

Helen Beale introduces an exciting approach to the healing potential of writing which synthesises several aspects of creativity - imagination, metaphor, the unconscious -into the 'whole' that emerges through somatic writing.

Writing the Body; an Introduction to Somatic Writing

Helen Beale

What is somatic writing? It is a creative process in which the knowing of the body and the truth of the word form one cohesive whole.

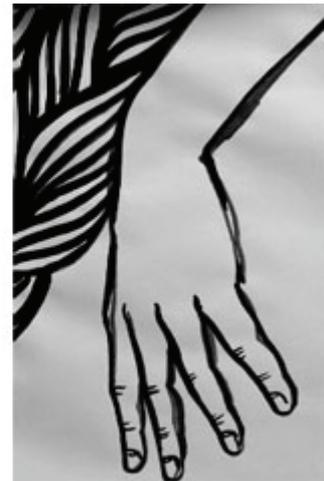
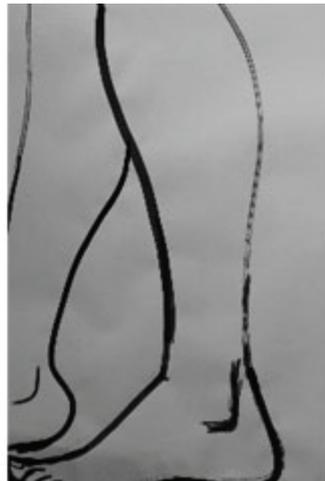
Somatic writing is an approach to writing that aims to synthesise the psychological, the creative, and the bodily sensing (somatic) nature of the individual.

It is:

1. a tool for psychological growth and wellbeing through the relationship of imagination, metaphor and the unconscious;
2. a tool through which anyone can access their own fresh, authentic source of creativity and enjoy a new way of writing regardless of previous writing experience;
3. a process to support physical wellbeing and give concrete expression to our subliminal body-knowing, learning to listen to and integrate its voice.

The real magic however, is in the synthesis of all of these – very much a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. The end product of each exercise tends to be a distillation and synthesis of all these elements.

Psychotherapeutic discourse has always recognised the connection between the unconscious and the body, but few forms of it offer the body full and equal participation in the therapeutic process. We have come a long way from the old Cartesian mind/body split and yet few therapies manage a real synthesis of the two. Even among the body therapies we still have progress to make in releasing the dominance of an 'interpretative', analytical therapist-stance. In the client's journey toward wholeness we need to offer systems of healing to the complex human organism which synthesise an individual's own aspects of awareness (such as body, creative imagination, thought). In this way, a client can develop their own holistic practice and be empowered by it. This in turn maximises their own psycho-somatic synthesis, becoming whole and healing.



As a holistic body therapist most of my awe and wonder at the body's wisdom, at what it knows and can do, and how it communicates, has come from practising craniosacral therapy; in particular the branch of it developed by John Upledger and his development of somato-emotional release. This is a complex, multi-faceted, deeply experienced process in which emotional energy in the body is connected with, and sometimes dialogued with, in order to facilitate emotional and physical release/ transformation. Much of the work in this field is truly mind-blowing. As a practitioner myself I am constantly inspired by the elegance of process that emerges when we let the person's body-wisdom take the lead and it informs and communicates with the rest of their being.

Upledger chooses to avoid the term 'unconscious', in order to avoid having to endorse a particular definition of it. He replaces it with 'nonconscious' – meaning anything other than the conscious mind. I empathise with this but will use the term 'unconscious' for the sake of familiarity.

As a body-therapist and someone who has always used writing as a therapeutic tool and creative expression, I began to want to put the two together, harnessing what is experienced in a somato-emotional process together with the creative mind-body tool of the pen in the hand. In this way the material that arises from the body, and may be transformed in the body, is then taken up by the creativity of the pen (or vice versa) and passed over onto another aspect of consciousness for further integration between body, imagination and the ego-mind. It is the *integration* of these different aspects which makes the process powerful and holistic.

