a very light form of bodywork that derives from Cranial Osteopathy. In parallel, I found maybe 15 years ago very clear signs that many apparently physical problems presented by my bodywork clients – musculoskeletal pain and dysfunction, physiological illnesses, etc – were in specific patterns that :

- i. are often reminiscent of classical trauma physiology and body psychology as described in extreme cases by Pierre Janet in his work in the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris.
- ii. respond very positively to being treated as if they were trauma cases (even though the patients might have no apparent "traumatic" events in their lives).

It is easy to assume this was projection of my own story onto everyone else – and that was a real concern to me for some time. However, careful observation over a few years convinced me that I was seeing something very real – and there are some very well qualified and respected people (e.g. Bessel van der Kolk) saying pretty much the same thing in pretty much the same way. And the theory is well backed up by my personal experience of applying it on myself, and personal experience of substantially improved clinical outcomes for my patients. When one looks with open eyes, trauma and dissociation are everywhere in this numbed out, addicted and frequently dysfunctional (western consumer and science-oriented) society.

Most trauma treatment today (2022) is psychotherapy-based, and is focussed on either major obvious trauma or major affect disorder due to abandonment or desperately bad circumstances and events in early life. So one contribution that I have to offer is a lot of experience applying therapy usually reserved for high level trauma - to relatively low

level physical and physiological problems. In working in this way I have had to develop my own techniques, some of which are worth passing on, or at least describing. Some of these are related to the way that boundaries and personal space are affected by Trauma, and how they can also be used in simple ways to renormalise hyperarousal. Having seen first hand the subtle layers of dissociation that infect everyone in this culture, I suspect that normal Trauma treatment could benefit from some of the experience gained from applying it to less extreme cases. In particular the insights as to how quickly and easily fuses can be blown (so the trauma becomes much harder to heal, and the healing process more prolonged, tortuous and even dangerous); and how this (fuse-blowing) can be prevented.

There are important issues around the journey back from Trauma to Embodiment that make it a non-trivial and delicate matter. Dissociation is essentially overwhelm, and also inherently overwhelm-ing. And overwhelm is surprisingly infectious. For example, barristers in the UK who work with victims of serious abuse are increasingly burning out through what is known as “*vicarious traumatisation*” – picking up and embodying somebody else’s trauma. As are police officers, emergency responders, journalists, and pretty well everyone who deals with or observes the physical, emotional and mental fallout of violence. As are most people who regularly watch violent content TV and films – there is little difference between make-believe and real life so far as the survival systems of the body are concerned.

Van der Kolk and others recognise that the basis for any progress towards healing and self-actualisation is mindful self-awareness. But initially one is placing attention on the body and the traumatic memories *also* reside in the body. So it is very easy in using mindfulness to enter a feedback loop which just maintains the trauma – or even makes it more entrenched and reactive. There has been an increasing fashion for teaching secular mindfulness in the past few years, within the framework of a common culture of desire for fast-acting magic bullets. My experience on a profound level is that “*fix-its*” only work for small traumas, and substantial long-term sustainable changes to bigger more entrenched traumas only come about by non-forceful and cautiously applied means. A growing concern in Trauma clinics worldwide is that plain vanilla mindfulness stripped of its supportive spiritual framework can be a very two-edged sword, and may just dig a deeper hole. Therefore, another aspect of the work described here – probably the most important part – is describing a few very simple ways in which this dangerous ground can be successfully navigated, and mindfulness, meditation and “*Focussing*” practices tweaked to make them less potentially dangerous.

Sources include Pierre Janet, Peter Levine⁶, Pat Ogden⁷, Bessel van der Kolk⁸, etc etc etc : modern approaches, body psychotherapy, research, Stephen Porges⁹, CST, Cranial Osteopathy and AT Still’s Classical Osteopathy. Stanley Keleman^{10,11,12} (1931-2018) was originally a biologist who became interested in psychology. His writings on body psychotherapy are more or less required reading for anyone who wishes to understand the relationship between our embodied biological selves and our psychological sense of identity. His pioneering work has been extended and supplemented by some other remarkable pioneers, including Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen¹³ and Lynda Hartley¹⁴. Once the fundamentally biological nature of human expression was recognised, and body

psychotherapy became a discipline in its own right, many other people have also made significant contributions. I have also had various passions through my life, one of which is biology - so there's a lot of David Attenborough lurking in the following pages.

