

Befriending My Body*

by Lorraine Huntley

When I first met Connie Frey at our MEVA meeting in April I was excited to find out that she was once a dance therapist and wants to draw upon that and other body-focused training to work with the ME/CFS/FM population. I had been interested in dance therapy since before I trained as a physiotherapist; I had read about it and observed a dance therapist working with children. Since I had already done so much body awareness and mindfulness training and practice, I didn't know if her approach would offer me more to work with than what I already had, but I was keen to know how she worked. I signed up for Connie's four-session program in May, thinking that at least I would be a good person to critique and compare this work, even if it didn't offer me any fresh tools.

I could only attend three of the four sessions. A nasty bug prevented me from being at the fourth. Not only were three enough for me to taste this beautiful work, but what I learned has remained with me these past few months. It is a rare thing for my always hungry brain to hang on to new knowledge for that long, because so much falls out before being digested. I believe mainly it has stuck because it bypassed my monkey mind and settled deeply into my body; the experience was so pleasant it comes to me when I am at ease and doesn't require any mental gymnastics to conjure up again.

In the sessions that I attended we started by getting comfortable on the floor with pillows, mats and blankets. This was nice, as it is far easier for me to attend to talking and especially to instructions when I am warm and comfortable. Connie was convincing in her emphasis to follow our inner selves and our own needs over her instructions. She thus created a spaciousness that eased anxiety and, at the same time, a focal point to travel and explore in a way that is pleasurable.

In many ways my experiences in this class defy description; it is not a purely mental process and doesn't fit within normal mental concepts. The experience I most remember is one when I am slowly rolling on the floor. I am not aware of what others are doing, only that they are there somewhere doing their own thing. There is warm sun coming through the window; as I move, my hair falls into my hands and I stop....I see my hands, my hair, the light, the texture and I have a moment of pure experience, like what I think an infant experiences. It is an almost indescribable feeling of pure pleasure. It awakens me in a way I cannot define.

We repeated some of the same things every time and then did something new. This created a nice balance between routine and freshness. One thing we did each time was feeling our body fill with awareness, one limb at a time. It was amazing how spacious my self would feel and how much smaller the pain would feel. It was lovely and I still practice this as often as I can remember.

Connie is offering this class again this fall. I highly recommend it. The space was quiet, comfortable and safe. Connie conveys compassion and acceptance to the group in many

ways. One way is by offering multiple options for how to engage in an activity. She created safety by suggesting an agreement to not offer any kind of judgement to others, even compliments. This encouraged us to value our own movement and our autonomy. She empowered us to access our deeper wisdom by validating that we know best how to take care of ourselves and to follow that. She is immensely respectful to each person's reality and is careful to applaud the courage for taking the journey, no matter if our experience does not match that of anyone else. Encouragement is not based on achievement; we have the opportunity to value ourselves as we are. The sharing of our impressions of our experience with others in the group brought a whole other perspective to how healing is experienced, more validation for our autonomy and a deep mutual respect.

In an excerpt from the article *Growing Through the Motions*, Hannah Green asks Connie about what participants get out of body awareness and movement experiences with her:

"I've heard people say they go away with an enlarged sense of self and increased self-esteem. Some discover a new source of pleasure. Generally people value movement adventures as a vital way to feel alive and learn. For some it's liberating to realize creative expression is a birthright. Other examples include realizations such as 'going to one's depth isn't all about pain' and 'my body holds a lot of information.' People take away self-attention, 'listening' to themselves differently in moving through everyday life. Basically, I hope people experience movement as a personal resource for lively expression and wisdom."

I have read many books concerning the brain, and it is clear to me that the frontal lobe, where we try to "figure it all out," is overworked. We put such a huge emphasis on rational thought that we are overtaxing a small portion of our brain while ignoring the potential of a vast untapped resource in the rest of our mind-body. It is not yet scientifically clear how a journey of awareness can help us heal but it is enough to have given it a try and been pleasantly surprised. How much friendlier could you be to your sensory life even when experiencing pain or unpleasantness? My body is my friend and I have become a much better friend to my body. My body says it's time to feel warm sun on my skin. OK, I say, let's go to the beach!

Connie Frey offers "Befriending the Body" private lessons and programs. The next four-week program for women with ME/CFS/FM runs in October. Enquiries are welcome at 250-388-5393.

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