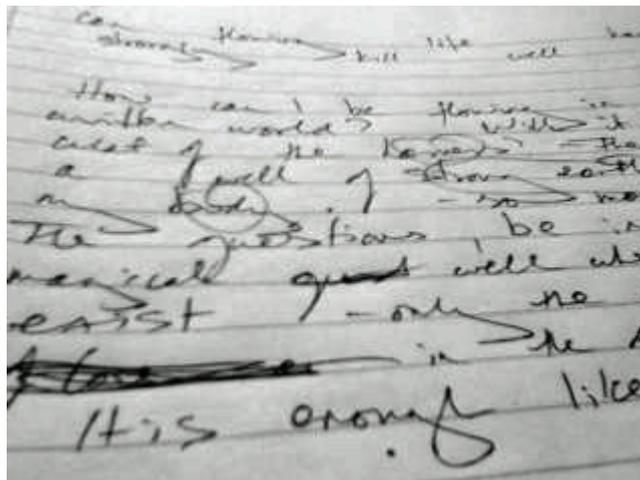
The techniques of somatic writing involve forms of 'free' writing which are then 'refined' using the body's connection with the unconscious to select somatically-resonant material. For example, techniques will often reduce a piece of writing to a phrase or just two words. It is like distilling the essence of the psyche-soma into a bottle. One is then able to keep the bottle in the form of the writing, take it home, look at it, be with it, and use it as a stimulus for further work and development. Generally these techniques form a natural ongoing wave-like rhythm of expansion, distillation, expansion...

Somatic writing incorporates some very simple forms of writing. The emphasis is on finding an intuitive, bodily or non-rational flow. Some techniques evolve into narrative but the majority, because of the move away from rational thought, refine down to poetic metaphor. Jungian analyst and writer Marion Woodman has a strong sense of the unity of metaphor, body and the unconscious. In *The Maiden King*, 1998, she wrote:

'Metaphor is more easily experienced unconsciously than consciously understood because it is the kinetic or bodily dimension of language.'

and

'Language operating at this energy level, where psyche and soma meet, is what, in essence, metaphor is.'



The somatic writing process of unveiling and developing metaphor creates an ongoing circuit that can be picked up again and again at any time. The metaphors (physical symbols of feeling) are not only developed using a bodily sensing; they are also taken *into* therapeutic body work for further integration and transformation. This organic process therefore moves between:

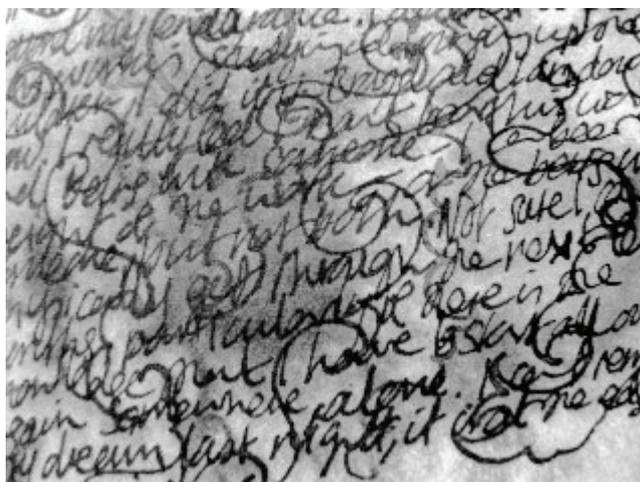
- material/energy being hidden from consciousness;
- this unconscious substance revealing itself in metaphor either in body work or through writing and soma – let's not forget that writing itself is a bodily as well as mental activity;
- consolidating its power as metaphor by being experienced/ integrated fully in somatic writing or in the body (choosing the opposite mode to the one in which the material arose);
- further organic transformation and integration through bodywork;
- transforming in time into further metaphor;
- development of the new metaphor with writing;
- ... and so on.

Because somatic writing is both a mental and a physical distillation of metaphor, it is a deeply physical, psychological and creative process providing a profound sense of authentic chthonic origin and holistic unity.