Nothing exists by itself alone.

We all belong to each other; we cannot cut reality into pieces.

My happiness is your happiness; my suffering is your suffering.

We heal and transform together.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

As may be inferred from above, dissociation comes in many differing shades, has a vast phenomenological range, and often affects people psychologically. Many forms of dissociation are mentally or even physically incapacitating. Later we will look at how diabetes and heart conditions and many other common physical illnesses may have their roots in dissociation and its effect on the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) and immune system. Likewise, many common psychological conditions – depression, bipolar disorder, etc - are driven by dissociation. But many manifestations of dissociation are not particularly noticeable, and may even result in traits and skills that are valued by society. The short story by HG Wells “Country of the Blind” is extremely relevant to dissociation and a trauma-induced shift in the way the nervous system processes information. Blindness was normalised – to the extent that nobody realised that they were blind; and viewed Nuñez's strange soft organs in his face as being the source of his troublesomeness, and decided to remove them so that he could be normal. This is not so far from modern reality. A society-wide dissociated numbness makes the kind of sensitivity to the environment that one might have as a hunter-gatherer in a pristine landscape – something of a liability or even a mental health “condition” (pathology). It is difficult to function with all senses available as the could potentially be (*should be?*) in a closely-packed city, in a technological world that fills the air with noise. It's not surprising that the people who are less (comfortably) numb tend to go a little crazy or behave oddly, or collapse under the mental and sensory overload. Many of them are given mental health diagnoses. Quite a few call themselves “neurodivergent” – meaning they are too sensitive for their own comfort (or mental health), and in adapting to that “excess” sensitivity that cannot be switched off are usually too cranky for other people's comfort.

Although I have no evidence that dyslexia has any dissociative origins, it gives a good analogy as to the effects of any dissociation. Clearly, a dyslexic has problems performing some tasks – specifically, the term “dyslexia” defines the area of difficulty – the identification of written letters and words and sentences, and the translation of those shapes into linguistic meaning. There is a disconnect between detailed visual pattern recognition and the auditory/language centres. But dyslexics can usually handle other pattern recognition tasks. And they are also usually very competent with spoken language. It's just that these two skills – spoken language and visual pattern

recognition - do not compute in the brain and come together how they should. What does happen instead with many dyslexics is that the inability to work with written words releases them from having to devote much of their brain to this task. So they often have greater than average skills in other areas – often being highly creative. One dyslexic I know ran a successful creative business, and his secretary was unaware of his dyslexia for several years – she just thought that he was good at delegation, as he presented her with all the business forms to fill in and then just signed the bottom of the sheet when they were completed. In a similar way, chronic dissociation is not necessarily an incapacitating burden. It restricts access to some areas of life. But provided the dissociation does not otherwise incapacitate them with mental instabilities, there may be very valuable compensations with more developed skills in other areas of life. However, the potential physiological/health compromises and a chronically reduced physical and mental resilience remain no matter how well adapted the person is psychologically to society. These adaptational compromises – like the psychological effects – are very individual in nature, and reflect the very individual history in which dissociations have been “accumulated”.

Continuing with the analogy - if you can imagine someone who suffered from dyslexia suddenly being able to read, how would that affect their life? You might equally ask – what if a blind person could suddenly see, or a deaf person hear? Or what if an armless artist woke up one morning and discovered that he now had arms? Each of these people will have learned to compensate for one deficiency by developing other, sometimes extraordinary skills well past the point that any “normal” person would. So their recovery of what had never been there would be an addition to their life. The skills that they had developed as compensation, and had mastered out of necessity would not go away. These capacities would always remain so long as they considered them useful in their lives (and therefore continued to use them to some degree). Likewise with numbness, dissociation and fragmentation. Sometimes, these losses of internal and external connection, or of systemic resilience, cause us to find extraordinary skills that otherwise would never have even been dreamed of. And sometimes the state comes to be seen as part of the id-identity. I have come across a few people in my clinical practice who made a very clear conscious decision that they wished to remain dissociative in a specific way, because that form of dissociation had given them specific and valued gifts which were also a major part of their self-identity. I would like to say here that these fears of potential loss are unfounded. Of course, there is always a choice, but if a skill has been used for a lifetime, then it is impossible to dam up the conscious and non-conscious pathways that lead back to the body-mind state that allows that skill to be used. Just like showing a 90-year old how to use the internet would not make them forget where the village post box is to be found, or how to write letters using paper and a pen.

