

Embodying Scholarship

Judith Greer Essex and Wes Chester

*Because the “disembodied mind” as an entity is a fiction,
our teaching must attend embodiment.*

The most critical part of becoming a student in our expressive arts training program in San Diego and at EGS begins with un-learning. The lingering Cartesian dualism that arbitrarily separates one complex form of behavior (thinking) from all the innumerable others (dancing, singing, playing, creating), is deeply ingrained in attitudes about teaching and learning. Thus, we often find new students confused by the adult experiential education model we offer. They crave the lecture, the explanation that provides abstract language for the messy business of experiencing. In spite of eloquently and poetically naming the learning in a dance experience, the codified abstractions of discursive language seem to them the only valid anchor for knowledge.

Overcoming the millennia-old Western paradigm of body as a vessel or a vehicle for self or soul is hard work. But we believe the recognition of a fully embodied consciousness represents a necessary and

critical shift for helping professionals. Embodied beings are capable of many states and emotions that are neither experienced nor expressed primarily through discursive language, although reflection may need such language to integrate these experiences. The power of the arts becomes most useful when our images are not held captive for interrogation. We may feel deeply drawn to an image, including poetic images, without knowing why. In this way, it becomes difficult to accept the exclusively discursive dominance of our narrative, and instead to see that everything we think, feel, see, and hear—all our visions and premonitions—is the way our fleshy beings understand.

After years of struggling with this, I think we understand why. It is hard to accept that our mere flesh is ecstatic—hard to accept that this animal being, this fragile, fearful thing, is also the only home of our shining genius. Common parlance denies the mystery of our fleshy existence, and therefore betrays us. Dualistic ideas keep pushing forward the notion that an experience must be grasped in the abstract in order to become exquisite and delicate; meanwhile, emotions unnamed, and ideas not yet formed into abstract terms, are the hallmark of the experiencing being.

When we embrace the notion that *learning is corporeal*, our heaviness becomes the dialectic response to our lightness. These tensions are evident in the dance. We know somatically. Words struggle to wrap themselves around the felt-sense, to articulate the just-right experience. The words are the clumsy part—not the action. Fluid or choppy, our somatic being speaks eloquently. Even the poetic word has a somatic component in sound and rhythm.

To teach the concepts that underpin and overarch the philosophical and theoretical tenets of expressive arts as taught at EGS, we cannot rely solely upon explanatory discourse. Students must imbibe these principles and let them become part of us. They must eat the fleshly metaphors and let the fire in their cells be the burning. They must dance, sing, speak and act their way to learning. Only after many such actions, do the words begin to make sense.



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