Words, phrases, mantras, sometimes entire poems are formed. These in turn resonate with the whole person, helping to bring more to consciousness. What is written satisfies both the psyche's desire for wholeness and the creative ego's desire for defining expression. Equally strong at this point is a sense of bodily release – as metaphor transforms so does the body that created it. Thus we have a synthesis and I would say that at this point the lines between what we could describe as the psychological, logocentric creativity, and soma or 'body

experience', become very blurred. The three elements join and support each other.

The ego, generally defensive of the status quo, does not resist this gently revolutionary process. This is because there are enough elements in it that seem attractive for it to engage in. In order to escape the exclusive grasp of what Marie-Louise von Franz referred to as the 'ego-mind', somatic writing *involves* it in the process by inviting it to spill liberally across the page, unaware that it will then have its words subjected to a more somatic selection. The intention is not to 'trick' the ego-mind but to incorporate it into a wider deeper process, the fruits of which it will be able to enjoy as artistic and self-reflecting. All parts of the psyche are kept on board, and all get fed.



It may be true to say that all creative writing performs this same multi-level, entire-psyche process. We are used to valuing the product of a writer's work rather than the psychological process they may be (unconsciously) engaged in. Some writers have inferred some of this process by describing the need for certain conditions in order to be able to write. Kafka once wrote in a letter to his fiancée:

'You said once you would like to sit beside me while I write. Listen, in that case I could not write at all. For writing means revealing oneself to excess, that utmost of self-revelation and surrender... that is why one can never be alone enough when one writes, why there can never be enough silence around when one writes, why even night is not night enough.'

Franz Kafka, letter to Felice Bower

This important writing 'space' has been referred to by many writers as a necessity in order to contact their deep creativity. The unconscious charge within the process is recognised but not worked with directly. The unconscious is given creative expression but may remain largely unconscious – in effect locked in a static metaphor. Somatic writing differs in that it *consciously* works with the unconscious metaphor and is designed to develop and integrate it. It finds what is hidden in what is shown. Its purpose is the subjective development of unconscious material and healing rather than objective interpretation and artistic product.

In contrast to Kafka, Saint Augustine is an example of someone who used writing and reading primarily as a tool to discover hidden parts of himself, in order to come closer to the divine. Augustine incorporated metaphors of interiority as his intuitive way of contacting the somatic element. His context for discovery may have been religious, but if one takes a Jungian attitude and exchanges the word 'God' for 'Self', Augustine's process stands tall as a prototype for a form of therapy rooted in writing, reading and its connection, through bodily metaphor, with the unconscious. He entered deeply into his own interior to find the hidden or immanent, *in-dwelling* word.

'For Augustine, one of the roles that God played in his life was clearly that of psychotherapist, forcing him to attend to aspects of himself from which he would much rather avert his gaze. In acknowledging 'that which is deliberately unattended' Augustine lays one of the first paving stones that will lead, in the nineteenth century, to the crucial concept of repression. The idea that the mind is motivated deliberately to conceal things from itself – that it creates its own unconscious regions – begins with Augustine.'

The Wayward Mind, an Intimate History of the Unconscious, Guy Claxton

If the unconscious is inseparable from the body, then we have to enter into the body to meet fully with it. What was not available to Aquinas or Kafka is now available to us; in a post New Age, quantum world, the body and physical intelligence are no longer seen as separate to consciousness. Subtle body therapies that respect this union are now available to us. Somatic writing carries the intention to utilise some of these skills and maximise the interplay between soma and word.

Somatic writing is inherently democratic in its use and who it is used by. Those who come to explore it vary: from 'creatives' – artists, writers, musicians – interested in the nature of their creativity and how to feed it, to individuals who simply desire more self knowledge; from those who wish to explore the nature of their physicality or ill-health,

to those who apply it to an internal spiritual exploration. Much of the process needs holding by the therapist but other parts, once adopted as a practice, become more autonomous. Understanding emerges from organic flow, not from rational interpretation. The words and the body do the work. The authority of the field in which this happens has to be respected and maintained, not corrupted by an interpretative agenda.

Culturally we may have a tendency to associate the word with that which is cerebral, and associate the word cerebral (of the brain) with that which is rational thought. Words however evolved out of our whole body, its experiences and instincts. Words belong in that exciting place of immanence and imminence that is the entire human being.

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