My opinion is that as a human race, we badly need to become less numb, more embodied, more aware, more whole. And I say that with very good reason. One significant way that dissociation has affected the world is that it makes war, factory farming, destruction of ancient forests, torture, genocide and other forms of physical or emotional violence possible. It is only possible to contemplate this kind of destruction if we are to some degree numb to its effects on ourselves and others, or are so

unempathic in our actions that we force others into war. One of the most fundamental levels of dissociation is the separation of “it” from “me” and “them” from “us” - not necessarily in a cognitive way, but also as a felt experience. If the internalised felt-awareness of connection is lost, then the dis-connection brings “Other” into existence. In one of its most subtle forms, “it” is the natural world of which we are an integral part. So this quite subtle level of dissociation makes Auschwitz or the wilful raping and destruction of the planet’s ecosystems possible. If we readily experienced this destruction as having an effect on our personal being (which it does – it’s just that we have somehow managed to lose the capacity to feel this – maybe we left it on a bus somewhere), it would not be possible to damage the world in which we live. Thus, dissociative fragmentation occurs on a continuous and clearly identifiable continuum not only on a personal level, but on a societal level and across entire societies, cultures and languages. The worse the collateral damage, the greater the reactive dissociation becomes, because deep inside our souls, in a place we have forgotten how to access, we can still feel the pain around us. The only possible response to it is to retreat even more, because there is not enough embodied resource to meet the pain, grief and shame eye-to-eye. Whilst this numbness continues to afflict most of the human race, dissociation and denial will prevent us making peace with the rest of our fellow men and with planet that we are managing to make uninhabitable.

The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth.

~ Rumi

Some readers will probably find much of the above so familiar that it’s almost not necessary to say it at all, and others may find all of it quite dubious. Thus it is – and another manifestation of dissociation is the vast range of sometimes irreconcilable personal experiences that cause (and are caused by) differences in belief systems and world views. The story of the Tower of Babel is not really about language – it is about perception. Over the next few chapters, the above broad brush descriptions and concepts will be fleshed out, explained, and embodied.

A brief review of the chapter structure

Section 1 contains a few background topics of particular relevance to Embodiment :

Chapter 1 looks at the beginnings of life. I have started at the very beginning, because this provides useful background for understanding issues around evolution, cell biology, resilience, consciousness and PolyVagal Theory (PVT). I also started writing here because Geology is one of the places I personally started from. It's impossible to have a good overview of ecology without also knowing at least a smattering of earth science.

Chapter 2 follows on by considering the various strategies that life has employed in its will to survive – again this has important implications for survival adaptation and consciousness. This evolutionary intelligence we have inherited and carry as a birthright - is the foundation of day-to-day resilience, but also of less useful jammed adaptive states (traumas).

Chapter 3 discusses further the principle of wellness and resilience. Wellness is something deeply misunderstood in modern medicalised cultures, and provides a powerful basis for understanding how the body self-heals. I also cover a little around topics such as polarity/oscillation - which are the basis for expression of life through growth, gesture and movement.

Chapter 4 looks at the sensory system and aspects of neuroplasticity that link it to conscious and non-conscious processes.

Chapter 5 then extends the sensory system into some general principles of how Meaning is determined. Interpretation of Meaning is the basis for response through movement and gesture, and so is also present at a very primitive level of cellular life. Certain levels of meaning are truly universal across human cultures and (probably) all animals – and even down to single cells.

Chapter 6 reviews the philosophical set of dominoes that have conceptually separated us from our bodies and the natural world, and discusses alternative ways of thinking about the world.

Section 2 covers the core topics of Trauma, Consciousness, Dissociation and the neurology of the Autonomic Nervous system – which is a useful lens through which they can be understood relatively easily.

Chapter 7 looks directly at a few aspects of neurology and physiology. **7.1** is a review of **PolyVagal Theory**, Autonomic Nervous system, and the Window of Tolerance. This is a powerful map to understanding mental-emotional-physiological states that we will refer back to in all subsequent chapters. Dissociation is seen to be a biological survival adaptation. **7.2** looks at **Thermoregulation**, because this occupies such a large part of the physiological adaptive response. **7.3** looks at **Hibernation** – an extreme physiological

adaptation that is common to both the ANS and Thermoregulation, and which is important for the understanding of dissociation.

Chapter 8 focusses on the perennial topic of **Consciousness** - seen through the lens of the previous material on its biological origins; including how embodiment and dissociation shine a light on conscious processes. This chapter also includes a discussion on consciousness as a field phenomenon (rather than something restricted to the brain), including various ways in which that manifests to result in pseudo-trauma and pseudo-dissociation. The overview is quite brief (considering the potential directions this topic can go in) and is particularly focussed on principles relevant to dissociation. However, it's still a big section, and I ended up subdividing it. Sections **8.1** to **8.4** look respectively at (1) the geometry of consciousness; (2) models of multiplicity (taking the mind and the organic human being to not be a unitary organism), (3) models of organisation of physiology, the brain, and consciousness; and (4) a small selection of metaphysical aspects of consciousness.

Chapter 9 is concerned with **Boundaries and the Proxemic Field** (i.e. personal and other forms of body space). These are strongly affected in many dissociative states, are diagnostic, and can be used directly to assist treatment of trauma and dissociation.

Chapter 10 is concerned with the details of **Trauma and Systemic Overwhelm** and the somatisations that can arise from these conditions. The idea of *systemic overwhelm* points to the fact that if the biological organism's normal homeostatic response is overwhelmed by multiple relatively minor stressors, its response is exactly the same as if it had suffered a major trauma. This Chapter brings all of the previous material together from (what might be accidentally confused as) the point of view of pathology. In fact, the view I wish to steer readers towards is one in which all adaptations are non-pathological, except in their secondary side effects.

Chapter 11 is (finally!) an in depth discussion of **Dissociation, Fragmentation and Embodiment**, particularly focussing on the fragmentary nature of the experience of dissociation, and its implications. Consciousness and the internal organic organisation of a human being are not unitary, but rather a cooperative and loosely coupled ecology – so this loose coupling can fragment surprisingly easily – which is one aspect of dissociation. Embodiment requires that all levels of the organism – mental, emotional, physiological, sensory, biological (e.g. microbiome), etc. function as a coherent ecology once more. That is not a unified ecology, but it is one in which every part recognises and responds to what might be called a *core organiser* – of which the ego-identity is one aspect.

From this point we will be looking more and more at treatment; and I am particularly focussed on applications of the principle of Wellness (Chapter 3). Trauma is seen as a loss of calibration with the current environment. So the question is - how can the biological aspects of the body-mind can be re-calibrated to the present situation, so

that dissociation (hypo-arousal) and hyper-arousal are normalised and the person returns to the normal psycho-physiological window of tolerance? If Trauma and somatisations are viewed as *adaptations*, then they can be addressed as such. Provided that the side effects themselves have not begun to dominate and threaten the health of the body and become entrenched issues in their own right, addressing the adaptation as an exercise in re-calibration is sufficient to return normal homeostasis and function.

Section 3 (Chapters 12 onwards) is focussed on various aspects of treatment, including scripts I have found useful for recalibrating the conscious observer mind to the more cellular-conscious animal body (and vice versa). Chapter 12 diverts slightly in looking at various ways more traditional forms of “medicine” or “treatment” have dealt with dissociation and trauma. The emphasis in these four chapters is to define a basic foundation for embodiment, based on material from Chapters 1-11.

The topics covered are all big and each deserve several books in their own right. In fact, there are many books out there on each topic, some of which you will find in the references and notes at the end of each chapter. That is - apart from Proxemics, which is very hardly covered at all in easily available literature. It's particularly important to realise that each chapter builds on the previous ones, so just fast-forwarding to the “treatment techniques” section without taking in the first half of the book would probably result in a complete misunderstanding of what is being described. Critical elements that have to come into place to make any significant headway in embodiment include :

- ◆ Compassion (and other heart-centred states)
- ◆ Mindful awareness, particularly interoceptive awareness (i.e. awareness of somatic sensation)
- ◆ Recognition of the body as having an intelligence in its own right – which invokes the Centaur (or rider on a horse) as a working model of the human condition
- ◆ Recognition through direct experience that be-ing in the right way is far more powerful than do-ing as a way to re-integrate the body-mind
- ◆ Titration – the idea that small is beautiful (because big is overwhelming, and most people do not realise how small “big” really is)
- ◆ Constant referral to resourced states and active cultivation of resource as a core strategy for life
- ◆ The body-mind as an ecology in its own right that is (also) continuous with the ecology of the Earth's biosphere

None of these are trivial. For instance, it can take years or even decades to come to an even vaguely substantial experiential understanding of what Compassion really is. The fact is that the society we are in is severely dissociative, and the words we use are deceptive – because in saying them (e.g. “Compassion”) we immediately and habitually enter an illusion of thinking we know exactly what they mean. The

information in here will not provide a silver bullet or immediate solution to any problem – because the issues of dissociation and loss of embodiment go back generations, and cannot just be “solved” by a few tweaks or application of a magic formula. Having said that, although embodiment is a lifelong commitment, for the most part it’s not actually hard work. There is a joy in reconnection, in coming “home”.

To finish, I should add that the last factor in the above list – *awareness of the body and identity as part of an ecological continuity* – has increasingly become the main focus of this book. Without me realising at first, it has justifiably written itself to be the principal actor in this movie, simply because we will remain unable to sustainably live on this small planet unless we collectively rediscover an inner knowing that humans are not separate. Human survival requires human embodiment, because current levels of dissociation from ourselves and the larger environment are perhaps the main reason that we are facing a climatic and ecological crisis at this moment. And (which came first the chicken or the egg?) this soul-level disconnection from “nature” is perhaps the main reason for dissociation from ourselves. We are an inextricable part of this chain of life. And the chain of life (Gaia) needs our conscious and healthy participation just as much as we need the ecosystems of the world to be vibrantly healthy for our own survival as individuals and as a species.

This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

- Walt Whitman : Preface to “Leaves of Grass”

Notes : Introduction

- 1 Why Scientists Are Starting to Care About Cultures That Talk to Whales. Smithsonian Magazine 6 Apr 2018
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science/talking-to-whales-180968698/>
- 2 Qigong and Taiji masters have travelled from China and begun to teach outside their previously highly restricted circles. Tibetan and other Buddhist lineages have reached out to the cultures of the West and are transmitting information that previously never left the stone walls of their ancient communities. Hindu Masters and Yogis were the first to come openly to the West (e.g. Parahansa Yogananda), and have freely shared their insights and techniques. Shamen from the Americas and Siberia, and indigenous peoples from Australasia and every other corner of the earth are now sharing their knowledge. Kabbalistic teachers have gone out from Israel to teach gentiles. It is almost becoming a danger that the rich Christian tradition of Europe is in danger of being lost as just another voice in the huge spiritual choice that we now have.
- 3 Zhixing Wang : see <http://chinesheritage.co.uk/>
- 4 Last month I listened to someone talking, and realised that almost half the words he was using jangled and clashed with my sense of reality – but if I considered the possible meanings of his words with a less dogmatic ear, he could well be describing my own perspective but by using words I would never personally have chosen.
- 5 Juha Sihvola (2006) Aristotle, the Stoics, and the European conceptions of humanity. A paper presented at Europe 2050 – EU Presidency Seminar in Rome, September 7, 2006
- 6 Peter Levine (2010) In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness. Publ. North Atlantic Books. ISBN-13: 978-1556439438
- 7 Kekuni Minton & Pat Ogden (2015) Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology). Publ. W. W. Norton & Company. ISBN-13: 978-0393706130
- 8 Bessel van der Kolk (2015) The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma. Publ. Penguin. ISBN-13: 978-0141978611
- 9 Stephen Porges (2011) The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology). Publ. W. W. Norton & Company. ISBN-13: 978-0393707007
- 10 Stanley Keleman (1989) Emotional Anatomy. Publ. Center Press. ISBN-13: 978-0934320108
- 11 Stanley Keleman (1989) Your Body Speaks Its Mind. Publ. Center Press. ISBN-13: 978-0934320016
- 12 Stanley Keleman (1987) Embodying Experience: Forming a Personal Life. Publ. Center Press. ISBN-13: 978-0934320122
- 13 Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (2008) Sensing, Feeling and Action: The Experiential Anatomy of Body-Mind Centering. Publ. Contact Editions. ISBN-13: 978-0937645109
- 14 Lynda Hartley (1994) Wisdom Of The Body Moving : An introduction to body-mind centering. Publ. North Atlantic Books. ISBN-13: 978-1556431746